



Stef Aden

**Class, Coffee,
&
Confrontation**

No Red Pens Series

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COFFEE,
&
CONFRONTATION***

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*To my family and friends:
thank you for your patience and support.*

*To educators everywhere:
thank you for the inspiration.*

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PRELUDE

In a small, semi-detached home, clutter had won. It started at the front door and continued non-stop, foot-by-foot. Every piece of trash imaginable, a conglomeration of items that the resident had discarded after use, carpeted the floor. *Time* magazines rifled and left open to the last page read; mail envelopes with torn flaps and the contents not removed; TV, VCR, DVD, and CD remotes scattered; *Bantamville Better Foods* grocery bags emptied and flattened; Scotch tape dispenser, tissue boxes, throw and bedroom pillows used and strewn; Taco City wrappers with remnants of cheese stuck inside; t-shirts, socks, underwear, jacket, shoes, sneakers abandoned. So much for the living room. The kitchen and bedroom were deep with more stuff.

A young man, oblivious to his surroundings, sat at a desk and focused on a computer screen. He moved the mouse like an artist creating a masterpiece. Devoid of human expression, he worked the cursor, searched, then found the page he sought. When he saw an interesting tidbit, he held his breath as he read paragraphs or studied photos. "Yeah." He muttered to no one but himself. "I can use that. Save to file." Then after he clicked to highlight, copy, and paste, he exhaled and relaxed until the next caught his interest, and he held his breath again.

With the information secured in the computer memory, he moved back to his video palette and continued to search. Hours went by before he logged off. Enough photos and article excerpts were stored to make the time worthwhile.

The doorbell rang, and the young man switched off the monitor before he got up to answer it. "Yes?" He opened it as wide as the chain lock allowed.

"Hello," the voice on the other side said. "I'm the real estate agent. Are you Mr. Zuno?"

"Uh, no. He's my landlord."

"Do you know if he'll be here soon? He said I should meet him here."

"I guess. He left a message that he'd be by. I didn't realize he meant today. What's your name?"

"I'm from the Worthen Agency. Benjamin Worthen. Ben."

The young man looked through the opening at an athletic, clean-shaven man of about thirty. He wore slightly wrinkled jeans and a blue blazer over a more wrinkled, button-down yellow shirt that highlighted his tanned face and crewcut, dirty blonde hair.

Just then a car pulled up to the curb. Both turned to look. A gray-haired man dressed in a tailored suit, crisp white shirt, and red tie got out of the driver's seat and waved.

"There he is," the young man said. "I guess it was today."

"Yes." The real estate agent stepped back. "Hey, I'll just go and talk with him. Thanks."

He spun and hurried down the six steps to the curb, introduced himself, and shook hands. Art Zuno smiled and said a few words, then grabbed his briefcase from the car and walked towards the steps. Ben followed him up to the door where the young man waited for them.

"Hi, Scott," Zuno said.

"Hi, Mr. Zuno."

"Scott, this is Ben Worthen. He's from the Worthen Real Estate Agency. Ben, meet Scott Berger." He wasted no time on small talk and got right to the point. "Scott, I'm putting the house up for sale, and Ben will be the agent handling it."

"Really? Does that mean I'll have to move?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Right now we need to ..." Zuno paused and frowned as he looked around the living room. "We need to clean this place up so it can be shown. You can stay until there's a deal, but you have to keep it clean."

Ben spoke with Zuno as they walked through the property. It was a typical semi with a living room, a smaller dining room, a kitchen, and a pantry on the first floor. Hardwood floors that were installed recently ran through the downstairs. The second level had a good-sized master and two smaller bedrooms along with a bathroom with vanity, toilet, tub with shower, and under-sized linen closet. Fixtures were new, and the floor and walls were ceramic tile in a herringbone design. The unfinished but open basement offered decorating opportunities. A fresh coat of paint throughout would turn it into a millennial's dream first home. Ben told Zuno the property would sell quickly. Young business people looking for good deals were interested in the neighborhood because the train station nearby made it ideal for commuters.

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Since Ben left no stone unturned, he asked Zuno about Scott. His living in the house could keep buyers from jumping in.

“Art, are you going to continue to have a tenant once we start showing the property?”

“You mean Scott? That’s a touchy situation, Ben.”

“Why?”

“Scott is the son of a good friend. He’s twenty years-old and doesn’t have much in the way of prospects. His mother, my friend, pays the rent. Telling him to leave will be difficult.”

“You realize, Art, that the prospective buyers are people who will want to live here themselves. A tenant in place may turn a lot of them off.”

“I know. You see, Scott had some trouble in his hometown. At school. He never graduated. And his mom thought it best he leave that environment, so Bantamville provided a change of scene, a good step. He’s doing online courses, and she says he should be able to get a GED. Once he has that, he’ll be in a better position to get a job, so he won’t be here.”

“Okay. I’ll work with it,” Ben said.

“I appreciate that, Ben. And he’ll leave before the property is closed on once it’s sold. I’ll make sure of that.”

“Great.” Ben’s quiet response said he was unconvinced Zuno had that power but knew he had to be careful not to lose the listing. “Let me finish up here, and we can be on our way.”

He took about an hour to complete the preliminary walk-through, take his notes, and discuss things with Zuno who seemed to want to sell quickly, turn a profit, and from the looks of the place, get the property off his hands. He said he would write a proposal and e-mail it to the owner for his approval. They decided to list it at \$175,000, which Ben said fit the neighborhood and the size and condition of the house.

On his way out, he found Scott at the computer searching the internet for something. Unaware that Ben came up behind him, he paused to read information from a school website on the screen.

“Scott, thank you for your time. I’ll be leaving now.” Ben’s eye zeroed in on the name of the school, and he hesitated as though to process it.

“Yes, Scott, thank you,” Zuno chimed in. “And, hey! Seriously, clean the place up, okay? Scott, I don’t want to have to throw you out, okay?”

“Sure,” Scott said, still focused on the monitor. “No need to threaten. I’ll get it in shape. Bye.”

1

A scratchy voice bristled over my radio. “We have an issue here at the Pirate Ship. Can you help?”

It elicited an instant response. “What’s up?”

“Uh, let’s just say the slide down into the cove was a little too exciting for a three-year-old. He did what I would probably do if I had to walk the plank.”

“In the water?”

“Thankfully not. But the slide is much slipperier than it was a few minutes ago.”

“Okay. I’ll send Jessica right away. She’ll direct the clean-up. Can you take care of the kid and anyone else who might be, uh, grossed out?”

“Can do. It’s pretty calm. Just need to clean the slide.”

“Keep me posted. Thanks.”

Sunshine. Temperatures between eighty and ninety degrees. Shrieks of laughter. Blasts of hip-hop, rap, and pop music over the speakers. Splashes of water on my legs. The slight scent of chlorine. The occasional child ignoring his need to go to the bathroom until he was at the top of a water slide and it was too late. These elements filled my days at my summer job as a greeter at the *Wet Zone* water park. And I drank in every element. The title *Greeter* was misleading though. My real job involved keeping the teenagers who worked there on task. And despite the occasional voiding on the slide, I enjoyed the summer weather at a job where people were happy and had fun. It was a one-eighty from my real one teaching English to Bantamville’s high schoolers. Though maybe it was a three-sixty since I still supervised teens.

After the slide slip-up, I took a lunch break. As I enjoyed a turkey sandwich, I read a text from a friend, Renee Dumont, who always got any school news first and shared it right away even in the summer. Now she passed along the information about our new principal, Rikki Parks. It raised questions

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about Parks' doings at her previous school. Renee said she would check Google for more.

Though I trusted her to send it my way, I wanted to meet the new boss. I'd been around education long enough to realize I needed to introduce myself within her first week on the job and make a first impression, good or bad.

I planned to interrupt my vacation job. I took a day off from the water park to get a first-person view.

When I ventured into Bantamville South High School on that hot August day, the smell of bleach and chemical cleaners attacked my nose. Summer in a school building meant super cleaning and disinfecting time. Custodians jammed the hallways with everything they emptied from the classrooms: desks, books, podiums, filing cabinets, posters, supplies, and anything else not nailed down. This gave them room to scrub and wax floors, wash walls, disinfect desk surfaces, and return the rooms to their shiny, untouched state, at least for a month or two before September brought a new year's opening, and about one thousand teenagers stampeded through the halls.

As I made my way through the main hallway, I met Hank Broadbent, my favorite custodian. The one thing every education major is told in college to ensure success at school is to befriend the building's custodian. He or she can make life heaven or hell. If you like trash cans that get emptied each night, doors that open, close, and lock, desks that aren't graffiti-covered, file cabinets positioned strategically, and floors and fixtures free of dust, he or she held the power. I did and took my professor's advice to heart from my first day of teaching.

Some custodians, though, made warming up to them tough. I remembered Walt Torrance, the custodian during my first year, who resisted any attempts to be nice to him. Coffee and donuts. A friendly hello. Lottery tickets for holiday gifts. Nothing worked, and I never figured out why. I didn't need to. He was transferred that summer.

But I got along well with Hank from the start, and from the moment of our first meeting fifteen years ago, we were friends. He just happened to clean the building. As an added perk, he had accurate inside information on district happenings. I hoped he could fill me in on Parks. He didn't disappoint.

"Hello, stranger," he said when he saw me coming down the hall.

"Hi, Hank. How's it going?"

"Back from that cushy summer job of yours already?"

“For a day. I need to check on something here.”

“What do you think about this one?” He pointed down the hallway.

“Who?”

“The big guy. Parks.”

I smiled. I was sure he knew the principal was a female, but he still referred to Parks as the big guy. “I guess she’s okay. I don’t know. She’s new yet.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But she has quite a record.”

“Really?” Renee had filled me in on the rumors, but I promised myself that I’d give the new principal the benefit of the doubt before I let the rumors affect my judgment.

Hank related the tales of Parks’ past. She came into a school district like a gangbuster, took down almost everything that existed, and replaced it with the policies and people she wanted. I thought that was standard for most new administrators, but the gossip mill overflowed with stories of unfairness from Parks. In her last school, rumor said, she denied tenure to ten out of fifteen teachers. The ten did not fit her idea of what a teacher should be in the classroom or in lifestyle. Living with someone of the opposite sex without a marriage certificate doomed six of the ten. Being openly gay took down three others. Discrimination never became an issue because beginning teachers have no protection, a hidden advantage to a principal and school district that allowed them to get rid of a nontenured teacher at will.

“I’m just saying that’s one story,” Hank said after he highlighted more details of that rumor.

“Not a great one,” I said. “Hank, let’s hang in there for a while and see what she does here. In fact, have you seen her today? Because I came back to meet her.”

“She’s around, yeah,” he said and grabbed his mop. “Hey, good to see you. Enjoy the rest of your summer.”

“Thanks, Hank. You, too.” I watched Hank push his mop and bucket down to the next classroom for cleaning then walked around the corner and into the main office and said hello to the secretary. “Hi, Lil. How are you?”

Lilith Chiarello had been a school secretary for as long as I had been teaching. She had the one quality that every principal looked for in a right-hand assistant. She knew all the secrets of the school, the teachers, the administration, and just about everything else—and kept them. Or at least knew which ones she needed to keep!

“Hey, Kassi. Surprise, surprise. What are you doing here?”

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"I came back to town for a day or two and figured I'd stop in to see how things were here and maybe meet the new principal. Is she in?"

"Yes, she should be down there." Lil pointed towards the office of her new boss. "Take a walk and see."

I stepped slowly and softly toward the door, stopped before I put my whole body in, leaned my head through the doorway, and said, "Hi. Do you have a minute?"

There before me stood Dr. Rikki Parks, newly appointed principal, dressed in an Anji Veltri baby herringbone jacket and matching pants, navy blue silk blouse, and blood-red sandals. I would find out later that they were Bolton Limited Gladiator-Strap Stacked priced at about three hundred dollars. With her perfectly coiffed black hair, she made a first impression that would stick with me for quite a while.

Parks presented the polar opposite of the previous principal, Lou Hudson. Rumor had it he owned five suits, each a variation of black or navy blue. He also owned ten white shirts and ten ties: red, blue, black, gray, red and blue, red and white, red and gray, red and black, yellow, and orange. He would start the week with all his suits hung on the top, side rack of his closet. Each day after wearing a suit, he would hang it on the rack at the back of his closet so as not to repeat the outfit. At the end of the week, the suits on the back rack would be collected and either sent to the cleaners or put back on the rack for the next week to repeat the process. He wore the same color combinations each week. And from our friendship that went back to the days when we chased racehorses at the track, I knew it to be true. The details came from Lou, himself, who sometimes shared too much personal information.

I wondered about the saying "Clothes make the man." It fit Lou. Did it apply to a woman, too?

I snapped to attention when Parks extended her hand and motioned me to sit. "I'm Kassi Stanton." I took a seat. "I'm the English/Language Arts team leader. I wanted to stop by and introduce myself and say welcome."

"Well, thank you." Parks stood behind her desk. "It's nice to meet you."

"I wish you luck in the district. I'm sure you'll find it an interesting one after you're here for a while." I noticed the absence of a chair behind Parks.

"Yes. Yes. I'm sure it will present challenges, too."

"I think you'll find capable people at all levels." I hoped to give her a positive impression of the staff.

“Yes, yes. So far, everyone’s been helpful,” Parks said. “You’re the E/LA team leader? I hope you’ll let me pick your brain soon about the duties of that position. The board has asked me to do a white paper on the pros and cons of restructuring the hierarchy to eliminate the team leader position. It is something I want to look at seriously.” She paused after she said it and focused on me for a reaction.

I nodded slowly. “Interesting. That’s an idea I hadn’t heard before.” The suggestion that my position might be eliminated did not foster relationship-building.

“We have to focus our efforts on raising our school ranking. I’m not sure team leaders offer much in doing that.”

Ouch! I thought. Nothing like making a good first impression.

“Really? Have you worked with the team leader structure in other schools?”

“No. But it seems an extra expense to pay ten or fifteen people extra money to unpack books and supplies. Because that’s pretty much what you do. Am I right?”

Ouch again! Is my job about to be eliminated?

“Mostly we work with our individual teachers to find methods that help them to be more effective. And we serve as mentors to new teachers.”

“Right. I’ve been told that. But I’m not sure that is what’s happening on every team. And whether it’s the most efficient way to operate.”

“Maybe if you see it at work, it will convince you.”

“I’m sure you will give me insights to help me in my decision. We’ll set up an appointment to talk about it.”

“Of course,” I said. How did a meet-and-greet turn into your position is probably unnecessary? And is Parks sold on getting rid of the team leaders? Has she already made up her mind? And why doesn’t she have a chair?

At that point, Parks’ cell phone buzzed to alert her to a meeting with board members in ten minutes. She gathered her things, thanked me for coming in to meet her, shook my hand, and said she needed to go.

As I watched Parks stride out of the office, I recalled a scene from *The Odyssey* movie I used in class when I taught the epic poem. Parks strutted down the hallway and carried her cell phone and laptop the same way Odysseus does when he takes the sack given him by the wind god. Both adventure and danger await him and his men if the bag of breezes, squalls, and gusts is opened too soon. I wondered that day which way the winds would blow for

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the school in the coming months and what adventures awaited. When would Parks open that bag?

In four weeks, when I officially reported back for the start of the new year, I'd find out. But at that moment, *Wet Zone* awaited my return. As I gathered my thoughts and was about to leave Parks' office, a bird chirped. My first instinct made me check my cell phone. No number or caller's name flashed. I heard it again. I turned in its direction near the wall to the left of the door and saw a cloth embroidered in a purple and white crossroads design lain over a dome-shaped object the size of a Tiffany table lamp. I lifted it and caught a glimpse of thin metal strips and a tiny, yellow and green shape. I shuddered, dropped the cover, and walked out of the room as quickly as I could. Is that an omen, I thought?

"Bye, Lil. Have a good rest of the summer. Gotta go." I scooted out of the main office and headed for the parking lot.

About to get into my car, I heard Hank call me. "How'd it go?"

"Okay, I guess, Hank."

"Any predictions for the year?"

"No. Not yet. But I'll give her a C+ on this one. Maybe a B. We have to wait and see."

"Not an A, huh?"

"She may have some good points. I'm the optimist, you know?"

"Okay. We'll see. Enjoy the rest of your summer!"

"Thanks, Hank. You do the same."

"Optimistic. Okay." The word hung in the air as he walked away.

Optimistic, but guarded. Yeah. Guarded, I thought as I drove away. I don't think I'll spend much time in Dr. Rikki Parks' office this year! Of all things, does she have to have a pet parakeet?

4

Once we seated the students in the bleachers, the teachers took attendance just in case we lost anyone in the trek out to the field. Then the wait began. For the next three hours, we sat. Zero communication from the administration left us to answer questions.

“How long are we going to be out here, Mrs. S?”

“What’s going on, Mrs. S?”

“This would be my lunch period. Are we going to get to eat?”

“Are they going to send us home?”

“Can I call my mom on my cell phone?”

“Are you going to move our project’s due date back now?”

“When can I go to the bathroom? I really have to go!”

I replied the same to each of the questions. “I don’t know. I’ll find out when I can.” In my mind, however, I had other answers.

“How long are we going to be out here, Mrs. S?”

If Laurent’s in charge, until the cows come home.

“What’s going on, Mrs. S?”

Did I walk out here with you? Did I leave you at any time? I know what you know.

“This would be my lunch period. Are we going to get to eat?”

Of course. That new privatizing deal makes lunch mandatory so the company can make its money off of you all. Even if all we have time for once this is over is lunch, you’ll have lunch.

“Are they going to send us home?”

Yes, at the end of the school day.

“Can I call my mom on my cell phone?”

Did you ever ask my permission before?

“Are you going to move our project’s due date back now?”

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Of course I'll extend the due date. What with fire drills, situation B drills, PTA fundraiser assemblies, school play preview assemblies, student government campaign rallies, school picture day, Black History Month assembly, Women's History Month assembly, standardized testing, and bomb threats, I will be able to cover only sixty percent of the curriculum by June, anyway. What's another day?

"When can I go to the bathroom? I really have to go?"

So do I. I'm eyeing those port-a-pots right now.

As I leaned against the bleacher railing and surveyed the area, I noticed a man dressed in a light blue shirt and wrinkled khakis with a camera slung over his shoulder walking in the expanse between the field and the building and heading towards the bleachers. A reporter, I surmised. I was pretty sure a newspaper photo of students who have been sitting on aluminum bleachers for a few hours with nothing to do was not a good idea.

First, I caught Sean Ackerman's attention and signaled to him to keep an eye on my group seated in the same bleacher section as his class.

Then I hopped down the steps and headed the reporter off before he reached the kids.

"Hi, can I help you?" I shouted as I approached him.

"Hi. I wanted to get a picture of the students," he said.

"You're not supposed to be on school property now. I have to ask you to leave."

"Sure, but I can get a photo from across the street, too, you know."

"Yes, that's probably what you should do," I said. "As a matter of fact, I'll walk with you to get there." I said it politely but firmly to avoid a confrontation, and I moved him away from the students.

"Okay. I get it," he said.

As pushy as news people were, they avoided overstepping the bounds of the school grounds. In this case, bad publicity was NOT better than none at all.

"What paper are you from?" I asked in order to make conversation. I found it much easier to avoid problems if I made small talk with people I didn't know but had to order around.

"I freelance. Most photographers do nowadays," he said.

"Is that right? I guess digital newspapers have cut into profits and jobs."

"They have. I work for a school photographer, too. All Photo. They do the portraits for the kids in your school," he said.

“I didn’t realize they hired freelancers.”

“Yeah, we all are. They do the paperwork, and we take the pix. It’s steady pay.”

“That’s great.” I searched my brain for another topic with the length of two soccer fields to go to the property line.

“Did you ever know a guy named Ben Worthen? Substitute teacher?” the photographer asked.

The question came out of nowhere. “Ye-e-e-s-s-s.” I hesitated, then was intrigued. “As a matter of fact, I did.” Ben was a friend of Jake Suder, one of my English/Language Arts team members up until three years ago. I met Ben when he worked as a substitute teacher at my school then, and I knew he worked now as a successful real estate agent. He also had been involved in a love triangle that kept the school’s rumor mill operating at full speed. It involved BSHS teachers, which captivated my attention, and when I first heard it, I vowed I would get the details. But the mill quieted down, and I moved Ben and that triangle to the back burner. Eventually it cooled off in the freezer. Now, out of nowhere, his name came up during a bomb threat evacuation. A little odd, but I had time to fill. “Do you know him?” Keeping this conversation going might be productive, I thought.

“Sort of. I took photos of houses for him for his real estate ads.”

Jake had told me that Ben’s skill at marketing houses drove his success in real estate. While location, location, location mattered, Ben realized he had to get the word out there about a house before he could sell anyone on any of its good points. He must have learned that a charming photo of a house filled the role of a thousand words. From what Jake told me, Ben had people skills, knew the ins and outs of construction and selling, and took over all the contacts of his recently retired real estate agent father. He had inherited seventy-five percent of the agency. Success must breed success.

“Right. He stopped subbing and got into real estate a few years back,” I said. “I hear he’s successful.”

“He is. At selling houses. But ...” He hesitated as though questioning if he should continue his thought. Then he did. “Did you know him personally? I’d like to find out what kind of guy he is.”

He piqued my interest. “I only dealt with him at work. What are you looking for?” I wondered what the reporter saw in Ben’s story.

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“I had a few drinks with him one night last month. It’s the nature of the job. Neither of us are office guys. We met at a bar to talk about the pictures, then to look at what I shot. He likes to drink.”

I became more curious as I talked with this guy. Ben had been a mystery to me, and this seemed like a safe way to snoop.

“I heard he had his moments,” I said.

“Well, he had a couple moments that night. He told me, no, bragged to me, about the women he’d known and been with. It was funny. It was guy stuff. Then he talked about this one woman, one special woman, and his tone got serious. He said she was the one, and he let her get away,” the reporter said.

“Really!” I said. “As little as I know about him, the first part I believe, but the second, the fact that he found that special woman, doesn’t fit the persona.” I thought otherwise, maybe knew it too. Was this the love triangle? I wanted the photographer to tell his story.

“That’s why I asked you about him. He showed me a picture of the woman. Perfect, long blonde hair that fell softly on her shoulders. I asked myself what she was doing with him. I mean, he’s an okay-looking guy, but I couldn’t put these two together. He’s Mr. Casual. Throw on a pair of jeans, dirty or clean, and a shirt, any shirt, and he’s dressed. She was decked out like a mannequin in a store. Wasn’t really tall, but every piece of clothing she wore fell perfectly the way it should, you know?”

“Like it was made for her?” The image he described seemed familiar to me.

“Yeah. But in a different way. I don’t know. Artsy? It made me think she was from a different culture or a different time period, even though I knew it was a recent picture. I even asked him if she was in another country when the picture was taken.”

I paused, looked at the reporter, and thought I’d ask if Ben had shared the woman’s name. I wanted confirmation of my suspicions. But he picked up the conversation before I posed the question.

“The more he talked about this woman, I could see his eyes water, and he got this far off look. He said he’d never get over her. Even after three years and lots of other girls, he still woke up every morning and thought of her. Man, he had it bad.”

“Wow,” I said. “But why do you care? You only worked for him.”

“It’s the last thing he said that made me feel sorry for him. I’m not a bleeding heart. And especially not for a guy who’s had too much to drink. But this guy was pathetic. And I thought he might do something off-the-wall. Maybe hurt somebody.”

“Why?” I had heard how successful Ben had become and how he had gotten his act together. Though true about his professional life in real estate, maybe he still sulked over the woman who got away.

“He said they had talked a while ago. She wanted to see him. He got the idea she wanted to start things up again. He asked her flat out if she would divorce her husband so they could get back together because that was the only way he’d do it. She told him he’d never meet anybody like her and, get this, she said he’d never love anybody like he loved her. Didn’t say yes or no. Just that. He’d never love anybody like he loved her. Like she put a spell on him or something. He said, ‘That’s what’s driving me crazy. Why would she say that?’”

We reached the school’s property line. The Ben story put a sadness in our eyes. I thought of *Great Expectations* when Pip, the main character, tells his friend he has been in love with a girl who admits to him that she could never love anyone. The friend tells Pip it’s hopeless, and he should forget her. I realized the value of this advice in the real world, too, but wondered if Ben could follow it.

“It was interesting, to say the least.” had reached the end of the school’s property and of our conversation. “Well. This is it for me. By the way, my name is Kassi Stanton. I teach English here. Nice to meet you.”

“Thanks, Kassi. I’m Oscar Servis. Nice to meet you, too. And sorry if I said too much about Ben. I’m intrigued. And maybe worried, too.”

“I don’t think there’s much we can do for Ben Worthen. But if you should see him again, tell him I said hello.” I shook Oscar’s hand.

“I will, Kassi. Something about the guy makes me want to see him to see how his life turns out. See you.”

“Yeah. I get that.”

I turned, headed back to the bleachers, and forced myself to trade thoughts of Ben Worthen and the woman he couldn’t forget with how the bomb threat would play out. How long would we have to stay outside? Would they ever find the person who sent it? Was this a taste of things to come?

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Three hours after we had moved out of the building, the all-clear message filtered to the football field, and we headed back. As expected, administration adjusted the day's schedule so that no one missed lunch. Then it was time to go home.

For the students of Bantamville South High, the first week of school closed with an afternoon session of sunshine despite the uncertainty. For me, it ended with a cloud behind the one that covered the bomb threat. Perhaps it was coincidence, perhaps irony. But why was Ben Worthen back on my radar?

SEPTEMBER

2

The eye an inch-and-a-half away from my nose blinked, and the lush eyelashes skimmed my cheek. My skin crawled. Paralyzed by terror, I wheezed and gasped for breath I could not catch.

Caught in a face-off with two hundred sixty pounds of ostrich torso on legs at least five feet high, I slid one foot at a time along the tiled floor and backed away. But the bird moved with me. When my shoulder blades touched the wall, I stiffened.

No where to go.

Flat against it with only inches of separation between the creature and me, I could see parts of its long neck, pinkish gray with a fine layer of down. It poked out as though it had swallowed tiny rocks. The bird bent towards me, nestled its head between my jaw and collarbone, and left my line of vision with one view: its enormous, filmy eye. Repulsed, I looked away and down, but the movement shifted my focus to the two toes on its hoof-like foot.

Yuck!

“Mmmuwaaaheehee! Mmmuwaaaheehee! Pop pop pop!”

The bizarre sounds that erupted through the air from some other place grabbed the bird’s attention and heft. Not content to keep its head buried in the crook of my neck, it looked, listened, then backed away.

With the load out of my path and in pursuit of the source of the noises, I slipped to the side and forced myself to run despite the near paralysis the bird’s presence inflicted on my body.

The sounds reverberated through the halls and echoed off the metal lockers and cinderblock. Then soft coo coo coos replaced the dull gibberish. Velvety touches brushed my ankles, and I looked down to see a sea of thirty dirty

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gray pigeons gathering underfoot. I willed each leg to move through the dim halls and the birds but made no progress. For every two steps forward, I fell back three.

Without this bag I could go faster.

Despite that logic, I kept the black, leather messenger bag on my shoulder.

Run!

I pumped my arms and hoped to increase my pace. My legs weighed me down. The waistband of my purple silk shorts lost its elasticity, and I struggled to keep them from falling to my ankles as I tried to put one foot in front of the other, a task that required strength and focus I doubted I had.

All I have to do is get around the corner.

“Mmmuwaahheehee! Mmmuwaahheehee! Pop pop pop!”

The sounds rang out again.

Just around the corner. I can do it!

I veered around the bend and let out a deep sigh of relief.

At last!

The door two arm lengths away was in reach. But before I could take another breath, I felt the linoleum-tiles beneath my bare feet begin to move backward. I struggled to stay upright and trudged forward against the conveyor belt motion of the floor which carried me farther from the room.

I panted, desperate for oxygen. When I saw shadowy figures, I tried to speak, but my words came out garbled.

“Drop the bag!” The oversized, ghost-like silhouettes spoke to me as they floated in the air. “You need to drop the bag!”

But I held on to it. As I drifted farther away from the door, I yelled for help, but only a muffled sound came out. “Ggwuppp em poorsss!”

I looked up and saw one ghastly figure as it glided towards me. A black hooded cape engulfed its body. When my eyes focused on the head, I saw its pale white skin, rubbery gray lips, and bloodshot eyes.

As it hovered above me, I propelled my legs to move forward, but they were too short to touch the floor. I made out fluttering movements in the form’s head and shoulders and realized seagulls with pure white feathers and orange beaks had grasped the cape in their claws and carried it through the air. When it neared me an end of it reached towards my arm to grab my bag, but I moved before it could.

“Please, God, get me away from these birds!” I swiped at one gull. “I will kill you!”

The birds swooped, and as they did, the cape once more reached towards my arm to grab my bag.

Don't let it go!

I yelled, and the same grotesque wail came out. "Ggwuppp em poorsss!"

I felt something grab my arm and shake my body, and I screamed again. "Ggwuppp em poorsss!"

"Kassi! Kas!"

I wanted to answer but couldn't.

"Kas!"

I reached for the bag on my shoulder and touched a human hand.

"Kassi! Wake up!"

"Whaaaa?"

"Wake up! You're dreaming."

"Whaat? Zach! Thank God it's you!"

"Another nightmare?" My husband had been awakened before by my distorted cries, and each one unnerved him. Each time, he, in turn, jiggled my arm to shake me out of it and saved me from my dream horror.

"Yes! Again! The same one."

"What were you saying?"

"Don't know. A call for help but not in my English."

"Mine either. That's three nights in a row. You must really be worried about starting tomorrow."

"It happens every year. But this is the worst. Must be Parks."

In my muddled state, I fumbled for an explanation and fixed on the name. Parks. If she agitates me when I'm asleep, what effect will she have on my awake time?

"Strange. Not being able to speak clearly. Like you forgot how to talk or your vocal cords are paralyzed. Your biggest fear?" Zach's analysis simplified it.

"Ugh. Must mean something more."

"Birds, too?"

"An ostrich. And seagulls."

"An ostrich? Kas, that scares me!"

"Not my normal parakeet phobia for sure."

"Different, anyway. Not like Hitchcock or Daphne DuMaurier. Timely, though. Shore birds. And we just came back from Seaside."

"Dreams aren't about what they're about. Right?"

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“I don’t get what you said. Let’s talk in the morning.” Zach hugged me then rolled over and away from psychoanalysis. “We still have a couple hours before we have to get up.”

“Umm.”

After a few minutes, my heart rate eased and returned to normal, and my breathing slowed. Almost twenty-five years and I still couldn’t control the nightmare. Worse, its intensity had increased. Worse than ever!

I listened to the calm rhythm of Zach’s breaths as he drifted back to sleep.

Is this happening across the country?

“You think every teacher goes through this the night before the first day of school?”

I asked it to the air.

3

Though it disrupted my sleep the night before day one, the nightmare faded from memory by the time the first period bell blared and the new school year began. The occurrence of the usual mix-ups assured me all was okay. Zombie-like teenagers dragged their feet in search of classrooms that didn't exist thanks to data processing and scheduling snafus. Teachers mangled the pronunciations of the names of students, some who didn't seem to exist, either. And, true to form, administrators unable to work the volume control knobs on the PA system interrupted classes over and over with crackling, ear-scratching, unnecessary announcements.

A smooth opening, I thought, for Bantamville South High School.

My students, two classes of freshmen and two of sophomores, needed a little motivation to get back into school mode, though they needed no stimulus to catch up with each other after ten weeks away. Like I did every year, I planned ice-breaking activities and a light literature assignment for the first few days. And as leader of the English/Language Arts team, I spent most of my non-instructional time helping my teachers to get settled with their classes, books, supplies, and the twenty-three pages of paperwork, forms, and reports they had to fill out.

Overall, the week had been a success, but I still appreciated when Friday rolled around. My classes had a mini-project they would work on in class designed to offer a calm, relaxed last day of a transition week for teacher and students.

But excitement intruded on this Friday, and, as I learned later that day from Mike Dietrich, one of my team members, it began in the main office. Mike recounted the details like a novelist crafting a scene to show, not tell.

"What?!" Lilith Chiarello shrieked as she dropped an envelope. "Oh, no!" She moved faster than she had since last June as she bolted from her chair

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and hightailed it down the short hallway to the office of her boss, Principal Rikki Parks. Quickly, she scurried back. "Where's Rikki? Has anyone seen her? Or did she tell you where she'd be?" Lilith's mellow voice took on an edgy quality.

No one had an answer.

The secretary on a mission darted in the other direction and turned into Vice-Principal Guy Santonio's office. Just as speedily, she dashed out. "Does anyone know where Guy is?" Again no one had an answer. She repeated the exercise as she looked for Dave Laurent, another vice-principal, with the same result. "I need an administrator right away," Lilith said.

"Lilith, use the walkie-talkie. One of them should answer," the other secretary, Teresa Kraml, told her.

"I hate to use that thing," Lilith said. "But I guess I have to."

She picked up the black device with its flashing red and green lights and asked for an administrator. The barely audible response of Lenore Knudson came through the static.

Lilith explained the emergency. "I opened an envelope with a note in it that says there is a bomb somewhere in the school."

"What?!" Knudson's response slurred over the radio.

"Yes. I opened an envelope addressed to Dr. Parks and found a note with a message that says there's a bomb in the school."

"Jeez." A more urgent pitch replaced the vice-principal's nasal tone. "Is there any administrator in the office?"

"No. That's why I'm on this walkie-talkie." Lilith's voice crackled back.

"Okay. Put the Situation B protocol into action. I will be right down. Keep trying to get Rikki, Dave, and Guy and have them get to the office, too."

"Shall I notify the superintendent?"

"Yeah, Lilith, yeah. Do that, too," Lenore said.

Thus the school year at BSHS began with a test, not of the students, but of the administration's plan to keep them safe.

My English/Language Arts classroom buzzed with chatter. Teenage bodies sat in chairs, on the floor, or on each other's knees. The odor of astringent, plastic permanent markers filled the air. The faint sound of scissors snipping reached the eardrums. My third period class feverishly worked to finish their assignment. To introduce the authors they would read during the year and to nudge the students back to doing school work after the summer break, I

turned them loose in groups to complete the Bio Sheet project. They were due Monday, and what they didn't wrap up in class had to be done on their own time, homework no one wanted on the first weekend off from school. Dickens, Steinbeck, Shakespeare, Angelou, and Oates would be preserved on oak tag on the walls of room E211 before the next bell rang, or the students would dissolve their partnerships forever, or at least for the next group project.

"May I have your attention, please!" The voice of Lenore Knudson boomed over the PA system. Since she spoke in her gym teacher's voice, one she perfected in cavernous gyms across the district, she could be heard over the noise of the classroom. "We are in Situation B. Teachers, please take out your charts and follow the directions for Situation B."

Ugh, I thought, and guessed the students shared my feeling. A drill during week one? This will make finishing this work impossible. But not one to ignore policy, I rummaged through my desk and surprised myself when I found and opened my flip chart. Whew! Thank goodness I saw the box of charts in the library last week and grabbed one, I remembered. I read the instructions. What's this? Lock the door? I don't have a key since they changed the locks. Next?

I told the kids to sit on the floor and pulled down the shades so no one outside could see in the classroom's windows. "Please follow my directions, everyone. Get comfortable. We need to be away from the windows, so everyone should be on this side of the room near the cabinets. Please stay quiet and calm. This will be over soon." I hoped.

After a wait of fifteen minutes with no announcements, a knock at the classroom door got everyone's attention. April, one of the school security guards, popped her head in, motioned me over, and told me out of earshot of the students, "You need to take them out to the football field. Seat them in the bleachers. Make sure they stay with you. It's a bomb threat."

Bomb threat? That's not Situation B, I thought. What the heck were they doing? A bomb could be hooked up to the PA system. Using it to make an announcement during a threat topped the Do Not Do list.

Because I thought it was a drill at first, I had taken my time to get the students under control. With April's arrival and information, I kicked it into high gear. I gave directions then got the students, my flip chart, my attendance roster, and my keys out of the building and on our way to the football field. Though I did not tell them of the threat, I knew they must have guessed.

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The announcement, the locking the door, the walk along with the rest of almost one thousand kids around the building and across the soccer and baseball fields to the football field left little to conjecture.

Fortunately, whoever sent the threat did it on a balmy September day. Was that a good omen or an oxymoron?

5

The following two weeks were quiet. That is, if further bomb threats were considered. But I had been a teacher long enough to know that humdrum rarely described a school day. Quiet did not mean without incident.

Bomb threats were not uncommon these days, but one during the first week of school unnerved everyone and set the tone for the year. I made sure to stay alert and in tune with my surroundings. When I stepped out into the dim hallway, I noticed it. The nothing. As I paused, that familiar twitching in my left eyelid began. The slamming of lockers and the snickering of students AWOL from their classes were absent. An eerie silence filled the halls in the middle of this first period.

My eyes focused on a sign on the wall in the main hallway of Bantamville South High School that proclaimed the rules in simple language:

No Profanity.

No Food.

No Drinks.

No Hats.

No Electronic Devices.

I always lingered on that last one. It created a picture of malevolent, mind-controlling, electronic gadgets, though I knew it meant cell phones and iPods. I remembered back to the early nineties when it stated No Walkmans, and always the English teacher, I thought, Shouldn't it be Walkmen? I asked myself that question every time I read the sign though I knew it didn't matter to anyone but me. Ah, well. Change.

Soon enough, the nothing I noticed when I first stepped into the corridor became something when Richard, a former student of hers, strolled in my direction. From far away, he looked peaceful in his black T-shirt, oversized, tan cargo shorts that reached below his knees, and high-top work boots, no

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socks evident. When he got closer, I smelled cherries and glimpsed the earbud wire that stuck out of his black knit hat. I took one step forward to tell him to make it disappear when my eye caught Guy Santonio ten yards behind him. He matched Richard stride for stride with energy and intensity. I stepped back and watched it unfold.

The vice-principal called him. Richard ignored him and continued on his way. The vice-principal did, too.

“Richard. RICHARD!”

Richard started singing. His voice produced a grainy sound that bordered on edginess. While the beat may have been driving and the melody uplifting, the words were blue.

“Richard. RICHARD! I heard that!” The vice-principal picked up his pace and caught up with Richard as he hit the refrain.

“Shut the f--- up, shut the f--- up, b----! Shut the f--- up, shut the f--- up, b---!” But Richard’s version didn’t include the dashes.

In a charming contradiction, Richard’s voice made the obscenities easy on the ears.

When he felt the heat of Santonio’s hand about to grab his shoulder, Richard ran in my direction. The clomping of his boots on the tile floor echoed down the hallway. I moved to step out in front of him to stop him or slow him but thought better of it and pushed up against the lockers. The clomping soon became a stamping then a zapping as Richard picked up momentum and speed. His cargo shorts fluttered and flapped as he passed me, and the opened wild cherry cola soda can fell out of his pocket. As it hit the floor, the burgundy liquid shot out in every direction. It splashed the lockers, Richard’s work boots, the manila folder I carried, and the parts of my white silk blouse that the rectangular folder didn’t shield. The half-eaten donut fell out of his other pocket, and its jelly oozed out onto the tile floor. Later, the line of scarlet red drops might be mistaken by some for blood, but for Richard they traced a trail of doom. Even if he knew one, he did not have a prayer for escape. As he hit his top speed, the main office door swung open and outward. He smashed into it and fell to the floor. Out walked Officer Madden, the campus security monitor.

No Profanity.

No Food.

No Drinks.

No Hats.

No Electronic Devices.

No Richard—for at least four days.

Entertainment—no charge!

Richard's trail of doom that became a spattering of red dots on my white blouse came at a bad time. I was late for an appointment with Rikki Parks, the school's principal, a meeting I tried to squeeze in between teaching three classes. I thought I might duck into a lav to rinse the marks out of my blouse, but then I'd have to rush just to be late, and my nightmare before the first day of school popped out from my memory. Maybe I'd never get there.

I channeled Shakespeare and thought of Lady Macbeth's line as she sleepwalks through the castle unable to rid herself of the guilt of conspiring to kill the king and unable to get rid of that spot. Maybe it was all connected. An omen. But I didn't feel guilty, only a little conspiratorial. I turned the misfortune into a sociology/psychology experiment. I remembered a study I had to read for a course back in college. The authors presented the idea that people see what they expect to see and experience what they expect to experience. If I pretended I didn't see the spots, would anyone mention them? Spots or spotless? Would people see what was there or what wasn't?

6

I followed the trail of red through the door and down the short, narrow hall. The path turned into Santonio's office, but I continued past it to the principal's. As I entered, I glanced at the birdcage and assured myself the purple cloth covered it.

Principal Rikki Parks greeted me with a slight smile and motioned me to have a seat. She moved behind her desk to pick up a paper and handed me the written evaluation of the class she had sat in on the previous day. She then picked up her smartphone, walked to the window, and checked her messages.

I knew, without Parks' instructions, to read it and sign it. Then a brief, cordial meeting would follow in which the principal evaluated my teaching. This process would be repeated once more during the school year, then the scores calculated to identify me as a teacher who is extremely competent, competent, emerging, nearly emerging, or incompetent, or in my view, out the door. A year of lesson planning, teaching, grading, counseling, chaperoning, guiding, consoling, and cajoling would be quantified into a number from one to ten, and a formal written report known as the Yearly Instructional Performance Evaluation, or YIPE, would be put in my permanent file. Teaching offered lots to love.

As I looked at the paper and pretended to read, I glimpsed Parks, the new principal of a month-and-a-half, and her stylish appearance. Her black hair fell to her shoulders and contrasted with the ivory-colored, short-sleeved Punto stretch-knit dress she wore. Competent. Fashionable. And pricey, no doubt. The two inch heels of her Harlequin-print pumps raised her to a height of five feet and ten inches. The shoes were not sold off the rack at the local mall, and I guessed her dress was tailor-made for Parks' tall, thin frame. An attractive woman in her mid-thirties, her look said successful professional. Extremely competent. But the clothes were out of place at Bantamville South

High School where more students became eligible each year for free or reduced lunches under the government's free lunch program. Emerging. It was early in the year.

"I enjoyed your lesson, Kassi," Parks said as I stepped away from the window. "Unless you have questions, I don't want to keep you." Parks seemed ready to end the meeting.

"I'm glad. Thank you." No discussion. No question of why I did what I did. No suggestions for improvement. Sweet, I thought. After twenty-five years of these evals, I finally got it right.

I congratulated myself and allowed self-satisfaction to sneak into my brain. Then a reality check took over. Maybe Maggie was right. I stopped myself. Maggie? Ugh! Cousin Maggie. First college-graduate in the family. First one to study abroad. The one whose games, concerts, graduations my parents dragged me to—where she was champion, soloist, valedictorian. The one they measured me by. The shadow I could never get out from under. Until I did.

Well, Maggie did embarrass me out of television, and that got me into teaching, I thought. Maybe she was right. And Parks thinks I'm good.

"No questions." I returned to real time and assured myself I'd be satisfied with a short discussion about a positive evaluation that scored me in the extremely competent range.

"Good. I do have one concern."

Almost made it out, I thought. The spots?

"Yes?"

"Your bulletin board? I noticed it's out-of-date."

"Really?"

"You didn't have this week's assignments posted."

"It's only Tuesday."

"You should have the week's work up on Monday."

"Things may change. Either I change them or circumstances like fire drills or bad weather make me change them."

"You do your lesson plans two weeks ahead of time, don't you?" Parks asked.

"Yes." I held back. That two weeks ahead requirement caused me to post assignments daily. It still gave me flexibility. And of course I did lesson plans. Almost a quarter of a century's worth.

"Then assignments for the week should be up on Monday."

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"I put them up daily."

"That's not how I want it done."

"It works."

"Do it my way. Your life will be easier."

I sensed Parks had ended the discussion there, but I wouldn't let it rest. "Easier? How?"

"The board brought me here to raise school standards. That begins with teachers. The status quo does not have to be preserved. And won't be."

"Status quo meaning veteran teachers?"

"Status quo meaning the existing state of affairs, whoever it includes." Her answer was quick and matter of fact. "My secretary will put a copy of the evaluation in your mailbox once I have signed it. Thank you for coming by. I have another meeting."

Wow, I thought. How did "I enjoyed your lesson" turn into "Do it my way"? And, damn, why didn't she mention the spots?

I had no answer. I signed the form, thanked Parks, and maneuvered away from the cage and out of the office before I said too much. When I completed that trifecta, though, I heard Dave Laurent call my name.

"Kassi? Can I see you?"

Ugh. Laurent. Now?

I walked in and sat across from him as he shuffled through several piles of papers on his desk. "What's up, Dave?"

"I have a request here from the university for a cooperating teacher to work with a student teacher in English/Language Arts. Is anyone on your team interested?" The lines of his forehead and his pursed lips formed a look familiar to me. Either the district's central office had called him a few minutes ago with the last-minute request, or they had called to ask him why he hadn't responded to the one they had sent last week. I bet on the latter.

"Hm. Maybe. I'll check."

"Let me know by the end of the day? This is a little late. I guess it got lost on my desk."

"By the end of the day? That's tough. I'll try, Dave." Once again, his procrastination required my immediate action.

"Thanks," he said and relaxed his face. "How's everything, Kassi?"

"Fine. A little rushed right now. But it's going."

Hm, I thought. Did he notice the spots?

“Is this all you want to do?” He brought his hands together yoga-style and sat back in his chair.

I looked at him and squinted. “What?”

“I mean, from early in my career I wanted to get into administration. Is this all you want to do? Be a teacher?”

No spots for Dave. This is all about him.

I paused, thrown off by the question, then let out a breath of air when I realized this registered as another Laurent moment for the books. It might be innocent, but it offended me. Did he mean that classroom teaching had little value and that every teacher must want to be an administrator?

I sighed. As I tried to focus my eyes on anything but Laurent’s face, I fixed on his shoes. Classy. And expensive, no doubt. The loafers, black patent leather uppers and leather soles, had to be Italian-made. His suit, two-button, slim fit, light blue sharkskin with tapered pants, had to be imported. Extremely competent. Bantamville’s administrators dressed in style.

Dave Laurent, in his second year as vice-principal at Bantamville South High School, could be the poster boy for the principle that each person rises to his own level of incompetence. Unbeknownst to him, he already had. Outwardly he presented the picture of how most people believed success and achievement looked. He appeared sharp with his athletic body, perfectly coiffed black hair, and tailored suits. Extremely competent. He supplemented that by driving to school each day in his shiny black luxury SUV. But inside he was more rent-a-car. He had come into teaching after working for five years as an on-air weatherman at a local television station. Though he had no training in meteorology, he hoped his personality and appearance would help him to move on to a network news show and a more lucrative salary. They didn’t. So, he took a few education courses for his teacher certification, fell back on art, his minor in college, and found a job in a local elementary school. After four years of teaching experience, he received the promotion to administration thanks mostly to his wife’s friendship with the wife of the school board president. Dave climbed the first rung of the ladder of success, but he rode the escalator up the rest of the way. His ineptitude had hurt no one yet, and he knew how to be a nice guy most of the time. But he followed up any helpful act with something unpleasant, earning many critics and few supporters among his staff. Nearly emerging.

Now Dave was no longer a mystery to me. After one year, I understood him. Still, he kept it interesting! When I thought I couldn’t be surprised by

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anything he did, he found something. His comments and questions during this meeting made me wonder. Did he really not get it?

I responded to his thoughtless question the way I knew best. Candidly.

“Gee, Dave. I am a teacher. Teaching is what we’re all supposed to be about, isn’t it? Are you suggesting that I should find something better?”

“Yes, yes. You’re right. We are about teaching. And you do a great job. I thought you might want to move up, you know, to administration.” He smiled and turned his palms up. “Maybe you want to be a leader, you know, and spread your knowledge and experience around.”

“Hm. You do know I’m the English/Language Arts team leader, right? It’s kind of important to have somebody in that position who can help with the transition to the new standards, right? Common Core? My plate’s pretty full with that right now.”

“Yes, yes. That’s right. And you are doing a great job at that, too.”

As he finished his version of a compliment, the lights flickered, then went out. Light bulbs and the electrical system were not as high a priority in the school district’s budget as Laurent’s suits were in his. Because the inside of the office lacked a window, the room fell into total darkness. I shifted into action. Before Laurent reacted, I popped up, snatched my folder from the chair, and hightailed it through the door and down the narrow hallway. I had said enough and felt it best to leave him wanting more.

Yes! Yes! This is it, Laurent, I thought to myself as I walked away with one more job to do for him and thoughts of one more useless administrator who would stumble his way towards retirement in thirty-five years.

The conversation sparked memories for me, though.

I had worked at Bantamville South, better known as BS High, my entire career. As a rookie, I taught the leftovers, which meant I took on a new grade or topic almost every year. I felt overwhelmed in those first four or five years. But I came to value the experiences with different types of students. During that early part, I observed other teachers, sat in on their classes and picked up pointers from them, and refined my own teaching style.

When the English/Language Arts team leadership position opened up six years ago, I felt prepared and confident enough to take it on. Controversy surrounded my chances, though, and the grapevine rated me a long shot. Jake Suder, the other candidate, had two advantages. His father was a friend of Lou Hudson, the principal at the time and the one who would recommend

the candidate. And Jake was mentored when he started as a teacher at Bantamville by Harvey Frazier, the outgoing team leader. Everyone expected Jake to get the position. He would have, except for the horses.

Lou had shared one love with me. We started teaching at BSHS in the same year, and though Lou taught Health and Phys Ed, we developed a friendship as a result of our love of horseracing, or more accurately of betting on the horses.

Lou's love, however, became a gambling addiction that caused his wife to take control of the family finances. In the days before direct deposit banking, Lou received a paycheck every two weeks. He usually went to the bank on his way home from school, deposited half of the money in their checking/savings account and took the other half in cash home to his wife. On one particular payday, a warm, sunny half-day, Lou headed to the track after the bank. I did, too, and had one of the best betting days of my life. I picked a long shot and a favorite and hit the Exacta for over two hundred dollars, then put twenty dollars on a long shot that finally had a good run. By the time I ran into Lou after the fourth race, eight hundred dollars more than I came with rested in my wallet. Lou, on the other hand, had lost all the cash from his pay.

"Joanie will kill me. I can't go home with no money, Kassi."

If anybody ever sounded desperate, Lou did.

In a moment of charity, or maybe of weakness, I gave Lou seven hundred and fifty dollars, a loan he paid back in cash ten dollars a week over the next two years or so. His wife never knew.

I believed that my appointment to the team leader job resulted from my qualifications but acknowledged that the friendly gesture and sticking to the code of silence helped put me over the top. Or maybe Jake and Lou had other issues.

While the position offered a pay raise and status, it carried no supervisory powers. Mostly, team leaders completed paperwork. I, however, inherited a fragmented E/LA team, thanks to its previous leader. I approached the role like a coach. I focused on getting teachers to be part of a team, a challenge since most of them liked to fly solo. They closed their doors to teach and rarely interacted or collaborated with their colleagues choosing their own solitary confinement. I joked that I was afraid that one day I would open a classroom door, find a scrawny English/Language Arts teacher asleep at his desk, and read a note on the computer monitor that said he had chosen to reject humanity.

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Maybe it reflected my laziness more than teamwork, but I subscribed to the idea that it saved time to work together to plan a unit. I also thought of it as a way to spark new methods to engage the kids. And why reinvent your wheel when the other guy's design makes it turn efficiently?

Still, I understood why some couldn't let go.

After one meeting to discuss working together, I had sensed antagonism at the thought of collaboration and had asked a seasoned teacher, Luke Cantrell, about it. "Why not, Luke? It can cut down your workload."

"Kassi, really? I've worked with teachers who wanted to collaborate on lessons or what-have-you with me. What do you think happened? I put together copies of all my units and shared them. Know what I got back? Zero."

"Oh." I got it and Luke didn't need to go further.

But he did. "Why should I share what took my time and hard work to create? It sounds like a great idea. Give and take. But no thank you. Not for me."

I got it. Though teaching wasn't entertainment, it did mean doing five or six shows a day in front of a tough audience of teenagers. And it required a sizeable ego to survive, an ego that often became the main act. For some teachers, sharing the stage was too painful to consider.

Add to the mix administrators, like Laurent, with little of any experience in the classroom, who forgot how isolated a teacher could become. They made it more necessary that I act as a coach.

In a career, a teacher sees many administrators come and go. I counted eleven principals and so many vice-principals I stopped totaling them after twenty. I had worked for administrations that ranged from first-rate to bat-shit crazy. In my early years several cared about their students and supported their staffs. In particular, I recalled Hannah Jeter, a vice-principal who remembered how much energy it took to put on a forty-five-minute performance five or six times a day, five days a week. She had perfected her classroom skills through eighteen years of teaching, then moved on to administration and offered real-classroom advice to teachers. And Ed Redlander, a principal who made a point to be in the office in the morning to smile and greet the teachers as they checked in each day. I admired Will Norwood, a vice-principal who took over a ninth-grade basic skills class for an afternoon to allow the teacher of that class to leave early to see her son in his school's Halloween parade.

The greats made it look easy. Laurent and Parks and the unease they created reinforced my belief that now I worked for the bat-shit crazy ones who

turned almost every day into an obstacle course. While they saw clearly what was not there, they missed what was right before their eyes. Yeah, I thought. Like my spots.

But where else could I get the entertainment everyday events like the Richard tableau offered? Or sit back and watch The Peter Principle unfold and the question Why do things always go wrong? get answered. Teachers said it almost weekly. You can't make this stuff up! After I met with the new principal, I suspected no one would need to.

7

I dashed into the English/Language Arts staff office, peeled off my Kristof Ventura jacket, threw it onto the chair, and called on my yoga training to breathe through the anger. “Is this all you want to do?! I can’t believe he asked me that at the start of a school year? What an idiot?”

My hair, strawberry blonde most of the time, would register high on the hot red scale if it worked like the old mood rings. In record time, I had watched the Richard takedown in the hallway, met with Parks about my YIPE, and listened to Laurent’s condescending question, then made my escape in the dark.

Only when the lights came on in the office did I notice Sean Ackerman at his desk.

“Whoa! Strong language from you, Kassi! Careful. Somebody may hear you!” he said as he looked up from his paper grading.

“Oops! Sean! I’m sorry I blurted that out. But right! Even if somebody heard me, he wouldn’t get it. He’s too arrogant to even know how stupid he is!” I had settled at my desk and tried to breathe both Laurent and Parks away, but my voice still had that are you kidding me tone it got when I faced a wall of stupidity.

Sean had experienced the Laurent effect a few times, last year being the most famous so far. He worked as advisor to the school newspaper, and Laurent expected him to do the school publicity, too. When the principal told Laurent to get publicity photos and stories out to the local press, Dave gave Sean the task. Once or twice did not create a problem. He cared about people and saw good in everyone. When Laurent asked, Sean responded. He had photos of school events that his newspaper staff had taken, and he put a package together for the local paper. But when it became a weekly request and evolved into attending evening events almost twice a week to get photos, Sean objected to doing Laurent’s job. With three sons that ranged in age from

six to twelve, Sean's nights were booked either with family time or with practices, games, and performances. After the fifth evening event coverage, he said no. Laurent argued that Sean's job as newspaper advisor required him to do it, but the requests stopped. Soon after, a first year, nontenured teacher began to do the school publicity. At first Sean's guilt that an overburdened newie, or new teacher, had to pick up the load made him think he should continue to do the write-ups and photos. But when the newie said he'd rather do that than lunch duty, Sean let it be.

"Let me guess. Who could that somebody be?" Sean teased. "You used the words idiot, arrogant, and stupid. Hm. Has to be my favorite administrator, Laurent."

"Too obvious, huh?" I said as my face returned to its normal complexion. "I should know better by now, but I still let him get to me, Sean. When will I learn?"

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Kassi. We all let him get to us more than we should. Whatever he said, you're better than that. Keep telling yourself that."

"Good thought, Sean. And I have too much work to do to waste time on him."

"Whoa, what's that? Was the meeting a bloodbath?" Sean blurted the questions out when he saw the red splotches on my blouse.

"Richard," I said, and Sean understood. Richard's name lived in lovable infamy in the school. Teachers and students knew of his love of music—at all times—and of his daily morning routine of visiting the bakery nearby to buy his favorite breakfast items before school.

"Jelly doughnut? Or cherry cola?"

"The daily double."

"What a kid!" Sean said. "I hope his music saves him."

"It didn't today."

"Singing in the hall? Something obscene?"

"Yep!"

"You know how good a guitarist he is, right?"

"Sort of. No. How good?"

"Ev Parsons told me he has a gift. He hears a song once and can play it. He taught himself to play piano and guitar. And he takes every music course we offer. She says music is the one thing that keeps him in school."

"Santonio will probably keep him out of school for a few days."

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"It's unfortunate. He doesn't fit their idea of what he should be. But once he gets to his music class, he's not a problem," Sean said.

"He's in his environment, his place, in music class?"

"He is. I hope Parks doesn't cut into that program."

"What do you mean?"

"Word is she thinks the money spent on the arts should be spent elsewhere. She wants to eliminate all the extras in music, art, shop, along with the programs that go with them. Band. Chorus. Art Expo. School play. Robotics. She's already taken field trip money from Ev and the music department."

"Where's that word coming from?"

"Parents, kids, teachers. Anybody involved in those programs."

"Are they doing anything to stop her?"

"That's a tough one. They met with the superintendent. He told them Parks knew her stuff, and they should trust her. It might take a few years, but she would make the school better. They took away that Parks had control to do whatever she decided."

"That's interesting. And scary."

"Yes. For all of us." He gathered his papers to leave and headed towards the door. "Stay tough. See you."

"I'll try." Then I remembered I had to do Laurent's job. "Hey, Sean. By the way, are you interested in working with a student teacher next semester?"

"Really? I would love it," he said and came back into the office.

"I have to let Laurent know today."

Sean's eyes brightened, and the words flew out of his mouth. "I would love it. I learn a lot when I work with student teachers, and I think I offer something to them, too. Yes. Sign me up!"

"Thanks. You reduced my workload by one. I'll tell him you'll do it."

When he left, I shook my head and replayed what Sean had told me about Parks and the superintendent and the changes they would inflict on the school. Sadness came over me, along with a sense of powerlessness that punched me in the gut.

But I had to shake those feelings. The bell would ring soon for the next period, and my blouse needed attention.

I walked to the lav and tried to clean it, but my efforts turned small red dots into large pink blotches. I gave up and headed for the cafeteria. After the Richard incident and after I had dealt with Parks and Laurent, I needed a pick-me-up, a reward. I thought about Richard and how I empathized with him. He

hated school but showed up every day because it gave him the chance to do what he loved—play music. Friendly foods got him through the rocky moments. I didn't hate school, but I sometimes hated the direction some administrators were steering it. They threatened to take away my chance to do what I loved—teach—the way I could be most effective. Maybe Richard had the answer. A child shall lead them?

Comfort food always made life better. I tried my luck at the vending machine and hit the jackpot. Two bags for the price of one. In the quietness of the empty dining room, I ate the contents of one and saved the other for later. This is doable, I thought. What more do I need?

As long as that vending machine stocked salty, greasy potato chips, high on the list of my go-to foods, and awarded a bonus once in a while, I would be safe. I would survive.

Bee-ee-ee-ee-eep! Wednesday afternoon brought another interruption over the classroom intercom to break the class's concentration as they worked through a test on the novel they had just completed. My students paused in their struggles. I wondered what could be so important this time. The hockey team excused at two twenty-five? Congratulations to the faculty drama production? For me, it became a straw that bent but did not break my back, another eighth period intercom interruption in what had become an almost daily occurrence.

"Teachers, please refer to your emergency step chart. We are in Situation B. Take appropriate measures."

Columbine. Jonesboro. Anytown. In 1999, violence, shootings, and danger in schools had escalated to massive scales and motivated districts to come up with emergency plans to deal with violent intrusions and to protect students in classrooms. Flipcharts with ways to respond to every conceivable crisis, from hurricanes to gas leaks to armed intruders, made administrators and board members secure that they had done something to keep the children in their care safe. But after fifteen years and more mass shootings, protection had not moved far past flipcharts.

Situation B! Wow! An intruder in the building, I thought as I searched through my bag and then the desk for the flipchart that was supposed to be kept handy. I had found it during the first week's bomb threat evac. It had to be somewhere. It was. Underneath the plan book, record book, texts, folders filled with students' essays and tests, the same paperwork of my roommate, Art, and my tuna salad sandwich. I flipped through it. Here it is. Lockdown. Okay, I can handle that.

"Everybody stay calm. You all have to sit on the floor over by the wall. Away from the windows. I have to lock the door and keep everyone locked in

until we hear something else.” Oops. I don’t have a key. They were never issued. And I forgot to remind Laurent after the last time.

The phone rang and broke the silence that filled the air in the classroom as anxious and unsure students wondered whether the emergency was real.

“Kassi, do you have a key?” Sylvia from next door spoke calmly.

“No. They were never issued to us.”

“Ah, well. What a great emergency plan!”

Click.

“Sorry, folks. We can’t lock the door. But we can pretend.”

So began the first safety drill to make sure we took every precaution to protect the valuable students of the district.

What does Parks think about this plan? An incident handled poorly is not going to make that ranking go up.

Everyone survived the drill. And since the cost of printing the flipcharts used up the budget, keys became a luxury.

How would Parks rate this emergency plan?

Parks began the monthly Monday staff meeting, the one that focused on safety in the schools. “As teachers responsible for the safety of your students, you must follow procedure.” To start, she fell back on the traditional way to identify a weakness or problem in a public school. She blamed the teachers. “I repeat. You, teachers, must follow procedure. But you did not.”

Problems there were. The bomb threat evacuation that came in the first week of school mobilized everyone quickly, but some procedures were not followed. Last week’s intruder drill did not go satisfactorily, either. Neither episode increased confidence. To straighten out the Safety in the Schools plan mess that unfolded during the first incidents at BSHS, Parks called on Sam Madden, the school’s Resident Police Officer, and asked him to do a presentation for the staff. He had worked with school administrations for several years and knew how to get things done. He also had attended many faculty meetings and knew his audience and how we felt about guest speakers. Rather than handle the presentation himself, he delegated reviewing procedures and answering questions that would clarify any issues that the drill raised to a better-prepared group. He brought the local SWAT team in.

Once the group had settled in but before she brought on the expert, Parks spoke. “Two things appalled me after the drill last week. One, the teachers were not prepared. Many failed to check their flipcharts. Others didn’t even know flipcharts existed, let alone where theirs was.” She made her points.

And so did someone else.

“With all due respect,” a deep voice from the back of the auditorium said, “we had no instruction.”

Annoyed at the interruption, Parks ignored the comment and continued. “Second, the students were out of control and seemed to regard it as free time. These drills should not be new to anyone since they have taken place

for several years in schools across the state, across the country. Yet here at Bantamville South, there seems to be a total disregard for their importance and taking them seriously.”

“Dr. Parks, excuse me,” the same deep voice said. “Drills have not been conducted here regularly, some of us do not have flipcharts, and as I said before, we had no specific, standardized instruction.”

“Irrelevant. You should read the news. You should be at the forefront of planning.” Parks raised her volume and squinted to identify the voice in the crowd in the dim auditorium. The question mark on her brow indicated she could not.

Another voice from the other side of the room continued. “Administration dropped the ball. Previous administration last year and yours this year.”

A low-level murmur hung over the room for a few seconds at the comment that accused Parks of not doing her job.

“Ignoring safety procedures will not happen. Not on my watch. Teachers, do your jobs. Learn the plan and follow it. Or find another venue.” Parks’ bark ignored the comment faulting her administration.

I held my breath and stared in shock that the exchange took place with guests, the SWAT team, in attendance. While I had heard complaints about Parks and rumblings that some teachers were, after only a month, unhappy with her, I was surprised that the anger for some had already escalated to heckling at staff meetings. As I sat and waited, I tried to identify the voices, too, but had no luck. They were male, but they didn’t match the familiar vocal sounds of the regular activists.

“I appreciate your attention today as Sergeant Brandon Hegstrom from the Bantamville SWAT team presents this seminar for your information. Thank you, Sergeant, for coming here today. And thank you, staff, for your attention. Please allow the sergeant to present some information to you. We’ll take questions when he is finished talking. Sergeant?”

“Thank you, Dr. Parks. Good afternoon, everyone.” Hegstrom stood at the front of the group dressed in his gray T-shirt, camouflage pants, and black boots. “This meeting today will, I think, clear up things and make you confident you can do the things you might need to do if an armed intruder situation occurs.” His deep, resonant voice bellowed I know what I’m doing, and you’d be smart to listen tone.

He must have had experience in handling uncooperative crowds during his police days. His first comments, I thought, were intended to calm and win the

group over after he had observed the earlier exchange. Though their feelings towards Parks sounded adversarial, as Hegstrom began to cover pertinent topics, the group showed they were eager to learn what he had to offer. They quietly listened to the officer even as lawnmowers roared outside the windows.

"... And so, if an intruder is in the building, you will hear an announcement that we are in Situation B," Hegstrom said in a serious tone as he briefed the staff on emergency procedures. "That means that, basically, you keep your students in your classrooms and follow the guidelines in your flipcharts. It's important that you do exactly what the guidelines say. Keep in mind we will have officers combing the building, and we will position officers outside who will use telescopic lenses to see as best we can into the room through the windows."

"Won't that be hard to do if we pull the shades down and turn out the lights?" Deb Scanlan's delicate voice was both innocent and interested.

"Why would you pull the shades and turn out the lights?" The SWAT team officer moved in Deb's direction.

"Because that's what the guidelines say. We've been practicing that!"

"Are you sure?"

"Here. Look for yourself." She passed her opened flipchart across the row to the sergeant in the aisle.

"Yes, that's what the guidelines say." The officer's voice volume decreased as he spoke after he took a few seconds to read the page. "But that's not what we want you to do. Dr. Parks, this really needs to be changed." He held the flipped-open chart up and turned to Parks.

"We will change that in the guidelines," she said and picked up her phone to make a note. "But in the meantime, you know what you're supposed to do. By all means, follow the officer's advice." Parks' gentle tone contrasted with the edgy sound of her introduction. After the drill the week before, she had determined that the staff was not prepared for the real thing. Unfortunately, as shown by the early exchange with the mysterious voice, she had not researched previous incidents or what the flipchart listed as standard operating procedure. Had she done her due diligence, she might have been better prepared for the unfriendly comments.

"Understand that you are the first line of defense." Hegstrom returned to the front of the auditorium. "You are on the scene and in the midst of the action. You may have the opportunity, if you see an intruder with a gun, to

stop the killing of many students if you can wrestle that gun away from the guy or throw your body in front of it so he cannot shoot the students.” He paused, and in that moment a buzz filled the air.

“Throw my body in front of the gun?! Are you nuts?!” Judy Wilkes shot back. “Is that what you expect us to do?”

“Well, we would hope ...”

Another voice cut off the sergeant.

“Listen, I don’t think I will sacrifice my body for any of my students.” Sylvia Dunn, who had taught teenagers for thirty years, expressed herself in simple to understand terms then looked around the room for support.

Another murmur, this one in agreement with Sylvia, floated through the room.

“Dr. Parks, what do you say to that?” Hegstrom moved in her direction on the side aisle and away from the center of the auditorium and of attention. He must have sensed a tough crowd and deferred to the boss.

“Of course, we don’t expect you to step in front of a gun. But maybe that big guy behind you might do it.” She pointed to the speechless football coach and laughed. To my amazement, Parks thought a little levity when she talked about teachers sacrificing their lives for their students fit the moment.

Hegstrom interjected an attempt at common sense. “Honestly, in the heat of the moment, we don’t know what you will do, and neither do you. Just do the best you can.”

His return to sanity may have come too late. Bob Nathan’s hand shot up.

“Yes, sir.” Hegstrom saw a chance to change the subject.

“Has there been any thought of arming teachers or administrators to deal with potential problems?”

Of course. My mind clicked into high gear. That’s what every teacher has hoped for since the first day on the job. Forget about spending money on minor things like pencils, pens, textbooks, technology, user-friendly technology in the classrooms, nutritious breakfasts and lunches, realistic salaries for educators. Empower the teachers! Give them guns!

“What, sir?” Even the veteran SWAT team officer, who had probably heard his share of arguments that promoted guns everywhere as a means of self-protection, needed to be sure he heard what he thought he heard.

“Arm selected teachers or administrators? So that there are guns in the building should a problem arise?” Bob, a science teacher turned guidance

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counselor with twenty-five years of experience, was a member of the Bantamville Rifle Organization, known as the BROs, and a second amendment man. To him, having teachers pack guns both insured against armed intruders and assured a constitutional right.

Jaws dropped throughout the room and breaths gasped. In the silence, a voice whispered low enough for all to hear and put into words the fear others could not. It belonged to two-years-from-retirement Barbara.

“Great idea, Bob. Give the menopausal women on the English team the guns. That will solve everything!”

End of the Safety in the Schools seminar for the staff.

Confrontation blew in the wind.

OCTOBER

10

The next day Parks designated Guy Santonio as the administrator in charge of improving the Safety in the Schools plan. She took on bigger concerns about what she considered a major threat to academic standards—homecoming!

Pre-Rikki Parks, festivities lit up BSHS during the first week of October. The student council organized activities each day so students could show their school spirit. On Monday, they dressed in their class's designated color, then wore their clothes backwards on Tuesday. Wednesday was sandals and socks day, and they donned superhero costumes on Thursday. Finally, they wore their recently purchased BSHS spirit clothing on Friday.

But this year's activities were in doubt thanks to Parks. As part of her push to turn the school around, she cancelled all homecoming-related activities during school hours in the week that led up to the big game. She scratched the daily costumes. Announcements each morning that highlighted outstanding performances by athletes distracted from academics and were prohibited. She even quashed lunch period touch football games which she said got the students too worked up and took away from their concentration in after-lunch classes. And Friday's pep rally during eighth and ninth periods took too much time away from learning.

If she had stopped at these, objections would have been few. But she went too far when she announced the faculty-student volleyball game would not happen. She didn't know that it raised money for the school band program. One phone call to a band parent who also served on the school board cancelled Parks' cancellation. And so as not to seem to show favoritism, he told her to reinstate the other activities, too. Homecoming in all its glory survived.

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On Tuesday, most of my students showed they could get into their clothes backwards but had a hard time keeping their pants and shirts zipped and buttoned. Drained of the energy I used to tell them of their underwear reveals, I returned to my office after my last class to add to my exhaustion and put in an hour of paperwork. I settled in, opened my To Grade file folder, took out a set of essays, adjusted my glasses, and gazed at the paper that stared at me from the top of the stack. While I usually would have to decipher the penmanship code in most of the papers before I graded them, this one offered a pleasant surprise. It was typed! I jumped in and read.

In the course of one's life, certain events exert strong influences. Birth, marriage, and death force each person to face what is termed the real world.

Hm, okay, I thought.

When a child is born, parents who held a live for you and me attitude now must live for the baby. Cocktails and lovemaking must give way to formulas and three a.m. feedings.

An example. Yes! My enthusiasm increased.

Death provides a ruder awakening. When one cries at a funeral, is he really weeping for himself and for the life he has let slip away by wasting time?

Hm, it's taking a morbid turn. I don't get the death angle for this topic. Curiosity turned to puzzlement. I looked up from the essay, shook my head to shake out the cobwebs, eyed the paper, then stared, speechless but not thoughtless. Who wrote this? I needed to know.

I had a long-standing rule to stay objective and not look at the student's name before I graded a piece of writing. But I wondered about the teen writer who could take a topic like *It Could Happen to You—Thoughts on Pip, Bidy, and Estella in Great Expectations* and turn it into that slice of existential thinking. I chose the only fair solution. I pushed up the sleeves of my blouse, shook out my fingers, bit my lower lip, and finished reading. Then I zoomed through the rubric, checked off each item, and totaled the points. Ninety-one out of one hundred. The mechanics were almost perfect except for some pronoun shifts, and the content was thorough though infuriating. I converted the number to a letter grade, used my favorite red pen to write both on the paper, and flipped to the back for the name.

I should have guessed. Courtney. Who else could turn an essay topic in which most kids wrote about their first love and breakup or their fights with

their parents into a rant on the female's perpetual search for the perfect man to complete her?

My stomach rumbled. Were they pangs of hunger from skipping lunch in my weak attempt to win the staff's Lotsa Losing Contest? Or were they warnings of my stomach's trying to rid itself of the distress I felt over Courtney's teen angst plus thirty years?

Thirty years since high school? And twenty-five since I started teaching at BS High. I appreciated and adopted the students' abbreviated reference to it, though never publicly. To me, the nickname was a term of endearment. Twenty-five years! My entire teaching life! Time flies when you're having fun, and even when you're not. My career and life were a mix of both, and I accepted that as okay. In fact, at the wonderful age of forty-eight and feeling forty-nine and fifty approaching fast, especially on days when I climbed up and down and up and down the thirty-two steps in the stairway to my second-floor classroom, I realized I wouldn't want it any other way.

As I turned and saw my reflection in the mirror that hung on the wall, I could almost make out my younger self with long curly hair and wrinkle-free face. Then my mind time machine took me back to a day at *Fred and Fran's Food-a-Rama* during my last few weeks of college and life before I became a real adult.

I had been lost in thought about the work I had to do, and I didn't notice him as he walked towards me.

"Anybody sitting here? This place is really crowded. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all."

What I had wanted to say was "Thank you for choosing my table, and can I help you with your chair?"

Yes, it started like this. Two early twenty-something people meet, talk, date, move in together after a few months, and get to know each other. Then eventually they break up. I moved that Phil Carlyle memory of our first meeting to the back burner of my brain. No time for trivia now.

But memories led to more as they always did for me. I thought of a weekend back in my final college days when I visited my parents.

They lived less than an hour away, but I limited home visits to no more than once a month, even though I could easily have gone more. It avoided the conversation I dreaded. The how happy are you one. It had become a

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mainstay when I visited in the last two years. My parents needed me to be happy now more than ever mainly because they weren't.

I came from an average family, not rich, not poor, but comfortable. My parents' lives were simple. Work during the week, beer and bingo on the weekend.

"Hi, Kasia." My dad had greeted me when I walked into the living room. He was the model of low maintenance as he sat in his favorite easy chair and reclined with his feet up and a Miller High Life in his hand.

"Hi."

"What's up with you?"

"Same old stuff. Where's mom?"

"She went to bingo. Sunday afternoon special with Alice."

I parked myself in the olive-green love seat with a view of the television on the opposite side of the room. The Eagles were punting early in the first quarter to the Giants.

"What's the score?"

"Nothing nothing. No offense for either side so far."

"Typical."

"So, Kasia, are you happy?"

"Yes. I'm happy, Dad."

"You sure? You don't look happy."

"I'm just tired."

"Have any friends?"

"What? Yes, of course."

"I mean, any boyfriends. You don't want to be alone."

"No. I'm fine, Dad. I'll have time for guys later. Right now, I want to finish school."

"You work too hard. It shows."

"Thanks. That makes me feel better!"

My father stared at me sideways, a familiar look I knew meant he tried to see inside me.

"All is good, Dad. Don't worry about my social life."

"Maybe Maggie could help you. She has lots of friends."

"No, Dad. I won't do that. Please don't suggest I talk to her."

"You know I love you and want you to be happy. Like your mother and me."

“Thanks. I’ll be going to Sunday bingo while my husband stays home and watches TV in no time, Dad. Trust me.”

While my parents lived a simple existence, other relatives led much richer lives, and I struggled to keep up with them.

My cousin, Maggie, six years older, paved the way. She excelled in academics, music, sports, dating, everything, including being the family icon. She won a full ride to college, graduated with honors, went on to law school, and started her own practice. My parents pointed to Maggie as the perfect model for me—and my older sister, Dani.

For her part, Maggie played the role—when they were around. But alone with me, her bullying side took over. She laughed at my dream to work in television and said I wasn’t creative, smart, or pretty enough. Beyond that, my stuttering, which I had overcome before middle school, returned in Maggie’s presence and became her source of hilarity and teasing when we were alone. Only when Maggie graduated from college and moved away to the city for law school did it stop. But the damage had already been done. I packed my dream in a deep corner of my heart and decided to become a teacher, a career that seemed safer.

While Maggie formed a roadblock for me, back in high school the Murdza name paved the way. Dani, either immune to or inspired by Maggie, became a celebrity at the school thanks to her singing voice. She played the lead in the annual musical three of her four years at the school. I, only two years younger and about a thousand put-downs shy, let Dani’s coattails drag me along to popularity. As a result, I knew and was known by everyone. Involved in tons of different activities, I had no problem meeting people and found it easy and automatic to be part of the group, to belong. Play basketball, hang out with the team. Work on the play scenery, hang out with the crew. Write for the school newspaper, hang out with the staff. I had the formula and fit in.

But no older sister to follow made college very different. The name Murdza had no history and offered no easy in to popularity. No one ever asked, “Are you Dani’s sister?” My self-image took a hit. I knew no one when I arrived, and after four years had not made one, lasting, close friend.

I shook myself from the flashback. You’ve come a long way, baby. I cringed. You’re dating yourself. And getting old.

Not so old, though, that I didn’t hear the pop and bang from out in the hallway. I bolted out of my desk chair, ran to the door, and looked out to see

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the doors of every classroom on the floor open. From each doorway, teachers who had heard the noise inched their heads out and checked for its source. Within seconds, the fire alarm siren rang, and the students emptied out of their classrooms to exit the building.

Strange, I thought. Aren't we supposed to lock it down?

Curious, I ventured out into the hallway to join the exodus.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound echoed through the hall again and sent students and teachers to the ground to duck and cover.

My heart pounded, but every other part of me froze in place for a few seconds. My imagination, however, bounced into activity and horror. I pictured a crazy person walking the halls with a Beretta shooting into classrooms or at anything that moved.

To get their students out of harm's way, teachers told them to stay near the lockers and head away from the sounds and towards the exit. And they obeyed. With their clothes on backwards, they squatted, covered their heads with their hands, and snaked their way down the hallway. Another series of bangs froze some in place. Teachers edged over on hands and knees and tugged those students who couldn't budge on their own.

I saw one lone figure crouched at the opposite end of the hall even when the others moved. What I did next surprised me when I thought about it later. I bent low and headed towards the squatting shape and the popping sounds. Staying close to the wall, I inched my way and reached the student. "Minday!" I kept the volume to a whisper. "Are you okay?" Minday Palmer, one of my sophomores, stood against the lockers.

"Mrs. S. I can't move!"

"We have to go!"

"I can't."

"It's okay, Minday. I'll cover you."

"No. I can't move. I'm stuck!"

"What?"

"My jacket. It's stuck in the door of my locker." Minday's face took on a pained expression. "I had it on backwards and when I leaned down to get my notebook out, somebody slammed my locker shut. I can't pull it out."

"Take it off!" I yell-whispered.

"No. It's my leather one. My dad will kill me if I lose it."

“Minday! Take it off! It’s too dangerous to stay here! You can come back for it later.” I tried reasoning with her.

“No! I can’t!”

Three seconds away from ripping the jacket and the locker door off to get the two of us out of there, I caught sight of April, the school’s security guard, headed down the hall in our direction.

“Why are you here? The building has been evacuated.”

“We know, April. Minday’s jacket is stuck in the locker, and she doesn’t want to leave without it.”

“You have to go.”

“Is there a shooter? Are we in danger right now?”

“What? A shooter? No. It was firecrackers in a kid’s locker. A homecoming prank, I guess.”

“What? Thank God!” I breathed a sigh of relief. “Why the evac, then?”

“Procedure. It takes a while to figure it out. The all-clear will be given in a few minutes.”

With that, April pulled out her keys, found the master, opened the locker, and freed Minday and her jacket. Minday stood up and smiled weakly.

“Lucky us!” I turned to her. “Get out of the building now, Minday. And we will talk about this later. Count on it.”

“Thanks, Mrs. S. I know. See you.”

Hmm. Hegstrom had it right. You don’t know what you’ll do. I wondered if that applied in all circumstances that presented a sink-or-swim situation. What threats would I throw myself in front of for my students and colleagues? When I found out, it would definitely be eye-opening.

On a warm, fall Saturday morning, I rushed into the local *Drug Mall* on my way to the homecoming football game. I knew it would put me on course to be late to pick up Renee, but I couldn't appear in school public without lip gloss. This would be a quick stop, in and out. I headed straight for the cosmetics aisle first and grabbed Cherise Lip Shine with sun-screen. The register near the door had only two customers in line. I went for it. On my way, I picked up sugarless gum and a package of red Slicorices, enough of that delightful candy to stick to our teeth through the day. Up to that point, all went according to plan. I stepped in line behind a middle-aged man with two items and felt confident the checkout would be quick. Yes! I thought. Perfect timing!

Then the first unpleasantness occurred.

The sixtyish clerk in her burgundy-colored *Drug Mall* smock stood at her register, her hands in the pockets of her khakis. At the counter, a woman, whom I aged as in her mid-forties, dressed in tight black Capri pants, yoga-style, and a colorful three-quarter length top, with her dirty-blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, talked without pause. The silent cashier stared at her.

What? I thought. What's going on?

Then I took a second look and realized that the customer chatted on her cell phone. As she leaned on her shopping cart, Phone Lady said, "The closing has to take place that afternoon," and I figured she was a real estate agent working on a deal. Normally, I would be angry at the woman's rudeness in continuing her conversation and ignoring the cashier and the business she stood in line to transact. But I understood how buying and selling a house requires several pieces to fall in place in the right order. I told myself to give her the benefit of the doubt. She's trying to get it done.

But after two-and-a-half minutes, patience left me. As the woman continued her conversation and made no effort to pay and move on, my breathing became shorter and louder. Frustration took charge. I surveyed the store for another out. Please use the next register signs rested on the other counters. I eyed the basket of the man ahead of me and counted his items once more to be sure. Two. Should I stay or should I go? Before I answered the question, Phone Lady slid her credit card through the machine and signed the screen though she still continued the phone chat. The cashier finished the sale, packed the items in a plastic bag, took the receipt from the register, gave both to the woman, and told her in the friendliest customer service voice she could muster to have a nice day.

Finally! I thought. Breathing returned to normal.

Then the second evil happened

Phone Lady, who had not turned yet so I could see her face, continued in deep discussion with her phone. Without acknowledging anyone else, she took her bag, walked around her shopping cart, left it in front of the cashier's counter blocking any other customers, and headed towards the door.

That's it, I thought. Not on my watch! I got out of line, strode towards the cart, and pushed it in the woman's direction as she walked out. "Excuse me, Mrs. Phone Lady!"

Oblivious to the call and still chatting, the woman had passed through the first door into the air-lock vestibule. She then glimpsed me headed in her direction dripping with sarcasm. "Excuse me, Mrs. Phone Lady! Did you leave your cart for one of us to move? You're not the only customer in the store."

"What?" Phone Lady's edgy voice sliced through the air in my direction. "What?! Excuse me, ma'am, but there are more polite ways to correct someone." She then made her way back into the store with a turn that finally revealed her face.

The sight unnerved me for a second. "I'm sorry," I said in a quieter but cutting tone. "By the way your face looks, you must be having a bad day. I'll get your cart for you." I didn't stop there though. "BTW, whatever kind of look you were going for, you missed."

"Hold on, Madge, I have an interruption here." Phone Lady monotoned into her phone as she moved towards me. "You don't have to yell or be so nasty."

"She's absolutely right," the middle-aged man with the baseball cap said.

I hesitated. Did I have to deal with him now, too?

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“She’s right.” The man warmed to the task. “You were rude,” he said to Phone Lady.

“That’s very mature. Everyone attack me!” Phone Lady said, not giving way.

“You need to get off your phone while you pay for your things. Didn’t you see other people waiting behind you? You’re out in public. It’s not all about you here.” The man took control, his voice getting louder.

As Phone Lady moved closer to us, I realized that I had started what could become a nasty run-in when I simply needed to buy lip gloss, gum, and candy and get to the game. Only three steps separated us. I put up my hand to signal halt like I did when students in school faced off with each other before a hallway brawl. Then I had a moment of inspiration. I paused, reached into my jacket pocket, pulled out my phone, looked at the screen, and said, “I’m sorry. I have to take this call.”

Phone Lady fumbled for words to shoot at me, but her phone rang. Torn between answering it or coming out on top in the scrap, she must have had a moment of clarity, to my relief. She looked at her phone, touched the screen, and answered it. “Yes. Yes, I’m on my way.” She shifted her eyes from me to the man, shook her head, let out a snort, then spun to leave and almost fell over the shopping cart which, somehow, had found its way to a position right behind her. She recovered her balance, said “I don’t have time for this nonsense,” pushed the cart to the collection area, and moved herself out the door.

I caught the cashier smiling faintly then calling in a most gracious voice, “I’ll take the next in line, please.” Civilized normalcy returned to *Drug Mall*.

At last I reached the counter, and as the cashier scanned the items, I searched my bag for my wallet to pull out a debit card. Panic set in. In a flash, I remembered the night before when Zach asked if I had any cash to pay the pizza delivery guy who stood outside our door. In a flash, I remembered I gave him two twenties and put the wallet down to answer a phone call. In all the flashes, I could not remember if I put it back in the bag. With no card or cash, I apologized and left the *Drug Mall*.

Both embarrassed and late, with victory over Phone Lady turned into a hollow one without the lip gloss, the gum, and the red Slicorices, I hightailed it to my car, flew out of the parking lot, and drove to Renee’s house to pick her up.

I recalled how the two of us had met five years ago. A position on the English/Language Arts team opened up in the middle of the year when a teacher's husband got a job in a different state. Bantamville hired Renee, who had worked for several months before as a substitute. I knew the difficulties of taking over a class in the middle of a school year. I offered Renee as much help as I could. I shared materials with her, gave her suggestions for classroom management and record-keeping, and even sat in on a class when she asked. Renee set to work and reined in a group that had not had a permanent regular teacher for four months.

The two of us connected on a personal level, too, and we looked forward to going out for a drink after work on a Friday to share stories of school, husbands, and family. But an unusual event endeared us to each other.

By the time Renee started at BS High, cell phone use by the kids during class had escalated from a minor nuisance to a major disturbance. I, always the problem solver, devised a plan to overcome it, or so I thought. At the beginning of the semester, I presented what I judged to be a hilarious and effective mini-lesson on the distractions and dangers of texting and ended it with a poem of my own creation composed of "ruined" lines from famous poets. Accompanied by photos I had taken at the local mall, I read it aloud to them.

Whose shoes these are I think I know
But I have messages to text,
And miles to go
before I rest.
I heard a Fly Buzz—when I phoned
Do not go gentle into the mall alone
I wandered obliviously as a cloud,
Shall I compare me to a summer school crowd?
I am the master of my phone
But when I hear that cool ring tone
I am the captain of my minute
Water, water everywhere, and while texting you, I fell in it.

Lovers of everything corny, the kids laughed. Maybe they just smiled. At least it made it easier to get them on board when I required them to place their phones in the file drawer as they entered the room each day. And they

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put up little resistance to “registering” them by letting me snap pictures of their phones so I could make sure each got the same one back at the end of class.

The plan worked for a few months, but after the holiday break, one particular ring tone rang out several times during my classes. I warned that the offender risked the loss of his or her phone when caught. But every effort to find it failed. To add to the mystery, I could account for each student’s phone. Not until I invited Renee in to see a particular lesson did the puzzle get solved.

While she sat in the back corner to observe the class, Renee heard a muffled brrrrring-brrrrring. She turned in the sound’s direction, towards the wall and a freshly painted cinder block. Brrrrring-brrrrring. It sounded again.

As we discovered later, Hank Broadbent, the custodian, had noticed a hole in the wall during the holiday break, dug out the plaster, and then re-filled the gap. Renee figured out, after much discussion among the three of us, a few bags of potato chips, and lots of laughter, that his phone must have fallen out of his pocket and dropped into the opening, and he didn’t notice it. He then spackled, painted, and sealed his phone in and started my journey to madness. Renee had solved the mystery and had cemented our friendship.

I made a quick pickup stop for Renee, and once we were on our way to the game, I entertained her with the *Drug Mall* story until we pulled into the school’s parking lot. As we walked to the football field, Brian Evans’ dynamic voice echoed through the air. “First down for the Bantamville South Sages on Rivertown’s twenty-four-yard line!”

In his social studies classes, Brian could keep his students mesmerized for a full period with his lectures on the causes of the Civil War. Other teachers in classrooms nearby always asked him to close his door because his booming voice carried down two hallways. When he pronounced it as “THE BLOODIEST CONFLICT IN NORTH AMERICAN HISTORY,” extended his arms in front of him, and moved them in rhythm with the words, his students couldn’t look away. When he asked what choice the Southern states had when they realized they had lost influence once Abraham Lincoln won the election, he answered his own question first in a whisper, then in a deafening voice. “SECESSION!” The stovepipe hat and scrawny black beard helped, too.

Exciting a crowd at a ball game was child’s play to him. As the regular announcer for football, basketball, and baseball, Brian earned the title The Voice of BS, a reference his friends loved to use especially after a drink or four at happy hour. He made what might be a hum-drum high school game sound

like the Super Bowl, the Final Four championship game, or the World Series. The athletes gained celebrity status when he gave each of their names a special flourish. Frankie Williams became FrankiEEEE WiLLLLiams when Brian pronounced it during a football game. Shawn Detmar transformed into Shawn DEADEYE Detmar. And pitcher Billy Ryan earned a middle name, Billy NoLLLLan Ryan.

Homecoming Day and Brian's announcing were a BSHS tradition, and I appreciated that its sights, sounds, and reunions continued despite Parks. The aroma of hot dogs and hamburgers cooking on the grill at the refreshment stand run by the Band Parents' Association tempted vegetarians to become meat eaters for a day. The award-winning band provided a rousing soundtrack to the festivities. Bantamville South graduates loved to come back from wherever they were, college, work, armed services, to reunite with their old high school friends.

This year offered a bonus, an undefeated football team. Though they had played only three games, the newspaper predicted they would win their league championship and go on to become state champs. Much of that success, as I heard, came because of the play of Williams, a senior whom the coaches expected to break school, county, and state records as a running back. Even more interesting, recruiters from several Division I colleges attended games to see him. A full ride for playing football awaited him.

"Hi, Mrs. Stanton!" The excited voice got my attention. Sam Norman, a former student, ran up and gave me a hug.

"Sammy! Hi, how are you? How is school?"

"Great! I'm happy at State. Thanks to you for getting me to go in that direction."

"I'm glad it's a good fit. Are your grades good? And you've adapted to college life?"

"Grades, hm. I think they're good. Mid-terms are in about two weeks, so I'll know then. But I keep up. I should be fine. And college is a blast."

"I'm happy for you, Sam. Glad you came back for today."

"Couldn't miss it. Really good to meet up with you, Mrs. S. I see some other people I want to talk to."

When he applied to colleges last year, Sam hoped to attend a major university. But he realized that too late in his high school career. He had the ability, but academic minimalist described his approach to studying. He spent as

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little time as he needed to on academics during his first three years. His involvement in clubs and activities would help him, but his grades didn't quite meet university standards. His counselor and several teachers tried to explain that to him and direct him to smaller, less selective schools. But Sam wanted to go big. He applied to major universities Princeton, UCLA, Northwestern, Maryland, and Penn State. I didn't want to stomp on his dreams, so I tried to suggest gently that he consider a few smaller colleges. I also spoke to his parents about it and with their help convinced Sam to apply to one or two. As it turned out, he didn't make the cut for the big schools, but State University accepted him and even gave him financial aid. I believed Sam had matured by the end of his senior year, learned how to handle college, and would succeed. I happily encouraged him to go to State. And after two months, he was happy.

While I spoke with Sam, Renee reunited with two of her former students, then we both found a seat high in the bleachers. "What do you think about Williams?"

"He's got the skills, as they say. For football, anyway." I fumbled through my purse to find something to chew or munch on. To my surprise, I found an unopened package of Slicorices. I tested them for flexibility versus teeth-breaking stiffness and decided they were still edible.

"Yeah. He's in my senior class. He struggles. Doesn't have the classroom skills."

"That's what I heard. Had him in my tenth-grade class. He didn't make it. Had to go to summer school. I guess he passed that." I now worked to open the Slicorices package but met with resistance.

"With all the recruiting, I wonder when they'll check his grades. They shouldn't lead the kid on. And they better not wait until the spring to check them." Renee spoke from experience. She had taught seniors for several years, and she knew that, by the end of the third quarter, if grades didn't measure up, the chances of the kid graduating grew slimmer.

I finally opened the candy and offered a strip to Renee. "For Frankie, not graduating on time could be disastrous," I said. "Though a college that wants him would probably find a way, grades or not."

"That's what worries me. Especially with Parks at the helm. A kid signing with a big-time college during her first year as principal could be the diamond in her tiara with the school board. How much pressure will she put on the teachers to pass him?"

“Good point.”

“You know, if the kid shows up every day, participates, does all his work, even if it’s not great, he’ll pass my course. And probably every other teacher’s. But Williams. He doesn’t get that. He cuts, he doesn’t do work, and when he is in class, he’s a PIA.”

The siren blared to end the quarter just as Renee finished.

“Half-time,” I said. “Want to stay for the festivities, or have you had enough?”

“Let’s stay. I’d like to see who gets Homecoming King and Queen and watch the band’s performance. Their Tribute to the Movies is supposed to be awesome!”

The hours I put in Monday through Friday satisfied me enough that I stayed away from school events on weekends. I made an exception for homecoming, however, because it offered me a chance to catch up with my former students. I got a sense of accomplishment when I heard about their successes. It made all the effort worth it.

To start the half-time festivities, each class paraded with signs that proclaimed them the best. Fantastic Frosh. Superb Sophs. Junior Jokesters. The E/LA team had aced teaching alliteration to the underclassmen. The seniors didn’t quite get it though. Their banner read *We’re Almost Outta Here*.

Brian then introduced the nominees for king and queen, and each couple walked to the center of the field. Last year’s winners returned to crown the new royalty. The old stereotypes from my high school days were gone. Cheri Lanigan, soccer star, matched up with Brian Barsel, lead in several musicals. Amy Jamison, cheerleader, strolled out with Rashiv Andor, tennis number one. Billy Retner, wrestler, escorted Sally Bolton, cosmetology student. Donna Burns, newspaper editor, and Larry Allen, football second teamer, rounded out the group. Guys and girls weren’t chosen for their looks, and they didn’t have to be dating each other. The kids had gotten past appearances and nominated students who contributed to the school community. More than cute, it fit today.

As the band began their march onto the field for their performance, Brian announced the winners and the previous royals presented them with their crowns. “The new Bantamville South Sages Homecoming King and Queen are Donna Burns and Larry Allen!”

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I smiled. Perfect. Burns and Allen. My favorite comedy team from days gone by. A great newspaper headline popped into my head. Burns and Allen Rock Homecoming. Maybe other dinosaurs like me would get it.

But maybe that wasn't all bad. Velociraptors and T-rex were in charge for a long time. True, they had luck from nature and adaptation when a climate catastrophe wiped out their main competitors, crurotarsans, from the early crocodile family at the end of the Triassic Period. But they rose to dominance from the volcanic eruptions. There had to be a lesson in that.

I chewed on another Slicorice and digested the topic of my conversation with Renee: seniors who did not care and did not work. Nothing unusual about that. They existed. But the prospect of a star athlete recruited by Division I colleges who wouldn't help himself and the questions about how far the new principal would go to make her school and herself look good raised the level of concern. I made a mental note to check Frankie Williams' grades to avoid problems in June. I added a footnote to do the same for Principal Parks' record at her previous schools in order to be ready for problems every day.

My intuition told me I would need to be prepared.

12

At the monthly staff meeting in the auditorium, Laurent did his best to organize the group. “Good afternoon. Please have a seat. We’d like to have everyone sit near the front. It will make sharing the information we have to give you much easier.”

But his voice could barely be heard above the noise from the voices and movement in the room. The room’s acoustics, perfect for one choir or band at a time, could not handle the cacophony as ninety teachers talked at once. Mercifully to all ears, someone handed Laurent a microphone and let him know the audio system worked.

“GOOD AFTERNOON,” he said into the mike. Heads turned up. “COULD EVERYONE HAVE A SEAT?” Bodies moved to seats. “WE’D LIKE TO HAVE EVERYONE SIT NEAR THE FRONT, PLEASE. AND QUIET DOWN SO WE CAN START.”

Two out of three isn’t bad. Calm and silence settled on the air in seconds, and Laurent began the meeting. After ten minutes of updates and run-of-the-mill announcements, he got to the main topic: test scores. Principal Parks now took over.

“First, I will ask once more, and only once more, for you to move to the front. If you cannot do this, we will not continue the meeting, and you will need to come here again tomorrow.” After she said it, she stared at the back of the room, pursed her lips, and did not move.

Whether motivated by her look or the threat of another day after school when they’d have to listen to her, the unwilling rose and moseyed closer.

Once the group settled and quieted, I saw a slight, self-satisfied smile on Parks’ face. She had won the battle.

“As you know, the new state regulations regarding graduation requirements are in effect this year.” She paused and peered at the staff over her reading glasses that sat on the rim of her nose, then half-looked down to read

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from her notes. "What this means for our students is that they must achieve, I repeat, must achieve passing scores on the Annual Assessment of School and Work Preparedness Enterprise, for short the AASWPE, in both math and English/Language Arts." She paused to let everyone process that point.

I suppressed my reaction, more intent to take in the crowd's mixed response. Bodies perked up in their seats, but they groaned and fidgeted, too.

"At this point, we don't know what those passing scores are because the state has not decided that yet."

That got a response.

"What?" teachers mouthed to each other.

"That does make our job a bit more difficult. Nonetheless, we still have to make sure our students are in position to achieve passing." She paused again for emphasis. "Because they will have to graduate."

At this point, a little hammer pounded in my head.

"You also should be aware if you are not already that your evaluation will include a score based on a formula which will take into account how your students do on the exam." She said this quickly, probably aware that it would raise the level of concern and attention.

I saw Parks' knuckles whiten as she clutched the microphone. The hammer gained momentum.

"We are working on a plan which we hope to implement as soon as possible. By next week, the administrators will meet with each department to lay out what we expect from each of you to get our students ready. Your team leaders will let you know when your first meeting is scheduled once we schedule it. In the next few months, we will have more meetings to give you more guidance on how to do test prep. Ultimately, student scores will be calculated in your YIPE final. These are mandatory meetings, so be there. If you are a coach of a sport or an advisor of an activity that would normally meet that day, cancel it. All teachers, I repeat, all teachers must attend."

More low groans filled the air as listeners fidgeted. In the last few years, as the educational system came under attack and reforms were put into place faster than the memos that explained them were typed, the administration held weekly meetings to update the staff on the changes. They quickly lost their impact. I listened to the comments every time the state or administration announced another.

"Who cares what the changes are? Tell me something that will help the students, then I'll listen. Another meeting is another waste of time."

Parks' mandatory ones would not change many minds.

Parks paused, looked up with her eyes while the rest of her face still pointed down at her notes, then continued. "Rather than talk in generalities, I will let the administrators provide you with the information at your team meeting. I will give you this information. The core subjects—English/Language Arts, math, social studies, and science—will implement a new testing program I have purchased. Students in these courses will take a test similar to the standardized test every month. It will give our students practice in test-taking. Teachers will be required to use the program."

Groans sounded.

Parks continued. "I will emphasize that I am here at this school as principal because the board of education recognized my expertise in improving a school's rank both statewide and nationally."

The staff did not need this reminder. They knew that Parks had *carte blanche* to do whatever it demanded. The board hired her based on what she seemed to have achieved at her previous school.

Parks, however, felt the need to hammer home that fact. "That is why I am here. I implemented programs in my former position that achieved results. I intend to do the same here. That's it for now unless there are questions?"

At that point in most meetings, teachers would begin to gather their belongings and get ready to join the race to be the first out of the parking lot. But not at this one.

Throughout my teaching life, I had experienced test preparation policies that claimed to involve all teachers, but they mostly fell on two departments. E/LA and math prepared the students every day and were required to identify our specific teach-to-the-test lessons. In the past, I had argued the point that our salaries should be higher. A music teacher friend laughed and told me, "That's your mistake. You should have become a music teacher." I joked that I was tone deaf, then added that test accountability shouldn't pit teacher against teacher. He agreed, and he brought me a coffee on test day to show his support. He left it on my desk before he left the building for a dental appointment, one he scheduled for that day since he was not required to proctor the test. Still I had to ask the question I had every year to every principal though it prolonged the meeting, and I would hear the whines of teacher friends at the next happy hour. "What will the non-tested disciplines do to help prep the students for the test?"

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“Good question. I will defer my answer to that. We will fill you in on all that at the team meetings.”

Once again, I thought, administrative deflection.

Brian Evans raised his hand and put on his sports announcer’s voice. “Dr. Parks, if the two areas tested are math and English, is it necessary for the other teams to be involved in these preparations?”

Parks snapped in response. “Yes, it is necessary. Even though your discipline is not directly tested, there are lessons and activities you can and should do to help your students develop the test-taking skills they will need. In addition, the E/LA test includes reading and writing based on texts from other disciplines. History, art, science. We all need to do our part.”

Brian stopped listening after yes, I thought.

Health/Phys Ed teacher Mary Jane Langer shot her hand up in the air like she had swished a three-pointer. “I’m not sure about the teacher evaluation part. If I don’t teach math or English, and there’s no exam in my discipline, what test scores will be used to calculate my evaluation score?”

“That’s the tricky part.” Parks spoke in her honeyed voice. “The state hasn’t decided this yet, but we think it will go like this. Since everything will be done by computer, including scores, we will create a spreadsheet. With your name, we will list the scores of the students in each of your classes. We will probably get an average for all your students based on their tests, and that is the score that will be used for your evaluation.”

“Even though I teach health or PE and not math or English, whether I keep or lose my job will be based on how my students do in those areas? Seems whacky, not to mention unfair,” Mary Jane said with the collective groans of the audience behind me.

“Yes. You’re right on both items. We’re all in this together. I expect each of you to follow the plan I will set forth to do this. Nothing less will be acceptable. If you foresee difficulty in that, please see me individually, and I will explain it to you so you can understand. If there are no more questions that’s it for today. Thank you and good night.”

Though the meeting ended, the crowd reaction didn’t. As teachers filed out of the auditorium, they put their thoughts into words.

“They can’t do that. It won’t work.”

“She sounds threatening!”

“It’s absurd. Evaluating me on how my kids do in another subject?”

“Sounds like she will bully us into submission!”

“Relax. It’s another impossible edict from above that will get nowhere.”

“Guess I’ll start teaching kids how to figure the angles of their free throws.”

“Yeah, and mine will read about how to do a watercolor painting.”

“Did she really raise that school’s ranking?”

“Ugh, another meeting next week on how to teach to a test.”

“I’ve got to Google her and her old school. She makes herself sound like a savior!”

“No way I’m changing what’s worked for me for twenty years.”

And so it went. We’re all in this together sounded collaborative, but experience had taught me that, for standardized test preparation, we’re all meant math and English/Language Arts teachers because theirs were the only tested areas. I sympathized with the others to some degree. Their students might be high achievers in the subjects they taught and that might be because of the teacher. But unless their students achieved high scores in English and math, they’d be rated emerging, or worse. A real estate agent’s commission for a house sale wouldn’t be reduced because other houses for sale on the same street were not sold for as high a price. In the real world, it didn’t make sense. But in the sphere of public education, it only had to please the politicians. At least Parks added two other subjects to the mix.

Nevertheless, a sledgehammer now drove a stake into my brain.

Later that night, as I stood at the kitchen sink and my hands luxuriated in the warm, soapy dish water as I cleaned up after dinner, I listened to the voice of Dirk Arthur as he introduced the categories for the first round of *Show Your Smarts*. With the TV audio dialed up to thirty-six, I could do the dishes and play the game, one of the perks of a small, open-design house where only air connected the kitchen and TV room.

Tonight’s topics grabbed my attention. Before & After, Notorious People, Television History, Mythology, Literature, and Word Origins. The contestants zipped through the first three with no problem, but they shied away from the last. I understood why when they had no other choice but to try to respond to questions in those groups. By my while-dish-washing calculations, of the fifteen items in Mythology, Literature, and Word Origins, they gave the correct answer to one, a highly unusual statistic for the show. Did people not know “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times” is the start of *A Tale of Two Cities*? Or “Once luring men to danger, now one warns of it” is a siren?

Or “Once a carnival performer who bit the heads off chickens, today it refers to a computer nerd” is geek?

When the show went to commercial, I got into a conversation with my husband, Zach, about how that display of *Show Your Smarts* contestants’ knowledge did not bode well for America or for my students on the new standardized tests. He provided a curious take on it.

“Colleges have fewer English and liberal arts majors now than they ever did before. Kids want majors that’ll get them a job.” Zach spooned the leftovers into containers to be put into the freezer as he pointed out the real world economics.

“Yeah. Thanks to that technology billionaire and his wife and their foundation,” I said.

Zach continued and played his favorite role when I was on a roll: devil’s advocate. “STEM. That’s the big push. Add student debt because college is so expensive, and it all makes sense. We need to STEM student debt.” Zach laughed at his own cleverness. “You go to college so you can get a job, not play around with ideas.”

“We still need people who can separate the fact from the bullshit when politicians talk. We need people who can read, listen, think critically, come up with ideas, incorporate different perspectives, and put their ideas into words. That’s what a liberal arts education does.” I was on a soapbox. “And from all of that, problems get solved.” I couldn’t understand why people didn’t get it. “And ...” I continued as I usually did to derail Zach in his argument. “Imagine the state of this country if there’s a guy who runs for president who plays with the facts. What if he says whatever he thinks will get people to vote for him, whether it’s true or not? Or whether he even believes it or not? What if the voters don’t know enough to call BULLSHIT on his ideas? We’d have a fast-talking, comical, egotistical, narcissistic buffoon in charge of the country ready to make his own deals with Russia, China, Iraq, Iran, and Kim Jong-Un. How safe would your guns make you then?”

“I agree with you, but it’s the twenty-first century, and an antiquated education in liberal arts ain’t gonna cut it.”

I prepared to continue to attack his argument even though I realized he was only playing his role. Then the mention of a name on the TV news break got my attention. “Did they say Rikki Parks?” I moved into the living room to see the screen.

“I didn’t hear it,” Zach said.

“Darn. I missed it,” I said. “Something about Parks and her previous job. I wonder ...”

“You’ll find out soon enough, won’t you?”

“Probably. But it is Bantamville ...”

In her research on Parks in August, Renee discovered several stories online that reported on borderline legal decisions and programs Parks had instituted in her other schools. They included complaints by parents about how she handled sensitive student issues. I read them and chalked them up to disgruntled mothers and fathers and kids who didn’t get their way. I wondered if the news story offered any additional or more detailed information.

“All right, contestants. It’s time to continue our game. We now head into the Show You’re Smarter round with these topics ...” Dirk’s voice hit my ears, the signal to return to the evening’s entertainment. Thoughts of Parks could wait another day.

Routine, as usual, returned.

“Names. Names. Names. They’re very important to us. Did you ever ask your parents why they gave you the name you have?”

On the Wednesday after homecoming weekend, I watched a lesson Nikki Mallon, a first-year teacher, presented on a classic novel the group was reading. As Nikki’s mentor, my responsibilities allowed me to sit in on her classes once in a while to watch her teach, then highlight the positives and offer suggestions for improvement. Unlike formal observations that became part of a teacher’s YIPE, these were for discussion only, their purpose to help the new teacher. I counted the chance to see innovative teaching strategies as an added perk.

Since the class had read most of the novel, Nikki intended the discussion to spark creative ideas for a writing assignment in a few days. This group didn’t talk too much even about their own lives. I expected Nikki to struggle to stimulate conversation.

“Parents choose their children’s names to establish an identity. For example, you may be a junior or a third and named after a respected family member. Or you may be named after a saint if your parents have a Catholic or Christian background. Or after a famous person, an actor, actress, character in a novel. Is that the case for any of you?”

A few hands went up, and Nikki worked her teacher-magic and drew conversation out of them.

Nikki had not originally planned to teach, but she was a natural. After an eight-year stint in the Marine Corps, she returned to college, majored in English Education, and graduated summa cum laude. Despite her friends’ best efforts to talk her out of it, she decided to teach, qualified for her certification, and, at the age of thirty-one, landed a position at Bantamville South High. Her Marine training and toughness came through in her mannerisms

while her sharp sense of humor and charming down-to-earthness helped her to connect with the kids. She shared her life experiences when they were relevant to the topic, and the kids responded to that.

After only a few weeks of classroom observations, I saw the thoroughness in how she planned, prepared, and delivered lessons. Nikki would succeed if she survived the politics of a school district where being talented and qualified didn't always result in a contract renewal. Most current candidates for office believed their best shot at election came if they attacked the work of public servants. Teachers offered a perfect target. Most people remembered the D or F they got on that research paper they spent an hour writing. Few remembered the three due date extensions their teacher gave them to complete the paper. Politicians who promised to hold educators accountable and control their excessive salaries had a receptive audience of voters. Conscientious, hard-working, new teachers who stayed at the job for more than two or three years were rare in a school environment where teachers' salaries ranked at the low end of the state pay scale. Nikki had effective instructional methods and also served as a positive role model for the students. I intended to do what I could to keep her at BSHS.

"Do parents have any idea what else the names they give and the spellings they choose for those names do for their offspring?" Nikki continued the discussion.

I noted that the class listened attentively. I hoped Nikki would build on it as she moved them into the activity.

"In a minute, you will group up with your partners and talk about names. Take ten minutes to talk about the topic, share what you know about your name, share favorite names, unusual names, as much as you can about names. Questions?"

None.

"Okay, move to your groups and get started. I'll set the timer. Ten minutes."

The students followed directions, and a buzz of voices filled the air.

"What about Billy Williams? What were his parents thinking?" Derek's group's discussion was veering off track a bit.

"Maybe it's a family thing. You know. His father. His grandfather." Mike served as a foil to Derek.

"How do you know that?" Derek held up his end. "Maybe they didn't even realize what they were doing."

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“Maybe they had a lot of expenses when he was born.” A slight gleam lit up Amanda’s eyes, and she held one palm up. “You know. Lots of ... bills.”

“It’s allowed.” Mike high-fived Amanda.

“What are you saying?” Nikki interjected to get the discussion back on track. “That parents try to fit the name to a quality they see in their babies?”

“Maybe. It happens today. Look at the names of some of the other kids in this school. They fit their names,” Derek said. “How about that kid? What’s his name? Mike, you know the one.”

His voice trailed off as he sought the name, and my mind wandered to those of students in my classes. I recalled the first day of school and my amazement at the variety.

McSteve. Stenley. Cyriaque. Maxcene. Danyell. Tyrell.

The creative names of students and Nikki’s group conversations took me back to classes in which I taught *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Kids related to the story for the most part. Some memories, though, equaled the entertainment value of the Richard incident.

I asked one class when they had read the first section of the novel and seen as much of the film, to share their opinions of it. Most of the students said they enjoyed it despite it being two hundred eighty-one pages long. Some parents read it, too. The most interesting and revealing response came from a student with one of those unusual and lovable names. Tenth-grader Annick, whose name rhymes with can speak, shot her hand up with no need for thought time. “It’s good, Mrs. S. But they better start killing those mockingbirds. The story’s already half over.”

I laughed out loud at the memory and it shook me from my daydream in time so that I heard the end of the class’s discussion on names. But my amusement did not escape the kids.

“What do you think, Mrs. S? Something pretty funny?”

“I guess there is something to the idea that parents name their kids to make a statement or to fit what they see in them at birth.” I tried for sober conversation.

“Okay. You’re the teacher.” But Nick wasn’t done. “Derek, what happened when you were born? Parents strike oil or something.”

The topic had shifted. But just in time Nikki concluded the lesson with a short assignment. “Consider your name. What does it say about you? Then think about the name of a character from the novel. In what ways does it fit the person’s character? In what ways does it not fit? Finally, how do you react

when you meet someone who has the same name as you? Write a paragraph in your journal to answer each question. One about your name, one about the character's, and one about how you react when someone else has your name. Jot some thoughts down right now before the bell rings. Finish it for tomorrow."

The choice of assignment impressed me. It required the kids to apply the literature to something in their lives after they had discussed the topic as it fit the bigger world. It made me think, too. I zeroed in on the final question. How would I react if someone else took the name Kasia Isabel Murdza Stanton?

Large-screen TVs lined up above the bar from one end to the other flashed enough variety that even the nerdiest drinker found entertainment. ESPN dominated the choices. *Darcy's Tavern* advertised itself as a sports bar, but CNN, MSNBC, and C-SPAN babbled a wealth of information. One smaller screen lit up with a History Channel special.

On a Friday afternoon that followed a long week, I scanned the screens as I waited for Ginger, a friend and E/LA teacher at BS High. I focused on the History Channel because the noise in the high-ceilinged room drowned out the audio from all of them, and only it had closed captions. A particular word drew my attention: *suiseki*.

In a few minutes, I learned that *suiseki* is an abbreviation of *san-sui-kei-jiyo-seki*, or landscape scene stone. The rocks and stones shown attracted my eye, but the story behind them kept me interested. As I read the caption, I learned that *suiseki* are water stones aged by wind, rain, and snow, and their appearance and shapes suggest natural scenes of animals or humans. They are collected, prepared, and exhibited in aesthetically pleasing miniature landscapes. The idea to gather and display them started in China and Japan, then a link to Zen Buddhism eventually spread it around the world.

The text in the caption explained that collectors look at the small details of texture, color, and shape. Unlike that of an ordinary stone, the beauty of a *Suiseki* waits for discovery below the surface. Only by careful observation over time can the collector grasp the stone's true character and personality.

Hm, I thought. Like people, teachers, students. The collectors take time to get to know the stones. I'll have to read more about *suiseki*. I wonder what they do with the stones that don't turn out to have great character.

Just then, Ginger came through the door and waved.

"Hi, Kassi!" She sang it out as she took a seat, placed her coat on the back support, her body on the stool, and her phone on the bar.

Ginger Kendrick joined the E/LA team at Bantamville South five years ago during my second year as leader. I again remembered how overwhelming my own first year of teaching was, so I reached out to Ginger and offered her whatever I thought might make her rookie year easier.

“Hi, Ginger. You made it. Have trouble leaving school behind?”

“Sort of. I wanted to leave right at three o’clock. But you know how needy some of my kids are. As I was about to put my coat on, two of them walked in and wanted to talk. Some kid drama. You know I couldn’t leave them, so we talked for a bit. Were you waiting long? Sorry.”

“No problem. I’ve been watching an interesting show, what I could see of it. Ever hear of *suseki*?”

“Oh, yes. Stone collecting? Japanese? Meditating on them to relax, de-stress? Part of tea ceremonies? I read about it in college. And one stone might sell for thousands of dollars. Very interesting.” Ginger half paid attention and half glanced at her phone screen.

“It is.” I was surprised by Ginger’s knowledge of the dollar value of the stones. “The idea is that to appreciate its beauty, you have to look at it from every angle. Art, literature, music all come into play. It gave me a whole new respect for the stone. I have to read up on it. It sounds serene.”

“Oh!” Ginger stopped suddenly, then reached for her phone, but the interruption did not come from a ring tone.

“What? Are you okay?”

“Oh, sorry.” She tugged then fiddled with the gold bracelet she wore on her wrist.

“Something’s wrong, Ginger. What’s going on?”

“Oh! I saw Ben Worthen across the way at the other bar. It’s fine, I’m okay.”

No way, I thought. Why does this guy keep popping up in my life? I hardly knew him.

I did know that Ginger’s history with Ben Worthen dated back to her freshman year at South Island University, a college about two hours away from Bantamville. Ben, who had transferred to SIU as a junior the previous year, met and became good friends with Jake Suder, and the two shared an off-campus apartment in their senior year. Jake, who started to work at the college’s television station in his first semester, ran it in his senior year and met Ginger when he interviewed her for a job. She got it and soon was included in his and Ben’s after-work munchie runs, as he called them, when they would

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hit the twenty-four-hour *Snack-in-a-Box* for burgers, fries, and shakes. Both guys were attracted to her. In fact, most males fell under her spell. If her feathery five-foot-four frame didn't interest them, her wispy blonde hair, light blue eyes, and soft smile charmed them. Before Ben could make his move though, Jake took action, and he and Ginger started dating. After eight months, when he graduated and landed a teaching position at BSHS, they broke up. Mutual? I didn't know.

After they checked out of SIU, Ben and Jake moved to Bantamville and rented a luxury apartment at Concord Royal that neither of them could afford on his own. Originally from Bantamville, Ben still had family in the town. He had majored in theater arts, and living in Bantamville, only thirty miles from the city, made the commute to auditions doable. For three years, they lived bachelors' lives until Jake became engaged to Kim, the daughter of the owner of the Concord Royal. They had dated for about six months. When they married and found their own place, Ben moved into a less expensive studio flat. He had done a few acting jobs, but to support himself, he fell back on work as a substitute teacher for a short time while he tended bar at a local restaurant.

Ginger married Greg Kendrick a little over a year ago, so her reaction to seeing Ben in the bar puzzled me. What had he done to her that his mere presence across a bar bowled her over?

"We can go somewhere else, if it bothers you," I said.

"No, no, I'm good. Let me order a drink." Ginger brushed back her curls, signaled for a drink, and stole a glance in the direction of the other bar as she waited. Once the bartender came over and she engaged her in a long conversation about the drink she wanted, my mind returned to our first meeting during my second year as team leader.

I had spent the first year cleaning up messes left by the last leader, Harvey Frazier. While the curriculum and teaching elements were in order, department morale rated lower than the bottom of a swimming pool. I worked to rebuild relationships and get teachers to like each other. On some days, I recognized the irony of it because I found it difficult, myself, to see the other person's viewpoint. I needed to see things as others saw them, and I wanted my team to do the same. A few did. Others mistook getting inside their skin for getting under their skin.

Ginger became the first new teacher hired in my term. A position on the E/LA team opened up thanks to the promotion of Donna Rhodes. She had

taught at BSHS for eight years, and she used the promotion to secondary supervisor as the first step of her plan to rise high in administration. If Dave Laurent had asked her, as he did me, "Is this all you want to do?" in reference to teaching, her answer would exhaust him. "Of course, this isn't all I want to do. I plan on becoming a supervisor, getting a promo to vice-principal, then principal, and finally becoming superintendent. Yes, Dave, your boss." I heard Donna in my mind now and accepted without doubt that it would happen. She worked hard, had creative, progressive ideas, and recognized good teaching. No batshit landed on her head.

When the opening had to be filled in the middle of a school year, the decision as to who would fill it was left to the principal. Lou Hudson recommended Ginger to replace Donna. Normally the district would advertise, review applications, and schedule and conduct interviews over the course of a month. The team leader would be included in the process. But Lou sent his recommendation to the board for approval in three days. I never met the applicants. In fact, I guessed there were none other than Ginger. A little unusual, I figured at the time, but I chalked it up to familiarity. Ginger knew Jake, and Lou didn't like to deal with unknowns. Things worked out. Though I never sat in on any of Ginger's classes, I had heard no complaints and didn't have to babysit a substitute teacher for months while the administration conducted their interviews.

Ginger's all-encompassing geniality had come with a bonus. I had realized the classes she picked up lacked the refinements of civilization. One, a lively group of eleventh graders, held the records for most total absences, most guidance conferences about failing grades, and most students in one room wearing ankle bracelets of the monitoring kind with three out of a possible seventeen. To the most experienced teacher they would be a handful. On Ginger's first day, I geared up for problems and expected I would need to offer a daily counseling or venting session to Ginger. But that was not the case. In fact, Ginger expressed total confidence and appreciation of her accomplishment.

I stopped in the room after the last period. "How was it?"

"Fantastic!" Ginger raised both hands in the air. "It was really, really great!"

"Tell me about it." I needed the details.

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"I am probably the least pessimistic person in the world, believe me. But I really, really thought they would be a problem. Turns out they were incredible, and no one has probably ever said that about them, they'd rather say bad things. Sad. But for me, they were some fine people. And I truly believe, and I've said this to people before, it's true, if you give them something interesting, something they want, they'll respond. I did and the results were amazing."

"Wow." I was stunned. But I craved the specifics. How did Ginger do it? "Tell me what you did. What did you cover?"

"Oh, Kassi. I know literature, but I know today's cultural language, too. I used, like, you know, whatever fit the moment. We had terrific discussions. No one could handle them like I did."

"Oka-a-y." I sensed the sketchy, noncommittal description was as thorough as Ginger would get. And I was relieved that a therapy session would not be necessary.

I thought Ginger's optimism might encourage other team members and lift morale. As we worked together, I spent time with her and listened as she talked about eliminating some of the more difficult pieces of literature in the curriculum like Shakespeare, handling unruly classes, and reading through one hundred fifty essays in one weekend. We weren't always in agreement, especially about Shakespeare, but the exchanges were revealing.

I delighted in my relationships with Renee and Ginger. Renee mirrored my characteristics both professionally and personally, and our friendship came easily and comfortably because we were so much alike. Ginger, on the other hand, embodied the attractive, popular, iconic friend I never could win over during my college days no matter what I did because we were so unlike. I wanted a give-and-take with Ginger, too, but often I had misgivings about whether the feeling was reciprocal.

Renee and Ginger each had left footprints on my heart, but at times it seemed one wore sandals and the other spiked heels.

Now, Ginger and I sat quietly for a few minutes, each deep in our own thoughts.

I tightened my grip on my glass as a small hammer pounded in my forehead. The quick hire made life easier then. But now I realized that being left out of the selection process did matter. Worse than that, though, for five years and through a developing friendship neither of us had broached the subject nor come clean. Had we both sold our souls?

Though I fought it, intuition stoked my curiosity, and I exhaled. "It's sad, I guess." My voice rose higher and took on the edgier tone I hated because it meant I had lost some control.

"Hm? What?" Ginger spoke as if she had been shaken from her sleep.

I breathed and regained a calmer, smoother pitch. "It's sad that it takes so long for the suiseki to develop their true character. Some people never get to see it. Sad, don't you think?" Then I looked back at the TV and saw the credit roll from the suiseki program. I whispered to myself, "Respect the stone."

I wanted to, but I doubted I had the patience of those Japanese stone collectors. Five years after the fact, something about that hiring still nagged at me. Why? And why did I have to think about it during Friday happy hour?

Respect the stone. Look at it from every angle to find its true character. And don't be surprised at what you find.

On the Tuesday following the happy hour Friday with Ginger, the sun's rays through the window warmed the classroom to a sauna-like temperature, and I loved it. I basked in the warmth and finished my lunch before I opened that To Grade file to the remaining papers on *Great Expectations* that awaited me. But before I got to them, a knock on my door interrupted.

"Come in!"

"Kassi, I need you!" Ginger hyperventilated as she scampered through the door.

"What? Is someone hurt?"

"It's Santonio!" She positioned herself in front of my desk.

"What? What happened to him?" I pictured Guy sprawled out in the hallway gasping for air.

"No. Nothing happened to him. It's what he's doing to me!"

Hm. Santonio doing something to someone that caused high anxiety. Not unusual. I had seen this before. I pictured Guy as he pressured Ginger to meet him for dinner. He liked to socialize with female teachers, especially attractive ones. His marriage to a delightful woman did not stand in the way of his socializing with other women and I couldn't convince myself he went any further than that. "What do you mean? What now?"

"He says I didn't follow school policy with Shani. Remember when she came to me in tears about the standardized test prep assignment she couldn't do because her computer at home was down?" The words poured out like water out of a faucet. "She couldn't come after school to use the school's computer because she had soccer practice and games all week. And her mother didn't want her to go to the public library because Shani might meet kids she didn't want her to be with. So I told her to tell her mom I'd be at the library. I got Shani's phone number and told her I would text her when I got

there so she could meet me. I did, and she came and took the test. That's all." Ginger spat out the rest of the explanation with uncanny speed. "Santonio says her mother was not happy that I intruded. He says I shouldn't have contacted Shani. I should have talked with the mother and worked something out. But I did it my own way. He says I broke school policy."

As she retold the exchange, she looked both revved up and upset, and I tried to keep her from becoming even more unruffled. "Okay. Maybe you were wrong, and he wants to give you a heads-up." I hoped to calm her.

"No, it's not a heads-up!" Ginger almost shouted it then covered her mouth with her hand. I sensed she would snap. Then she said in a calmer voice, "He said to meet him in his office to sign the discipline report. He's writing me up, Kassi. Can you believe it?"

I could. That's how Santonio operated. But I didn't think it wise to say that to Ginger. I got up from my chair and walked around the desk to stand next to her. "That sounds impossible. All because you met a student at the library?"

"Well, I drove her home, too." She whispered it as she looked down at her hands. "It was raining."

"That's not good," I said. "But writing you up is harsh. Didn't you talk with him about it back then? You said you would get his okay before you did anything."

"I tried to, three times, but something came up each time. We never met. I e-mailed him, too, but he never answered. And the deadline was close."

Parks had mandated that E/LA teachers give a monthly on-line test and send her the students' scores quarterly. This not only stole one more day away from instruction. It also put pressure on teachers, as it did on Ginger, to do whatever it took to meet the deadline.

"When the due date to give Parks the results got closer, I needed her score. So, I went ahead and did it." She raised her voice volume. "I explained that to him yesterday."

Ginger's shoulder jerked and twitched as she walked towards the window. She stared out as though trying to process the unfairness being done to her.

"It sounds like he can't write you up for that. He dropped the ball."

"That's what I thought yesterday!" She snapped and managed to convey her anger and disappointment at the same time. "He said to call the mother and explain and apologize, which I did. But he came by my classroom last period and told me he had to write me up, and I should come to his office this

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period.” She paused and twirled her curls. Then she closed her eyes for a second and said, “Could you come with me?”

I hesitated. I had not heard this voice before with its soft I don’t want to go alone tone. “Sure, I’ll come.”

I cleaned my lunch bag off my desk before the two of us headed to Santonio’s office.

Tension filled the air as we walked down the hallway. Ginger did not look forward to a reprimand and a negative discipline report in her permanent personnel file. I did not look forward to talking with Santonio.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Kendrick,” Santonio said as we stepped into his office. “Come in.”

I noticed the questioning look in his eyes as I followed behind. “I’d like to sit in for this, if you don’t mind, Guy.” Most teachers made it a practice to have a colleague with them when they met with an administrator in cases like this.

“Of course,” Santonio said.

I took a seat next to Ginger and opposite the vice-principal.

“Here is the write-up. Mrs. Kendrick. Please read and sign it.”

“I don’t understand why you are writing this up, Guy,” Ginger said. “I spoke with the mother yesterday, and she was okay with it. I apologized for overstepping, and she said she wanted to protect her daughter. She’s good now.”

“Yes, yes. This write-up is only a formality. The principal insists we document everything regarding students and teachers. I have to do this.”

“It’s not fair, Guy. I work hard.” Her voice cracked. When I looked over at her, I saw her tearing up. “I’m a good teacher. I tried to help a student. Why punish me for it? What about the teachers who leave this building early every day and give nothing back?”

Her comment on other teachers’ behavior or lack of concern for their students surprised me. An unwritten rule said don’t criticize another teacher in front of an administrator. Bosses valued team players. I hoped she’d walk back on that one or move on to another defense.

She did, sort of, through her sobs. “Guy, I tried to talk with you before I helped the girl, but you were too busy.” She paused and reached for a tissue.

“Yes, yes. This is difficult, but it is only a formality.” Santonio tried to stem the flow of tears.

For an uneasy moment as the room got hotter, Ginger muffled her sobs. Santonio shuffled papers, looked out the window, and seemed unable to understand what had upset her.

“Guy, is it necessary? It’s simply a paper in her file. No one will ever see it.” I began negotiating. “Ginger follows the rules. Nothing like this will happen again to draw attention to her. Can’t you let it go?”

He shook his head and remained silent.

I knew it was only a formality, so I turned and put my hand on Ginger’s shoulder. “Sign it. It’s not going anywhere but in a file cabinet.”

Ginger sniffed and wiped her eyes, took a minute, stared at the painting on Santonio’s wall, then took pen in hand and signed.

I realized at that moment that this reprimand would be a first, and I felt a twinge of sadness. I pictured a life from kindergarten through high school, college, and her first few years in teaching where Ginger had done everything faultlessly and had broken none of the rules of those institutions. Standing up to the man had no chapter in her playbook. How difficult it must have been to be perfect. How much tougher now to be flawed.

“Thank you. You are a good teacher. We know that. And this is simply a paper in your file.” Santonio tried to make her feel better.

Ginger exited without saying a word. I, however, had some left and stayed to say them.

“Guy, you need to rethink filing that. You’re punishing a good teacher who probably doesn’t deserve it. If the mother is fine with it, can’t you be, too?”

Santonio walked behind his desk, sat down, and exhaled. I hoped he would reconsider. But he did not back down. “Kassi, Dr. Parks is on us about doing everything according to policy. I have to file this.”

When he mentioned Parks, I understood. He had to protect his standing with the boss. Close to retirement, he would not jeopardize remaining in his administrative position or collecting his lucrative pension. “According to policy” and “What the principal wants, the principal gets” were his mantras for the next two years. But I tried once more, and this time I played the card I held up my sleeve. “Guy, do you remember the graduation test incident a few years back when you were a new VP? When the student almost didn’t graduate because you forgot to schedule him for the make-up graduation test? I called a friend in the Department of Ed and got a special extension and permission to give him the test late as long as I gave it? Then I took my own time to give him the test. I could have told you no, but I didn’t because you needed

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help. And no one else found out how close the kid came to not graduating—because of your mistake.”

“I remember, Kassi. You saved me.” Santonio’s admission gave me courage to go on.

“I’m calling in the debt. Tear up this report and we’re even.” I sat back in my chair and rested my chin on my hand in the curve between my thumb and index finger.

“Um. That’s a tough one. Rules are rules. We have to follow policy.”

Guy Santonio was nothing if not a follower of rules, I knew.

“And Mrs. Kendrick didn’t follow one. But tell you what I’ll do. I’ll talk with Dr. Parks. Tell her I think we should let it drop.” He finally gave me something. “If she says okay, I’ll tear it up.”

“Okay, thanks, Guy.” I rose from my seat and left Santonio’s office without looking back. Only when I had walked halfway down the main hallway did I let out a huge sigh of relief. It worked, I thought. Who would have guessed?

Though it meant I’d be late for my next class, I stopped by Ginger’s classroom and found her about to start teaching. I poked my head through the doorway.

“Are you doing okay?”

“What? Oh, yes. I’m fine, fine. Why?” She acted as though the earlier meeting had not happened.

“It got tense in there.” I remembered Ginger’s teary-eyed plea and Santonio’s refusal.

“Oh, that. You know, Kassi, we shouldn’t make too much of it. It was one of those things, right?”

I stood motionless. I parted my lips as though to speak, then stopped, raised hands to my mouth, and brought them together as if in prayer. God, I thought, how can she make such a dramatic shift after that traumatic meeting? Did the talking, the explaining, the pleading, the tears really happen? Did I trade my lunch break and the Santonio ace-up-my-sleeve for an awkward thirty minutes of drama queen performance?

Whatever the case, I left and walked to my classroom to continue the lesson from *Great Expectations* on Estella—If She Only Had a Heart. Once I settled the class down, they took on the topic with gusto. In the end, they decided Estella had one. But she took good care of it and had learned to avoid putting it out there for anyone else. I decided that would be a good starting

point when we discussed love and Romeo and Juliet. I filed it away mentally for a later discussion.

Later that day, after classes ended, I stopped by Ginger's class again and found her smiling as she graded papers. She seemed even more relaxed than a few periods ago. I found out why.

"He tore it up," Ginger said. "He came by and said he spoke with Dr. Parks, who told Guy he could do with it what he wanted."

"That's great! And what he should have done."

And now you sound like the Ginger I thought I knew, I thought.

"Yes. I guess he realized that I'm a good teacher, and he wants to keep me."

Well, almost.

"Absolutely, Ginger, absolutely. See you tomorrow."

As I left the room, I replayed the scene mentally and almost tripped over a rock Ginger used as a doorstep. Strange, I thought. I didn't see that stone when I walked into the room.

After I had an hour or two to process the Ginger incident, I decided it was more complex than I could handle. Amnesia was a good choice for now. Let the memory sink into oblivion. If only ...

“Knock, knock.” A honeyed voice drew my attention to the slightly opened office door. “Can I come in?” Ginger poked her head through the opening.

I looked up from the papers on my desk. “Of course. It’s your office, too.”

“I thought you might want privacy since the door was almost pulled shut.”

“Nope. Just happened that way. Come in.” I gestured to Ginger to sit.

“Kassi, I wanted to say thank you for coming with me to see Santonio.”

Ginger pulled a chair up to the desk and sat across from me as she spoke. “I didn’t want to face it alone.”

I realized I now talked with Ginger number three. Not the hyper, anxious Ginger of the pre-Santonio meeting. Not the laissez-faire, what-will-be-will-be Ginger of the post-Santonio meeting. The calm, polite, and grateful Ginger sat before me.

“Not a problem. Glad to help you.”

“You know I didn’t mean to do anything wrong, don’t you? I tried to help a kid.” Ginger sat eye-to-eye with me.

“Of course. It was an oversight. You wanted badly to make a difference. Guy did what he thought he had to do, too. It’s over now. We should move on.” I didn’t intend to relive it. Especially after the “we shouldn’t make too much of it” amnesia episode. Besides, I had work to do.

“Thanks. I try to do the right thing, especially since I feel I’m under a microscope here.” The emphasis on try and microscope led me to believe she was sincere.

“A microscope? Why? You mean me?”

“Oh, no. I mean because of Jake and what happened. Everyone he knew treated me coolly then, and they still do. Which I get and I’m okay with. But

once in a while, I wonder if things that happen are because of that." And now, Ginger number four: victim of an ex-lover's friends.

For one of the few times since I had met her, I sensed a helplessness in Ginger and felt sorry for her. The gossip mill overflowed with talk when she started at BS High that a spark between Jake and her had been reignited despite his marriage. I knew little more than that they had dated in college. I had never heard the details or the true story and wondered if the rumors were true.

I felt now might be the time to ask. I paused, pushed myself back and away from the desk and my paperwork, and made a slight turn in the conversation. "What went on there, Ginger? You've never given me the details." Hm. I probably shouldn't have asked that. I lived by the policy that colleagues' personal lives and relationships were out-of-bounds unless they initiated the topic. But now my desire to know and the many faces Ginger showed overcame the code. I thought, I deserve something to improve my own mental health.

"It upset me. Do you really want to hear it?" A pleading twang in Ginger's tone said she wanted to talk. And I wanted to listen.

"I do, if you want to talk about it. It's a piece I'm missing in trying to be your friend."

I do want to be your friend, I thought. But, damn, you make it hard.

"I do feel comfortable talking about it with you."

"I only want to understand the whole thing better."

And it would satisfy my curiosity.

"Since college, I've been in love with Jake, and I probably always will be."

That covers the tenses.

I flinched. "Ginger, you married Greg."

"Greg and I are good together. He knows about Jake."

Everything?

My eyes widened. "That you still love him?"

"No, of course not. That would hurt him. He knows Jake and I dated in college."

The nonheated parts, of course.

I noted the whine in Ginger's voice as she continued.

"Anyway, the breakup with Jake hurt. But then when I got the job here, he was welcoming and helpful, and I was still in love." She turned towards the door as though to check if anyone else might be in earshot. "So, yes, even though he was married to Kim, we had a little thing like everybody thought.

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He even told me that he loved me. But he ended it. And it hurt. Not long after that I hooked up with Ben.”

Suspicions confirmed, I thought. Ginger, Jake, Ben. The triangle.

“I knew they were still friends, and, yes, I used Ben to get to Jake. It worked. A few weeks into dating Ben, I got a call from Jake. He wanted to see me.” She paused and took in my reaction.

“What happened?” I felt like a voyeur but didn’t care.

“What do you think?” She said it in her “do you really have to ask” voice. “Turns out, he wanted to be with me. So, yeah, we tried it again. For a few months. But he stopped it again. Said he couldn’t do it to Kim. Said he was head-over-heels in love with her. Jake likes the good life, and he has it with Kim. She’s pretty and a catch. Her family has money. I couldn’t compete with all she offered him.”

What a creep!

I scrunched my face muscles, then had more to ask. “What about Ben? How did you handle that?” I knew I should stop. But I had pried the can open this far, and I would tear that lid off.

“It hurt. But I kept dating Ben.”

Not what I meant, but really?

Ginger continued matter-of-factly. “He never knew what Jake and I were doing. We met in restaurants and motels at the shore where no one would know us. We didn’t want to hurt anybody.”

Motels? See no evil? Ben?

“Ben was really nice, and I liked him.” She stopped and looked away from me.

“What went wrong?”

“He wanted to get serious, but it scared me. He wasn’t Jake.” The whine returned to Ginger’s voice. “And he was trying to be an actor. No future there.” She looked at me for assurance and agreement. “And I couldn’t commit to him. I couldn’t do that to him.”

To whom?

I struggled to make sense of Ginger’s short and sweet explanation. I wondered what was left she hadn’t done to Ben and sensed from the bit of a whine I heard that she couldn’t do it to Jake. I had read research that showed that women in love tended to speak in a higher-pitched voice to men they found attractive. Was it so far-fetched that they spoke in a whiny voice about the men they were in love with but couldn’t have?

“How did it all end?”

“When Jake broke it off, it was comforting to have Ben around. But it didn’t work out. It was a few dates, Kassi. I broke it off before it got serious.” Ginger summed up her relationship with Ben. “It was just a fling.”

Not to Ben, though, according to the gossip mill of BS High and a revealing and compassionate conversation I had had with Oscar Servis. And more than a few dates. When the breakup happened after a ten-month relationship, it left Ben heartbroken, and he tried everything to get over it, from therapy to dating other women. Nothing worked. He moved to the city, but he hated the job he found, property manager for a condo association. He soon returned to Bantamville and signed on to work for his father who owned a real estate firm, The Worthen Agency. The mill said Ben had pulled things together. In fact, he had become the top salesman in the county and could afford that luxury apartment on his own. Though the work didn’t give him a lot of free time, it did allow him to set his own schedule so he could continue to audition for acting jobs in the city.

“Thanks, Ginger, for sharing.” The conversation had exhausted me.

But Ginger still had energy. “I kept quiet about it in school because many of the people I work with knew Jake and Kim and kind of saw me as the other woman trying to break them up.”

Which you were. The mental comments continued.

“And I have few close friends outside of school I can confide in. Working down the hall from Jake was difficult, so when he left teaching, it was a big relief.” The whine eased. “Wow, Kassi. I’m surprised you didn’t hear it. It was a hot topic.”

“I heard the rumors. You know, the whispering in the staff room. But I try not to be in a position to listen to stuff like that. I don’t know how much of it is gossip. I try to do my job, treat everybody fairly, and leave their personal relationships to them.”

Not entirely true, I thought. I didn’t have time for this one.

The Ginger/Jake saga had not been a priority to me since I had other issues to deal with as I tried to persuade the E/LA team to get along with one another. Too many personalities vied for power, and I had to focus on them. I wondered if it rated as that big of a story to everyone else as Ginger seemed to believe. Now, however, it had become the Ginger/Jake/Ben story, and Ginger verified the suspicions that Oscar Servis raised.

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“And Jake never brought it up. I cared about both of you and tried to be fair and objective whenever an issue came up, and I had to make a decision. Both of you were good teachers and valuable for the team.” I tried to stay on topic as the woman Ben couldn’t forget sat across from me.

“Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this, but Jake didn’t feel the same about you.” Ginger’s voice leveled off, and she spoke dispassionately. “He thought he would step into the team leader position. Harvey groomed him for the job. He was disappointed when you got the position. He thought you were an interloper.”

I recalled Jake’s resentment. “I’m sorry he felt that way. He never voiced it, to his credit, but I sensed the chill. It’s unfortunate, but he was too close to Harvey. That’s what didn’t get him the job.” I could air it out, too. And it was true—partly.

“What do you mean?” Ginger slid back in her chair and crinkled her forehead.

“There was no love lost between Harvey and Hudson.”

Harvey Frazier had been an encyclopedia of all things literary. And he made sure everyone knew it. Though he may have had the right to be arrogant since he had the literary chops, his condescension alienated anyone who didn’t live up to his standards. I thought he came to respect me because I stood up to him the first time he tried to cross me. A student who had been failing his class transferred into mine. Harvey took every opportunity to criticize the kid to me and hinted strongly that, as a favor to him, I should fail him, too. I finally told him he was off base in both his opinion of the student and of me. Adding that I knew he gave a final exam which had not been board approved and that I had a copy locked in my file helped, too. Our relationship cooled. But while many teachers dreaded the simple act of standing in line behind him at the copier, I had no problems with him after that in the twelve years I worked with him.

The principal, Lou Hudson, however, found himself the target of much of Harvey’s cynicism and venom. Lou avoided confrontations with him, but he paid a price for it and lost the respect of Harvey’s disciples. He repaid favors though, and I tallied my promotion as interest on the seven-hundred-and-fifty-dollar racetrack loan I had given him. Now I realized that Lou hired Ginger quickly in hopes he could mend fences with Jake and smooth over their relationship. My feelings were collateral damage.

I held nothing back as I continued with why Lou, the principal at the time, passed over Jake for the team leadership position. “Hudson knew Harvey was Jake’s close friend and confidante, and he didn’t want to get stuck with another prick in a leadership position.” I checked Ginger’s reaction when I called the man she loved a prick. Her expression did not change though I noticed the whiteness in her knuckles as she gripped the chair. “Jake didn’t have a chance. I thought you knew that.” It had to have been the topic of conversation between Jake and company back then.

“Well,” Ginger huffed. “I don’t talk politics in social settings, so we stayed away from those kinds of things when we were together.” She slid her chair away from the desk as though she were ready for the conversation to end.

I found it hard to believe that they didn’t talk politics. In the Bantamville school district, no topic rated higher when promotions and job openings came up in the conversation. Did Ginger really not know that?

“That’s a good rule, Ginger. And thanks for sharing. You probably have work to do, and I definitely do.” I wanted to end the talk, too.

“Yes. Thanks. I have students waiting for me to help them with their essays. I had to pop in and say thanks.” She made her way towards the door. “I could have handled it myself, but I always feel better when I have support.”

“So do I, Ginger, so do I.”

This conversation was almost productive, almost being the key word.

I admitted defeat and gave up trying to make sense of the Santonio/Ginger incident. But I still needed to vent. I thought about going home to talk with Zach, who was always more than willing to listen and offer advice. But he had to work late. I texted my next go-to, Renee, to see if we could get together.

At the library, Renee's text read.

Need to talk.

Come here. I need a break from work, Renee texted.

On the way, I passed Renee's house in suburbia where she lived with her husband, two sons, a daughter, and three dogs. The colorful landscaping included green bushy hedges, creeping ivy, yellow daffodils, and adorable statues of elves, rabbits, and frogs. In the beds along the driveway, several rectangular signs emblazoned with upbeat, positive words like LIFE, LOVE, LAUGH, GROW, and SMILE surrounded the path to the front door. Not one plant or flower dared to be limp in that yard.

I loved the inside of the house. It had an open flow from room to room. Hardwood floors, either shiny or dog-hair covered depending on the time of day, brightly colored walls, and the welcoming, comfortable furniture made me feel good. Most times when I stopped by for a visit, savory scents of apple pies and fresh bread wafted from the kitchen, and minty aromas filled my nose when I walked in the door.

But I wasn't stopping this time. I headed to Renee's favorite place other than her home: the library where she could get online and surf the web or walk around the shelves and browse the archeology and the history sections to her heart's content. She felt comfortable there where she could catch up on the happenings in the new world but could also learn about the old.

One of Bantamville's newest structures, the library built ten years ago had ultramodern everything, from construction with eco-friendly materials, to interior design that provided high-output lighting, to furniture with the utmost in reading and studying comfort, to rest rooms with automatic flush toilets, to movie viewing rooms, to meeting rooms, to state-of-the-art technology. It could have been a monument to a municipality that valued knowledge above almost everything. Very un-Bantamville, I thought each time I visited. A library of that kind with its accompanying expense seemed unusual in a place that prided itself on being the home to state champions in baseball, softball, basketball, football, and soccer. In fact, the town council had only approved it because a Bantamville native, Dylan Quentin, who prospered in the technology boom of the nineties, funded it. His grandmother, Barbara, whom he lived with during his childhood from the age of three, took him to the library at least once a week. She loved reading, and she instilled a similar love for knowledge in him. He offered to pay for the construction if the town agreed to name it after her. The Bantamville Barbara Quentin Library, BBQ for short, became the showpiece of the town and introduced many young Bantamvillians to their first story time.

When I walked in, I went to Archeology and expected Renee to be there since our most recent conversation focused on an article she had read about the Highland Scots who arrived in North Carolina in 1739. She discovered a heritage festival for the Argyll Colony descendants and wanted to take a road trip. Sure enough, Renee sat near that section, laptop in front of her and books opened and spread across the table, happily alone with her books. But not for long.

"Mrs. Dumont. Hi. What are you doing here?"

I stayed back and watched things unfold. I could tell that Renee recognized the voice instantly, and I detected a cringe. It was Renee's stalker.

"Hi, Sara. How are you? Wow, I didn't expect to see you here."

Her stalker, a student whom she never had in a course but who liked her, hung around her classroom ready to talk about anything with her. At first, it was benign. Kids needed an adult to chat with, and Renee turned nobody away. But Sara became more and more "around" wherever Renee was. Getting work done became difficult. So did staying kind.

"Really? I come here a lot. I like the quiet."

Right, I thought. So does Renee.

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"Yeah, I do, too. When I have work to do, it's easier to do it here in peace than at home when everybody is around." Renee continued to keep her attention on her laptop's screen.

"I bet it gets loud at your house when your family is there. How many kids do you have?" Sara liked to chat.

"Three. Yeah, I have three. Are you working on something for school?"

"Sort of. It's Merrell's history project." Sara pulled out a chair at Renee's table.

"I hear that's an interesting one. Hey, don't let me keep you from doing it. I'd hate to have to answer to Merrell if it's late." Renee tried guilt.

"No problem. It's not due until the end of the marking period. I have at least four weeks." Sara settled in the chair. Guilt didn't work.

"Great." Renee's cell phone rang. She looked at the screen and smiled. Then she turned to Sara and said, "Um, excuse me, Sara. I have to take this."

"Go ahead, I'll wait."

"It might take a while. Hey, it was great seeing you. Don't let me keep you."

"You won't. I have lots of time."

Renee smiled and reached out with an upturned palm. "Sara, it's my husband, and it's kind of personal. See you tomorrow, okay?" Then she frowned. Too late. Renee realized what she had done. Sara would now be encouraged to see her tomorrow.

"See you tomorrow, Mrs. Dumont. I'll look for you early." A satisfied smile filled her face as she walked away.

"Great." Renee whispered it out of Sara's earshot then returned to her phone. "Hi, husband."

"Hi, hon. Whatcha doin'?" I said into my phone.

"Trying to work, emphasis on trying."

"I know. I saw it all." As I spoke, I walked around the book stack to sit down at Renee's table.

"OMG, she finds me everywhere. Did you see that whole thing?" Renee put her phone down as I came into view.

"Yes. Sorry. But enough of that." I lightened things up. "Let's talk about me."

"What's going on?"

"I had an incredible afternoon and need to talk. Have a few minutes?" I knew Renee didn't, and I shouldn't distract her or interfere with her getting

her work done. But I needed to rehash the Ginger saga, and Renee would understand. Sometimes people need to come before schoolwork, at least in an ideal world.

“Sure. It will be a welcome change. It may look like I’m reading these books, but they’re just a break from this stack of papers I’ve been grading. And I need a break from it all. What’s up?”

I told Renee about the incident along with Ginger’s lack of concern once she left the office meeting.

Renee provided a quick explanation. “That’s just the way Ginger is.”

“I’m exhausted after what went on today. It’s like someone took an energy vacuum and sucked the life right out of me.”

Renee channeled her encouraging self. “Hey, that’s the price you pay for being you, Miss How Can I Help.”

“LOL,” I said. “Why do I give off that vibe? I’m a terrible person, if you get to know me. Ask Phone Lady from *Drug Mall*. Or my children. They must have a running tally of all the Mom’s lost it episodes of their formative years.”

“You have that problem, you know.”

“Which one?”

“That spelling problem. N and O. You can’t put the letters together. Try it. Say no.”

“I couldn’t leave her to Santonio alone. She was a basket case with me there. Imagine if she were by herself.”

“I rest my case. But she would have survived. Maybe there’s more to why you got involved.”

“Like I’m nosy?”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking, but, okay, that too.”

“Then what?”

“Sometimes, and this is really hard for me to tell you, but even if you don’t want to hear it, I’m going there.” Renee closed her eyelids and took one deep breath. “Two things, and I’ll say them fast to get it over with. You want to be liked too much, by everybody. And you’re a control freak.”

“Wow, Renee, that makes me feel good. You have a knack.”

“I try. But on the plus side, as terrible as you think you are, people come to you for help because everyone else in their circle of friends is worse.”

“So ... I should ...” I rubbed my hands together in a washing motion. “... say no to people?”

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Renee kept at it. “Not all the time. Maybe start with one no each day for a week.” She chuckled, then patted my shoulder. “See how that goes.”

“Baby steps?”

“You’ve got it. What’re you up to now? Heading home?”

“Zach is working late, the kids all have some other place to be, so it’s alone time for me.” One of my sons, Abel, was away at school. The other son, Carter, had soccer practice, and my daughter, Robi, went to a friend’s house to work on a project, which left one of those rare nights when I only had to take care of myself. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do. How about you? Staying to grade papers?”

Renee hesitated for a nanosecond. “Not if something better comes up. Want to grab a quick dinner?”

I paused, ran my tongue along my lips, and squinted at Renee. “No.”

“Ooh.” Renee lowered her head.

“Practicing,” I said. “Of course, I want to! I thought you’d never ask.”

“Asshole. But funny.” Renee packed her laptop and grabbed her coat. “Let’s go to *SmartFolkz*. It’s out of Bantamville, but not too far out.”

“See you there.”

This day might end happily after all. Intuition told me to cherish that.

NOVEMBER

18

A week-and-a-half into *Romeo and Juliet*, my favorite Shakespeare play to teach because its characters and story resonated with ninth graders, I felt the love. I had taught it to approximately two thousand freshmen in my career. And in each of those seventy classes, I always found something new, either in the play or in the students' responses. This day, my third period provided number seventy-one.

"Good morning, everyone. Welcome back from what I hope was a relaxing weekend for you."

The silence echoed off the cinderblock walls, the usual case on a Monday morning.

"Check out what is up here." I moved to the smart board and read the prompt aloud. "Re-read or read for the first time, Act Two, Scene Two, Juliet's lines to Romeo. Write what Juliet is saying in modern-day language. Then write 3-5 sentences to explain what Juliet means. HINT: It has something to do with telling Romeo her feelings."

I paused for ten seconds as they processed it. Then I walked to the side of the room, picked up the chicken head oven timer I used to keep time and myself on track, turned it, and said, "Okay. You have eight minutes. Start now."

I returned to my desk, scanned the group to take attendance, glanced at the three passes the late students had left on my record book, wrote two passes for the lav and one for the nurse's office, and gave Friday's absent students the make-up work. Finally, I walked around the room.

As I read over shoulders, I saw that most of the kids could do the first part. After lots of practice during the reading of Act One, they got the hang of

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Shakespeare's language. The second part of the assignment though, the explanation, stumped a few of them. Eventually, everyone came to an interpretation before the chicken squawked.

"This is the famous balcony scene when Juliet and Romeo profess their love for each other. In these lines, though, Juliet has extra thoughts. Who will start it off by reading your modern language interpretation?"

No hands shot up. I reached for my handy name index cards, picked one, and congratulated Connor on his selection. After he finished reading, I selected another card and high-fived Dan on coming in second place. The process continued with three more students. Finally, they agreed on a translation that Connor put on the board.

"Actually, handsome, I like you so much, you may think I'm too much of a flirt. But trust me, dude, I'll be more faithful than girls who act shy and play hard-to-get. I suppose I should have been more standoffish, but I didn't know you were standing there listening, so I said what was in my heart. I'm not sure I should trust you, but I have to be true to myself. Sorry."

"What is Juliet saying here? What's the subtext?" I tried to stimulate discussion.

I had to prod them before the students shared their written responses. Once the discussion opened up, it became one of those moments in teaching that made me want to stay. Well-thought-out ideas of where Juliet is coming from led to the interpretation that Juliet is not sure she should be honest with Romeo and tell him she loves him. Maybe she should be more cunning, like other girls.

Amber summed it up. "She wonders if it's safer to act the way she thinks every other girl acts when she likes a guy. Don't tell him straight out. It's safer. But she's not sure if she should trust him to treat her right."

"Right." Melody chimed in. "You put your heart out there for people. And not just in love relationships. It's the same with friends. Some embrace it and put it up on the mantle to honor it; some trash it. Juliet is afraid of what Romeo will do. But she takes the chance anyway."

The kids impressed me. They had done the work, the interpretation, and the thinking, and discovered for themselves what Shakespeare meant.

I loved teaching.

After the class, the discussion about putting the heart out there took me to a familiar daydream, a first meeting, more years ago than I wanted to count, with Phil Carlyle and my first extended romantic relationship.

I had been eating a fast-food lunch alone and reading *Moby Dick* for my lit class when his voice crashed over me at the same moment a wave broke over the bow of Ahab's boat.

"Do you eat lunch here often?" he had asked as he salted his French fries.

I learned his name and that he worked as a management trainee at a local men's store chain. After fifteen minutes, he invited me to have dinner with him the next evening.

"Yes, dinner sounds great."

"Do you like Atlantic City?" It sounded like an afterthought.

"It's okay. I like the shore, yeah."

"Okay." As he grabbed his tray and stood to leave, he reached to touch my arm, but his hand knocked the saltshaker over. Grains of salt spread over the table. "Sorry."

"Not a problem." I began to clean it up before he could say more.

"See you tomorrow."

As I wiped the table clean, I wondered. Atlantic City? Why in the world did he ask that? And did I agree to have dinner with him too quickly? Should I have been harder to get? What was he going to do with my heart?

Does literature mirror life? I found out within a year after I met Phil.

The voice broke the quiet I had enjoyed for the past half-hour in the E/LA office.

“Hi! How are you?!”

I looked up from my paperwork. Luke Cantrell’s voice was multi-purpose. Besides sending a greeting to me, it also got the attention of anyone else within earshot. But since the last period of the day had ended an hour ago, only I would get to experience it.

“Hi.” I spoke with the enthusiasm of one who knew this would take a while.

Luke had been an E/LA teacher for five years when I became team leader. Conscientious to a fault, he sometimes created controversy with his methods. He was old school and professional in a lot of ways, from his clothing styles to his demands on his students. He dressed in a suit, shirt, and tie or, at the least, trousers, dress shirt and shoes, and modeled for his students what he expected of them. If they didn’t meet his academic expectations, he gave them no slack. The kids had grown to expect second, third, and even fourth chances, and the administration usually sided with them if they complained. Luke, however, held his ground, and despite losing one battle, he remained prepared to wage the next. To his credit, he also tutored students so they could meet his academic requirements. To maintain his principles, he spent lots of time on school-related matters without hesitation, whether for grading, tutoring, or parent-conferencing. And also, without hesitation, he always let everyone know how busy he was.

“How’s it going?!” It was more a statement than a question from Luke.

“It’s good. How are you?”

“Good. Busy but good.”

“Busier than normal?” I recalled the many times Luke was too busy to come to a team meeting, too busy to meet with a colleague for collaboration,

too busy even to eat lunch. At first, I admired his dedication to his work and students. Now I wondered how he survived all the hard work. He left high achievers in his dust; he was a super achiever. What was on his plate now? I would have to wait to find out.

The cell phone he carried in his shirt pocket buzzed. "Let me take this, okay? It's Jared. I'll be right back." Luke stepped outside the office for privacy.

His busyness reminded me of Phil Carlyle's busy-ness when we dated. Except in Phil's case, his had no connection to work.

I remembered the day I let myself believe that he was the one, the same day those beliefs were shattered.

Phil's mother loved dogs. For Mother's Day, he and I took her to the Fountainville Kennel Club's dog show.

With a brilliant sun, a lively crowd, and exhilarating competition, the event ran on all cylinders. I drank in the perfect brew of people and animals.

Mrs. Carlyle enjoyed a delightful afternoon. She watched the dogs as their owners put them through their paces for the judges. Every breed interested her, but she loved the shih-tzus. Something about the way they held themselves as they walked through the various presentations set them apart, like they knew they were far above being judged but did it for the sheer enjoyment of seeing the humans react to them.

For Phil, the event seemed a duty. His mother loved dogs though she didn't have one. When he agreed to take her to the show, I saw Phil as the one for me. I guessed he'd rather be at the Borgata playing blackjack, drink in hand and chips accumulating. But he did something nice for his mom. Only later did I find out he did it in exchange for an extra week to pay that month's room and board.

Not that he disliked dogs. In fact, he wanted to get one when he could swing it. He simply didn't want to be there then, but his most recent trip to the Borgata made it necessary to get the room and board extension. He had gambled and lost most of his paycheck that week, including the rent money for his mother.

"Let's go over to that ring," his mother said, as we strolled through the grounds.

The show, the biggest on the East Coast, lasted all day with simultaneous judging of different breeds. Whether dog people loved sheep dogs, poodles, shepherds, or any other breed, they could see it at this show.

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"You're enjoying this, aren't you, Mom?" Phil said as he followed his mother across the grass.

"I love it, Phil."

When we reached the ring, we found a spot next to a group of well-dressed enthusiasts. One woman stood out from the others. At five feet two inches in spiked heels, her height didn't set her apart. But her style did.

Her pale green chiffon dress shimmered, her blonde hair gleamed, and her eyes sparkled at the sight of the dogs being put through their paces. When she spoke, everyone around her leaned in to hear. Phil's mother listened intently, too.

"She's so pretty. Look at the croup. And note how the handler uses the choke. Effortless. Excellent," the woman said of one of the shih-tzus being shown.

"Mom, who is that?" She drew Phil in, too.

"That's the show chairperson. She puts together this show every year. She's a breeder, too. She knows her stuff."

"What's her name?"

"Linda Dalforth," Phil's mother said, perhaps too loudly as Linda looked in our direction when she heard her name. Then she made her way over to us and stood beside Phil.

"Hi, I'm Linda Dalforth. Are you enjoying the show?"

"It's wonderful," Phil's mother said. "I'm Nancy Carlyle. This is my son, Phil."

Linda focused on him. "How about you, Phil? Do you like dogs?" Her voice sounded more lush and sexier than I expected from the chairperson at a dog show.

"I do. In fact, I hope to get one soon. What breed do you recommend?"

"A lot depends on the living situation. Is it a house, an apartment, city, country? Are there kids involved? Will the dog be alone a lot because of your work situation? You have to consider everything. Some dogs are high maintenance, some are not."

"Hm, yeah. I guess I should think more about it." As Phil said it, I thought he looked a bit too long into her eyes.

"Here's my card. When you know what you want, call me. I breed shih-tzus, but I can give you more." Then she smiled as she added, "About other breeds. I'd love to."

"Thanks."

“Nice to meet both of you. Excuse me, I have to get to the other rings. Enjoy!” Linda shook Phil’s hand and put her business card securely into it.

In hindsight, I realized, I should have noticed the spark that flared when Phil’s hand met Linda’s and held it three-and-a-half seconds too long. But I didn’t. In hindsight, I should have noticed the perfumed scent on his clothes when he came home from work late. But I didn’t. In hindsight, I should have noticed that I had more free time to spend with girlfriends. But I didn’t. Instead, I daydreamed of the day Phil and I would start our married life together. Then one Thursday evening, I came home from a shopping trip with friends a half-hour earlier than I had planned because I felt nauseous and lightheaded. That nausea didn’t compare to my queasiness when I found Linda Dalforth in my bathroom buttoning her blouse and gathering the leash of her shih-tzu as Phil slept on our bed.

Reality returned. So did my clear head.

After a loud discussion, Phil told me he didn’t love me but only needed to be with somebody, which meant anybody. After tearful accusations and non-apologetic apologies, he sleazed into the bathroom for a shower. I wrapped Phil’s favorite suit in the sullied sheets I tore off the bed and tossed the bundle out the window and onto the garage roof. On the floor, I found Linda Dalworth’s business card, the one she gave Phil at the dog show, the one that fell out of his suit jacket before I threw it out the window, and, as a final touch, the one I put on the mantel in place of the photo of Phil and me in Atlantic City on New Year’s Eve. I laid his car keys on top of it. Then with the relationship over, I moved on to trying to figure out what I had done wrong in it.

After months I got over him, but I still could not get my head around why he stayed with me if he didn’t love me. Being alone seemed easier.

I considered myself lucky. I bounced back and started dating and even had one or two long-term relationships. But looking back I realized the break-up affected my relationships with men. I met Zach when I finally put my heart out there again, and he embraced it and placed it on the mantle of his life. Corny, yes. But true, too.

Before I could dissect that thought’s meaning, Luke interrupted my reverie when he came back to continue our conversation after his chat with his partner.

“Jared is a handful. But yes. The house is a lot of work. Renovations are so time-consuming. That’s why I stopped in. I wanted to tell you I won’t be able

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to make tomorrow's meeting. I have to get home to check on what's happening."

"Oh? What are you doing?" I attempted to keep my brain and the rest of me from getting frustrated that he would not be at the meeting. Parks finally had given the team leaders the plan for what all teachers, regardless of their subject, would be required to do to prepare the students for the AASWPE, and how their scores would be calculated as part of each teacher's evaluation. While the E/LA information was similar to the way we had done things in the past, some new procedures might affect them. I hoped everyone would come so I would not have to schedule individual meetings with the absentees. Luke, however, had important things to do.

"We've lived there for two years, and now we want to make it ours, kind of. We are doing lots of renovations."

"Like what?"

"The biggest thing is a new entertainment room. The old one was too out-of-date, so we decided to enlarge it and add new equipment. Jared said we could finance both our retirements for the price of the reno, but we said we would upgrade when we first bought it. That was a selling point for me."

"Do you entertain a lot?"

"Yes. Neither of us cook. We'd cater whatever we did. But with an updated entertainment room, imagine the gatherings I'd have with all the state-of-the-art equipment, new furniture and floors. Movie Marathons, Binge parties, Super Bowl, World Series, Boxing parties. We had to do it."

"You plan on lots of entertaining? Do you have a big family?"

"Big enough. I want to give them a place to get together."

"Do they live near you?"

"No. They are about two hours away. But they won't mind the drive, I'm sure."

"Is Jared doing any of the work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is he working on the flooring, painting, putting in the new equipment?"

"We hired a contractor, and he has cheap laborers. Guatemalans, I think. But he's always there with them."

"Cheap? Guatemalans? So, he pays them under the table? Or very little?"

"Gee, I don't know. That's his area. So is how much he pays them. Jared's taking care of that. I don't get involved. It's Jared's project. I'm waiting for it to be finished."

Hm. I wondered. The Guatemalans are doing the work; Jared is overseeing it. Why is Luke so busy with it?

I accepted it as none of my business and gave him as much support as I could muster, which amounted to not much at all. "I can see you'd be anxious," I said.

"I already have my first party planned. For the kids. For my Variety Is Spicy Club. I'll have the kids over to make plans for next month's cause. It's supporting fair treatment of immigrants."

"Really? Wonderful."

Though not so wonderful is how Parks will take your not being at the meeting, I thought. No accolades for your extras from her!

"It's important to get the kids involved," Luke added.

When I thought they couldn't surprise me, they did. The old line came back to me. You can't make this shit up!

But Luke's paradox came up short of the number one spot when another colleague soon entered the competition.

On a frigid, windy November Saturday, I savored a second cup of coffee as I read the newspapers. Earlier when I walked out to get the papers from the driveway and felt the biting wind, I decided to stay in all day and dream of retirement when I would move to Florida or another warm weather place. The shiver that wouldn't go away convinced me that nothing would get me out in this cold.

As I paged through the *Bantamville Bugle*, I realized how much of a dinosaur I was still getting news via hard copy instead of the online version. I inherited the trait from my dad who read the *New York Register* every morning at breakfast, and I continued the tradition. I had just finished *Waiting Works Wonders*, an article about procrastinating being a key to creative thought. The author took the view that ideas need time to grow. Waiting until the last minute to finish a task gets the best results. Then I became engrossed in a second, *The Heart That Keeps Typing*, by a career secretary who explained how her job, though demeaned in terms of pay and respect, is the core element of any office. Before I made it to the end, the phone rang and interrupted my reading. D. O'Rourke. The caller ID showed a first initial and last name somewhat familiar, but I couldn't place it, and the phone number didn't ring a bell. I answered to end the suspense.

"Hi, is this Kassie?" the voice asked.

"Yes."

"Hi, Kassie, this is Dee O'Rourke. How are you?"

"Oh, hi, Dee." A friend from my first years at BSHS, Dee had left teaching after a few years to find something less stressful. She had moved out of state, worked her way through the executive-training program for the *Better Foods* grocery chain, and risen up the ladder to regional manager. "I'm fine. How are you?"

“Good. I’m sorry to bother you on a Saturday, Kassi. I’m at the *Bantamville Better Foods* today and have a little problem you might be able to help with. Have a few minutes?”

“Sure, Dee.” I put down my coffee and paper to focus on the call. “What is it?” Curiosity to find out what knowledge I had that might help with a supermarket issue kept me interested.

“It seems we have a situation here.” Dee inhaled as she said it.

“A situation? What do you mean?”

“We caught a woman shoplifting Thursday night. I called you because you might be able to help us.”

“Help? Dee, how can I help? I’m not a detective.”

“I’d rather not talk about it over the phone. Can you come to the store today?”

I shivered at the idea of going out in the cold. I had no experience with shoplifters, either. “That’s kind of inconvenient, Dee. Why me?” I tried to get out of it.

“Well, Tim, our manager, caught her last night, and she claimed to be an English teacher at BSHS.” Dee paused. “She said her name was Kassi Stanton.”

“What!!!?” I screamed into the phone. The shiver was gone. “I’m coming over there right now, Dee.” I had my coat halfway on and my car keys in hand before I ended the call. The cold would be refreshing considering the heat I felt at that moment.

Dee met me at the door. She pulled me aside to give me the details. Character, description, dialogue. She mustered her storytelling skills and presented the account like a play-by-play announcer.

Tim had worked the Thursday late shift, a good day for supermarkets with plenty of customers and enough part-timers scheduled to handle it. Few minutes go by without something to do. Someone calling for assistance, a customer complaining, lines getting too long at the checkout. Busy, chaotic at times, but mostly smooth-running.

Deb worked at the customer courtesy counter. A woman wearing a black trench coat and black pants tried to leave the store with an eighteen-pound turkey tucked in them. The coat hid any bulge, so she would have escaped without anyone noticing, except that the turkey was frozen. She made it to the door, but she apparently could stand the cold no longer. Or maybe her thighs had gotten so cold she lost feeling in them. Five feet from the exit, but

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directly in front of the customer courtesy counter, the bird flew the coop. Plop! It dropped to the floor and wobbled for a few seconds before it came to rest at Tim's penny-loafers as he rounded the corner.

"Whoa!" he screamed. "Where did this come from?"

Tim had missed the take-off, but Deb had not.

"From between her legs!" Deb blurted it out and pointed to the red-faced woman. "Ee-ew!"

"Ma'am, can you explain this?" Tim recovered.

"Oh, I ..." For a second, she was speechless. Then she said, "Explain what?"

"The frozen turkey that just dropped out of your coat?"

"That's not mine."

"Ma'am, you're the only one around here. It's yours. Deb, unlock the office door. Ma'am, you had better come inside with me." Tim wanted to get her and the situation out of the view of other customers.

"Oh, no! Please don't make me do that." Her head bobbed from side to side as she pleaded with Tim.

But Tim held firm. "Please, now, Ma'am."

Once in the office, the woman pleaded with him not to prosecute. She admitted that she tried to steal the turkey. As he questioned her, Tim discovered that she taught at his daughter's school. She told him a sad story about how she made little money to begin with and had a sick aunt with no health insurance whom she was trying to help. She couldn't afford to buy a turkey for a Thanksgiving dinner she wanted to make to cheer up her aunt. If he called the police and had her arrested, she'd lose her job and leave her aunt with no one to care for her. If he'd only let her go, she'd never come in the store again. She took no merchandise, and it being close to Thanksgiving, he let her go.

The story mesmerized me as Dee told it. This must be how she held the attention of her classes as a teacher. She crafted an irresistible tale. What a shame she left teaching!

"They had told me when I came in this morning," Deb said. "I'm the regional manager. I visit here every couple of weeks. Tim does a good job for us, and I trust his judgment. I was okay with his decision to let her go. But since I had taught at the school a few years ago, curiosity made me want to find out more about the woman."

"My gosh, who was it?" I asked.

“She said she taught English.” Tim filled me in. “Gave me the name Kassi Stanton.”

“I couldn’t believe it,” Dee said. “No way you were shoplifting.”

Dee continued her narration. “I told him I know Kassi Stanton. We spent a lot of time together. She wouldn’t shoplift.”

“What did she look like?” I was now beyond curious. “Do you have the surveillance camera footage?”

“Yeah. Let’s bring it up.” Tim sounded angry at the idea he’d been scammed. “She was unusual. Kind of thin, artsy sort of,” he said as he searched for Thursday’s video.

“Artsy, sort of? What else?”

Tim gave me the details. “She wore a trench coat that covered her body. But she was shorter than you and had short, curly brunette hair, clearly a wig, a bad wig. It shifted once when she moved her head.”

“That’s when I told Tim she bamboozled him,” Dee said, “Kassi has reddish brownish strawberry blondish hair, and she is a little taller than me.”

“But why would she give me another teacher’s name and jeopardize somebody else’s job and reputation?” Tim asked. “She worried that she’d be arrested and lose her job.” Tim paused. “Duh! Why would she give me her own name?”

“I knew it wasn’t you, but I had an idea of how we could find out who it was,” Dee said. “That’s when I called you. I figured since the video was so good, so clear, if you saw it, you could tell us. Thanks for coming in.”

“This is a nightmare, Dee. Thanks for calling.”

“We have the video from Thursday. Would you take a look?” Dee asked.

“Hell, yes!”

Dee hovered as I took a while to identify the body that claimed to be me.

Tim, weary from the stress of reliving the event through Dee’s narration, still found it hard to believe. “Wow! She got me with her sob story about a sick aunt.”

My eyes and brain took time to get in sync with the video. Then in a flash, a look of recognition come over me, and I whispered, “No way.” I froze in my seat and stared at the figure.

“Kassi? Recognize something?”

At that point, Tim realized I had. “Tell me who it is. I’ll have her arrested today!” he said.

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“I’ll tell you who I think it is. But you can’t have her arrested. You can’t be sure!”

“I guess you’re right. And it’s probably not worth it anyway,” Dee said over Tim’s gasp. “She came back Friday and paid for the turkey even though she never took it. I guess she felt remorse. But who is it, do you think?”

I paused, unable to speak. Then my barely audible voice said the name. “Ginger Kendrick.”

At that point, Tim realized the event would become merely a note in a file and a story to tell his grandchildren, and he strolled out of the office whispering, “What a turkey!”

The note was short. "Let's talk, Ginger."

I did not feel cordial on this Monday morning. After leaving the note in Ginger's mailbox, I retreated. I had proofread an academic review of Toni Morrison's *Home*, a book I previewed for the social studies team as a possible course requirement, and I labeled it as tense and searching. Those same words described me as I waited.

I sat in the dimly lit E/LA office, my back to the early grayness of this Monday. On most mornings, I flicked the lights on and raised the shades when I arrived. Today the gloominess seemed more fitting. In the ten minutes before classes started, I planned how I would delve into a new chapter in the shoplifting story, and it revved me up. I didn't need coffee for a stimulant. The darkness might help me keep my emotions under control though I cared little about checking them now. More so, Horatio and Hamlet came to mind and thoughts about friends having your back no matter what.

"Oh, Kassi. Hi," Ginger said in her singsong voice. "I got your note. Of course. I love to talk with you."

This might not be one of those times, I thought, baffled that Ginger could be happy and carefree after the shoplifting episode only four days ago. Did she live so much in the here-and-now that she had forgotten it? Or was she sure the store had dropped it, and I would never know? Either way, I got into it. "Did something happen last week you, maybe, want to tell me about?"

"Mm, no. Everything went smoothly if you mean the Old Time Radio Club meeting. I didn't realize you were interested in that."

"I'm not," I said tightly. "I'm interested in what happened Thursday night."

As soon as she heard Thursday, her head perked up. Ginger knew I knew. After a twelve-second pause, her brittle voice started. "Oh. It was such a misunderstanding."

"Really. How?" Long, complex sentences would not work at this point.

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"It's connected to the club. After the meeting Thursday, one of my kids told me his family would not have a Thanksgiving dinner because the dad lost his job, and they had no money for food. You know me. I felt so sad for them I told him I'd buy a turkey and, at least, they'd have something. But I didn't have my wallet with me. I said I would bring the turkey over that evening, and I didn't want to disappoint the family, so I decided to take the turkey and come back to pay for it the next day. Unfortunately ..."

"So, you put your brunette wig on and went shopping?"

"What? Wig?" She took a breath. "Yes. I was overdue for a coloring. I have a wig for times like that. You know how I hate to be seen if I don't look perfect. I was going to the salon afterwards, so I wore the wig."

I glossed over that explanation, including the discrepancy between Dee's and Ginger's versions of the story, and moved on to another detail. "I can't believe you would think you could walk out of a store with a turkey between your legs." Even in my anger, as I said it now, I had to suppress a smile and laughter at the picture of Ginger, a woman who never passed up a chance to check herself out in a mirror or reflective glass to make sure she looked first-rate, squeezing a frozen, twenty-pound, dead bird between her skinny thighs as she tried to stroll chicly out of the store. "God, Ginger, you know that's stealing regardless of your intention to pay later."

"I know, Kassi. Bad judgment, atrocious judgment, on my part."

"Anything else?"

"No, that's it. I didn't tell the manager the turkey was for the family. I didn't want to bring them into it and embarrass them."

Nice. A verbal selfie pat on the back.

"Anything else?"

"No."

I waited and looked at Ginger as though I gazed into her soul. "Anything else?"

"No."

"What name did you use?"

"I told the manager I was trying to help my aunt."

"What name did you use for yourself?" I shot back and cut Ginger off before she created another fiction.

Ginger's head popped up, and her eyebrows raised into two Vs.

"Did you tell them you were Kassi Stanton?"

After another twelve-second pause, Ginger's dead voice whispered it. "Yes."

I struggled to speak. Finally, my voice forced out the words. I tried to hold back the tears. "How could you throw me under the bus, Ginger? Didn't you think about me and my reputation?"

"I did. But I figured it would buy me time, time to convince them I'd pay for the turkey. And the truth would eventually come out that it wasn't you if they really pursued it. You know, I couldn't afford to have that on my record. I hoped they'd let me leave, and then I would get my wallet, return, and pay for it. I'm sorry it didn't work out that way." The explanation mesmerized me. But only for three seconds.

"Ginger! What world are you living in? I'm lost. I don't know what to do now. We worked together, shared, socialized. We're friends, I think. And you threw me under the bus when it served your purpose. It's not right." I couldn't keep my eyes from watering.

We sat silently for several minutes and contemplated the conversation, the emotions, and what to say next. Outside the door, students talked, laughed, and slammed their lockers as they rushed to get to first period on time. But the tension between the two of us amplified the quietness of the office.

For me, an apology would be nice. Even if one came, which I highly doubted, I faced the prospect of working with someone who played with the truth.

Ginger fidgeted, perhaps a betrayal of her lower expectations and desire to leave the office and the conversation. The five-minute warning bell provided a reason to escape. She looked up quickly when it rang. "Kassi, we should get to class. Are you okay?"

"No. I'm not."

"You're upset with me, and I want you to know I will try to work at not disappointing you." She smiled as she walked to the door to leave.

As depressed as I felt, I mustered the energy to respond. "It's not about disappointment." I spoke slowly and quietly. "I thought we had a good working relationship here, and a friendship. That's not what friends or colleagues do."

"Kassi, sometimes things aren't what they seem." Ginger's voice betrayed no emotion. She reached for the door handle, then turned back. "Remember.

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I tried to help that poor family. The store's not pressing charges. It's pretty much over."

"Yeah." I breathed and struggled to speak, then stared after Ginger as she walked into the hallway. "I guess it is."

I remembered Renee's analysis of my need to be loved and realized attempts to win Ginger over had failed. I needed to control the damage. I tried to put the conversation and its effect on me aside and focus on finishing the preliminary budget, then teaching three classes. But the scenario played over and over in my head as I went through the day. Was it Ginger? Or me? Everything worked out. Why couldn't I live in the moment like Ginger did?

On this Friday, as my freshmen concentrated on their test on *Romeo & Juliet*, I sat with a stack of essays before me that cried out to be graded. Though I tried hard, I couldn't read them. My attention, instead, returned to Ginger's words that repeated in my brain in the conversation that frustrated and annoyed me. Why did Ginger choose my name? And why did the scenario have to play on in my head? There must be a way to interrupt it or change it. Then it hit me. I had to see it as one isolated incident, not a permanent pattern of events.

Ginger gave my name when Tim caught her shoplifting. While I believed it would hurt my reputation, I did not want to believe Ginger had that not-so-nice side. But the evidence contradicted that. I had to leave the comfort of a warm house to go to the store on a frigid day, hear the story and watch the video, feel my heart break when I realized what Ginger had done, and decide whether or how to confront her. Lots of angst there. But the Duh moment came when I convinced myself that giving my name was Ginger's problem.

At least I'll be able to sleep at night, I thought. Ginger, on the other hand, might be up surfing the internet, reading novels, doing anything but sleeping. That is, if she had a conscience. I believed she did, and it gave me the little victory I needed.

Finally satisfied, I put confusion at the incident to rest. Would it surface again? Well, I thought, I'll be ready for it. Will Ginger?

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After the shoplifting episode, I struggled with how to act towards Ginger. I saw her every day. Frostiness guaranteed more tension in already stressful days. I couldn't avoid interactions with her and had to see that she had everything she needed to do her job according to administration policy. I knew I had to swallow my pride and any other negative emotions the incident caused and be the best version of myself I could dig up.

I grabbed my spade and started shoveling.

I stopped by Ginger's room before classes began each day, said hello and how are you, and maintained a friendly, non-judgmental face. I usually walked the E/LA hallway every day routinely to say good morning to the teachers and check in on them. Most of them stood at their doors to greet the students. That daily stroll allowed me to connect with each of them, even if only for a few, brief seconds.

But Ginger rarely came outside her room. Mostly she sat at her desk being a dutiful teacher as she worked at the computer to set up the day's lessons or check e-mails. Before the incident, I passed by without intruding unless I had to, but now I made a point of walking into the room. Each morning brought a revelation. Ginger arranged the thirty desks differently on a daily basis. The set-up varied from side-versus-side to classroom-in-the-round arrangements, and every possible geometric pattern in between. When I greeted her, she responded with a surprised "Oh! Good morning. I didn't expect to see you!" even after two weeks of that seven-thirty-two a.m. ritual.

Based on the visits, I felt things still were not healthy between us, and I struggled to bridge the gap. Finally, I reverted to the one way I always found successful: food. Away from the work world with its stresses, I hoped Ginger

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might let her guard down and let me in to see her true self. Her quick yes to a drink and early dinner at *SmartFolkz* one night that week convinced me I had made the right choice.

When we arrived at the restaurant, its calming atmosphere gave me even more confidence. "I'm glad you could make it, Ginger." The hostess seated us at a table by the window. The carpeting and covered walls of the large, open-space dining room allowed diners to talk without shouting no matter how lively the crowd. I needed to hear Ginger, especially today. "This is perfect. We can talk," I said. "I feel like we need to connect outside of school a bit. Don't you?"

"Of course, Kassi. It's nice to have a friendly meal." Ginger placed her phone to the right of her silverware, then reached for her napkin. "I know we'll talk shop, but maybe we can go beyond that."

"Absolutely. Let's get a drink first." I opened the beverage menu. "What looks good to you?"

"Hm. You know me. I like my tequila. I think I'll have a Snow White. It's so tasty."

"Really? What's in it?" I wanted to sound interested and hoped Ginger quickly ordered one without a long discussion with the waiter about the drink and its contents and how it was mixed and how it was shaken.

"Tequila, obviously, liqueur, cognac, and cream. It's not for weight watchers, but today is special."

"Sounds great. I'll try one, too," I said.

"And I thought of you as strictly a beer girl. Getting daring?"

"Maybe. But I wanted to join you. We'll have something in common." I thought simply ordering the same drink might help to get us on the same wavelength and past the shoplifting incident.

When the waiter returned with the drinks, I sipped mine then smiled. The Snow White tasted delicious and warmed my throat.

"You've taught for a few years. Are you staying?" I led with a topic that might interest Ginger.

"Oh, yes. I love it. It's where I belong." She paused for a split second. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, Laurent asked me something when I met with him for a post ob. He asked me if it was all I wanted to do. Teach English. I was kind of offended. It sounded like he didn't think teaching should be the highest level to aspire to."

“That IS offensive. Especially for him to say it to you. You do so much.” She sat upright and sang it out.

“I guess I should consider the source.” I allowed myself six seconds to savor what I took as a compliment. “He didn’t spend too much time teaching before he moved up. I guess he doesn’t appreciate how rewarding and fun it is.”

“Don’t let him get to you. We are so important to the kids.”

I flinched mentally at the pronoun switch. At that moment, the waiter returned for our dinner orders. Ginger ordered the Chicken Marsala and I the Seared Ahi Tuna. We decided to forego appetizers and save room for dessert.

I sipped my drink, then continued the conversation. “I’m glad to hear you say you plan to stay and you’re happy. You’re a good teacher.”

“Thanks.”

The dinner was genial. We chatted more about work, then exchanged small talk relating to our personal lives. At one point, Ginger shared what I took as a desire for a closer bond.

“Kassi, I appreciate you reaching out and offering me your friendship. It means a lot.”

The words surprised and touched me, and I took a few seconds to put the next sentences together. “I’m glad we connected. I value you as a friend, too.”

When Ginger first started at Bantamville South, I had reached out to make her feel comfortable and welcomed. Ginger accepted, but she never wholeheartedly jumped into the friend pool. After the shoplifting incident, I questioned if I should continue to work on it.

Since I had to see her every workday, only good could come if we mended the relationship, and I set out to be my best self. Perhaps the Snow White fueled the sentiment, but it felt healthy. Finally, I had gotten what seemed like a sincere response. Finally, I felt we were friends. Finally, I could enjoy dessert.

A new issue arose a few days later on what started out to be a quiet Thursday, and the Ginger episode became history.

Like most old school buildings, BSHS suffered from uneven heating syndrome. While the temperature in one room might be a comfortable seventy degrees, that in the one next door could be ninety. The tiled, locker-surrounded hallways heated up between classes from the bodies of one-thousand teens moving for four minutes. During classes, though, they became cold and drafty. In September, May, and June, teachers and students enjoyed a refreshing cool down after spending forty-five minutes in the oven-like climate of a classroom. But in the winter, they buttoned and zipped up sweaters and jackets for the trek in between periods.

As I marched down the hallways to Parks' office, my body temperature rose, and my face and neck reddened. But not from the air temperature. Beads of sweat dripped to my waist, and the little hammer in my forehead pounded faster with each step. The feeling reminded me of the one time in school as a student when the principal called me into his office. When I sat before him, he told me that another student said I stole a pair of shoes from her locker. I didn't do it, but I had no way to prove it. The details eluded me now, but I remembered the small hammer and the sweat riding down my back. Eventually, I convinced that principal I was innocent. Now I hoped to convince this principal of the innocence of a new teacher.

As I approached the office, I saw Ginger coming from the other direction waving that she wanted to see me. Not now, Ginger, I thought. I smiled, waved, and headed towards Parks' door. One problem at a time. I knocked once instead of my usual four and didn't wait for an answer. "Hi, do you have a minute, Rikki?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Give me a second to save this white paper I'm working on for the school board."

She had to insert the school board part.

I sat in one of the two chairs across the desk from Parks. The room's subdued lighting created a muted, funeral parlor-like atmosphere. The fluorescent fixtures were turned off, and two Tiffany-styled lamps positioned on Parks' desk and bookshelf generated a calm quietness. I had priced the lamps a few months back to buy them for Zach's home office. They each cost at least four hundred dollars. Part of the benefits a new principal received included funds to redecorate her office. Parks' perks included the lamps and a very comfortable high-back executive chair with a headrest that went for nearly fifteen hundred dollars. Very impressive. Competent.

"What's up?" Parks lowered herself into the chair.

Finally, I thought. She got a chair.

Parks' frame filled it as though it was made for her shape.

Worth waiting for, I thought.

Parks reached over, grabbed a filled-to-the-rim paper cup with a neon green logo, and sipped through the straw sticking out of its lid.

Disposable cup? Doesn't quite fit.

"I just spoke with Misty Konover." Stay on topic. "She is upset about her meeting with you."

"Really? Why?"

"She feels you attacked her for something she didn't do."

"Really? Attacked her? I don't understand."

"Did you tell her something about blips on the radar?"

"Yes. I did."

"She took it to mean that you were looking for some indiscretion, like you were out to get her." The calm and low voice I started with took on that higher-pitched tone I tried hard to avoid. "She's a nontenured teacher. To hear that from the principal adds a lot to an already stressful day."

"I'm not out to get her. But maybe someone else is. You know, I hear two different voices talking, one in each of my ears." Parks sounded sober and restrained, a definite contrast to my tone. "One says one thing, and the other says the opposite. I'm new here, and I'm not sure which to believe." She continued to sip her drink.

I hesitated. What is she talking about? But I wouldn't let Parks re-frame the conversation with herself as the innocent who didn't know who to believe. I leaned forward and asked, "What is it that those voices are saying?"

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“That money for the club she ran last year was mishandled. The board investigated her involvement.” Parks seemed to have more details than I had guessed.

“And the result of that investigation showed that Misty had done nothing wrong.” I stated it as fact, not speculation.

“Not exactly. There were charges and a court case pending, too.”

“No, Rikki.” I interrupted and pushed myself back in my seat. “The court case had nothing to do with Misty other than that she might be called as a witness. The court case involved one parent charging another with assault because of something that happened after a soccer game. It’s a coincidence that they are both parents of kids in Misty’s club. And one charged the other with attempting to run her down in the parking lot. Misty was not even there.”

“The powers-that-be made a connection between the club and Misty. For that one voice in my ear, she caused the thing to happen.” Parks’ cell phone buzzed, and she peeked down at it.

“You don’t have the facts, Rikki!” My uncontrolled voice intruded. Then I caught myself. Quiet that voice. “You’re going after an innocent teacher, and a very good one, too. She’s concerned it will affect her job, and it has nothing to do with her teaching.”

“No, no, no.” Parks leaned forward on her desk. “Tell her she needs to continue the good work she’s doing teaching and stay off the radar.” She looked me in the eyes and smiled. “She really, really, really needs to stay off the radar.” She then took one more long sip from the cup and rose from her chair.

I sensed the meeting to be over, but Parks added a new challenge. “Before you leave, I should clarify one other item for you.”

“Yes?” Only one?

“Sean Ackerman submitted a request for a field trip the other day.”

“Yes. For his journalism class. Van Ness University runs a one-day conference for aspiring journalists. The students go to workshops run by professional journalists and interact with kids from other high schools throughout the state. It’s a valuable experience for them.” My voice rose with each sentence, and I held a finger up for each point as I said it. “Plus, they get a tour of the university and a chance to talk with admissions people. We’ve had many of our students apply there because of that day’s experience.”

“Yes.” Parks didn’t skip a beat. “I won’t approve any field trips this year.” She stared at me.

“But this one is a proven winner,” I responded.

“It’s best our students use school time for academics, not field trips.”

I stuttered as I tried to get the words out. “It—it—it—is, Rikki! These are valuable experiences for the students. It’s not like they’re going to—to—to ...” I looked around in search of the right analogy when my eyes landed on Parks’ cup. “It’s not like they’re going to lunch at *BestofBurgers!*”

“Please tell Sean, and anyone else on your team who plans to apply for a field trip, that I will deny it.” Parks took one more sip as she reached to open the door.

With that meeting-ending signal from Parks, I stood up, turned, and moved away from the desk. I paused as I passed the cloth-covered cage. I had forgotten about you. I left the office with the beads of sweat now a steady stream of perspiration. Worse, though, facts didn’t matter to my principal, whether they concerned staff or students. That scared me, and I felt more unsettled than when I arrived.

Now another question arose. Has *BestofBurgers* become BSHS’s main source of nourishment?

Now, I thought as I walked down the hall to my classroom after the meeting. The guarded optimism I had last August when I first met Parks was in shackles now. How could I have been wrong?

When I walked into the room, I placed the mail I had retrieved from the office onto my desk and eased myself into my low back task chair. I guessed its cost to be about sixty-five dollars. Emerging.

As I settled in, I recalled when I first got word of Parks' appointment last August and made it a point to come to school mid-summer and meet her.

To my dismay, Parks had indicated then that she wanted to eliminate the team leaders. But she had not pursued it or spoken about it since. I had figured that she needed to deal with other policy issues and problems, so the team leaders were off the table and safe, at least for the moment. Parks now seemed to set her sights on going after certain individuals and eliminating programs regardless of whether the facts warranted it. That direction troubled me, mostly because Parks' teaching background had given me hope that the principal would take the humanistic approach. I recalled our first meeting when she had inserted the topic into our conversation.

"Tell me, what is your team like? Are they up to the challenge of the new standards and testing?" Her five-foot-eight-inch frame had placed the standing Parks in position to tower over me as I sat in the chair across from her.

My back stiffened. I had to be very careful here. As I sized Parks up from head to toe, I saw a woman who put effort into her appearance. Her tailored suit highlighted her perfect weight and posture. I wondered if Parks was making small talk or probing for more information than I wanted to give right now. Usually, I gauged a person's level of involvement in the conversation by her eyes, but Parks' hazel ones gave nothing away.

“Of course, they are. They’re English teachers. They are the leaders of the school academically. You know. You were an English teacher, weren’t you?” I turned the topic back to Parks with the question.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I was.” Her face almost lit up with joy when I said it.

“Tell me, why would you want to give up the best job in the world to become an administrator?” I watched for Parks’ reaction.

“The best job in the world? What do you mean?”

“Being an English teacher. They pay us to read stories and plays and poems and academic articles, write about them, and discuss them with young people. It doesn’t get much better than that.” It was a reference I made when friends asked me whether I liked teaching. I wondered how this principal would view it.

Parks had seemed taken aback for a second as though she didn’t know what to say, but she recovered. “Right. Well, I thought I might be more effective, have more impact, as an administrator. The job carries some—some—power.” She paused to gauge my reaction. “I do plan on going back to teaching once I retire from administration.”

Bong. Bong. Bong. The bell for sixth period awakened me from that brief mental trip to the past. I recalled the question I wondered about that August. When would Parks open the metaphorical bag, like the one given to Odysseus by the wind god Aeolus, that could either save him or push him farther away from completing his mission?

I thought I knew the answer. It seemed to be now.

After a long day of teaching and taking care of E/LA team items, I still had more work to do to prepare for tomorrow. I headed to the copier room to run a test for two classes, a worksheet for three of them, and a memo for my team. On most days, the room got busy after school, as though everyone had planned the same moment to get their handouts prepared. Today was different. Only Bill Peterson stood between me and the machine. A quick stop, I thought.

As I waited and listened to the punching, sliding, snapping sounds of the copier doing its work, I saw Renee making her way to the room.

“Hi!” Renee sang it out. “Looks like we all had the same idea. How are you?” She lined up behind me.

“Good. How are you?”

“Great. A little tired. It was an exhilarating day in the classroom. A lot of energy flowing.”

“Yes? Sounds educational.”

“Definitely. Definitely.” A wry smile crept onto Renee’s face. “Nothing like a class full of seniors whose bodies are too big for the desks and whose minds are out in La-La Land. And did I mention, they have senioritis, and it’s only the second quarter?”

“Sorry, Renee. You were the only choice for teaching it. Okay. The only one that wouldn’t give me a hard time about it. You know I appreciate it.”

Certain senior courses had team members asking to teach them. Students in the Advanced Placement and upper-level Honors English classes were interested and informative. Their priority in getting into college motivated them to work for good grades. They joined clubs and tried out for sports to follow their passion or to pad resumés. As a bonus, a teacher could learn the social news of the school by listening to their conversations before the bell

rang to start classes. Always enjoyable and amusing, these kids made a teacher's day.

Other senior courses ranked lower, much lower, on most teachers' love-to-teach list. Students in the vocational programs and others who had not planned to go to college took the regular twelfth grade English course. Those on the vocational track figured they would never need to read a novel or play or write a paper again. Motivation to do the assignments registered low. Students who had not planned to go to college saw little reason to do any assignments. Both students and teachers in these courses struggled with the academic routine and rigor. But the kids' real-world stories made that part of a teacher's day far from humdrum.

In her first go-round with them, Renee wasted no time in developing her own program for those unmotivated seniors. It served her since she ended up teaching them year after year, one of the perks of her friendship with me. By now comfortable with them, she took the classes with minimal complaints. She even once said out of earshot of anyone but me that they eventually turned out to be the students she appreciated the most because she saw them mature by the time June rolled around.

"Absolutely. It's okay. As long as you let me vent." Renee controlled her voice letting only a tinge of sarcasm come through.

"Not a problem. I enjoy breezes." I turned to Bill Peterson at the copier. I counted mentally as his papers flipped out of the machine. Ninety-five. He had small Special Ed classes, but he ran lots of copies. I'd love to ask him what they're for, I thought. But copier room etiquette would not approve.

Then Renee's voice got my attention. "I have some news. Remember I told you my son was struggling with what he wanted to do. Police officer? Accountant? Computers? Well, he finally decided."

"Charley? Yes. I remember. He had a lot of interests."

"Yes. Which was better than having none."

"What did he decide?"

"Get ready for it." She inhaled. "He wants to teach."

"What!? Great! I think."

"Exactly. I think."

"What made him decide that?"

"His girlfriend. Nia. The one from Accomplish Academy."

"Your old school. That's a charter, isn't it?"

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“Yes. Sidebar. I was happy to get out of that place. Anyway, he told me last night he wants to major in education.”

“So how did Nia help? You have a good relationship with her, right? You helped her back at Accomplish. She’s the one you watched over.”

“It’s a different environment at a charter school.” Renee thumbed through her papers as she spoke. “Nia had a lot going against her then. She pretty much supported herself. She looked at me like a mother-figure. She got herself into strange situations. A lot of teachers thought of her as a troublemaker. I felt bad that she struggled. She wasn’t a bad person. Just did stuff that people didn’t like. But she didn’t try to cause problems. It was Nia being Nia.” Renee stopped, looked up, and exhaled. “Darn. I’m missing a page.” She checked her papers on the counter one more time. “Save my place.” On her way to the door, almost as a second thought, she turned back to me and said, “I’ll be back.”

I looked at Bill to gauge his reaction and movie trivia knowledge then replied, “I’ll be here.”

But before Renee made it out of the room, the fire alarm sounded. A combination of a whistle, siren, and bell clanging over and over, the signal sparked fear in anyone who had never heard it before, and even in those who had. Designed to be loud enough to get the attention of those in large, busy areas like the cafeteria and gym, its shrill sound pierced the eardrums of anyone who heard it while in a small room. Renee, Bill, and I covered our ears and headed out of the building when it continued longer than it would take a custodian to turn off a false alarm.

We gathered with cheerleaders, band members, and the yearbook staff, along with a few teachers, all who had been involved in conducting after-school practice, running activities, or catching up on lesson planning, grading, or copying. Lenore Knudson, the only administrator remaining after school, joined us after a few minutes.

I spotted an unfamiliar face come out through the cafeteria’s doors. “Who’s that, Lenore?”

“The tech. She’s here to service the computers in the lab.” Knudson filled me in. “She’s from tech. And the fire department is on the way,” she told us. “The cafeteria alarms are going off.”

We groaned. Then a sharp, swishy sound and a flash of brightness drew our attention to the cafeteria windows. Within seconds we smelled burning paper and saw plumes of smoke filling the lunchroom. As the group moved

farther back to safety, the fire trucks pulled into the parking lot and headed for the section of the building covered by the white puffs. The firemen jumped into action, grabbed their gear, and ran into the building. Students and teachers watched closely and quietly. After five minutes, two firemen walked out, one pushing a trash can.

Knudson walked over and introduced herself.

"A paper fire. Good thing the alarm sounded. This is the only damage. Maybe a little smoke," the fireman told her. "We're checking everything out. It'll be a few more minutes."

"Thank you." Knudson sighed, a response we all shared.

"At least it's not during class time," Bill said. "After the bomb threat evacuation, I am really behind in my courses."

We all seconded Bill's comment but had nothing else to add. Most of us had adapted to standing around and waiting for an all-clear. Mercifully this one came after twenty minutes.

When we returned to the building, Renee headed off in search of her missing page. While I made my way to the copier room, I wondered what inspired people become firefighters. Did they have a strong desire to serve and protect? Or did the thrill of running into unpredictable and dangerous situations and surviving motivate them? Whatever the case for them, neither motivated me. I prefer the obvious.

Left with nothing to do but stare as Bill continued to run his copies, I returned to Renee's topic and the two-edged sword of charter schools. The programs of some worked for kids who couldn't succeed in a regular public school. From what Renee had told me, they did for Nia. Smart, artistic, and untamed. She found a mentor in Renee who helped her figure herself out. The other side of the story, though, viewed charters as so selective in admitting kids that many who may have benefited never made it through the door. The public school could nurture them if the administration and teachers recognized that different did not mean bad.

"Found it!" Renee waved the paper as she appeared in the doorway of the copy room.

"And you still have your place in line." I hoped Bill would hear and get done.

"So back to my story. Nia is getting As and Bs in college, and she must have told Charley that her teachers, and not only me, helped her when she was

ready to quit. He put two and two together and realized he could help kids as a teacher. He's going for it!"

"And that's good, though we might not think so today." I shied away from telling students to go into teaching, but not because of the work. My first twenty years were productive and rewarding. But the direction in which politicians were pushing the public schools soured me on it as a career, and I questioned its future. I saw more and more new teachers leave the profession after a year or two, either of their own choice or as a result of the political atmosphere.

"Right." Renee paused and shuffled her papers. "But you know, if he's passionate about it, I can't tell him not to."

"And it would be hypocritical for two people who have happily made a career in teaching to bad mouth it to a young person."

"Yeah. He deserves his chance to make his own choice. And he'll be a good teacher. He enjoys working with kids, he's smart, and he wants to do something that gives back. He'll be fine."

"He will." I smiled. Despite my misgivings, I held on to my optimism that public school teaching would survive the attacks. "On the bright side, there's going to be a major shortage of teachers in the next few years. His job prospects should be good!"

"And I have more news. Nia and Charley are engaged!"

"That's great!" I said. "Isn't it?"

"Yes. It's something to celebrate. They're perfect for each other."

"Have they set a date?"

"The Fourth of July. Two years from now. They'll finish college first."

"July Fourth," I said. "Quite a choice." I gazed at Bill as he continued to stare at the machine spit out copy after copy.

"They were looking for something different. I'm not sure it'll be that, but it will be hectic. Ah well."

"Different enough. Are they having a big wedding?"

"About a hundred people. Which is small by my family's standards. That's because I have a big family. But you know Charley. He doesn't like people making a fuss over him. Nia, on the other hand, is really social. They're compromising. A quick church ceremony, then a small reception."

"Sounds perfect. Are you involved in planning?"

"Not yet. I offered to help, but I get the feeling that they want to do it their way. It makes things easier for us."

“Then it’s win-win.” I quoted the conflict resolution principle that had been promoted to death in school in the last few years.

I remembered my wedding and how Zach and I almost eloped. After two bad relationships, I became Miss Cautious when I met Zach. I didn’t want to give my heart away and have it broken again. But Zach’s easygoing, cheerful way was refreshing after two previous self-absorbed boyfriends. With Zach, I sensed from the beginning that he cared about other people. When I finally let my guard down and allowed myself to fall in love with him, a little self-protection remained. That’s why we told our families there would be no big wedding, and we planned to get married by the mayor at city hall. Zach went along with the plan even though he believed that two people needed a support system to make a marriage work. If two people couldn’t make their commitment to each other in front of the people who care about them, that marriage seemed doomed. I realized I agreed with Zach about weddings, marriage, and a lot of other things. That turned out to be a valuable element in our relationship. Another win-win.

I leaned on my papers and smiled. “It sounds very have it your way. And they are including you. Here’s a confession. Zach and I almost eloped. The first time we went off quietly to get married by a justice of the peace.”

“Really?” Renee’s interest rose.

“When the ceremony ended, I was happy, but I felt an emptiness without our family and friends there. Zach probably knows me better than I know myself now, and he did then, too. Without telling me, he arranged for them to meet us at Eldon’s Bistro where we all celebrated. We got to share the moment with them and kind of announce our commitment to each other.”

“Wait! Did you say the FIRST time you went off quietly?” Renee’s voice hit an incredulous high note.

“Yeah. We got married a second time in a church which all my Catholic relatives consider our first time. So instead of eloping, we had two weddings.”

“Wow! What other secrets are there in this mystery woman we call Kassi?” Renee joked at the idea that strait-laced me might be an enigma.

“You’d be surprised. Hope you never get sucked in by the other secrets in my life, Renee. They could be dangerous. World-changing. Or life changing. School changing? Maybe I’m getting carried away.” I laughed at my self-promotion.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

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“So will I,” Bill Peterson said. “School-changing seems to be the theme here this year. Have you had any doings with Parks yet?”

I paused. Bill rarely spoke to anyone in the copy room. “Nothing big, Bill.” I hesitated to share my Parks’ appraisal with him. “Have you?” I had no qualms about listening to his, though.

“Her m.o. seems to be bully for change,” Bill said. “A few teachers in my department are feeling her heat. I’ll leave it at that.” But he didn’t. “Seems she’s hinted termination for newbies and transfer for oldies. Not very encouraging.”

“Not at all, Bill.” I looked at Renee and rolled my eyes.

Renee let out a sigh.

“I think you’re next, Kassie.”

My head shot up, and I saw Bill pointing me to the now-open copier.

Life goes on.

JANUARY

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Tommy Snyder never hesitated to express his opinion. “Ugh. Worst day of the year.” This time he aired his view of the lesson that I had introduced at the beginning of class. Parks had mandated that teachers in all subject areas do standardized test prep. I incorporated activities that practiced test-taking in lessons throughout the year. Extremely competent, I hoped. And with the mandate, I would be allowed to check it off on my have-to-do list.

To make it as painless as possible, I chose not to start something new on a Thursday. We’d do the prep to end this week, then begin fresh on Monday. Nevertheless, Tommy’s evaluation of the day didn’t differ much from mine.

I accepted that students needed practice, and instruction in certain test-taking strategies could add a few points to their scores, whether on SATs, ACTs, or the AASWPE, the state’s latest graduation requirement. Sometimes those points made the difference between graduating or coming back next year for a retake. But few administrators recognized that English and math teachers taught approaches and tricks throughout the year. We didn’t need a special directive. Parks would get better results if she also encouraged teachers in other subjects to include test-like activities. This promised dramatic score improvements. But when Parks sent the e-mail that required all teachers to spend the day on test prep, it created an atmosphere of rebellion among the staff. Now I had a mini uprising in class.

“I admit it. It’s not the most exciting thing to learn. Sometimes, though, we have to do things that aren’t. You’ve heard the whole speech about how these new tests are different, tougher. How you need to be prepared for what

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the test looks like. How you can pass it, but you have to be ready for something different. Graduation, guys and girls. That's what it all means to you."

Then a hand shot up. Ellie Kraft puffed her cheeks and exhaled. "But we're in tenth grade, Mrs. S. Our graduation is a couple of years away. It's not fair we have to take this test."

"It's meant to tell us if you are where you should be as a tenth grader. If you're not, it gives us time to help you get there. And it's a state requirement. You are not the only school that does this. It's statewide. In fact, other states do it, too." I laid out my best pro-prep argument, though I doubted I had convinced them.

Then another hand shot up. Alex Lawson peered over his glasses and monotoned his comment. "I've taken tests for nine years. I think I know how to do that. Can't we say we did it and get back to *Of Mice and Men*?"

They were experts in techniques to wear me down, but I held the line.

"Like I said, this is a new type of test-taking. You'll have to do it on a computer. You need to practice the ins and outs of that. And we WILL get back to the movie later."

Then another hand shot up. Henry Gladney held up his ear buds and stretched the wire between his hands. "Mrs. S, we're the wired generation. We're attached to our smartphones; they're an appendage. Remember you said that? We can do that test without practicing how to. Let's skip it. We won't tell anyone. We won't tell Parks. No trouble for you."

My eyes opened wider at the reference. I hadn't realized the students even knew Parks existed, let alone that she required specific lessons. "Thanks, Henry. And everyone else. Thanks for your opinions. But we will do this. And I expect your cooperation. I promise it will be almost painless. And we will revisit George and Lenny. I noticed you got into it when we stopped the other day. But today and tomorrow are the only days I could get the laptop cart. Trust me. You will see what happens in the film. Those of you who didn't read the book will still be ready in case you ever are on *Show Your Smarts*."

Quiet laughter floated through the classroom once my attempt at humor sank into their brains. Then Henry shuddered in mock disbelief. "What?! How could anybody not read *Of Mice and Men*. It takes about thirty minutes."

"You know, Henry, what they say about the best laid plans?"

"Right. Nice one, Mrs. S."

Henry's refreshing take on reading impressed me, but after I spent ten minutes in that exchange, I realized I needed to move things along. I'd have

to cut those minutes out of the lesson. Not a bad discussion, though, I thought.

Once students got their laptops from the mobile cart and logged onto the AASWPE site, I gave them a quick introduction. I then told them to start the practice test, get as far as they could in the time left, and save. They could pick up where they left off and finish it tomorrow. Once I saw the results, I'd plan a lesson or two in the areas they were weak in. I had set aside two days for that next week. I'd introduce the new literature, Shakespeare and *Julius Caesar*, on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, then assign them the first act to read. Thursday and Friday would be test prep, which would give them at least four days of it in all. Once the test window rolled around, they'd spend two more days on the English/Language Arts part. Since they were required to do pre- and post-testing, that added at least two and possibly four more days on to the total number of days testing would take, though I preferred steal, from the school year.

Non-teachers who heard this might think what a great deal the teachers got. Ten to twelve days of not working. If only, I thought, if only. Besides proctoring the test when it's given, the teachers also had to figure out a way to cram a curriculum designed to cover one hundred and eighty class periods into one hundred and seventy or fewer. And the kids had to absorb the material at the same pace.

As I watched the group get down to work, their focus impressed me. Despite the resistance they expressed at first, they let it go and concentrated on the task at hand, no matter how boring it might seem. And though the day would be much easier if they did what I told them without question, I was glad they didn't. They had opinions and articulated them respectfully and logically. An English teacher had to appreciate that, and I made a mental note to reward them and release them from their boredom as soon as I could.

Five minutes before the bell, I told the students to stop, save, log-off, and return their laptops. Ten seconds after I checked in the last one, the bell rang and the students moved on, more test prep awaiting them in the coming weeks with a different angle.

Since I had lunch break the next period, I gathered my coat and bag and headed towards the main office. I hoped to see Parks for a minute to talk about ideas to raise the students' morale since they were so negative towards test prep.

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The meeting, however, did not make Parks' agenda. She had left the building.

Rather than waste my lunch period, I scribbled a note to Parks in which I asked for a meeting later, then I headed out to the parking lot. Though I had packed lunch and would eat it later at school, I felt antsy and needed activity. I decided on the perfect cure and something I enjoyed: hitting golf balls.

Though a small town, Bantamville had an indoor, 3D driving range. Golfers played any of thirty-two courses in the rain, cold, or snow thanks to a state of the art, 3D golf simulator. After I hit thirty balls, the hassles of the workday usually flew away. But this time I questioned its effect as a stress-reducer.

When I put a token into the simulator, nothing happened. I tried to get it to work for a few minutes then stood and stared. Luckily, another customer, a twenty-something man in shorts and work boots, came up, pressed the *Start* button, smiled, and said, "It helps to hit this button."

"Wow. Thank you. I forget every time. It's too obvious, I guess." I hadn't yet grown into 3D indoor golf range routines.

"No problem. My mom forgets all the time, too. I have lots of practice." He then made his way to a nearby tee, put his token into the slot, said have a nice day to me, and turned and pulled out his driver. I saw that a woman of about forty-five, probably his mother, stood at the next tee down. I couldn't be sure without my glasses, but the woman looked like someone I had seen before, maybe at school.

Though three tees away from them, I heard most of their conversation. I didn't want to invade their privacy, but the acoustics of the indoor range made it impossible not to.

The woman teed her first ball, swung through two practice swings with her driver, then made contact. She watched the flight of the ball then turned to the young man. "Are you going to finish on time?"

"Mm. I hope so." He stepped up to his first shot.

She waited for him to swing but didn't follow the path. "Scott, this is important for you. This is why you are here. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, Mom. Yeah." He set up for his second shot.

Again, she waited for him to swing but didn't follow the ball. "I spoke to Art. He says he's putting the house up for sale. You may not be able to stay there much longer."

"I know. I was there when the realtor came." He paused as she hit her second shot then looked at her and said, "I talked to Art about it."

Again, he ignored the flight path.

By hitting one ball for each of their pair, I had time to check out my own shot, tee up the next ball, pause, and eavesdrop on their conversation. I gathered that the young man lived in a rented house, had a deadline to finish something, and was not a good golfer. And if golf skills were in the genes, he had little hope of improvement. I also learned that the mother worked in the Bantamville School District's central office in the technology department. I found that interesting and coincidental. Funny, I thought, how I can't seem to get away from BS no matter where I go. At least it explained why she looked familiar. I must have seen her working on the computer system at school at some point.

The woman sent her final ball to the twenty-five-yard marker. "I have to get back to work, Scott. Anything you need?"

"No. Hey, how's that going?"

"As I planned. Last month worked out as I hoped. This month's will be soon. I'm alone most of the day, so it's easy. Once I got assigned to maintaining the technology in the buildings, it made things easier. I can visit the schools whenever I want to, which works, too. In fact, I'll be at the high school in the next week or so."

"Thanks for doing this for me, Mom. But be careful."

"I'm very careful, Scott. I'll be okay. You know I love you, Scott. If things don't go better for you, then I feel I failed you. I'm doing what's gonna help us both. Anyway, I have to get back. Bye, Scott,"

"Bye, Mom."

The conversation touched me and informed me that the mom worked for Bantamville Schools because it would help her son accomplish whatever he needed to do. And from the sweet, seriousness of her voice, she happily took on what seemed to be a difficult task.

I finished the virtual reality equivalent of a small basket of balls and judged my game to still be in good shape. Or as best shape as I should expect after three months of inactivity. When I headed to my car, the aroma of grilled burgers and greasy, salty French fries filled the air and my nose. I only had a tuna salad to look forward to when I returned to school and running into the *BestofBurgers* next to the range to get lunch tempted me. One day of cheating wouldn't throw me so far off my diet that I couldn't recover by Friday for the Lotsa Losing weekly weigh-in. The discomfort of the band of my pants

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cutting into my waist reached my brain in time though, and it gave me the willpower to say no to the burger and fries.

I avoided looking in the direction of the *BestofBurgers* until an older but well-maintained, indigo blue sportster pulled out of the restaurant's lot and caught my eye. A few years back, I had seen a similar car every day in the staff's parking lot when I arrived in the morning. The color reminded me of the uniforms of my favorite college basketball team I watched on TV in the late sixties and early seventies when I loved the game. The sightings began back then after Jake Suder had totaled his Mustang in an accident. Each day for about two weeks, he got out of the passenger side of the sportster. It was Ben Worthen's car then. And once I got a view of the driver, I was pretty sure it was his car now, too.

I hadn't seen him in a few years and didn't know if I would recognize him had he not been driving the familiar coupe. As he looked in my direction, he stared for four seconds. I lowered the window, but he quickly turned and pulled out of the lot and away from my minivan. I guess he doesn't remember me, I thought. But he sure was in a hurry. And I should be, too, if I wanted to get back in time to have a bite to eat before I had to teach a class.

When I returned to school and the E/LA office after the driving range, I met Ginger.

"Hi, Kassi!" She sang out the greeting and continued to move her feet at a brisk pace towards her classroom. "I left you a coffee on your desk. My treat. I went out and got one for myself and thought you might appreciate one, too."

"Thanks. Coffee brings me back to life. You saved me."

"I go out most days. I'll keep you supplied if you like it that much. Enjoy! I have to get to my room and get ready for next period." Ginger's voice trailed off as she continued down the hallway.

Hm. I smiled. Nice that she thought of me.

On-the-run I dodged half-asleep students and rushed down the congested hallway in an attempt to beat the first period bell. “Guess what I’m doing?”

“What? Marathon training?” Renee stood at her door, one hand on the doorknob, the other akimbo on her left hip. Her benevolent smile didn't disguise the sarcastic-but-friendly style only she could pull off.

“Guess who called in sick and didn’t leave plans.” I was one room past Renee by the time I finished speaking.

“Get out. No, it can’t be. She burned her last sick day long ago. How can she get away with this?”

The week after doing Parks’ mandatory test prep lessons, teacher attendance ran higher than usual. Finally, we could return to teaching the curriculum, and we didn’t want to miss a day since we would soon lose more to the actual testing. Amadiane Kinpal, however, marched to her own drum. Amy, as she liked to be called, came into public education at the mature age of forty-five after a twenty-year career working as a chef at her father’s restaurant at a shore resort. When her father sold the place, she updated her teaching certificate and landed a position at BS High. As a second career, it benefited her though the same couldn’t be said for the school district. The post-test prep week served as an off week for her, which meant she took a day off. In the three-and-a-half years Amy had been teaching, by my count she had averaged one absence every two weeks. Since she seemed healthy when she was in school, the gossip mill filled up with possible reasons for her being out other than illness. In one story, she worked a part-time night job which required her to work one day every two weeks. In another, she ran her own business and needed time for that. In a third, she wrote novels and had deadlines she couldn’t meet unless she took a day every two weeks. While Kinpal

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had a great imagination, the e-mails she wrote lacked a writer's style and clarity, and I dismissed that last one.

And though I did have some not-so-nice versions to explain the non-attendance, none of the stories mattered to me right now. I had deadlines to meet.

As Renee's voice trailed off, I unlocked the book room, formerly known as the boy's lav, and ventured inside being careful to avoid walking into a cart. When smoking and vandalism forced the administration to close the lav permanently, it became a storage spot for the E/LA department's books and mobile television and laptop carts. The electric circuit had shorted out not long after that, and since the room had been closed to students, fixing the lighting shifted to a low priority for the district's facilities maintenance department. Since it became my team's space, I had maneuvered in and out so many times that my brain had memorized a safe path. That paid off at times like this when I raced to beat the bell. I grabbed a TV/DVD combo cart, jockeyed it out, and pushed it down the hallway towards the classroom. Amy Kinpal hadn't left lesson plans for any serious or productive work. Instead, she said the kids could watch a film.

As I approached the door, the substitute teacher saw me and immediately expressed her gratitude. I realized why as I wheeled the cart in and saw the group there. At the desk by the door, a thin girl dressed in a cropped top, leggings, and flip-flops filed her nails. Two rows away, a dark-haired boy rested his head on his desk catching the winks he must have missed last night. Behind him, another in a flannel shirt and jeans slouched in his seat and stared out the window. In the back corner, four boys had created a card table with their desks. Three of them watched as the fourth dealt their hands. The poker craze had ascended on BS High. I saw no sign of a pot though the camouflage jackets and hoodies they wore had the potential for hiding large amounts of cash. Five other students were scattered around the room, each separated from the other by at least one desk.

"Well, good morning!"

They recognized the voice of a regular and paused in their activities.

"Here's an idea. You all need to put away the extras—nail file, cards, music players, earphones—and give the teacher your attention."

In fine turtle fashion, they each made one final gesture to finish what they were doing. I guessed they were bookmarking so they could pick up where

they left off once I was out of the room. But at least they were taking a breather. It worked for me, and I turned to the substitute teacher.

"There's a DVD in the desk. The kids can tell you where to start, and they can watch it for the period. Ms. Kinpal says they like the movie, and it should keep them interested. Leave the DVD in the desk and the TV cart here when the class ends. I'll get it later. Good luck."

I talked fast and left no room for discussion. I wanted to return to finish the report for my nine a.m. meeting with Parks. I made it. As I sat and read it over to remind myself where I had stopped, someone knocked at the door.

"Come in!"

A small, thin hand with nicely manicured nails opened the door, and I saw a small, thin girl sheepishly looking around the room.

"What's up?"

"Scuse me." Her thin voice barely registered a decibel. She looked at the floor. "The lady sent me down here."

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Is something wrong in the room? Is the lady okay?"

"Yeah, nothing's wrong in the room."

"Okay. What do you need?"

"We ran out of movie."

"Huh? What?"

"We ran out of movie."

"You ran out of movie?"

"Uh-huh."

The explanation stumped me. What the heck does that mean? Ran out of movie?

I recognized the girl as one I had seen in Kinpal's class minutes earlier. Then it hit me. Ran out of movie as in the movie ended.

"You mean the movie is over already? Ms. Kinpal said it would take most of the period to finish it."

"No, we seen most of it yesterday."

"Are you sure? She was here yesterday. Wouldn't she know how much you saw?"

"She didn't watch it yesterday. She was doin' other work, then she left for a while."

"She did? Tell the sub I'll be right down with something else."

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Seconds after the girl left, I felt the heat and dialed Amy Kinpal on the phone. Only one thought occupied my mind. She better be home.

“Amy, it’s Kassi. The film you left ended two minutes after the sub started it.”

“It did? I guess they saw most of it yesterday. Oh, well.”

“Amy, give me another plan.”

“What?”

“Amy, they have nothing to do. Give me another lesson plan.”

“Do they really need anything else?”

“Amy. A plan.”

“Tell them to watch it again.”

“What?”

“Tell them to watch it again. It won’t hurt them. By the way. Could you tell the sub the computer is down? I put in a req for repairs, and someone should be in. Maybe today. Hey, did you hear? I should get tenure at the beginning of next semester. Isn’t that great?”

I hung up the phone.

Kinpal, I thought. Tenure? You’re killing me.

I tugged open a file drawer, rummaged around for a minute, then found the folder. Labeled Emergency Sub Plans, it held a lifeline I hadn’t used for a long time since my team proved to be conscientious in providing lesson plans for their absences. Except for Kinpal. As I rifled through the papers, I found one that fit, an assignment called Ownership Paragraph in which the students write a description of the item they value most. Generic, written, and doable. I hustled to the copy room, lucked out when no one was using the machines, made 40 copies, and dropped them off with the grateful sub. Crisis averted, I hoped.

With ten minutes left before the meeting, I returned to my desk, scanned what I had written, added a paragraph, and fast-paced it to Parks’ office at the other end of the building.

“Good morning, Kassi.” Parks smiled and motioned me into the office. “Come in. Have a seat.”

“Good morning, Rikki. How are you?”

“Good. I have to run a copy. I’ll be right back.” She moved towards the door. “Have coffee if you’d like.”

“Is Dave going to be here?” It seemed a logical question. As the school’s testing administrator, he should have input into the topic, standardized tests.

“No, he couldn’t make it.” Parks stopped in the doorway, looked down at the paper in her hand, then turned towards me. “He had to attend another meeting about the county wrestling tournament we’re hosting next month. It will only be the two of us, but I’ll fill him in.”

Hm, I thought. Parks’ timing in scheduling this meeting hit the target. His absence left Laurent no choice but to agree with whatever came out of it. Bull’s-eye!

I did not need coffee after the aerobics of planning for Kinpal’s classes. I sat in a supportive yet comfortable chair across from Parks’ desk, back to the purple cloth. I scanned the walls of the office and read the dates and details on the framed degrees and diplomas placed in eyeshot of anyone who visited and sat down. On a side wall were photos of Parks at the various jobs she held. She posed with students in some and with what appeared to be board members in others. In each photo, Parks’ pose reminded me of someone aware that many would see the image into the future. Her hair fell behind one shoulder and in front of the other, her jawline looked strong with no flab under her chin, her back arm lifted slightly to reveal her slim waist, her front shoulder pointed to the lens, and her eyes gazed off-center of the camera lens.

Amazing. The same pose in every photo.

When Parks returned, she carried the papers she had copied and a cup of coffee with the same logo as the soda she sipped the other day. I needed a minute to adjust and focus on the real person before my eyes.

But before my vision cleared, Parks began. “Kassi, I asked to meet with you because I want to make sure we are on the same page as to the importance of the standardized test scores, the AASWPE.” Parks paused at her desk and looked into my eyes. “As the English/Language Arts team leader, your input is valuable to all our teachers, not just your team.”

Wow! She’s interested in my opinion.

“Yes. What is your plan? How do you want to approach this?”

“I looked at the scores of the last two years, and we are in pretty good shape. Our students did well on those tests. Of course, the new test will be much more difficult, but if we maintain our standards, I’m confident the scores will be consistent with what the state expects.” The red from Parks’ silk blouse reflected on her face and created a pinkish glow. A trace of flab beneath her chin weakened the strong jawline of the photos. “For your part,

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I ask two things. One, please convey to your team the importance of preparing their students for this new test. I'm sure they know that, but it doesn't hurt to reiterate. Two, I need you on board as I reach out ...," Parks raised two fingers on each hand and completed her sentence, "to the rest of the staff." She then curled her four raised fingers downward.

I clenched my teeth after point one and wondered why Parks added the air-quotes for point two.

"Okay. To your first point, my team is aware of the role they are asked to play." The words flowed, a result of having made this presentation to administrators year after year. "They have been aware for as long as most of them have been teaching. English/LA is perpetually tested. We know that, and we understand how to prep the kids and still follow the curriculum." I paused and wondered if I had hit that higher pitch that came when my temper heated up as my bullshit meter registered above midpoint. For at least the past thirty years, the state's standardized test for high school graduation included two areas, math and English/Language Arts. While attempts were put forth, mostly during election years, to make the tests more stringent by adding science and social studies parts, none ever panned out. Trial runs proved that creating, administering, scoring, and using them created financial burdens states could not handle. The two-discipline test would stay.

I continued. "Now to your second point. That's a tougher one. How do you plan to get those teachers from disciplines that are not tested on board to do test prep? No one so far has been successful. And your most recent one—test prep day—was that a success?" I knew many teachers ignored it. Did Parks?

"I know. It's a task. And I don't want to be like the cliché of the bull in a China shop, going in and destroying everything that is in place." She lowered the volume and spoke in a smooth and natural voice. "However, I will hold every teacher responsible for helping our students on these tests. I know some will grumble, and I don't want to make test scores the most important, number one item that governs everything we do. I have a plan which I will announce at the next faculty meeting. I ask that you support me."

"What's the plan?" I hoped Parks would outline the details she would use to address the issue on which many administrators before her had failed. I expected to hear the same list of steps to get everyone on board to help the students other principals had tried. I reached for a spearmint candy out of a bowl on Parks' desk, unwrapped it, put it in my mouth, and enjoyed the refreshing taste as I waited to hear the plan.

Parks rose from her desk and walked to the front of it. She leaned against it, pushed her hair behind her right shoulder, extended her chin forward, sent her gaze somewhere above my head, and said in a crisp, seismic voice, "The plan will simply make them want to do test prep. Make them WANT to do it."

I almost swallowed the mint when I heard it. Yet as overbearing as the statement seemed, if it forced other disciplines to get on board the test prep train to join the E/LA and math teams, I supported it.

Parks explained that she had formulated a way to assign every student's E/LA or math score to each of the student's teachers. She had also calculated and created a scale to assign points to each teacher based on them and had set it up in an Excel spreadsheet. Guidance counselors would fill in the data. Administration would convert the final calculation into a rating for the teacher's yearly evaluation. She would also offer teachers after-school workshops and materials to help them incorporate the test prep into their classes and lessons. Down the road, once the state returned scores, every teacher's YIPE would be affected by their students' performance in reading, writing, and math.

Yow, I thought. Parks' plan invited moans from the staff. But if it meant they'd do test prep, I supported it.

"Sounds complex and serious." I paused and leaned forward towards Parks. "Here's something for you to store away. I have a file of test-prep-like activities I created a few years back for social studies and science. If you plan to give the teachers handouts to help them, these could be part of that. They give general test-taking practice and give basic groundwork for the new skills."

"Thank you. Yes. Pick out those that will be helpful and give them to me. I'll have the secretaries put together packets for the teachers." Parks looked at her buzzing cell phone and moved from her position on the desk's edge to the door, her signal of the meeting ending. "Any questions you have for me?"

"You know the students are not on board. They feel like they have been taking standardized tests since second grade, and they don't need any more prep. They also feel no one, administration, is interested in their thoughts and some are even thinking about opting out of testing altogether. I offer it as a heads-up."

"Thank you for sharing. I'll keep that in mind though I won't worry too much about it. Have a good day."

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As I navigated around the purple, cloth-covered dome to leave the office, I let thoughts that Parks might be good for the school into my brain. The response, or lack of one, about the students bothered me, but I gave Parks the benefit of the doubt and expected she would address the issue in some way. After all, she had a plan, she figured out a way to give everyone a stake in the testing game, and she asked me to get on board rather than imposing it on me.

I moved more lightly down the dim hallway as I headed to class. Maybe I misjudged Parks. And I have to find out about that birdcage.

The day after I met with Parks on the standardized test preparation plan, I sat at the computer and searched for the files for the social studies and science departments. When the phone rang, I swiveled around and reached for it. My principal's voice pierced my eardrum. As I listened, I grabbed a highlighter and outlined the *BestofBurgers* logo on the side of the coffee cup Ginger had left for me yesterday. The attention-getting design masked the clever science of it. The fuller the cup, the more vibrant the lettering. I only had time for a few sips the day before, so *BestofBurgers* jumped out at my eyes. I traced over the neon green with effervescent pink.

Parks asked if I had found the across-the-curriculum test prep activities.

"Yes, I was about to pull them up on my computer. I'll send them to you as soon as I find them and put them in order." I hung up the phone, swung back around to the monitor, extended an arm as I swiveled, and sent the coffee cup flying off my desk. I cringed. I'd now have to clean up the mess I created. Luckily, I hit it cleanly, and no liquid spilled on the floor or desk. In its entirety, the cup landed in the wastebasket. For a second, when I saw the *BestofBurgers* logo outlined in pink, I hesitated. Hmm. Ginger isn't a fan of fast food. She must like the coffee though.

I wanted to get to my other work. Once I found the files and sorted through them to pick the most appropriate and easiest ones to include in a science or social studies lesson, I e-mailed them to Parks. I kept it simple and selected one writing and two reading items. I included the rubric for writing responses to questions and essays that the E/LA team had created to make life easier for the teachers. The students were familiar with the rubric since their E/LA teachers had been using it for two or three years. For reading, I found two articles, one about cloning for the science people, and one about Thomas Jefferson for the social studies group. With each were sample

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AASWPE questions. To be kind, I sent the answers, too. As I finished the e-mail and clicked SEND, Amy Kinpal burst into the office.

“Kassi, I need help!” She blurted it out.

“Okay. What’s up?”

“Look at this. I found it on my desk when I went to my room after lunch.” She held out a piece of loose-leaf paper with words that had been clipped from a magazine or newspaper glued to it. “It’s a bomb threat.”

I grabbed it, read it, pushed up from my chair, and headed out the door. “We need to get this to the administration. Come on.”

We made the walk through the hallways in record time. I, with Amy close behind, checked Parks’ office first. No Parks there. Neither were Santonio and Knudson in theirs. With no other choice, we walked straight to Dave Laurent’s office and didn’t bother to ask if he were available. When I stepped through his doorway, I told him I had an urgent matter. Deep in conversation on his cell phone, he looked at me with his you’re annoying me, wait your turn face and continued to talk while he held up his hand in a stop sign.

“This can’t wait, Dave.” I placed the opened note on his desk in his eye-sight and pointed to the words.

“Hold on,” he said into the phone, then glanced at the note. After a few seconds, the words sunk in. He cut his call short, grabbed his walkie-talkie, and summoned the other administrators. “Where did you get this?”

“Ms. Kinpal found it on her desk when she came back from lunch.”

Guy Santonio arrived and asked what was happening. Laurent showed him the note as he continued to question me, then Kinpal. “Is it real? Could it be a prank? Was it folded? How long were you away from your desk?”

Santonio interrupted Laurent and said protocol called for them to notify the police and evacuate. He said they needed to do that immediately and ask questions later once they cleared the building.

“Right, right.” Laurent switched on his administrative light as Lenore Knudson came through his door. “All right. Notify the superintendent, the officer, the custodians, and the aides. We can’t make an announcement. We have to go to each class and knock on the door. Guy, that’s your area. Lenore, go to the exit doors and make sure everyone files out orderly. Stay outside and monitor it until you hear further from me. Use your cell phone to contact the police and let them know what’s happening. I will meet them when they get here. I’ll have Lilith contact Dr. Parks. She’s out of the building, but we’ll get her back.”

The two vice-principals moved out to handle their duties. Laurent walked out to the secretaries' area and gave them instructions to gather the paperwork they were responsible for and evacuate. Amy and I, who stood off to the side, expected him to return and give us our instructions. Neither came. After a minute or two, I looked in Laurent's direction and saw no one. I followed instincts and common sense and waved Amy over. Together we walked out of the building into thirty-two-degree weather.

Great, I thought. Standing out in the cold for hours. Not a good thing.

I watched as the students filed out of the building into the freezing temperatures. Pauses, groans, shrieks, then acquiescence flowed out of them. With no choice but to be out with no coats or warm clothes, only the T-shirts, tank tops, short skirts, and pajama bottoms and slippers they wore to class, they did their best to find warmth. Some huddled together and tried to merge their collective body heat into a warm circle. Some jumped up and down and flapped their arms. Some stood with hands in jeans pockets and screamed as though the higher the shriek the warmer they'd get. Some stood motionless, frozen like statues.

After about twenty minutes, after the bomb squad, fire department, and policemen arrived and began the protocol to search the building, word came to direct the students to *Prince of Peace*, the Roman Catholic church across the street. Torn between staying outside to see what happened and going to a warm shelter, curiosity did not win out. The students moved slowly but surely in the direction of the church. Neither Amy nor I had students since the events occurred during our lunch period, so we followed the last group.

Though built about fifteen years earlier, *Prince of Peace* reflected a new type of architecture standard. The outside had multiple roofs at odd angles, windows impossible to see in or out of, and plain white concrete walls. An expansive church-in-the-round filled the inside, with the pews angled in a semi-circle around the altar. From what I remembered of an Intro to Architecture course in college, this represented the epitome of the modern place of worship. Space, lines, light, and sound.

We walked into the first door we found. Immediately a blast of noise from the main seating area hit my ears. The roar engulfed the foyer. The architects had not planned the acoustics to handle one thousand excited teenagers set free from classes descending on the building at the same time. If Jesus came in now, I imagined, He'd think He had to do His cleansing routine. But this

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time, He'd have to chase out a mob of teenagers. Quite a dilemma, even for Him.

While the main area accommodated about five hundred students comfortably, a basement handled the other three hundred. Thank goodness for work programs. About two hundred students had left the building after their lunch period. Though not ideal or roomy with that many bodies, the church offered a warm sanctuary from the cold day.

"Ms. Kinpal, go over to that far right section and help the teachers maintain control. That group is getting loud." I wondered how Lenore Knudson determined that only that section needed to be brought under control.

As Kinpal headed to the offending zone, I volunteered to check on the other areas and calm the kids. I suggested to Knudson that she get the speaker system turned on in order to use a microphone to tell the kids what they should do.

"Good idea." Knudson moved out towards the exit. "I'll go over to the rectory next door and ask if someone can do that."

"Uh, maybe you should stay, since you are the only administrator here. Maybe you can find someone to go over. An aide, or even a kid you can trust." I guessed that if Knudson left this group of students and teachers in a church with no authority figure, she risked upsetting the upper-level administration, something she shouldn't do for her own self-preservation.

"Good idea. Yes. Let me see if I can find someone. Do you see any student who could do it?"

"Yes." Here we go again, I thought. "I'll ask my juniors. I have two good kids in mind." I realized Knudson stepped out of her league in her attempt to run this show, so I moved to survey the junior group.

I found two students, told them what I needed and where to go, and sent them on their way. In the meantime, I watched as Kelly Jensen, a math teacher, walked from teacher to teacher, stopped for a brief conversation with each, and took a few dollars from some. After she circled the entire church and spoke with every teacher, a feat she accomplished in about five minutes, she headed towards the side door.

At that point, the two students I had sent on the mission returned with an older man in custodian's clothes. He told me he would get the microphones and speaker system turned on for us. I thanked the students, sent them to find Knudson, then walked with the man to help with the set-up.

He smiled as he unlocked the case, plugged in the microphone, and turned on the system unbothered by the roar of the students. He handed me the mike. "Quite a group you have here. Very lively."

"That they are." I took the microphone and held it by my side. "Is this ready to go?"

"Yes. Flip up the switch on the side of the mike, and you'll sound like the voice of an angel."

"Really? I don't think so."

"The speakers are mounted high above the congregation. It will seem like your voice is coming from the skies. It's a little touch I incorporated when I put the system in. Makes me sound powerful." He winked. "It can't hurt."

"You're the pastor? Your attire doesn't quite fit," I said.

"These are my other work clothes, sort of. Once in a while I get my hands dirty doing repairs around the rectory. It keeps me down to earth, if you know what I mean. I'm Father Jim."

I smiled and thought I wouldn't mind sitting and listening to this priest. "Nice to meet you and thank you for your hospitality and help. I'm Kassi Stanton. I teach English."

"My favorite subject." He grinned.

"That's what everybody says, Father. Then they tell me how much they hate to read and barely made it through English class."

"No. Seriously, I love literature. I even write poetry. And I certainly read a lot."

"I believe you, Father." I smiled at the thought of a poetry writing priest.

"The sound system is turned on for the basement, too. When you speak, the students down there will hear you, too. It's something we put in for Christmas and Easter. You know, when our a la carte Catholics come to services."

"A la carte?"

"I mean the lapsed Catholics who never miss Mass on Christmas and Easter. We welcome them. But sometimes we have the overflow. They attend Mass in the basement."

At that point, I saw Knudson, motioned her over, and introduced her to Father Jim. He then said he had a meeting back at the rectory, and if we needed anything else to send someone over there. I tried to pass the microphone to Knudson, but she rejected the handoff.

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“Oh, Kassi. I’m really not good at that. My voice is not microphonish. Would you do it for me?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“I would owe you. Please, Kassi.”

“No.” Renee would be proud of me, I thought.

“Really? You’re not going to do it?”

“No.”

I had no problem talking to a crowd using a microphone. I used to do it every weekend as a party DJ, but I didn’t want to let Knudson off the hook. She had the VP job and needed to do it. All of it.

When a group of students witnessed the back-and-forth with Knudson, they began to chant “Stan-ton! Stan-ton! Stan-ton!” without stop. It got louder as more students picked up on it. I had no choice. If I didn’t speak to them, they would blow the roof off. After holding off as long as I could, I gave in, clicked the microphone’s on switch, and raised it to my mouth.

“Good afternoon.”

Before I said another word, the juicy sound of the school band playing *God Bless America* punched through the air, the volume louder and louder each second. The band had been marching on the football field next to the church during their practice period when the threat and evacuation occurred. Normally during the winter, the band would not have been outside for practice. But they were invited to play at the upcoming mayor’s inauguration to be held outdoors, and the band director used every thirty degrees plus day to get outside and rehearse. Word of the bomb threat failed to reach them, so the practice continued while the other students filed out of the school and into the church. As I stood with microphone in hand, the band performed a lively rendition of the song, and students who would never sing at a football game raised their voices in church. The acoustics, I had to admit, made for a sound that had *joie de vivre*, perhaps the first time the song rang out with such energy at BS High. Or at least at the church across the street.

Once the music stopped, either because the song ended or someone had finally let the band know of the evacuation, the students quieted enough, and I began. I told them as much as I could about the situation, and I asked them to be patient, to try to settle down, and to respect the church. Something in

what I said had an effect, or they had used up their energy singing, because the roar seemed to reduce to a lower decibel level after I spoke.

After finishing the spiel, I turned towards the door and glimpsed three food service employees rolling in carts filled with candy bars, soft pretzels, bags of chips, and bottles of water. We're here for a while, I realized. At that point, I handed the microphone to Knudson, told her I was off the air, and walked to the foyer.

On the way, I noticed that several teachers had Java Joint coffee cups. Kudos to them for grabbing them before they left the building, I thought. Some even munched on a donut or a bagel. Who gave out food while they waited? Then it hit me. Jensen. The exchange of money. She had collected cash and orders, made a Java Joint run, returned, distributed the goods, and no one even missed her. Jesus, what's going on in Your house?

But the goings-on in the house across the street, better known as the school, interested me more.

After two-and-a-half hours and about two hundred complaints from students that they missed their lunch, Knudsen gave the all-clear. Students returned with about twenty minutes left in the school day, enough time to gather their belongings from wherever they had left them, go to their lockers, and exit the building. The food service did not have a productive Tuesday.

The teachers received notice of a staff meeting right after school. Parks took this one from the start. She attacked immediately. “The behavior of our students today at the church is unacceptable. Your allowing it is also unacceptable. We had a bomb threat. Our students must take these situations seriously. You, their teachers, are expected to control them. Not doing so is unacceptable.”

The group murmured.

“What could we do?”

“We have no plan for having that many kids in one big room.”

“She ought to try controlling the kids.”

Parks tolerated none of it. She heard but showed no inclination to listen or discuss.

“It is not acceptable.” Her voice pierced the air. “Not acceptable. When we are in a situation like this, I expect you to account for your students, to keep them with you under control. Failure to do that will result in a formal write-up. Take me seriously.”

The room quieted, but the air thickened with emotion.

“That’s all I want to say. Mrs. Stanton and Ms. Kinpal, please come to my office now. I’d like to speak with you. Thank you. Good night.”

Parks and two detectives met Amy and me in the office. After the others sat down, she spoke. “Detective Martinez and Detective O’Brien, this is Mrs. Stanton, and this is Ms. Kinpal.” Parks clasped her hands behind her back and stood. Her piercing eyes and pursed lips signaled her intensity. I sensed from her stance and taut voice that praising Amy and me for our actions had not been placed on the agenda. “They brought the note to Mr. Laurent.”

“Thank you, Dr. Parks.” Martinez turned to Amy and me. “We have a few questions about the note and the events once you found it.” He smiled and

opened his notebook, then started the questioning. "Mrs. Stanton, how did you get the note you brought to Mr. Laurent?"

Seated in one of the two chairs in front of Parks' desk, I thought it strange that he questioned me about the note. "Ms. Kinpal gave it to me after she found it on her desk, as I told Mr. Laurent."

"Did Ms. Kinpal say anything when she gave it to you?"

"She said she needed help, then showed me the note."

He turned to Amy. "Ms. Kinpal. Tell me how you found the note."

"I came into my classroom after I ate lunch and went to my desk to grab a paper to make copies. I saw the note folded on top of my record book."

"Okay. Is there anything else you can tell us?"

Neither of us had more to add.

Martinez jotted a note in his pad before wrapping it up. "Thank you both. Dr. Parks, thank you, too. We will keep you informed if we come up with new information."

When the detectives left, Amy and I rose from the chairs, but Parks motioned us to stay seated. I sensed more questioning. I also noticed the purple cloth was still pulled down.

"Mrs. Stanton, where were you when this happened?" Parks focused on me first.

"In the E/LA office."

"And what time did Ms. Kinpal come in?"

"I don't know. I didn't look at the clock. I wanted to get the note to administration as soon as possible."

"Was it early in the period? Late?"

"It was later. Amy said she found the note when she came back from lunch."

Parks did not move or change her pitch as she peppered us with questions. I sensed her looking for something beyond the events as they happened.

"Ms. Kinpal. Tell me how you found the note. How was it folded? Neatly? Unevenly?"

"It was crumpled." Amy shrugged and held her palms open.

"You were absent yesterday. Are you sure the note was left today and not yesterday?"

"I can't be sure. The desk was filled with papers from yesterday's sub assignment. It could have been underneath them, and I only saw it when I cleared them."

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“Was your door locked while you were at lunch?”

The questions came fast as though they were scripted.

“Yes. No. Oh, I’m not sure.” Amy bit her lip as she spoke.

“Well, was it, or wasn’t it? Did you have to unlock it? The policy is to lock the classroom doors when a teacher isn’t present. You know that, don’t you?”

“I don’t remember. Honestly, Dr. Parks, I was so upset when I saw the note, I couldn’t even remember what I ate for lunch.”

The questioning continued for another five minutes. Parks asked the same questions over and over but in different words. I wondered what lay beneath the surface of it all. Before I could figure it out, Parks turned towards ending the interrogation.

“I am not happy with the way this has transpired. We are all exhausted. I suggest that you go home, try to remember as many details as you can about what happened before, during, and after you found the note, and write them down. We will meet tomorrow to go over things. I’m sure the board and the police want to know everything. Good night.”

The tone of the questioning amazed me. It sounded as though Parks blamed Amy and me for the whole thing. Rather than saying we acted appropriately, she interrogated us like we were hiding something.

What does she expect to find? Does she know something more? Is she hearing those voices in her ears again?

I promised myself that the Stanton voice would sound loud and clear when the time was right.

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Sean Ackerman whispered as he came into the E/LA office. “It’s quiet out there. Almost like a PD Day when the kids aren’t here. But they are, and it’s eerie.”

“Yeah, I thought the same,” I said.

After the bomb threat, Parks had sent out her mandate that required all teachers to include two days of test prep in lessons before testing began. Now two weeks later, the normal sounds of Bantamville South were silent. No loud guffaws then stifled laughs, no slapping footsteps echoing as the owner of the feet ran from one end of the hallway to the other, no Kaka, the wandering student who mimicked the expressions he heard as he passed each classroom. A quiet morning surrounded BS High. For half of the day, only one class would come to school, and they would sit in assigned classrooms for four hours to take the tests. The pattern would continue for the next few weeks thanks to standardized testing.

For an hour-and-a-half, as I squeezed up and down the aisles between desks, my neck stiffened, my back ached, my brain numbed, and my bladder called for relief as I proctored the test. How do the kids sit there with those same effects for four hours?

When I finished the shift, I went to the lav then the office to review notes for my classes that would meet during the second half of the day when normalcy returned. Sean stopped in on his way to proctor the test. He thought I might have information on the bomb threat that had caused the evacuation. I didn’t. The grapevine that normally would have already identified and convicted the perpetrator remained eerily quiet, too. None of the sources I relied on to keep me updated had any news.

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“It’s strange, Sean. The police asked Amy and me a few questions and left. Like these things are so routine they’ll simply file it away. But Parks grilled us after they did. She must’ve been a CIA interrogator in an earlier life. She was relentless. But we had nothing more. It seemed like she needed to lay the blame on somebody, and we were the goats.” I suspected Parks felt pressure from higher up to find an answer or someone to blame.

“We don’t know anything more than that there was a note with the threat left on a teacher’s desk?”

“Nothing more, Sean.”

“Weird.”

“And she said she’d call us in the next day to go over it, but she never did. Like she just dropped it. No talk about it at all by administration. That tells me they know something, and they’re hiding it.”

“You don’t think it’s Parks who’s keeping it quiet, do you?”

“No. Someone else had to put a gag order on her.”

“Who? The superintendent?” Sean squished his nose into a wrinkled V.

I shrugged. “Who else would have the power?”

“Wow. I’d love to hear more about this, but I have to relieve the other proctor. I’ll check in later.”

“See you, Sean.”

I continued to review my notes, then re-read the Cyclops story in *The Odyssey*. The kids were supposed to do the same for today. I could count on them to read it once they realized this one-eyed monster ate men like they were wiggly worms. I focused on the section where Odysseus and his men are captives in the Cyclops’ cave, unable to escape because the creature has blocked the opening with a boulder bigger than he is. I paid special attention to the character of Polyphemus, the Cyclops. With his larger-than-life size, booming voice, careless disregard for anyone else, and wide gait that causes anybody or anything in his path to skedaddle, he is the epitome of a bully. The galoot is mean-spirited and super strong, and his father is a god. He seems invincible. Yet Odysseus outwits him and saves his crew.

I tilted my head a bit, and I gazed into the distance at nothing for a few minutes as I processed that picture of Cyclops. For some reason, Polyphemus, the bully, brought to mind Parks, the principal. The comparison made sense to me after I had watched her verbal takedown of Kinpal and her refusal to believe the facts about the lack of wrongdoing by Misty Konover. I tapped my pen on the desk and beat out a dah-dah-daht-dah-dah as I replayed the

scenes mentally. The repetitive tapping put me in somewhat of a trance as I considered the possibility that Parks would intimidate the staff into submission. Would they need an Odysseus, a crafty, courageous, cunning conniver who would risk the few for the good of the many? If they did, when would that person show up? Who were the few and who the many?

"See me. R. Parks."

The yellow memo that summoned me to Parks' office ranked as neither a bad omen nor a sign of good news. When any administrator left a See me note, I paid attention to what it didn't say.

What, I wondered, did she want now? And why must the note be in my mailbox at the end of the day? Whatever the reason for it, I intended to find out ASAP.

But Parks was not in her office. Lilith told me she had left the building for an hour to meet with the superintendent about the recent bomb threat. For my ears only, she added that the board had reprimanded Parks for her handling of it and for not cooperating with the police when they arrived. She told them they could not search the building, and that they should ignore the threat.

Then why did she interrogate us after the police left?

Before I finished my thought, Lil added that, according to Parks, the note was sloppy and childish and pointed to a teenage prankster trying to get out of taking a test rather than a bona fide terrorist. But when word got to a school board member, he fumed, and Parks now had to answer for it.

Though I would have to wait, I did get good information from Lil. The note, however, would disturb me at random moments before the morning. Parks' timing? Perfect.

The next morning, I didn't want to worry any longer than necessary. I headed to the office as soon as I signed in and gathered my other mail. "Good morning." I held the goldenrod paper up so Parks could see it. "You wanted to see me?"

“Yes. Yes.” Parks hesitated at first as though she had forgotten about it. “Good morning. Come in, Kassi. Have a seat. Let me give this to my secretary.” She lifted a red manila folder as she spoke. “It has to go out now.”

“Okay.” I lowered the load of books and papers onto one chair and myself onto the other. At seven thirty-five a.m., I felt weighted down already. I looked around the office and noticed the paper-free desk. How can a principal of a school have no papers? It seemed odd, yet the only items on it were Parks’ laptop, the “company” phone, and her personal smartphone which buzzed with excitement as it signaled each call and text that came in as I sat there.

Wonder why the buzzing doesn’t bother the parakeet? I have to ask her, I decided. Someday.

“I apologize, Kassi. I had to get that taken care of. I wanted to discuss an issue concerning Amy Kinpal that has come up since we met after the bomb threat. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Of course.” I spoke softly as I controlled my anxiety. I wanted to get to this now, and I’d stay in that chair until I knew what Parks wanted.

“To recap, Amy says she found the threatening note on her desk, and she has no idea how it got there, or who might have put it there. My concern is why her desk in her classroom. Have any thoughts on that?” She looked sideways as she spoke.

“I don’t. Should I?” I scrunched my nose and squinted. I had nothing to reveal.

“Let me get right to the point. One of your team members came to me yesterday and told me that Amy knows who wrote the note. Did she tell you that?”

“No.” A chain of question marks scrolled through my brain. Parks’ thinking I would hold back evidence amazed me. But the idea that the information came from someone on my team stunned me and made my hair stand on end. “What, exactly, did this team member say?”

“Just what I told you. Amy knows but is protecting whoever wrote the note.”

“Who is the team member?”

“The person asked to remain anonymous, and I will respect that. This is serious, Kassi. It goes beyond the building or even the district. It is a police matter. Whatever anyone knows, it is their responsibility to come forth with that information.”

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"I don't want to accuse anyone of not being truthful, but I don't believe Amy knows more or is protecting anyone. She has her faults, but she wouldn't do something to jeopardize her job, or mine, or yours. I think there's a misunderstanding." That higher-pitched level my voice rose to when I became annoyed took over. I remembered clearly Amy's state when she came to me with the note that day. Her serious face, her nervous voice, her erect posture all indicated her uncertainty about what to do. The note surprised Amy as much as anyone. "Rikki, please don't rush to judgment here."

"I have no intention of doing anything like that," Parks said. "Tell me, what kind of teacher is Amy?"

"What? You've observed her. I haven't."

"I mean does she follow school policies? Does she do what you ask of her? Is she cooperative?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" My voice rose half an octave. Parks' interrogation to get information annoyed me. "Rikki, if you or anyone else is accusing Amy of something, or if you or anyone else has information about her, you need to discuss it with the police. But it's not something we should guess at because someone said something but doesn't want to identify himself or herself. That's not fair to anyone."

"I will do what is required when it is required." Parks' flat voice made me cringe. "I ask you to keep an eye on Amy for any unusual or suspicious behavior. I know you like to befriend your team, but sometimes you need to take on a different role. You're not her friend. You're her team leader. You are responsible for her behavior. I will hold you to that."

My face burned. Besides the fact that Parks had it all wrong and that a team leader did not serve as a supervisor, I resented that Parks tried to shift any blame onto me should Amy know something and it not be found out. Among the many jobs hoisted upon me in addition to teaching, detective did not make the list. The administration needed to work with the police. I would not investigate anyone except for my own purposes. "I will do my job," I told Parks. "Administrators should do theirs, too."

"That's all I ask. I wish this had gone better, Kassi. Nonetheless, if you have something to add, please do it now. Otherwise, you may leave. I insist that you do not discuss or share this conversation with anyone, Amy included." Parks looked at her smartphone which had buzzed three times during the meeting. "I have to end our meeting. Okay?"

"Yes. We do need to end it, Rikki."

I stood, gathered my load from the other chair, strode out the door, and kept the same rhythmic walk through the three hallways to the E/LA office. I unlocked the door and moved inside the room, calmly put the load of papers on the desk, and hung up my jacket. My throat tightened, and breaths came too quickly. Then I walked back to the opened door, put my hand on it, opened it as wide as it would, and slammed it shut, creating an echo down the three hallways I had just traveled. When the reverberation stopped, I exhaled.

With breathing slowed to a normal rate, I noted I had two items on my to-do list. Talk to Amy without revealing any of my conversation with Parks and find out who on the team gave the principal the news. Who among my staff felt Parks' love? I vowed to find out. It would not be easy.

As I taught classes that morning, I worked to stay focused on the lesson and decided that for lunch I'd head for the driving range. I wondered, though, how helpful to my game this round would be. It didn't matter. I cared more about improving my attitude. When the time came, I grabbed my keys and jacket, left the building, headed to my car in the parking lot, and drove off.

Whether from hitting the balls or getting out of the confines of BS High, by the time I emptied the virtual basket, my breathing had slowed, and my throat had relaxed. I got in the car, started the engine and backed out of the spot. When I looked down at my wristwatch, I noticed I had ten minutes to get back, just enough. Then I glanced across to the *BestofBurgers* lot and saw the indigo blue sportster. Ben's. Wow. He must really like fast food. Without time, and with the memory of Ben's non-acknowledgement of the last time, I pulled out of the lot.

On the short drive to school, I went down the list of E/LA team members and tried to figure out who might have knowledge and take it to Parks. It stumped me. None of them, as far as I could tell, was a fan of the principal. They all cared about the safety of the kids, and if any of them knew something, he or she would come to me first, if only to ask me to be wing man with Parks. None, from conversations with them, felt comfortable talking with this principal alone. None. Then I stopped. Correction. One of them already did. Who?

Exhausted and frustrated, I pulled into the staff parking lot, ran into the building and up to my office, and found a fresh cup of coffee on my desk. Ginger had remembered. It was good to have a friend.

Glasses jingled, TVs droned, customers chatted, bartenders smiled, and Renee and I sat at a table dejected, charred, and smoked. TGIF took on extra meaning this Friday. After an exhausting week, we sipped our first drinks silently to regain equilibrium. An especially nasty Parks, more demanding kids, and wet, damp weather sucked the life out of us. After a few sips, as we sat and waited for Ginger, the ability to talk returned.

“OMG! I didn’t think this week would ever end!” Renee started.

“I second that. It seemed like every time I turned around a new problem came up.”

“They don’t pay us enough.”

“You’re preaching to the choir!”

“I know. But I need to let it out.” Renee sighed then shook her head.

“We both do. As does every other teacher in the building who spent a couple hours e-mailing and e-mailing again, at least thanks to Parks and her data gathering fiasco.”

“Ugh! Will someone please tell her she needs to figure out what numbers she wants before she sends the e-mail out to request the numbers?”

Though the kids’ demands added to the week’s toughness, both of us accepted that as part of the job and dealt with it. But we struggled to deal with Parks, our principal, when she sent a directive that asked for information immediately, then an hour later sent another directive to correct the first directive, then a few hours later sent a third directive to correct the first two. It left little time for teaching.

“That was incredible. I hate her. She’s got to go.”

“Now you’re preaching to the choir.” Renee raised her glass, and I did the same to toast the idea.

“Here comes Ginger.”

“Hey girl, we’re over here!”

“Hi!” Ginger’s sing-song voice seemed to echo off the liquor bottles that lined the walls of the bar. “Sorry I’m late. Kid drama right after the bell. I should have texted, but you know how it is. Friday, hey?”

“Indeed. This has been quite a week.”

“Yes? Really? Why, Kassi?”

“It was crazy. The kids, Parks, the weather.”

“You know I didn’t notice. I mean, my kids were their lovable selves. The drama after school was them being themselves. And Parks, well, I kind of stay out of her way,” Ginger said.

I looked at Renee with a quizzical look I got when I didn’t get another person. Renee turned away from me to avoid eye contact that might lead to an embarrassing moment, then said, “You’re lucky. It was a bat-shit crazy time for me this week.”

“Ohh, Renee. I love the expressions you use. They get to the gist of the matter, no holds barred.”

“Ginger, order yourself a drink. ” I said, though Ginger didn’t look like she needed one. After all, by her account her week was not the stress-inducer ours had been.

“Thanks, that’s nice, but you don’t have to.”

“I already did. That’s what that upside down shot glass in front of you is for.” I wondered if anyone had ever bought her a drink before.

“Oh.”

Ginger ordered a Disac Chic martini with pomegranate and pineapple juice after she conducted a five-minute conversation with the bartender about the different types they served. She once told me she had learned good and bad liquor brands through an old boyfriend, a bartender, and now when she ordered, she enjoyed the discussion as much as the drink. She appreciated the vodka’s origin. A bit pretentious, I thought, but like everyone would say, that’s the way she was. And on this Friday, I did not want to dwell on that. But I had to admit Ginger’s old boyfriends provided her with a lot of benefits.

Ginger sipped her drink, sighed in delight, and jumped in on the conversation. “So, Kassi. You’re always busy. What’s on your plate next?”

“English Expo!” I blurted it out, and my voice, fueled perhaps by my second gin and tonic, shouted my enthusiasm. “I have wanted to have an English/Language Arts festival of some kind at school. A day when the English classes take over the cafeteria and have displays, presentations, performances, and maybe we’ll even have professional writers, poets, actors come

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and work with the kids. A nerd fest. Please don't tell anyone I called it that. An old college friend of mine is an actor and said he'd love to do a workshop. What do you think?"

"That sounds wonderful!" A tinge of excitement sounded in Ginger's voice.

"I'm working on a proposal to give to Parks to see if I can get it going," I said. "It's lots of work, but I think we can do it."

"I'm on board! If you need help with the proposal, I'd love to see it. Let me help!"

I saw a look in Ginger's eyes that suggested she switched her brain into gear making plans. "Thanks. I'll hold you to that." I felt much better about my connection to this friend and team member.

"I have some wonderful news! Greg and I want to go to Japan this summer." Ginger shifted the subject to herself almost seamlessly.

"That's great," Renee said.

"Very, um, different." I hesitated. "But special."

"It's a plan for now." Ginger's voice took on her whiny tone. "I've wanted to go forever. Greg is checking out flights and travel plans. I only hope he doesn't get discouraged when he learns too much about traveling there."

"What do you mean?"

"Ohh, Kassi. You know, he's a little too cautious. The first hint of something risky and he gets cold feet."

"Japan is very different but not risky," Renee said. "What made you choose there?"

"Greg found a tour on Travel Japan that looked good to him. We've been looking for a place to go on a vacation, sort of. When he showed me, he said he thought I would like it. I had thought about Asia maybe, but then his business went through slow times, so I forgot about it. I really didn't think Greg would be interested, either. Now he figures, if we cut a few corners, we'll be able to afford it. Plus, Greg says you have to do things when you can enjoy them. He surprises me!"

"Life is funny," Renee said.

Ginger described the tour. Tokyo, Minato Mirai in Yokohama, the Osaka Castle, the Hiroshima Castle and Peace Park, the Sapporo Clock Tower. They would add places in Sapporo if they could fit them in. Greg thought it would give them a get-away from their families for two months. He knew she

wanted to go to an unusual place, and though Japan scared him, he'd go if it made her happy.

"Sounds like you're going then," Renee said.

"I hope so. I've wanted to go for a long time." Ginger smiled and looked out across the bar.

What a coincidence, I thought. I had dreamt of traveling to Asia with my husband for several years since I had lived next door to a woman who had been born in Japan. She moved to Los Angeles as a teenager, attended college, married an American, became a citizen, and raised a family in California. When her husband died, she moved to my neighborhood to be near a son who worked in the area. About five years ago, she returned to Japan to be with the rest of her family. Her stories made me want to see it though I rarely spoke of it to anyone. Time and money never worked out. Soon Ginger would have all that I wanted. I was a little jealous, I admitted to myself.

"That sounds ideal, Ginger. Congratulations!" I tightened my grip on the drink.

"Like I said, we're in the planning stages. A lot depends on Greg."

"Hey, think positive." Renee sat back in her seat. "If it's meant to be, you'll go."

"Exactly." I quieted the inner voice that screamed Why you! Why not me! and raised a finger to get the bartender's attention to order another drink.

As Renee and Ginger continued to talk travel, I remembered a conversation with Ginger one September after I had raved about a ten-day vacation with Zach and the kids to the Gulf Shores of Alabama. I took time off from the summer job at the water park, and we drove to Orange Beach, stayed at a hotel on the beach, and felt like we were in paradise.

Ginger had asked, "What's your idea of the perfect vacation?"

"What do you mean? Of course, it's time at the shore. It's relaxing. I love it."

"Come on. Isn't there a more exotic place?"

"There is. But it's expensive, and right now, we don't have the money for more than a week or so at the shore."

"So where do you want to go, Kassi?"

"Asia. Japan. I'd love to see my old neighbor. She lives there now and invites me every time we talk on the phone, which is about once a month."

"Japan? Get out!"

"That's it."

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“I’m more of a mountain retreat person. I never even considered Asia.”
Ginger laughed and, as I recalled, got a far off look in her eyes then, too.

And now, I thought, you’re planning a trip there.

At least I’d get to experience it vicariously through Ginger. It’s what friends did.

On a February Saturday when the temperature hovered between twenty-five and thirty degrees, I wrapped myself in a comforter and watched television from my favorite chair in the warm living room. On the screen, skiers raced down a steep, moguled course as they vied for gold in the Freestyle Skiing competition. My eyes followed as each skier maneuvered through mogul after mogul, threw in a flip or rotation through an air jump, then finished through the final section. The physical skill alone impressed me. But what mental discipline must it take to stay focused through the run?

When my son came into the room, I didn't notice him.

"Hi, Mom. What's on?" His voice startled me.

"Abel! Hi. It's freestyle skiing. They're incredible!"

"Yeah. That takes skill," he said.

"How do they stay focused?"

"A lot of it's muscle memory, I guess. Doing it hundreds of times."

"Still, they can't think about, I don't know, having pizza for lunch when they're out there."

Abel and I watched silently as three other skiers tackled the hill before the station went to commercial.

"I guess it's like a quarterback whose brain has to process a lot of information in seconds and decide what to do."

"Yeah?"

"He has to check his options. Pass or not to three possible areas on the field? Keep the ball and run himself? Slide to avoid having his legs bent in unnatural directions or his head smashed to the grass or try for that first down? Pull the ball in to his chest and wait for the sack and hope the defender is in a friendly mood?"

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“Yup. That’s football. And that’s why everybody can’t be a quarterback.” Abel summed it up simply.

But I went on. “Then he needs to pick himself up, dust himself off, listen to his helmet headset, and start all over.”

“Good analysis, Mom. You could be on TV!”

“Maybe when I retire.”

“I’m going out for a run.”

“Dressed like that? It’s thirty degrees.” I shivered.

Abel wore soccer shorts and a light polar fleece over his t-shirt, and I constantly told him to wear warmer clothes when he ran in the cold. The nagging never worked.

“I get hot once I get going. Bye.”

When he left, I returned to the topic of athletes and focus. Both the skier and the quarterback have to put everything else out of their heads during those moments of action. They can’t think about their moms, dads, brothers, sisters, girlfriends, boyfriends, wives, husbands, kids. They have to be in the moment only. Nothing and no one else matters. Not even the chill of ten degrees. I pulled the comforter closer and settled in for more TV.

The idea of that total disinterest in anything but the sport came back to me the next Monday morning before school in a conversation over coffee with the school psychologist, Jason Brennan. Because of the recent bomb threats, the terrorist personality became a popular topic. I also disliked that Parks tried to find a reason to blame Amy Kinpal. Though Amy’s excessive days off kept me on edge about finding work for the kids for those absences, I believed in her innocence. Even more so, I resented Parks searching for evidence of her guilt. I felt a need to prove her wrong and protect Amy. If I figured out who made the threats, I might do that.

I wondered about the relevance of what I remembered from lit courses in college. Characters in plays and stories acted like terrorists. One discussion about Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* centered on the main character, Verloc, who is a secret agent but not a great terrorist. He belongs to a terror group that creates anti-government pamphlets and has long discussions about the inequities of their situations. Verloc gets involved in a bombing because he is told it will make him look better to the authorities. His self-preservation becomes his cause. But the bomb he sets kills his wife’s brother. When

she finds out, she kills Verloc. I remembered that the class debate got heated as they questioned Verloc's and his wife's motives.

I sat at one of the gray Formica-covered tables in the warm staff lunchroom and discussed terrorists with Jason. I said as a seven-a.m. good morning, "You're the shrink. Is this right? Does this describe the terrorist personality? Terrorists always have a score they want to settle, right? They are the victim of some wrong, they want to get even, and they don't care about anyone or anything that might be hurt in the process. What's important is that they get their revenge." I was on a roll, and Jason could only listen. "And like the skier or the quarterback, they have tunnel vision about it. The athletes, though, adjust once they're off the course or field. Terrorists don't."

"And a good morning to you, too, Kassi." Jason let his sarcasm echo through the room before he responded to the question. "Sounds right. A little simplistic, but for an English teacher, it's accurate."

"Whoever is making these bomb threats probably has a score to settle with someone, right?"

"It's a high percentage shot that it's true. But a lot of people have grudges against schools and teachers and other kids. It's nice to know, but it's not likely it will help ID who sent the threat without other info." Jason added his psycho logic to the chat.

"Right. At least it gives us something to talk about and maybe think about, too. I wonder who I have pissed off in my career. I can take credit for a few unhappy campers out there." I managed a weak smile and gazed in thought into my coffee.

"All of us can. It's unlikely, though, that someone making bomb threats wants to get back at one person. It's more like the system he or she hates."

"Hm. I don't know if I agree with that, but I'll leave both options out there." I took the last gulp of coffee before I headed off to class. "See you tomorrow. Have a nice day, Jason."

My second period group of sophomores chattered with excitement about what they read for homework. We had worked our way through the first two acts of *Julius Caesar* and finally reached the high-interest part, the third act when the conspirators murder Caesar. I had them read the scene and answer a question. I hoped they would connect it to the real world they had experienced with the bomb threats. But I'd have to be careful not to cross over the

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line and say too much or make it too lifelike. Parks wanted the topic downplayed. I wondered if I could do that.

After a short discussion that covered the basics, what happened, whom it happened to, where it happened, I asked the question. "In what way might Caesar's murder be considered an act of terrorism?"

After the initial, obligatory quiet, Nick started it off. "They didn't like him. They killed him. They got rid of a problem. Case closed."

Twitters and groans rose from the class.

"Explain why that's terrorism, Nick."

"They killed the man in charge. That's got to send fear through the country."

"Only in the people that liked Caesar." Minday raised a new point. "Was he really that loved by most of them?"

"He knew how to get them to love him. He did two things. Reward them and keep them afraid," Ellie Kraft said.

"Who was the terrorist? The killers? Or Caesar?" I asked. "If he kept them afraid, isn't that what terrorists do?"

Silence took over while they processed that one.

"It's something to consider." I moved them on to the final part of the discussion. "We agree that there is terrorism in the play. Now let's prove it. Partner up with the person who sits across from you and talk about this for about seven minutes. Come to agreement either that Caesar is a terrorist or the conspirators who murdered him are terrorists. Write reasons down and have them ready for a large group sharing. Okay? Questions? None? Talk."

After seven-and-a-half minutes, I called them back to share their reasoning. Minday volunteered to type the responses to be shown on the smart board. With about five minutes left in the period, I gave them their homework assignment. Respond in an essay: *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* is a story of terrorism. Give at least three examples to support your view. Draft 1 due tomorrow.

"Any questions?"

None.

"Have a great day. Don't get up until the bell rings."

After they filed out, I went out into the hallway to keep an eye on things there. Jason, my morning coffee partner, dodged students as he walked towards me. "Hey, Kassi. I had to bring this to you." He handed me a paper with information he had printed out from the internet. "That terrorist personality

stuff. Kind of interesting. Read it when you get a chance.” He didn’t stop long enough for me to respond with anything more than a thank you.

Curious, I read it right away. The article dealt with terrorism in literature. As I plodded through the long sentences, my brain slowed and made me re-read one section about rejected lovers using tears and arguments like terrorists use the threat of violence to get what they want.

I read the article over a few times, and it made sense. The discussion on the play focused on how the terrorists instill fear in the objects of terror and single mindedly pursue what they want. A spurned lover who uses any means to get what he or she wants might not be that farfetched.

Now I wondered if my suspicions about the love triangle and Ben was logical. Could he be obsessed with the woman to the point that he would do anything to get her back? Oscar Servis worried that Ben might be dangerous. Would he go as far as bomb threats? How could he do it and not be found out? Would he risk his real estate success for a woman? Maybe it would make sense when I slowed down to think about it. But I had a class to start, so I filed it away for later.

MARCH

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The early March weather brought higher average temperatures than in the month in previous years. I went to the driving range during lunch as a weekly habit. I thought, why not? Timewise it worked out and made me feel good, and my golf swing improved. Win. Win. Win. And only one loss. *BestofBurgers* tempted me, and I bought a fast-food meal on more days than I wanted. Usually I hit the drive-through after golf and picked up a burger and fries to take back to school. Today, however, I finished driving and chipping quickly, so I ate at the restaurant. When I had devoured half of a Baconburger, I heard a voice carry across the place.

“Yo! Berger-man. Over here.”

I looked up, turned towards the door, and saw a familiar figure. The young man whose conversation I eavesdropped on at the driving range a few weeks ago stepped inside the restaurant. When he heard the boomy voice, he recognized it, smiled, and walked over. “Lingo. Good to see you, man. How long has it been?”

“Too long. How are you, Berger?”

The two reached out to greet one another.

They fist-bumped in greeting and seemed truly happy to see each other in this reunion, which played out at twelve thirty in the afternoon in a not-so-empty *BestofBurgers*. “I’m doin’ good, Lingo. And you look dope, and I mean that in the best way.”

“I’m good now that I finally finished my time.” Lingo beamed.

“Time? What time?”

“High school, man. I went to night school. Finished the classes I flunked. I’m gettin’ my diploma.”

“Whoa. Didn’t tell me you were doin’ that.”

“I was kinda embarrassed. Especially since I said I’d never do it. I was talkin’ tough, right?” Lingo’s voice level decreased. “My mom, I did it for her. She got all emotional when I didn’t graduate. I couldn’t live with that. Took two years, but I did it. I did it for her. She was all happy and stuff when she heard them say Anthony Francisco Lingero, and I walked up to get my diploma. We’re good now.”

“That’s cool, dude. I’m happy it’s all good with you.” My golf buddy smiled and reached out to shake Lingo’s hand.

“What about you? When is Scott Edward Berger getting his diploma? What you been up to these last couple years?”

Scott stayed silent for a few minutes.

“Stuff,” he said. “Hey, let’s get something to eat, then we can talk.”

“Hey, Scott,” the cashier at the counter said. “How are you?”

“Hi, Sam. I’m good. How you doin’?” Scott seemed to be very familiar with the worker. “This is my friend, Lingo. Lingo meet Sam.”

“Hi, Lingo. You’re here with one of our favorite customers. What can I get you?”

“Aah. You come here a lot, hey Scott?”

“Just order, man.” Scott seemed to want to change the subject. After they placed their orders and waited for their food, he fidgeted as though he had little to say to match his friend’s success.

I tried not to eavesdrop but could not help myself, and whether I wanted to or not, I learned more about Scott and Lingo than I needed to know. It interested me. I gathered that they had gone to the same school and hung out together, maybe too much, in their senior year. Neither of them got involved or interested in school-connected activities like sports, studying, attending. They did whatever they wanted during that year and had a great time. Trips to the beach, fishing days, video games at one of their homes when their parents worked. Life was good. Until their cuts added up to too many, according to the school and the state. Neither had the required attendance during their senior years. I was aware that this wouldn’t have prevented them from graduating necessarily. Students with Cs or better knew that teachers and administrators might waive the attendance requirement and let them pass. But neither Scott nor Lingo had even passing grades. Sometimes, out of kindness, the school let the student take part in the graduation ceremony and process to the strains of *Pomp and Circumstance*, hear his name

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called to walk on stage to receive a diploma (envelope only), have the cap and gown picture taken, and party after the ceremony. Kind principals allowed it, not for the student but for the family. Scott and Lingo's principal never claimed to be kind.

Scott struggled with how to answer Lingo's question about what he was up to. He stammered, shook his head, and looked at his hands. "I've had some setbacks."

"Really? Like what, Berger-man? And why are you living here in this shitty town?"

"My mom wanted me out of Crayton. Away from bad influences."

"Like me?"

"Sort of, I guess. Away from bad influences and bad publicity. You know. For my dad," Scott said. "So, she got me this apartment here. She pays the rent. I have a part-time job, and I'm supposed to be getting my GED. But I haven't done anything to get it for a while. She doesn't know that yet."

Lingo looked at his friend through narrowed eyes. "What's wrong, dude? You can't live off your mom forever."

"I don't plan to. But I'm working on somethin'. Once I'm finished with it, I'll get my diploma and move on." Scott sipped his soda and gazed out the window, away from Lingo.

"You have to, man. You have to."

The two sat silently for a few minutes. Each ate his burger and avoided eye contact with the other. Despite their history of hanging out together, they had reached that proverbial fork in the road and were now on different paths.

Lingo looked at his old partner-in-crime. "Scott, what's the thing you're working on?"

"Huh? Um, something to wrap up the whole graduation fiasco. To put it behind me so I can move on, you know?"

"Yeah. What is it?"

Scott hesitated as though he did not want to share too much with Lingo.

"Tell me. What is it?"

Scott looked Lingo in the eyes. "Parks."

"What!?! Why?" Lingo's reverberating tone drew looks from the senior citizen diners who ate their discounted lunches. The name grabbed my attention, and my brain told my ears to raise the volume.

"I have to, that's why." Scott answered matter-of-factly. "She could have let us walk, Lingo. She should have. It wouldn't have made a difference in her

life. It would have made all the difference in mine. She's gonna find out, she's gonna pay."

"Okay. I can see you're bummin' over it, Berger. You never explained it then, but it was worse for you than me, I guess."

Scott told him that the graduation ceremony, even graduating, didn't mean that much to him back then. He knew he messed up, and he accepted his fate. Until he had to tell his grandmother. She had been big in his life. Both his parents worked, so she took care of him. She treated him lovingly then, now, always. When he told her he couldn't graduate, it upset her. He saw her eyes tear up. It affected him so much that he met with Parks, his principal, and begged her to let him walk. He explained to her that his grandfather died earlier in the school year, his grandmother struggled with that, and if she could hear his name called and see him walk across the stage, it would raise her spirits. He wanted to do something for her. He promised Parks he'd be on his best behavior and vowed to go to summer school and make up the work and legitimately earn his diploma. As he pleaded his case with her, he expected that anybody with a heart would allow him to participate in the ceremony, especially since he wanted to do it for someone else. Scott did not know Parks very well. How could he since he rarely went to school? She denied the permission.

"Scott, she made a principal's decision. That's all."

"I know. I know. That's not why I have to get back at her," Scott said. "It's not what she did, it's how she did it."

"What you mean?"

"That meeting I had with her when I pleaded to let me walk. I told her all about my Gran, how she was hurtin' after my Pop died. Know what she said when she told me no?"

Lingo stared silently and let Scott talk.

Scott pursed his lips, shook his head from side to side, stared out the window as if he'd find the right words in the parking lot, then looked back at Lingo. "She said, 'I don't care if your grandmother is terminally ill, you will not walk. You screwed up. You live with the consequences.'"

"No way."

My eyes opened wide, and my heartbeat increased.

"I said I'd go to the superintendent. She said, 'This is my school. I decide. The superintendent already knows about you. He left your decision to me."

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It's over, Mr. Berger. Let's move on.'" Scott examined a French fry carefully before he dipped it in ketchup and put it in his mouth.

Lingo cringed, sipped his soda, looked out the window, and cringed again. After a minute, he turned to his friend and tried to reason with him. "Scott, whatever your plan is, think about it first. Ruin the rest of your life to get back at her? Your Gran, what's gonna happen to her if you get in trouble? Don't do nothin' crazy, man."

"I won't get caught. And my Gran's been hurt enough." Scott raised his head and smiled at his friend. "Hey, I'm happy for you, Lingo. I gotta go. Peace out." He pounded his chest with his right fist, then fist-bumped Lingo as he stood up, grabbed his tray, and headed out.

"Yeah. I hope so, Berger-man. I hope so," said Lingo.

I wanted to run after Berger and continue the conversation, but I already would have to break the speed limit to get back to school on time. I dumped the scraps of burger roll and dried out fries in the trash and hurried to my car. Berger's words, "she's gonna pay," played over and over in my head. What was his plan? I thought about Poe's short story, *The Cask of Amontillado*. The narrator, Montresor, seeks revenge for an unexplained insult and goes to great lengths to get vengeance. I wondered how far Berger-man would go with his plan. Then I wondered if it had already been put in motion, twice.

During my preparation period, I settled in the E/LA office to work at the computer on a report for Parks and almost missed the excitement. When I heard faraway voices of students, I peeked out the window onto the parking lot below and saw the whole student body standing in groups. What were they doing? No announcement to evacuate had come through, but they had. Instinct and the events of the last couple of months told me I should do the same. The report was already late, and that made the decision easy. I wasted no time, saved, grabbed my coat, and headed out of the building.

I saw April standing on the walkway just outside the entry door holding a walkie-talkie up to her ear. "What's going on?"

"Bomb threat," April mouthed as she continued to listen for instructions.

Evidently, administration made no announcement in keeping with the protocol to not use electronics in the case of a threat. Evidently, my office did not make the list of rooms that should be checked for people to evacuate. Evidently, I now had another item I'd have to take up with Laurent.

I looked at the students and noticed a definite change from previous evacuations. After the second one back in January fizzled, this third failed to ignite much concern among the potential victims, who referred to themselves as members of the Bomb-Threat-of-the-Month Club. Students and teachers loitered around their assigned waiting locations with nonchalance. After all, they had done this two times before with no violent ending. As they stood in the parking lot, laughter, giggles, shrieks, and singing filled the air. They would wait this one out, too. The atmosphere suggested they adapted quickly.

Then a few minutes after the students evacuated, a sound grabbed our attention. "BOOM!" Bodies dropped to the asphalt in an instant. Hunched down as low as they could get, everyone went quiet, unsure what happened. Smiling and laughing faces became serious. Through the cafeteria windows,

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those outside could see custodians run towards the doors that led to the basement.

Immediately, word circulated to relocate the students across the street to the church. The kids moved faster than they did headed to the parking lot at the end of the school day, and the transfer took less than three minutes.

As they filed into the church, teachers directed some to the main area proper and some downstairs to the community room. The tone in the air hung at the polar opposite of the earlier time they holed up there. Quiet voices. Quick settling into seats. Muffled conversations. Apprehensive faces. The boom in the parking lot shook them out of their detachment.

Lenore Knudson, again in charge, contacted the church office right away to have the audio system turned on. Whether because Parks told her to do her job after the last non-performance or whether she realized she had to rise to the occasion and be the administrator-in-charge, she overcame her microphone phobia and spoke to the students. She assured them they were safe, then she gave them information as to what happened at the school. She let them know that they would stay in there until the authorities made sure the school was secure. In an unusual concession, she told them they could use their cell phones to let their parents know they were okay. She took charge, a behavior that did not escape my notice. Administrators do have good qualities, I thought, even if it takes a near disaster to awaken them.

I walked around the church alert and ready to calm any students who might be upset. After a few minutes, sure that they were under control, I found room in one pew and sat. For a few quiet moments, I scanned the design of the inner church to calm myself. Though the angles on the outside of the building were cold and stark, the inside exuded a softness and warmth. The cream-colored walls behind the altar, bare except for a huge crucifix, encouraged anyone who ventured inside to empty the mind for meditation. There were no sharp edges, unlike the stark angles evident on the outside. Arced corners joined the walls and created a sense of roundness and continuity rather than separateness.

For a moment or two, I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to open to whatever the spirit, or maybe the room, offered me. Peace, I thought. Peace.

When I opened them, I noticed a few of my tenth-grade students nearby, and I recalled the Caesar discussion we had earlier. I pulled out the paper Jason had given me on the terrorist personality and read it carefully. The parallel the author drew between terrorists and lovers stuck in my mind. It made

sense, sort of. Both wanted the fulfillment of their desires and cared little about the needs of those they threatened. Lovers usually did not resort to violence, or even threats of it, to get what they wanted though. I wondered how Romeo and Juliet might react if they told their parents of their love and heard their parents' disapproval. Romeo says early in the play, after he is rejected by Rosaline, the woman he is in love with at first, that he might as well be dead since she doesn't care for him. He is ruled by passion rather than reason.

As much as I loved to consider these far-out ideas and connect them to literature, I shook myself from continuing. Someone, a real terrorist, threatened my school, students, colleagues, community. If only those intellectual journeys could help solve that mystery. Wishful thinking, I figured.

"Mrs. S." Minday Palmer called from the other end of the pew. "Mrs. S. Here."

"Yes?"

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

I had lost track of how long the students had been in the church, but it must have been at least an hour since we evacuated. Minday's question would be the start of a line of requests. I dreaded becoming the lav police, so I tried to put her off.

"Can you wait until Ms. Knudson comes back? I'm not sure where the lavs are here, or if it's okay to use them." I had learned to refer questions like that to an administrator as a good stalling tactic.

"Okay." Minday agreed.

Minday's body language or interpretive dance told me I had little time before she asked again. I set out to find Knudson or the lavs. On the way, the quietness of the students struck me. The basement blast really affected them.

I found Knudson and asked her how she wanted us to handle students' requests for the lav or for anything else. I determined that the church had only two rest rooms, one upstairs and one downstairs, each with two stalls. With about one thousand kids in the building, we both started to worry.

"Let's have the girls use the one upstairs and the boys use the one downstairs." I knew Knudson needed a suggestion. "We can have a teacher monitor each and try to keep them moving if the lines get long."

"Good idea," Knudson said.

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“Shall I go to each teacher and let them know the plan? Or do you want to announce it? I’d suggest you tell each teacher quietly. Otherwise, the kids will suddenly realize they have to go to the bathroom.”

“Yes. Yes. Good idea,” Knudson said. “After you tell the teachers, can you do me a favor? The pastor asked us to keep him updated on how things are going. Could you go over to the rectory and fill him in? Let him know we are all good here, but they are still assessing things at the school building. We may be here a while.”

“Sure.” I had no students since I didn’t have a class when the threat came in, so it made sense that I could leave the group in the church and go next door. I also remembered the pastor from the last evacuation and looked forward to talking to him.

In ten minutes, I finished my mission to circulate through the church to give the message to each teacher. Then I walked out and across the prayer garden to the rectory. On the way, I looked across the parking lot to the school to see if anything was happening. As I surveyed the grounds, the indigo blue sportster traveling much slower than the speed limit came into view. I guessed Ben Worthen to be curious about the fire trucks parked in the lot. I envy the life of a real estate agent. He gets the freedom to drive around in the middle of the day to look at neighborhoods and houses. And it’s his job. I presumed that Ben’s decision to get into the family business made him happy. It occurred to me that the worries Oscar Servis had about him were not warranted. After all, I saw him or his car three times in the last few months, more than I had seen him in the last three years. Ben must have found the solution to his lovesickness.

I rang the bell of the rectory. An older woman, presumably the secretary, answered the door and let me in. She told me she didn’t know if Father Jim could see me, but she would check. She showed me into the priest’s office where I found a comfortable rocking chair and sat.

In the quiet, thoughts returned to Ben and a moment I had with him during his stint substitute teaching at Bantamville South. The first few months of my tenure as team leader were hectic, but I tried to interact with substitute teachers to make them feel at ease. Ben treated me cordially. He responded to good mornings and gave me any business paperwork I requested, but I sensed he preferred not to be bothered. Though I usually had friendly relationships with teachers and enjoyed personal interactions, especially with my

own team, I had no time to analyze Ben's standoffishness or care much about it.

I had noticed Ben alone several times, and I reached out to him one day. If I took a few minutes to talk with him, it might let him know that I appreciated his cooperation. He substituted for Amy Kinpal on one of her many absences. I had stopped by his classroom during a free period for both of us. He had an interest in cars and was a racing fan. I used that as an icebreaker. Though not an expert myself, I lived with one, my husband. Since I listened to Zach talk about it and watched it on TV with him almost every Sunday from February to November, I knew the well-known race car drivers and road courses from tri-ovals well enough to carry on a conversation about the sport. So, I did.

"I saw the number sixty-six car photo on your clipboard. Was he a favorite of yours?"

"Yeah. Yes. He had qualities I like."

"He was a great driver. It's a shame what happened. That race where he crashed was the first race I sat and watched," I said.

"Well," Ben said matter-of-factly. "I was there. The first race of the season. Great weekend, great race, until the end."

"Yeah. What did he have that the fans loved? Besides being a good driver?" I had found an interest of his and wanted to keep him talking.

"I think he was a throwback, in a way, to those Southern drivers who didn't care if they offended anyone. They were there to drive and win and take no prisoners. But they also held on to tradition." Ben's voice grew a decibel louder. "In the sport, you had to prove yourself. Work your way up with a mentor—an established driver. Take your knocks. But once you did, you earned their respect. The veterans put in a good word—and that word was like gold."

"Interesting. Allegiance, huh? The racing world respects and promotes loyalty and taking care of family," I said.

"It's changed since those days. That respect is missing today." He paused, looked at me, and narrowed his eyes. "And not just in the racing world, I've found."

His tone stopped me. Did he mean in the teaching world, too? As in the interloper, me, who got the team leader position over the guy from the family who had been groomed by the outgoing leader, Harvey? As in Ben's friend, Jake?

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"I guess that's progress," I said.

"Yeah." Ben answered without looking up from the papers on his desk that had suddenly become much more important than they were a few seconds ago.

Silence filled the room, and a chill filled me. I had come in to warm things up between Ben and me, but his body language told me that my selection as team leader over Jake had created an ice cap that global warming or friendly conversation would not melt. "Excuse me, Ben. I have to take this," I said, as I reached into a pocket and glanced at my phone. Conveniently, I had put it there before I left the office. Ironically, whether lit up with a call or not, technology, which kept me constantly connected by the cell phone, also created the perfect excuse to disconnect and end a conversation.

As I sat in the rocker in the rectory and waited for Father Jim, I wondered why I felt that same chill when I saw Ben drive by the school. The fact that I had seen him a few times now after not seeing him for so long made it even chillier. Again, I thought of *The Odyssey*, and Odysseus's encounter with Aeolus and the precarious bag with the world's winds in it. In sight of their home island, Ithaca, Odysseus's men think the bag is filled with silver and gold. They open it, something the god warned Odysseus not to do. The escaping winds create a storm which drives the ship away from Ithaca and back to troublesome adventures.

The conversation with Ben sent our relationship back to square one. It left me with a substitute teacher who resented my promotion and position and who, like Odysseus's men, didn't trust me. Not a great combination. I should never have opened the Ben bag back then. And now?

Before I finished my thought, Father Jim came into the room and greeted me. "Hello. Yours is a familiar face. How are you?"

"Hello, Father. Nice to see you again though I'd prefer it not be under these circumstances."

"Yes. Twice in a couple of months. It has to make you uneasy."

"Actually, it's the third threat. During the first one, we were on the football field since the weather was warmer," I said. "I wanted to check in to let you know that everything is in order at the church. Last time it got chaotic, but all is under control this time. Thank you for your help."

"Not a problem. As you probably noticed, the church isn't that busy on weekdays. Anyway, they're kids, and it was an unusual and scary event for them. All is forgiven."

“Thanks, Father. Like I said, things are much calmer and under control today. We don’t have any information from the school yet, but we’ll keep you updated,” I said. “Thank you again.”

Father Jim walked me to the door. “I guess I have another visitor.”

In the side parking lot, an empty indigo blue sportster took up one of the three spaces for rectory visitors. “He must be inside. Mrs. B probably showed him into the parlor. I should go in and not keep him waiting. Good day,” he said and sent me on my way with a swiftness that surprised me.

What business did Ben have with Father Jim? It must be real estate-related, I decided.

At two fifteen as I returned and entered the church’s vestibule, I heard Knudson’s voice as she told the students they could return to the school, go to their lockers, and exit the building.

And the dismissal bell rang at two thirty to end another day in paradise.

Epiphany: an appearance or manifestation, especially of a divine being (Webster).

A faculty meeting loomed as a taxing way to end the day. Once a month from in front of the stage in the auditorium, the administration shared with the staff the problems the group was responsible for throughout the school, and what we should do to remedy them. Today's agenda signaled much of the same. Parks handled the emceeing and hit on the big issues.

From Laurent, today's gathering, as always, promised to be another you've got to be at your posts entreaty. Santonio and Knudson would add something about recording lates and calling parents when students were absent. Fun stuff. I found a seat along one of the side walls and settled in for an hour of it.

Guy Santonio popped up and gazed around the room in search of anyone as he took attendance. Lenore Knudson looked over Guy's shoulder as if she wanted to learn how to take attendance. The vice-principals each had a job to do at faculty meetings, and they put their hearts and souls into them or at least appeared to do that. Dave Laurent swiveled his head from right to left and checked his notes as if he saw them for the first time.

"Good afternoon. Would everyone please settle down?" Parks started but the noise of voices that greeted voices and hands and feet that shuffled over dusty floors made it impossible for anyone more than one yard away to hear her. A teacher walked to the audio system, turned it on, picked up the microphone, and handed it to Parks.

"GOOD AFTERNOON. PLEASE HAVE A SEAT DOWN FRONT AND WE'LL GET STARTED."

The noise quieted, but the front row seats remained empty.

"Mr. Laurent will start us off today."

Laurent looked up in surprise as though she hadn't told him he would be first. "Thank you, Dr. Parks. We don't have too much today. In fact, if you check your e-mail, you will find the agenda with the notes and explanations you'll need for most of the items."

Great, I thought. I could have read about this.

"First, though, let me give you the facts so that rumors don't continue." Laurent shared the info about the recent evacuation. "About the most recent bomb threat and the explosion. That was not a bomb. It was good, however, that we had evacuated the building because some old paint cans that were too close to the boilers ignited and exploded. That started a fire. Fortunately, the responders to the bomb threat put out the fire quickly and prevented its spread or any damage to the rest of the building or to any staff or students. We had to keep everyone out for an extended time because the fumes were strong, and we didn't want to expose anyone and possibly cause illness. Please, if any other stories are out there, give the facts."

He then read and explained items on the list: professional development and the importance of reading the memo listing those sessions teachers had to attend; marking period grades and the importance of getting them entered into the system by midnight on the due date; tardies and the importance of marking students late to class; and standardized testing and the importance of it. He even added a thank you to the staff for their cooperation in getting the students through them. To finish, he asked if there were any questions, and of course, there were none.

All right, I thought. A quick one. We're done. I'll be home in time to work out.

"Now back to Dr. Parks."

Short and sweet, short and sweet, I repeated mentally. Please, short and sweet.

"Good afternoon." Parks spoke softly into the microphone. "I want to start by sharing with you something I discovered during a stay in the hospital last week. While you are waiting for the procedures to take place, you have time to think," she said.

"She was in the hospital?" Amy whispered it.

"The hospital?" Corey mouthed it.

"She was in the hospital?" The question softly echoed through the room.

"She thinks?" Eric asked.

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“As I walked through the halls today, I realized something.” Parks was persistent.

“She was out in the halls?” Amy whispered it again.

“The halls? I didn’t think she did that.” Corey mouthed it again.

“She was out in the halls?” The question echoed through the room again.

“She walks?” Eric asked.

“Most of you, ninety-five percent of the teachers, were at your doors between classes doing exactly what we ask you to do to monitor the halls.” Parks went on. “And I realized that it’s only a few who don’t do what they’re supposed to. Yet we stand up in front of all of you at these meetings and tell all of you that you are not where you need to be. I realize that we have to see those few teachers that are not doing their jobs and address the matter with them. I guess you could say I had an epiphany. I don’t have to make a blanket statement like I have in the past.”

“Wow, an epiphany!” Amy whispered again.

“She had an epiphany? I didn’t think she did that.” Corey mouthed it again.

“She had an epiphany?” It echoed throughout the room once more.

“What’s an epiphany?” Eric asked.

“I and the other administrators will do that. And I need to let you know that most of you do what you’re supposed to do.”

I stared at the whole scene in disbelief. Parks’ changes touched every teacher and student, mostly negatively. More measuring resulted in less depth. Teachers cut back on enrichment. Students had fewer opportunities to learn outside the classroom. But this meeting dealt with touchy-feely fluff.

Parks put a number on everyone and everything. I soon found out that her calculating included more than the numbers.

“On another note, I’d like to announce and congratulate our VIT for April. As you know, this month I asked the team leaders to nominate someone for the honor. I received a list of great candidates who all deserve recognition.”

I came to attention. I had nominated Renee as April’s Very Important Teacher for the work she did all year with the seniors who were not on track for anything after graduation, not college, not tech school, not work. The forgotten ones. The school offered them few programs and had no plan for them other than to graduate and get them out. Renee taught most of them. She created a unit that introduced them to life skills like budgeting, applying and interviewing for a job, buying a car, renting an apartment, surviving. Besides the fact she deserved to be acknowledged, something Parks never did, Renee

needed a boost. She had had a rough couple of months. Her grandmother who raised her died in December, her mom had health issues and needed her help daily, and her husband might not have a job in a few months. I tuned in to get the name of the winner.

“The winner is a member of our Language Arts team.”

I perked up. Yes, I thought. Renee got it.

“April’s Very Important Teacher is Luke Cantrell.” Parks smiled and joined in a polite round of applause.

Wha-a-at?! I screamed it in my head. Luke? I didn’t nominate him. What’s going on here?

Luke covered his face then accepted the applause. As he told everyone, he didn’t like being singled out and recognized for his work. He found it embarrassing, or so he said.

The gears turned. How did Luke get it if I didn’t nominate him? What team leader nominated someone from another team? And what am I supposed to say to Luke?

After general updates and reminders, Laurent ended the meeting to a quick shuffling of chairs as teachers raced to beat each other out of the room and then the parking lot.

Always stragglers, Renee and I took our time.

“Yay, Language Arts Department. Yay us.” Renee mock cheered as she moved towards me.

“Yeah. Wow.” I controlled my enthusiasm.

“You don’t sound thrilled,” Renee said.

“I didn’t nominate Luke.”

“Then who did?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I want to find out.”

“He deserves it. It makes him happy, too,” Renee said.

“Hi, Language Arts. Congrats. You have a winner.” Carol Manziel, team leader for science, moved over to talk with us.

“Yeah,” I said. “Can I ask you something? Did you nominate Luke?”

“No.” She sounded offended. “Are you kidding me? If my team found out I nominated somebody on another team, even the few who don’t hate me now would start.”

“I didn’t, either. I wonder who did?”

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“I know Don, Rob, Ev, and Judy nominated from their teams. That only leaves two others, Manny and Susan, and I’m sure they stayed home for their picks. They have tight teams.”

“Is it possible that Parks picked? I mean made her own choice? She’s the only one who gets to see everybody’s nominees. She could nominate her own choice and pick that person as winner, and no one would know. Would she do that?” I wondered it aloud but knew the answer.

“I wouldn’t put anything past her.” Carol said it with no hesitation. “I told you what she did to me in August when she had had the job for only three days. She changed our schedules and didn’t tell me, then loaded me with teaching four levels in five classes. She’d do it.”

I wondered why for a minute. Could this be Parks’ way of getting back at me for questioning her about Misty. Then I saw Luke coming my way, a smile on his face and a new BSHS backpack in his hands.

“This is what she gave me. It’s cool. It’s for VIT. Of course, I won’t use it, but I can give it to one of the kids for something good they do. Kassi, thanks for the nomination.”

“Oh, uh, uh ...” I tried to respond, but I struggled with whether to let it pass or tell the truth. I opted for the latter. “Luke, I didn’t nominate you. Not that you’re not a good choice, but I can’t take credit.” I tried awkwardly to smooth it over.

“Really?” Luke said, then smiled. “I assumed it was you. Gee, if not you, who nominated me?”

“I guess you are admired beyond the Language Arts team. That’s a compliment. Congrats,” Renee said and took the pressure off me. “Hey, let’s get the hell out of here. We’ve been here long enough.”

“I’m with you.” I packed my bag, ready to move on.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, everyone.”

Not yet for me though. I accepted that Parks would tamper with the voting. But why? Luke was on the E/LA team. That gave the team recognition. Did she want to make clear who wielded the power? Before I formed an answer, I saw Ginger come into the library towards me.

“Kassi, I forgot to tell you. Great news! Dr. Parks said that she liked that English Expo idea I gave to her. She’s giving me money from the principal’s account to fund it. And best of all, I get to run it. She gave my lunch duty to another teacher so I can have a free period to work on it during school.”

Now I got it. Divide and conquer. Parks gave Luke and Ginger the perks. She left me to eat crow and tell Luke he wasn't my first choice. She also set Ginger up to facilitate the Expo idea and left me to watch from the sidelines.

"And, Kassi, she also suggested I ask you for time to speak to the team at our next meeting to get people on board to help. And you told me in some conversation we had, and I honestly don't remember when it was, that you had a good friend who is an actor. If you give me his contact information, maybe I can convince him to come and do a workshop. It's so exciting for me. I'll be able to introduce the kids to professionals in the arts. Just an idea is about to fly. Isn't that great?"

"Absolutely, Ginger, absolutely."

I almost sang it out when I walked into the main office this Thursday. “Good morning!” I carried a bag filled with freshly baked bagels, cream cheese, and butter in one hand and a *Java Joint* carton in the other as I stepped lightly and quickly to sign in, pick up mail, and get on my way.

“Hi, Kassi,” Lilith Chiarello said.

Say how are you, say how are you, say how are you, I thought. If Lilith got beyond a hi, I breathed easily and knew I was safe. If the *how are you* never sounded, I sighed and waited as Lilith handed over the dreaded red slips. Around this time of year, depleted budgets forced the administration to put money-saving measures into place, like not hiring substitute teachers. This meant that administration pulled a teacher from a duty like policing the hallways or cafeteria, or monitoring a study hall, or calling the parents of absent students and sent her to cover a class of an absent teacher. Sometimes it worked out, especially if the absentee’s lesson plans arrived in the right classroom. Mostly it was a crap shoot because the best-laid substitute lesson plans of absent teachers often went astray, to paraphrase Steinbeck and Burns, to the wrong classroom. As team leader, I was presented with all the slips for my team and given the dubious privilege of handing them out. I had developed a tough skin about it since some teachers took it in stride while others took it out on me.

“How are you, Kassi?”

“Good, Lil.” Phewww. “How are you? Good day today?”

“Yeah. Everybody’s covered. No slips for you.”

“Thanks. Bagels in the office if you have a minute to stop by. Have a good day!”

“You, too. Thanks, Kassi.”

Happy to escape, I lost no time. I got through the door, then made my way to the E/LA office to set up the goodies. Tradition called for bagels and coffee

on the day before Spring Break. At least my tradition did. I started it when I became team leader, and I continued it when veteran members who had been around during Harvey Frazier's reign asked why they hadn't done this before.

Once I set out the refreshments, I started the day as I always did with coffee and an e-mail check. Today the Spring Break gods were on my side. The hearty taste of coffee lifted me up, and the teaching gods caused the internet to go down. Unable to check e-mail, I could relax for a few minutes and socialize.

Nikki Mallon came through the door first. "Bagels! Yesssss!" and then a good morning.

Renee was next. "Awesome!" and then a good morning.

Misty followed closely behind. "Yes! Coffee!" and then a good morning.

Sean and Donna arrived together. "Damn, Stanton. There goes the diet! Thanks!" and good mornings.

They continued in, one after another, and reacted like little kids on Christmas morning, excited, then grateful. All except Luke and Ginger. Luke had arranged a Spring Break trip to England and had to load students and luggage on a bus for the airport and a one p.m. flight. Ginger was busy.

What more could we ask for? I wondered what could be added to the sunny day, one that brought warmth after weeks of clouds and below-freezing temperatures, and a friendly breakfast with workplace colleagues.

As official teacher starting time got closer, each of us gathered food and drink, wished each other a relaxing break, and headed for first period on the last day before vacation—a positive start.

Today would be easy for me. Classes either would take a unit test or write an in-class essay. Break, however, promised lots of grading, especially since the day was also the last of the quarter, and grades were due shortly after our return to school. Nonetheless I intended to make the most of it. And for half of it, I did. Then lunch happened.

As I sat in my classroom, I munched on a leftover bagel and graded the tests the morning classes had taken. The shrill blast of the fire whistle cut through the silence. Worse than any of the bells, signals, and sirens that blared for various notifications, the fire alarm annoyed me the most with its ear-piercing horn. No matter how many hundreds of times I heard it, the next one always surprised me. I got used to the bells that rang before and after every period; I got used to the trumpet that interrupted class for a special call

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from the office. Somehow my brain muffled those sounds enough to protect my eardrums but still process them. The whistle of the fire alarm, however, baffled it, and each time it intruded, I knew I lost a tiny bit of hearing.

I wondered. What is it? Fire drills aren't done during lunch. They were too disruptive and kept kids from buying food. The privatized food service company probably had it written in their contract that no fire drills could be held during lunch periods. This, I thought, is something real. I reluctantly got up to leave the building.

The students evacuated fairly quickly and moved slightly faster than the typical teenage shuffle speed. The smell of burning nastiness filled the air and let everyone know that a real fire burned somewhere and that we probably would be out there for a while. The siren of a third fire company got louder as it got closer to the school and confirmed it.

After we stood outside for half an hour, I saw Lenore Knudson at her post in the area near my classroom. "What's happening?"

"A fire. In the lunch area outside the cafeteria. The rubber mulch caught fire from something, and it spread pretty quickly. Don't know how it started."

"Anybody hurt?"

"I don't think so. The teachers saw it right away and got the kids away."

"Thank goodness for that," I said. "Any word on if we'll get back inside soon?"

"The fire's out, so we might. But they have to check the building first. Standard procedure."

Great, I thought. The two classes still left wouldn't be able to take the last test of the quarter today. Time for Plan B—if I could only come up with it.

Administration gave the all-clear after the students had been outside for about an hour. Once we returned to the building, the normal protocol to report anyone who had been out of class when the alarm sounded and other procedures to narrow down the cause of the fire took fifteen minutes. With twenty left before dismissal, the regular school day continued. I did not meet either of two afternoon classes. I would figure out Plan B and post it on my web page where half the students would see it and half would never look. At least I'd give it a shot.

Before Spring Break began for the teachers, Parks held one more staff meeting to update us on the fire. No one was injured. The fire charred the entire outside lunch area. A student thought it would be therapeutic to burn

the love letters his ex-girlfriend had sent him before their breakup. Unfortunately, he chose to do it in the newly landscaped courtyard, didn't realize how hot burning paper gets, and dropped the letters once he lit them. The ignited bundle landed on the mulch that covered the ground and spread quickly. To everyone's surprise, Parks congratulated teachers for how we handled the evacuation. No epiphany occurred.

"Enjoy the break," I said to end the meeting.

Moments after Parks spoke the final words, I heard car engines revving up. A driver at Indy couldn't exit the pits faster than this group of teachers left the building. The caution lights would slow all competitors and give us a chance to recharge, at least for a week. But new obstacles were sure to arise afterwards in the race to June.

The friendly voice that shot out from the speaker sounded genuinely counterfeit but clear, unlike the usual muffled “Can I take your order?” prevalent at most fast-food restaurant drive-thru lanes.

“Hello! How may I help you on this beautiful day?”

“I’ll have a C plus meal with a diet soda, please.” The franchise’s use of letter grades to identify its meals amused me. My choice reflected my own evaluation of the day, and today struggled to be adequate. At least, it left room for improvement.

“A C plus. And would you like that supered?”

This *BestofBurgers* voice showered the customer with sociability. To order a regular meal would seem ungrateful. The patron had to supersize. Anything less would be rude.

“Yes. You talked me into it.”

“All right. Will there be anything else?”

“Not today.”

No, nothing else today, please, I thought.

The day’s excitement had exhausted me. I abandoned a leftover bagel when the fire alarm sounded, and I needed a pick-me-up now. Though I knew salty, greasy, fatty fast food failed as a healthy snack, I ordered a cheeseburger and fries. My inner therapist told me it was a need. Until my recent forays to *BestofBurgers* after sessions at the driving range, I had eaten little of it. Ten years ago, my blood pressure had spiked and landed me in the emergency room. Since then, I had lost weight and changed my diet. French fries, once a comfort food, became a thing of the past or a special treat. Healthier pursuits, exercise, and yoga replaced them as the de-stressors in life. The de I needed today? De-light.

“That will be six dollars and nineteen cents. Please drive around to the next window and have a fantastic day!”

If only it were that easy, I thought to myself. Though better than nothing, even a deluxe cheeseburger with fries fell short of providing the attitude adjustment called for after today's events. I needed a lotus burger for that.

As I breathed in the exhaust fumes from the car ahead of me and waited for the order, my eyes rested on the tile designs on the wall inside the BestofBurgers pickup cubby. The bags, cups, condiments, napkins, and plastic ware were within easy reach of the workers. Customers followed a methodical procedure to get to the window, one that comforted me. Despite the sometimes-long wait, they were patient. At stop one, they placed their order at the thumbs-up shaped microphone. Then they pulled up to stop two and handed over their cash. At stop three, they waited for their fast food and the *BestofBurgers* thanks you signal that they could drive away. The system required calm symmetry to work.

As I sat in the car waiting, I remembered another fast food stop many years back when I worked part-time as a wedding and party DJ, a job I took after a devastating breakup with my boyfriend, Vince.

After two and a half years of an on, off, on-again, off-again relationship doomed from the start, I ended it when he showed up on my doorstep one night after a four-and-a-half-month absence. After he said hello, I turned on the sarcasm. "Returning to the scene of the crime?" The question caused him to pause, probably speechless, screw his nose into a facial question mark, turn around, and walk to his car in the peacock strut he used when he needed to show himself to be the center of the relationship.

For emphasis, he deleted me from his life and moved to another state. Curiosity led me to track him down with the help of a friend who worked for the FBI. I called him and hoped to rekindle whatever we had, but when he threw into the conversation that he had already answered twelve calls from people who asked if Karli, his girlfriend, felt better, I knew I made a mistake and shortened the call.

As breakups usually do, this one devastated me. I couldn't function for weeks that became months. The job would get me out of the house on weekends and provide an alternative to summer employment.

And it did. I enjoyed the first few gigs. They were fun, even easy. Weddings on Saturdays in the spring. Basic stuff. Benevolent crowd. Happy clients.

I had picked up the details of my next wedding gig coming up in a few days from the scheduling office. It promised to be an experience that would test me. I had stopped for a fast-food lunch to give myself time to think about how

to approach the assignment before me. As I sat behind the wheel of my car and ate, I scanned the list.

This one would be different. Of course, the crowd would be happy. All wedding guests were. To other DJs, it would be an easy gig. Cocktails at four, dinner at five, dancing and entertainment until nine.

When I called to get an idea of the couple's music preferences, the bride Karli said, "Just play regular dance music. I'm not picky. But for our first dance, I have something special in mind."

Here it comes, I thought. An obscure song I didn't have in my collection, a choice that would send me through record stores across town to track it down.

"Great! What is it?"

"It's a song Vince and I consider ours. It says so much that is like our relationship, and well, it wouldn't be our wedding if we didn't dance to this."

"Sounds like this song is important to you."

"Yes! We love it!"

"That's great! I'm always happy when the song a couple chooses for their first dance means something to them. The tone carries the rest of the party and creates feelings that warm up the audience to have a good time. What's the song?"

"You said it, sort of."

"I did?"

"Yeah. This song will set the mood for the rest of the party and for our marriage, too, I hope."

"Great! That's what it should do! So, what is it?"

"You said it. Vince and I want our life together to be like the song. It's so romantic!"

"So, I said it, but I don't ..."

"It's Feelings." I stretched the title out.

Good choice!

My stomach churned when I hung up the phone as anxiety and confusion overtook me. But not because Karli's Vince had been my ex-on-off-on-again-off-again Vince. I had tried to get out of DJing the event the minute I saw the groom's name on the contract that Neil from the SoundPros office gave me. I had made peace with the breakup. I also knew that Vince needed to be married or at least have a girl to be there for him. He would tie the knot; I

wouldn't be the girl there. And the guys at the company office even sympathized and found a substitute for me. But the sub's son came down with chicken pox, the sub never had them, and since his exposure could spread them, he had to opt out of the job. Because June is prime wedding season, the company had booked every other DJ. I had no choice. I gritted my teeth and went on with it.

But I never imagined I'd have a conversation about Feelings as Vince's favorite song. Feelings?! I understood why others would choose it for a first dance. It escaped me why he would want it for his wedding song. Had he ever listened to it? Vince, the country music addict. Vince, the guitar-strumming, boot-stomping, Tennessee-loving wannabe. Feelings?!? This girl must be incredible!

The day of the wedding, I had forced myself to be the best version of myself I could find. I pushed my professional persona to the front, DJed the celebration, spoke briefly with Vince who remembered little about our time together, collected the fee, and moved on.

The movement of the car ahead of me in line as it drove away shook me from the memory. I rolled to stop three for the order. What about me, I wondered, makes me so easy to forget? I'd have to look into that. But for now, the aroma of a deluxe burger and fries filled my car and sense of smell. I pulled into a parking spot and ate in solitude before heading to the next stop. Maybe there I'd find a new look and a new attitude.

The platinum-haired stylist made her way through the two rows of chairs to the front counter. "Welcome to *Slick Cuts*. Are you checked in online?"

"Yes, I'm number three. Kassi S."

"Okay. And what are we doing today? Cut?" The stylist keyboarded some code into the computer to pull up my style file.

"Yes." I started to go into detail but stopped. The stylist concentrated on the monitor. Let the pro handle it, I thought. She knows what she's doing. I took an open chair near the window and relaxed, happy to sit and watch the world go by. The stylist's voice distracted me from my moment of Zen.

"Kassi, you can have a seat in that chair. Let me clean up here, and I'll be with you."

I sat mesmerized as I watched the stylist in her black smock move the black broom across the black and white linoleum floor. She pushed tresses of blonde hair into one big pile, then to the back of the room, and the once

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messy floor became clean underfoot. The broom swept the remains of the old customer away and the new one in. Order returned.

"Thanks. That was quick," I said.

"Checking in online lets you get in quickly. Customers are happy with it."

"It saves time for me."

"I'm Elena. What are we doing today?"

"I need a trim and shaping. I'd like to keep the length as much as I can."

"Okay. The back we can take off maybe half-an-inch. The sides, too. What about the top and front?"

"The top is where it loses it. Can you do something there?" Let the pro handle it. But giving up total control demanded more self-discipline than I thought I had today.

"I can texture that to give you more lift and body. And I'll trim the sides to flow with the rest of it. Is that okay?"

"Great. Do what you think will work."

As Elena scissored the back, I heard the old question in my brain: Am I doing the right thing? I struggled with the dilemma. Long or short? High maintenance or low? Every visit to the salon induced stress as I tried to decide. Finally, I'd admit that I didn't have time or the desire to primp my hair each morning and would opt for mid-length and simple. Then after a few days, I regretted it.

Decisions, decisions. Couldn't someone else make them for me? Not going to happen. Just pick something! I wondered if I had reacted the same way to the other decision I had come to. Maybe. But I would not change my mind. Last night, I prepared five copies of my resumé along with a cover letter. Teaching no longer fit me, I decided, and neither did Parks. I wanted to sleep on it before I sent them out. Now I had to answer the multiple-choice question.

If a teacher works at a job where she finds she disagrees with her superiors more and more every day, what should she do?

- a) Discuss her issues with her superiors.
- b) Find the good in the midst of the nonsense.
- c) Suck it up and teach.
- d) Find employment somewhere else.

Like standardized tests required students to make one and only one choice, I had to do the same. Today's events made up my mind.

“There you go. What do you think?” Elena held a hand mirror behind me to let me see the back.

“Great. I like it. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Have you been styling long?”

“Five years.”

“You figured me out. I’m happy with this cut. I’ll be back.”

“Thanks.”

Elena totaled the cost in the register and smiled when she saw her creation. The cut made me notice my brown eyes. The woman leaving looked much more upbeat than the one who walked in earlier. “You know, that style does something for you. It’s very becoming, and I’m not saying that because I did it. Very stylish.”

On the drive home, I sat amid the empty wrappers of greasy French fries and a once juicy burger. I glanced at the new look in the mirror and decided to go in a different direction. I’d sweep out the car, choose answer D, and send those resumés out tonight. Time to make room for the new.

INTERLUDE

Art Zuno's house had been on the market for several months, but Ben trusted that he'd soon have a sale. He had taken ten prospective buyers through in that time and had a tentative deal until the young woman who made the offer unexpectedly transferred to the West Coast. The location, a ten-minute drive to the Bantamville Transit Line, sold her on it. She had planned to work from home three days a week and take the train to her office in New York City the other two. She said she loved the house and all its features. When her accounting firm made the job offer, she told Ben that she almost refused it because the house offered so much. Then her company added that the move came with a promotion, and she couldn't refuse. Despite the setback, he expected to finalize a sale in the next month or so because of the interest from other millennial professionals like the media producer he was about to show the house to today.

He kept his fingers crossed that Scott Berger was keeping his promise to Zuno. Unlike the first day he visited when Scott's "stuff" filled every space, each time he brought a potential buyer through they found clean and open rooms. The home's features stood out. Hardwood floors in the living room, classic tile in the kitchen and bath, and the sunlight that streamed through the windows, along with the updated appliances and fixtures, offered a young professional the perfect investment. Scott had done his part without threats.

As Ben walked up the pathway with the producer, all looked in order from the outside. He scanned the front of the house and stole a look inside the bay window to make sure.

"As you can see, the exterior is in good shape." He began his sales pitch before they entered. "And it's maintenance-free." Zuno had made sure of that when he first purchased the house. As a landlord, he didn't want to get calls from a tenant to come to fix this or that. He invested in materials and designs that, though costly at first, proved durable and cost-effective in the long run. "You'll find that the entire property, inside and out, is maintenance-free." Ben used the phrase twice. He knew that a busy commuter didn't want

to be slowed down by home repairs and used it as one of the house's main sales points to these upward professionals. "There is a tenant here. So, though I have a key, I want to ring the bell to let him know we're here, just in case."

"No problem," the young man said as he examined the front porch and pathway. "Are these pavers maintenance-free?"

"They are. They look like separate pavers, but they are one piece of concrete with the paver design stamped on it. In fact, it's called stamped concrete. Cool idea, huh?"

"Really is. I like it."

Ben reached to ring the bell a second time when Scott opened the door. "Hi, Ben. Nice to see you."

"Hi, Scott. Did you get my message? I have someone who would like to see the house." He realized he surprised Scott with the visit.

"No. I've been busy with some, uh, schoolwork. I haven't checked messages."

"Scott, it would be great if we could come through and take a look. I know you must be busy trying to finish up." Ben placed his foot inside as a door stop in case Scott did not cooperate.

"Yeah. I'm on a deadline, you know?"

"We'll take a quick walk-through, Scott. I know the end of the semester must be closing in fast." Ben would not be denied. Before he finished his last sentence, he took three steps inside the house. "You don't even have to stop your work."

"Okay. Give me one minute to straighten up a bit." Scott quickly moved inside then returned within a minute. Ben passed on figuring Scott out and thought it was something for his eyes only.

"Come in. Hi, I'm Scott." He extended his hand to the buyer.

"Hi, Scott. Nice to meet you. I'm Barry Hopkins. Thanks for letting us in."

"No problem. I'll get back to work unless you need me."

"Go ahead, Scott. I'll take Barry through. Get that work done." Art Zuno had filled Ben in on Scott's situation. He knew that once he got his GED, it would remove what could be a stumbling block: a tenant who refused to leave.

While Scott returned to his desk and laptop, Ben led Barry through the downstairs and pointed out the features of each room, then took him upstairs, a quick trip since the house had three small bedrooms and one bath.

Class, Coffee, & Confrontation

They descended the carpeted stairway, then headed to the basement. After a few minutes, Ben came up alone and moved into Scott's work area.

"Hey, Scott. What are you working on?"

Scott jumped up from his chair. "Ben! Man! You scared me."

"Sorry. Barry wanted a few minutes to look around himself. Are things good with you? Are you on schedule to get that GED?" Ben scanned the laptop's screen over Scott's shoulder. Though the angle, distance, and Scott's quick repositioning of the shot on his screen made it difficult to see clearly, he thought he recognized a web page with pictures of a professional-looking woman. Scott worked to add captions to the pictures. "Who is that?"

"No one. They're default photos. It's something for school. They're photos from an online file the teacher created."

"Aah. Well, good luck, Scott. Get that GED. It will really change things for you." Ben tried to get a clear view of the photos and captions. "Thanks for keeping the place clean. It helps to sell." He took one more long-distance look at the picture of the somewhat familiar woman on the screen. But his eyes couldn't focus on the image to allow him to see it clearly. And when he could finally read the words beneath them, it surprised him. What school project of Scott's required a picture of a woman and the caption, Is this what Bantamville wants? In another photo where she walked through a hallway, it cut deeper. Brashly on my way to another high-paying principalship. Heh-heh-heh!

"Anything else, Ben?"

Ben stared over his shoulder at the screen. "It's none of my business, but what are these pictures for?"

"A school project, like I said."

Ben didn't drop it. "But they're kind of negative, aren't they?"

"Yeah. That's the point. To create a negative tone through photos and captions. It's a different kind of assignment." Scott's raised voice at the last comment exuded earnestness.

"Hmm. Yeah, very. School sure has changed since I was there. So, you don't know that woman? I mean, they're not photos you took?"

"Me? No. Like I said. They're default photos."

"Yeah. The person looks familiar to me. Like someone I know." He had a filled schedule, so he moved past the mystery and said his goodbye. "Scott. Thanks, again." He shook his head and Scott's hand, then took one more look at the woman in the photo.

“No problem. Hey, Ben, when I get my GED, can I talk to you about getting my real estate license?”

He hesitated before he answered. “Absolutely, Scott. Absolutely.”

By that time, Barry had come up from the basement ready to finish the tour outside. He thanked Scott and said goodbye.

Ben paused and glanced once more at Scott’s computer screen but found it dark. Scott had either finished his project or thought the real estate salesman had seen enough.

APRIL

39

The five-thirty a.m. alarm intruded on my rest all too soon and made this Monday morning crueler than most. Enjoyment of Spring Break, with its balmy temperatures and sunshine, with the gatherings of friends and family, and with the split from the routine, rejuvenated me for the two months left of school. I convinced myself in the last few days that I could do it.

Last night though, within minutes after I curled up in bed, my brain raced as it reminded me of the lessons on writing research reports I would start, the presentations to be set up, and the handouts to be copied. Unlike the September nightmares before the first day of school, the night before returning from Spring Break problems involved not sleeping. I tossed and turned, felt cold then hot, needed a drink of water, then had to go to the bathroom. I fell asleep, woke up and felt like five hours had passed, looked at the clock and saw it read twelve fifteen. My brain jumped from classes to the meeting with Parks to what I should pack for lunch. I tossed and turned again, needed another drink of water, slept, then had to go to the bathroom at one fifteen. At about four a.m. I finally drifted off to sleep until the alarm interfered. I hit the snooze and heard muffled sounds from the bathroom. Zach usually awoke at five fifteen. I stole seven minutes more, a fleeting seven minutes, until the bathroom opened. Reality, in all its starkness, reached over to shake me from sleep. The first day back from any extended vacation or long weekend, to put it succinctly, sucked.

I dragged my stiff body out of bed, showered, brushed make-up on my face, and slipped into a generic red silk blouse and skirt and comfortable shoes. On the way to the kitchen, I picked up my phone from the hallway

table, noticed its flashing text message signal, and ignored it. Everything could wait until I made it to school. I needed nourishment. After I prepared breakfast, I plopped down at the counter, began to spoon oatmeal into my mouth, then sipped coffee as I scanned the Opinion section of the Sunday Times, a day late but interesting anyway. Once I finished my food, I took one last look at the paper and pushed my chair and myself away. I gathered my books and lunch, shoved them into my bag, took one last look in the mirror, and journeyed back towards the world I had left behind ten days ago. You can do it, I told myself. Only two months until summer.

Two months would fly by at the speed of a dirigible. And like the dirigible, it would be filled with gas. The question: was it hydrogen or helium? Only time would tell.

On the positive side, I could commiserate with someone.

"Ughh." Renee's greeting lacked her normal enthusiasm. "Sorry. That's the best I can do today."

"I get you." I knew just about every teacher struggled with the first day back from a break. "It's a tough one today getting back into things."

"That and the other thing."

"What?"

"You didn't hear? Pink slips were in the mailboxes this morning. Every nontenured teacher got one."

"The first day back? They couldn't wait until tomorrow?" My pitch rose.

"It's Bantamville. The number one shit-show in the county." Renee hunched her shoulders and paused. "Sorry for the language."

"Is that why it's quiet? Where is everybody?"

Renee shrugged then said, "I guess the nontenureds are either in their classrooms getting ready for the day, in the lavs crying their eyes out, or at their computers typing up their resumés."

"Mallon? Kinpal? Conover?"

"I haven't seen them."

"I'll take a walk to their rooms. See if they are there and okay." I moved away from Renee and down the hallway.

On the way, I glanced into each of the E/LA classrooms. Not a teacher in any except for Ginger, who sat at her computer as she set up her presentation for the smart board. She looked up at the door as I passed. "Good morning!" She used her best sing-song voice. "Welcome back!"

Class, Coffee, & Confrontation

“Good morning.” I couldn’t match the melody and was unsure if Ginger’s happy voice matched her attitude.

“Did you have a restful break?”

“Yes. It was very nice. And yours?”

“It was wonderful. Very relaxing, even though I worked on the Expo for several hours. We’ll talk.”

Ugh, I thought, then flinched but recovered quickly to hear the rest of Ginger’s glass-is-half-full comment.

“But I’m excited to get back to teaching. I want to make the most of the next two months. I feel like we have a lot to accomplish, but I’m confident we’ll get it done.”

“Okay. Sounds positive.” I couldn’t identify the tune Ginger sang, but I needed to move on to find the rookies on my team. As I turned the corner, a group shuffled out of Nikki Mallon’s room.

“This sucks.” Dominick DeSantis’s whisper carried him through the door.

“What a delightful welcome back,” Misty Conover said.

“No words. I’m working on my resumé today.” Amy Kinpal seemed a step ahead of the rest.

“Good morning,” I said as they passed by me. I took a deep breath before I headed into Nikki’s room, tried to think of the right words then decided there were none, and walked through the doorway. Nikki surprised me with a cheery smile. She sat at her desk with the letter smoothed out before her.

“Hi, Kassi. Come on in.”

“Hi. I heard and saw. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. It was a shock at first. But then, these are the people I work for. What can I do?” Nikki’s voice was soft.

“Not much anybody can do.” I noticed a shiny object on Nikki’s finger.

“What is that? A diamond?”

“Yep. I got engaged over the break. Want to celebrate?” Nikki held her hand up in front of her unsmiling face.

“That’s wonderful, Nikki. I’m happy for you. And yes, we’ll celebrate. Just not at the moment. Sorry.” I guessed Nikki had shared the news and her joy with her work friends. I also guessed that they were subdued if they showed their happiness at all.

“I know. I feel bad. For them. For me, too. But I’m still happy for this,” she said as she raised her ringed finger. “And I feel bad for feeling happy.”

“I get it. It’ll take a while for them. They’ll come around. Are you okay with the letter though? You know it’s a formality, right?” I held on to that idea and thought it would help if Nikki did, too.

“Yeah. I’ll keep thinking that until June.” Nikki’s voice quieted.

“You will be rehired. You’re good. But it’s not a bad idea to get your re-sumé in order. You have experience that will be a plus. Be smart.”

“I know. I’ll do that this week.” Nikki’s resignation came through.

“And we’ll celebrate your engagement this week, too. Give us time.”

“Thanks, Kassi.”

“I have to go. If you need anything, a break, someone to talk to, a cup of coffee, let me know. See you.”

As I continued through the day, several young teachers spoke with me. They were in a state of shock about not being rehired. Also troubling, administration expected them to go into their classrooms for the next two months and teach with the same enthusiasm they had back in September when they first started. And the school board dangled a carrot stick in front of them, the possibility they would have a job next year. But no matter how effectively they performed or how their students progressed, they might never run fast enough to get that carrot. I had faith, though, that none of them would quit the race.

During lunch break, I went out to my usual place, the driving range. With the outdoor section now open, the fresh air and exercise gave me a lift and the energy to finish out the day in school. As I put my clubs into the trunk, the aroma of greasy, salty French fries wafted over from *BestofBurgers* and enticed me. Today I could justify fast food, so I walked over the barrier between the two lots.

Busy, I thought as I opened the side door. Then despite the activity of the crowd, I noticed Ginger at a booth. I waved to her, but she did not respond. I got in line at the counter to place my order. The establishment lived up to the adjective fast. In only a few minutes, with burger and fries in hand, I turned to go towards Ginger’s booth but found it empty. I scanned the parking lot for her or her car but saw neither.

Not unusual, I thought. Though she had been friendly this morning, her behavior towards me had been Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde-like lately, best friend on one day and invisible the next.

Class, Coffee, & Confrontation

I figured that Ginger had other things to do, yet I thought it strange she left so quickly. I filed it away and ate quickly. I then headed out the door and across to my car in the range lot, got in, started it, and pulled out into traffic. I checked the traffic lights and the pedestrian countdown. 12... 11... 10... and calculated my distance to get through before it turned red. I stopped just as the indigo blue sportster cruised through the intersection. Ben, I thought. This time, though, a figure sat in the passenger's seat. Must be a client, I thought. Or maybe he's got a girlfriend. Good for him. I smiled to myself. Then as the car turned, I caught an unobstructed view of the figure. The shiny black hair could have confirmed the sighting, but if it didn't, the turn into the school parking lot verified it. My mouth fell open when the sportster stopped at the curb in front of the door. The passenger got out, smiled a goodbye, and walked towards the entrance. It stayed open when I looked four rows back and saw Ginger get out of her car, walk to the entry door, pause for about thirty seconds, stare at Ben's car as it left the lot, then walk into the school thirty feet behind Rikki Parks.

Through the rest of the day and night, the image of Rikki Parks and Ben Worthen together flashed through my mind at random times without warning. The visual of Ginger as she stood and stared at Ben's car provided its only competition.

I could not get either out of my head.

I asked Renee for a second opinion the next morning. True to form, she listened, empathized with my sense of bewilderment, then told me in her sanest voice that I didn't need to understand it. I had to accept it and let it go.

Good advice, I thought. But I probably couldn't follow it.

Along with the picture came the question. What is going on?

I had no answer. Or maybe I had too many. I needed lots of time to consider them all, time I did not have at seven thirty a.m.

I carried a crate filled with two textbooks, about forty research papers of fifteen to twenty pages each, and the ever-popular red coverage slips along with classroom door keys. With these daily props in hand, I emptied my head of that scene from yesterday to focus on today. My palms burned as the heavy crate's edges cut into them. I moved down the hallway through the maze of students who stood, sat, or hung at their lockers or in the middle of the passage. With the door in view about fifteen paces on the right, my brain calculated how difficult it would be to position a key in the door to unlock it while I still held the load. As I pictured the scenario in my head, an eye glimpsed Ginger scampering towards me from the other direction, and the guessing game began. Would she acknowledge my presence? Or would she repeat the *BestofBurgers* scene and pretend not to notice me and turn to the other wall as we passed each other? Did she realize that I saw her seeing Ben and Rikki, and I knew something was going on between somebody? Probably not. I confused myself with thoughts of it.

Class, Coffee, & Confrontation

Beads of sweat formed on my back. They were mostly from the warm April weather and the exertion I put out to carry that load of papers and books in the crate. But the perception of how Ginger made me feel insignificant and invisible in the last few months and the confusion about our relationship created the heat that added to the fever.

And I remembered the day the Expo landed in Ginger's lap. I had no doubt she stole it from me and sucked up to get Parks to approve it.

As I remembered the slights, I reddened and my head seemed to blow up like a balloon, as if each slight added another puff of air. The balloon would explode long before the air flow stopped.

As Ginger approached with her hand on the key that hung from a lanyard around her neck, control slipped out of my grasp. I can't do this anymore. I'm gonna let her know I exist.

"Here, I'll get it." Ginger's morning voice penetrated the air even from ten feet away.

I dropped the crate with a boom that echoed down the hall. Students and teachers turned and gazed in my direction. I stared at Ginger and was primed to bark "DON'T BOTHER. I'M FINE!" in my get-out-of-my-face voice.

Suddenly I felt young, like a kid again, but not in a carefree way. What am I? Thirteen? I thought. Hubris. Why can't I just say good morning?

Then I realized Ginger hadn't offered help to me or even moved toward my locked door. After she hesitated a moment at the sound of the crate as it thumped on the floor, she looked left and screwed her face into the uneven eyebrows and curled upper lip look I had seen her make when she disapproved of someone's behavior. Then she veered to the opposite side of the hallway towards the neighboring classroom.

A student who held a bakery box with the word TREATS on it knocked on the locked door.

"Mm, they smell good, even with the box closed." Ginger spoke playfully to the student as she bent to unlock the door. "I got here in the nick of time."

"Thank you, so much, Mrs. Kendrick. You saved me," the student said.

"I saw you from down the hall and figured you might need help. Go ahead in. Ms. Kinpal should be here soon." Ginger turned the lights on in the room oblivious to my overload predicament.

I froze for a few seconds then watched her as she retreated into the room. Shallow breaths came fast as the heat crept through my entire body. I shakily unlocked the door, opened it, picked up the crate, and moved like I

was walking over red-hot coals to the desk in the classroom. I heard footsteps behind me, and after I unburdened myself of the load, I expected to turn around and see Ginger. But when I spun about to unload my verbal baggage, I stopped myself. I stood face-to-face with a concerned Minday Palmer.

"Mrs. S, are you okay? I heard a bang from this end of the hall and thought maybe something happened to you."

"I'm okay, Minday," I said. "The load I carried was too heavy, and I dropped the crate when I tried to open the door. But thank you for checking on me. It's good to know somebody cares."

"No problem. You're okay, though?" Minday seemed worried.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Okay. When I was on my way down the hall, I saw Mrs. Kendrick running in the other direction. I thought something was wrong, and she went to get help."

"She was running awa—" I stopped myself. "She ran in the other direction? I guess she had something urgent. But don't worry yourself. No problem here. Thank you. You better get to first period. The bell is close to ringing. See you fourth period."

"Okay. See you." Minday scurried out of the room to get to class on time. Ginger running away? Damn, I thought.

Before I had time to have another, Nikki Mallon and Misty Conover came into the room. They looked sheepish but had a mission. A few steps after them, Dominick DeSantis appeared with the same look.

"Good morning," I said to them.

"Good morning." Misty responded first.

"Hi, Kassi," Nikki said.

"Hey, Kassi." Despite being the last in, Dominick took the lead. "Do you have a minute or two? We want to ask for your help."

"Okay. I have time. What's up?"

"You've heard that Parks gave all of us pink slips. All the nontenureds?"

"Yes." I knew if I tried to say more, my voice would crack, and my eyes would begin to water.

State law required that notice of not being rehired be given by the first of May, a formality except in election years when board members seeking reelection used it to demonstrate to the taxpayers that they could be austere. Not an election year and three weeks before the May deadline, this seemed

to be a power play by Parks to show the new teachers who made the decisions.

In other years, even when nontenureds received a letter, the other superintendents required their principals to hand-deliver them to the teachers. They recognized that finding out they would no longer have a job despite their positive evaluations could be emotional for some. And in practical terms, to send a teacher back into the classroom after she got the news might need to be an on-the-spot decision, depending on her reaction.

Parks eliminated any of that human concern. A letter in the mailbox picked up and read along with the mountain of other mail that had accumulated over the week's break, or not, sent a strong message and left the delivery to an anonymous hand. I struggled with administrators like this who, as leaders in a field that put a high value on humanistic treatment and as leaders of a school district with the motto *Caring About Your Kids, It's What We Do*, cared little about their staff. But sadly, I had become used to it. Insensitivity had been normalized.

"We want to speak to the school board about this." Dominick started the request. "We think, maybe if they hear us out, they will change their minds."

"You realize they will say that it's a budget thing. And that they'll say once they know how much aid they are going to get for next year from the state, they will probably be able to hire most of you back." I tried to talk them out of any action that might hurt more than help.

"We know all that. That's not what we're bummed about," Nikki said. "It's the way they did it. If we get our jobs back, great. If not, okay. But did they have to treat us like things. Couldn't they have explained it to us with some sensitivity?"

"You realize you work for Bantamville, right?" I channeled years of observing how the district treats employees.

"What do you think we could do that would send them a message at least? We wanted to go to a board meeting and speak ..."

"No." I stopped her before she could finish. "You are nontenured. You have no protection at all from anybody. To speak publicly will do nothing but lose you your jobs for sure. They won't rehire someone who embarrassed them in front of the taxpayers, even if the money is available to reinstate the positions. Don't any of you even think of speaking about this at a board meeting."

"Then what can we do? It's not only our pink slips. Parks' cuts are taking away so much from the kids. She needs to be stopped, or at least slowed down," Nikki said.

"You need to get the support of veteran, tenured teachers, students, and parents. But that's not easy because most of them don't want to get involved." I sensed that same sense of powerlessness I had when Sean told me about the band parents' meeting with the superintendent.

"How about you, Kassi? Would you speak for us?" Nikki tilted her head to the side and waited for an answer.

"No, not a good idea." Any employee speaking out is risky, I thought. I recalled Sean's comment that the band parents got the idea that the superintendent had given Parks free reign to make changes at the school. "I speak out a lot, it's true, but not at board meetings."

"We need you, Kassi," Misty said. "Teachers and kids know you. You have a leadership position. They would listen to you."

At that point, to my relief, the warning bell for first period rang. My breathing, which I only noticed now had been fast and shallow, slowed. I saw the anxiety in the three young teachers. Nikki bit the left side of her lower lip, Misty clasped her hands to heart as if in a yoga pose, and Dominick rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. I didn't want to speak for them to the board, but I knew I needed to offer them a little hope. I said I'd think it over.

"Give me a day or two. I've got a lot on my plate right now, but I will talk about it with someone I trust, and I will let you know. Okay?"

"Thank you, Kassi. That's all we ask. And we have to run, but thank you," Dominick said, and the three backed out of the classroom into the hall and hurried to their classrooms.

I looked half-heartedly at the clock and realized the bell would ring in less than one minute. I didn't have a first period class, and I had planned to move *Great Expectations* books from the classroom back to the bookroom. Rather than maneuver through the onrush of students as they tried to get to first period on time, or at least within the five-minute grace period, I waited. I stood in the doorway and watched the parade of bodies, then I glanced over at Ginger who loudly greeted her students as they came in. I remembered the incident with Santonio and how I helped her only to be met with a quick thank you and her amnesiac response afterwards. The young teachers were asking for help now. I questioned whether I had it in me, and even if I wanted to have it in me. Should I put my heart out there to have it trashed?

Class, Coffee, & Confrontation

In free moments during the rest of the day, then later at night as I watched *Fabulous Facts*, the new game show I had become addicted to because facts were fabulous to me, I thought about it. I argued with myself, one part of me pro, one part of me con. Did I help because I saw someone in need or a wrong being done or a principle that needed defending, or did I help for the ego boost it would give me? Each time I came up with the same answer. I didn't need or want an ego boost. The newbies were fighting for a principle, a climate of fair treatment. I should help them. Parks' take-no-prisoners stance worried me, too. School rage hung in the air.

On the other hand, in the last month or so, my own tête-à-tête with Parks had simmered and almost disappeared. I played detective in my free time to figure out who made the bomb threats, or I impersonated a therapist to analyze where my friendship with Ginger stood. I hadn't visited Parks' office in several weeks. The testing circus had calmed down. Curiosity about the purple cloth-covered birdcage had waned. And I planned to move on. The résumés were out there, both teaching and non-teaching, and I felt confident I would not be at Bantamville South next year. Should I let my blood pressure rise and blood boil over the incident that would have no effect on me after June?

At about two a.m., the pros and cons sorted themselves out, and I knew what I had to do. The problem: I didn't look forward to doing it.

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I sat and stared through the window at the rain as it poured down in monsoon-like fashion. Puddles formed in different parts of the parking lot below, some deeper with water than others. I wondered if June, warm weather, and summer vacation would ever come. The year had been a long one. Until recently when Parks let up on me, days were a series of hassle-filled events with never a dull moment. I thought it would fly by, but it dragged on.

The swish of footsteps from behind distracted me from the April shower, and I turned to see Renee as she dragged herself into the office. “Man, is this year ever gonna end? And this weather sucks.”

“Why so cheery?” The question ended on a high, sarcastic note.

“Everything. Parks. Laurent. My husband. Can’t they leave me alone for a day?”

“Okay. I get the first two. But your husband?”

“I added him to complete the trio. He’s fine. A little too much of a worrier though. This time it’s the car. He’s afraid it won’t last another year. It’s time for research. You know what that means.” Renee’s husband obsessed over the details when he made a decision. In this case, buying a car meant he read everything online about the best cars. But he also texted Renee with everything he discovered. “He doesn’t get that I’m happy with whatever he decides. I don’t need all the info he does.”

“What’s that you always say when I complain about my husband? It could be worse. He could be having an affair,” I said.

“Yep. Got it. I’ll focus on Parks and Laurent. They’re enough PIAs.”

“Hey, how are your seniors doing?”

“Believe it or not they’re great. It’s that time of year when they suddenly get that adult attitude. It’s magic.”

“Like what?”

Class, Coffee, & Confrontation

“They realize they are close to getting out there in the real world. They also know they won’t make it if they don’t clean up their acts. Here’s their latest. They figured out that they can’t use certain language in the workplace, but it’s become so much a part of the way they talk that they can’t control it. So, they came up with a way. They created, and I had nothing to do with this, a swear jar. Whenever somebody uses inappropriate language in class, they have to put a quarter in the jar.”

“Good idea. How’s it going?”

“Not bad. We’re up to twenty-two dollars after three days. James drops a dollar in each day when he comes into class. Kind of like credit. Or maybe a down payment.”

“Cool. What are you going to do with the money?”

“Half goes to charity. Half goes to pizza on the last day.” Renee raised both hands, palms up. “I’m good with that.”

“Damn,” I said. “How could you not get VIT? That is growth for those kids. And mostly it’s because you stay on them all year.”

“Pizza will be my reward,” Renee said before she walked out the door and headed back to her classroom.

My thoughts returned to Parks and the world the staff and students lived in because of her. I expected stress as we adapted to a new principal with different rules, requirements, and ideology. But it had been a few months, I hadn’t yet sorted out the new principal’s goals and priorities, and frustration plagued me. Not a Pollyanna by any means, I accepted that good and bad leaders existed. But how to label Parks eluded me. On the one hand, she brought a fresh view of what a high school should do, and I appreciated the value of change. On the other hand, her methods were underhanded and bullying. After only a few months, Parks had accomplished one thing. She identified the easy victims, and though the young, nontenured teachers were her number one target, others made the list, too. She put Dave Laurent in her viewfinder when she recognized him as an administrator who had two things that worked against him: his incompetence and the mutual dislike most of his staff had for him. In no time, she usurped most of his decision-making and left him almost powerless.

Almost was the key word. Though Parks made the important decisions and handled the major events, she handed Laurent enough responsibility to implicate him if need be. He evaluated new teachers, and though Parks had a hand in this, too, he sat in on their classes and wrote their evaluations, one

of the few administrative duties he now had. He took it seriously, but he lacked the background and experience in the classroom to be effective.

I had heard from a few young teachers that his evaluations, to say the least, were not very helpful. He could point out a negative, like the students were chatty and not involved in a discussion, but he offered no strategy to engage them. He lacked knowledge about classroom management and knew less about the curriculum. What bothered me most was when he would include titles of literary works or books or mathematical equations or formulas he had copied from the teachers' notes or books, but they would be written incorrectly. In an algebra class, when he noted the formula for finding the area of a circle, he left out the little raised two, the squared symbol so that $A = \pi r$.

I recalled one class he observed on Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of novellas in *The Decameron*. The students read the assignment prior to the class, and they were engaged in both the activity I set up and the discussion. I felt their analysis of the work bordered on the college level standard. In the evaluation; he focused on how orderly the students moved to their groups and engaged in talking about the literature and how I circulated from group to group to keep them on task. But he made no references to content in his write-up. I guessed why afterwards. When he referred to the lesson topic, even though I pointed out the title on the board and on the handout I gave him, he wrote *The Decathlon*. When I pointed out the mistake during the post-ob conference, he said the secretary who typed it misspelled it, and he would correct it on the final write-up. When the edited version referred to it as *The Decamera* I figured that made sense to him since it is Boccaccio's snapshot of one hundred pre-Renaissance tales.

I sat and looked out the window now as I waited for Nikki, whose class Laurent had visited yesterday. As Nikki's mentor, I saw her progress and improvement over the months. She struggled with the paper load at first, but her classroom presence and lessons rivaled, if not surpassed, those of some veteran teachers. She sought suggestions for revision and improvement though I had to dig deep to find a weakness. She said she had pulled up the evaluation write-up once Laurent posted it and wanted to speak with me about it before she met with him to sign it.

What in it, I wondered, makes her want to talk to me first?

Nikki made her usual Kramer-like entrance into the office. "You won't believe this one. Wait. Maybe you will. He's an idiot. You know that. Everybody

knows that. He doesn't. How does somebody like that become principal? Preaching to the choir again. I know." Her stream-of-consciousness talking would have been comical except that she spoke about a formal, and permanent, evaluation.

"Can I read it?"

"Here. What a ..." Nikki left the blank open. "He's rating me in areas we were told would not be in this round of evals. And he's not even getting it right."

I forced myself to focus despite the continuous stream of sentences and phrases that came from Nikki. I got to the part she objected to most. To see a teacher in one class period made it impossible and unfair to evaluate all aspects. The administration told the teachers that, while they would look at all areas for discussion, they would only score surroundings and teaching for this go-round. Laurent's comments, the negative ones, criticized her lesson planning and indicated failure to use the mandated format and to have homework assignments and handouts available on her web page for absent students. Those two areas fell into the design and professional tasks sections.

"He scored me very low on design and professional tasks when he shouldn't have scored them at all. But then he said I used the wrong lesson plan format. Which I didn't. I used the revised, updated one we got after school started. Not the original one, which everyone recognized as poorly done. Except, of course, Laurent. And I have assignments posted. I don't know what he looked at." Nikki's voice grew a decibel or two with each additional point she made.

My breathing got shallower. I guessed my heart rate somewhere around one hundred beats per minute like I had run a mile. "You're right, Nikki. This is an unfair write-up. You haven't talked to him yet, have you?"

"No. I just downloaded this report."

"Are you going in soon?"

"Yes. He said to come in this period."

"I'll go with you. I don't know if it will help, but at least you'll have support."

"Thanks."

I took one more look out the window at clouds gathering in the sky that were darker than the earlier ones that had opened up to unload a downpour. Ominous. The perfect word for them.

The discussion with Laurent went as well, or as poorly, as I expected. After he summed up his view of the lesson, Nikki presented her points. I backed her and reminded Laurent of the two areas that should be scored and the two that should not. I even pulled out the manual, which I thought to grab from the desk on my way out of the office, to read the sections that identified each to him. The back-and-forth went on for about fifteen minutes. He continued to defend what he did as appropriate and applicable; Nikki and I continued to present the details to him. Ultimately the facts, though by Webster's definition a true piece of information, did not change his mind. The meeting ended when Laurent said he would not change what he had written, but Nikki certainly could write her rebuttal, and it would be attached to the evaluation.

"Irregardless of how you feel, you do need to sign it. You know it simply means you were presented with it, and you read it," he said. "Really, Nikki, it's not a bad evaluation. I understand there are some things you are not happy with. But this eval won't keep you from moving on and up if you are considering being an administrator someday."

At that my head popped up and almost off my neck. But not because of his irregardless botch. I recalled Laurent's comment to me. "Is this all you want to do?" Again, he judged teaching as not quite as valuable as being an administrator. To say that to a new teacher, just starting out and establishing her teaching credentials, lacked good sense. I figured that Laurent had picked up the phrase from Parks, and I wondered why she was leading her staff in that direction.

When Nikki heard Laurent's comment, she almost crossed the line a nontenured teacher should never step over with a vice-principal. I noticed a slight tremble in the young teacher's hand, and Nikki must have, too. She gripped the chair's armrest as though it would dump her if she didn't hold on tight. "Your evaluation is unfair, and it's unfair because you are wrong," she said. Her voice cracked a bit, and I thought I might now witness a second female teacher cry because of a vice-principal's treatment of her. Nikki, however, sidestepped crying. "I'm uncomfortable signing this. But I will. And I will let you know that I am going to ask the principal and the superintendent for a meeting to discuss it." She stared at him for a second-and-a-half, her breath controlled and steady, then flattened the paper on the desk and smoothed it several times to eliminate every possible wrinkle in each section of it. Finally she picked out a pen from the soccer ball pen holder on his desk, examined it slowly, clicked it three or four times, looked at it for a few more, waved her

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arm in a back-and-forth motion several times, then signed the form and pushed it across the wooden, almost empty except for his phone and keyboard, desk back to him. "Please put a copy of it, once you sign it, in my mailbox. Thank you." She didn't miss a breath as she raised herself from the chair, picked up her things, and strode out the door.

Mesmerized by Nikki's execution of her exit, I tightened my jaw to control a smile. A Biblical passage from Isaiah came to mind. "And a little child shall lead them." Then the follow-up to that, a passage from another book which I could not identify at that moment. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Jesus, You are the sun on a rainy day!

I quietly pushed myself up from the chair, turned to leave, and noticed a ray of sun on the floor. I smiled at Laurent, picked up the pen Nikki had left on the desk, put it in the soccer ball, and said, "Nice pen holder. Have a good day!"

Walking through the halls back to the E/LA office, I paused at the classroom of Dominick DeSantis. The sound of laughter echoed from it. When I looked in, I saw that the students sat side-by-side as they scanned their textbooks and talked then typed onto their laptops. Dominick walked around the room and stopped to chat with each group of kids.

A few doors down, teenagers laughed in response to a voice that said, "I might as well say it," the emphasis on the *I*. "And believe me, I've never said this before to a class of seniors, but I think I can trust you to be mature enough to not get silly about it. Yes, Billy. The closest comparison for a male is this. Pushing out a baby during childbirth is pretty much like pushing out poop during a bowel movement ... a very constipated bowel movement." Mary Jane Langer made things real for her Sex Ed class, and from the volume of her voice and the giggles from the classrooms on the hallway, for most of C hall. I shook my head and smiled. Mary Jane used that same line in every class during the childbirth unit, and her in-the-gym voice did not differ in volume from her classroom one. The lines had echoed and caromed off the lockers a few times already that day.

Then I heard it again. Laughter. This time it came from farther down the hall. I walked down to Misty Conover's room, looked in, and saw a group of students at their desks. They smiled, giggled, and looked intently at the front of the room where three students dressed as a question mark, an exclamation point, and a period, all papier mâché, performed a skit.

And I would bet that, if I continued to walk around the building, I'd see more of the same. Kids were engaged in learning. Teachers were passionate about it. It shouldn't stop.

Now I saw the decision that I had put off in a different light. Parks needed to be stopped or at least slowed down. Fear seemed to be the main motivating factor in a building with a miserable climate. And that made for heightened tension, in-the-dirt morale, and a sense of powerlessness. The school, staff and students, needed a voice to speak for them and their needs and an ear to listen to them. Laurent wouldn't, even if he had the weapons. Santonio and Knudson happily and silently counted their days to retirement.

Despite the previous decision to find another venue and job, after I witnessed Nikki's courage as she respectfully, intelligently, and forcefully stood up to Laurent, I had other thoughts. Issues needed to be addressed and corrected. Where to start? Go where you are wanted, I thought. I would meet with the nontenureds who had asked me for help and brainstorm a way for them to weather the blizzard of non-renewals.

Then I remembered Suiseki and corrected my thought. No, I won't meet with the nontenureds. I'll meet with the new teachers. Respect the stone.

MAY

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After a week of dreary, rainy days, the sun appeared. The spring weather, warm, bright, and fresh, made the world seem better. On my way back to school from the driving range, I lowered the windows. A balmy breeze fanned my face. Not too cold, not too hot. Refreshing. Sixty-eight degrees and sunshine combined for an early May delight.

When I got to school, I would talk with the new teachers and offer them support, though I had no idea what that would be. In fact, I took off for the range during lunch for more than just to get out in the beautiful weather. I hoped to be inspired with an idea. I chipped ten balls in a row and hit the fifty yard marker with each one. I had no luck, however, chipping away at the problem of what to advise the new teachers to do about the way their *no rehire* notices were given to them. I'd figure that out soon enough. Now for a few more minutes I took in the spring day.

As I cruised along headed back to work, I made every green traffic light until the final one at the intersection where the school and the church stood across from each other. Stopped for the ninety-seconds red signal, I noted that the two buildings on opposite corners contrasted in style, too.

The fifty-five-year-old school building showed its age. The structure appeared in good shape, but the little details gave away the years. The brick walls needed pointing. Sections of the roof begged for repair and replacement. Doors and windows called out for paint. Sidewalks and the parking lot, with their crumbling concrete, mirrored cobblestone streets minus the charm. Across the road, the fifteen-year-old church still had the clean lines of a new building. The perfectly white and smooth walls and the roofs with black shingles blended to suggest a sturdy resilience. Doors and windows stood

waiting to be opened to welcome those who made their way up the neatly paved walkways.

I recalled the two times the church sheltered the students during the bomb threats and thought about the changes of the last fifteen years. While schools were once considered a haven for kids, districts now needed to have a standby refuge in case violence threatened the once-immune school building. Luckily for Bantamville South, the church served that purpose.

When the light changed to green, I turned the car towards the school's parking lot, and thoughts turned to finding a plan to save the future of education and give refuge to the newbies. I needed an idea to stop Parks.

Back in the building, I headed towards the main office to check my mailbox. As I approached the door, one of my students, Nick Arandt, stood in the hallway looking through the window. "Hi, Nick. What's up?" I startled him. He turned his head towards me and quickly put his hand in his back pocket. I had seen the move many times before as a student tried to hide a cell phone before a teacher or administrator confiscated it.

"Hi, Mrs. S.," he said. "Nothing. Waiting for a friend. I have a pass."

"Okay. Thanks, Nick. Have a good day. And don't hang out in the halls too long."

When I walked through the main office door, smiling secretaries greeted me, or so I thought. Then I noticed they were in stitches, though tiny ones, as they watched the entertainment near Guy Santonio's office. A figure in a bright yellow dress with curly blonde hair stood outside the VP's door and spoke with someone inside, presumably Guy Santonio. "I'm here to get my son's cell phone," the speaker said in a grating, abrasive voice both shrill and steely at the same time. I assumed a mother came to retrieve a cell phone that had been taken from a student. School policy still prohibited cell phone use during the school day. Students who broke the policy had their phones confiscated and their parents called and notified they would have to come to school to pick up the phone.

I went about my business as the scene unfolded, but I sensed something off in the looks of the mother. When I moved down the narrow hallway past Santonio's office, my eyes focused below the yellow dress to legs both muscular and a bit too hairy. Then I got a closer look at the face of the mother and stopped in my tracks. Unable to hold back my surprise, I screeched. "Jerry! Is that you?!"

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Speechless, the head of the figure spun around only to have the curly blonde hair tilt sideways. Underneath it, Jerry Goldman, a sophomore in my class, lifted his eyes to me.

“What are you doing?” My voice almost matched the shrillness of his-hers.

“Uh. Trying to get my phone back.” He looked down at his gloved hands holding his purse.

Guy Santonio’s mouth opened wide, and he had trouble closing it. “What!?”

“Jerry. Are you joking?”

Before he answered, Santonio turned his chair, pointed to him, and said, “Get in here and sit down. You have some explaining to do.” Jerry shuffled to a seat. “This is not good, Mr. Goldman, not good.” He shut the door.

Still not sure what had happened, I froze for a moment before I leaned on the wall, took a deep breath, and let out a howl.

When I walked back to the secretaries’ section, I learned that Jerry had come to the office and claimed to be his mother to get his phone. The women might have been fooled except that about a half-hour earlier, Jerry’s mother had come into the office with a *Bantamville Foods* bag she asked them to deliver to Jerry during his lunch period. As one of the secretaries took it from her, the blonde wig fell out. A dress, purse, and black pump shoes completed the package. The mother said Jerry called her twenty-minutes earlier and said he needed it for a skit in his English class, and the secretary said she would get the bag to him. When the same wig showed up in the office on the head of the person with the cell phone pickup story, the secretaries played along. They thought it might be entertaining. They knew their stuff.

Needless to say, Jerry did not get his cell phone back that day, though he did get six hundred and seventy-eight likes when Nick posted the picture he took through the office window on social media.

The amusing scene took my mind off the mission to help the new teachers for a brief period. But I returned to reality and stopped on my way to class to set up an after-school meeting with them. The Jerry incident reminded me of *The Emperor’s New Suit* and an idea came to me. I pictured Jerry in his mom’s dress that hardly disguised him and thought of the story. I wondered if BS High’s emperor might like some new clothes.

Sometimes inspiration comes in the weirdest situations. I had the weird part. I hoped I also had the inspiration part. With a phone call, I thought I might.

After school, I met with the three new teachers and convinced them not to speak out at a school board meeting about Parks' treatment of them.

"I have a plan. But you need to trust me. I don't even want to tell you what it is because I don't want you to know in case, somehow, you get questioned. You will know nothing, so you will not be lying when you say you don't know anything."

"Huh?" They each had the same response.

"Trust me. Can you do that?"

"I guess we don't have any other option," Dom DeSantis said. "I trust you."

"Me, too." Misty Conover was on board.

Nikki Mallon held out. "I'm meeting with Laurent and Parks. I feel like I have nothing to lose. I want to talk about Laurent's evaluation."

"Can I say anything to convince you not to do it yet?"

"I don't know if I can wait. Letting someone else fight my battles isn't in my DNA," Nikki said.

"Can you give it a week?"

"Okay. A week. I have nothing to lose. What's your idea? Maybe I can help."

After a few minutes, I convinced myself that Nikki could.

"Have you read the story *The Emperor's New Suit*?"

"Sure. Ages ago."

"If I'm reading her right, our emperor, or I should say empress, has too much hubris, and like in the story, it can work in our favor."

Nikki looked sideways at me. "Oka-a-y. I'm rereading that story as soon as I can find a copy."

"Okay. If you want to do something, you can help me." As I spoke, the plan developed, and I realized how to use Nikki to move things along. "Are you game?"

"Hell, yeah." Nikki's enthusiasm encouraged me.

"Okay. Here's what I need you to do."

I returned to the E/LA office to finish up one of the book inventories I would need in a few weeks when I had to order for next year. I found Renee on the phone, and the spike in Renee's voice hinted that the conversation involved a parent and a problem.

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“Yes. That assignment was made in February at the beginning of the quarter and was due on March seventh. He didn’t do it. I then gave him an extension to get it to me by March fourteenth. He didn’t.”

As the conversation continued, I couldn’t help but eavesdrop. I knew Renee would not mind, and we would talk about it once she hung up. From what I heard, I figured the topic concerned Frankie Williams and his grade in Renee’s class. He hadn’t done the work, either on time or on Frankie-time, and he probably would fail the class. Though one quarter remained in the year, Frankie’s history showed his chances were not good. Finally, Renee ended the conversation.

“Is anyone shocked?”

“Frankie? Failing?”

“As expected and predicted. And no one listened when I told them after the first quarter. And no one listened or cared when I told them after the second quarter. But now, all of a sudden, everyone is concerned.”

“Was that the mom or dad?”

“Neither. It was Parks.”

“Parks? Why?”

“She wants to make sure Frankie is given every chance to pass. She’s talking to each one of his teachers to check on him and to ask them to keep him updated daily. I don’t have that time.”

“I don’t get why Parks is involved. Isn’t that a vice-principal’s duty?”

“Usually, it is. But this is Frankie, and big-time colleges are recruiting him. Parks would love to have that in her resumé,” Renee said. “If it happens on her watch, she gets the credit, and we know how she likes that.”

“Darn. She talked so much about how she would hold kids to higher standards, and how she had our backs if we held our ground on grades as long as we had documentation. Do you think that’s why she asked for daily reports? To make sure she has the evidence if she has to defend his failures?”

“That would be wonderful. But based on how she’s handled things since September, I don’t trust her as far as I can throw her,” Renee said.

“Yeah. I don’t have much confidence in her either.”

“Whatever he earns he gets from me. I’ll play her game. But he won’t slide by. She’ll have to change his grade if she wants it that badly.”

“It’ll be tough. Trust me, though, I think I can help.” I offered support to the fairness and justice cause.

I thought Parks’ interest in Frankie could work in our favor.

"Thanks. It's time now to get the hell out of here for the night. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, I'm done." I packed my bag, grabbed my coat, and headed for the exit.

"Have a good night."

"Renee. Can I call you tonight? Maybe late?" As I spoke, my brain worked on the plan.

"Sure. What's up?"

"I'll tell you then. I have to find out about something before I have the whole story. I'll call. Good night."

"Good night," Renee said as she closed her car door.

I did the same and looked forward to the long day's end. The last call would be to Renee once I took care of the final item on the agenda.

That night, I contacted a friend from my high school days.

"Hi, Kassi." A resonant stage voice answered the phone.

"Hi, Lee. There's that voice I love."

"Sounds like you want something."

He knew my tricks. For the past ten years, Lee Salinas had worked in New York in television commercials to survive and acted in mostly Off-Off-Broadway plays to satisfy his passion. Zach and I had dinner with Lee and his wife, Audrey, at least once a month, either in the city or in Bantamville. In high school, Lee had played the lead in the annual musical when I had worked on the crew. Our friendship, begun because we also took the same art class, carried over to college. Though we attended different schools, we kept in touch, a relationship which paid off for me when Lee helped me through a required acting class. He gave me tips on how to get over nervousness when I performed in front of a crowd and suggestions and tricks to memorize lines of dialogue, something I struggled with previously. In a way, he brought me out of my shell. Now I hoped he would help me out in a different way.

"Really, Lee? You don't think I would call to say hello?"

"You would do that, I admit. But it's *Show Your Smarts* time and even talking to me doesn't beat that. What's up?"

"Actually, it's *Fabulous Facts* now. But that's a different story." I then filled him in on the Parks' situation and asked for his help. My plan involved borderline illegal activities, and I told him exactly what the risks might be. After some back and forth in which I explained the plan, he told me I was crazy, I

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admitted I most likely was, he asked what I would get out of it, and I convinced him that Parks endangered the school and kids. Only extreme measures would work, Lee agreed.

They would put things in motion in the next week and become heroes or goats shortly.

Before I called it a night, I made one more phone call to Renee to get her to join the fun.

As I lay in bed that night, I couldn't sleep, but I didn't toss and turn. I played the plan over and over and tried to convince myself that the elements were in place.

I needed a new teacher onboard, and I had gotten Nikki. Because I mentored her, an element of trust existed there. I admired Nikki's toughness, something her background forced her to be. Her family life had been almost nonexistent since her sixteenth birthday when she accepted that she had to fend for herself. She had spent four years in the Marines, saw combat duty, as much as a female soldier could, and got into teaching because she saw similarities between the two. Both soldiers and teachers were always on duty, worked towards a greater goal than money or self-satisfaction, knew and aimed for standards, and gained their strength and success through teamwork. This last point endeared her to me. Nikki knew that neither a soldier nor a teacher could be effective alone on an island, and she participated in group efforts as both a giver and a taker.

Renee Dumont would fill the role of the experienced teacher. Our history as co-workers assured me I could trust her. Like Nikki, Renee's family background—her father had left the family when she was thirteen, her mother suffered from depression—made her grow up faster than other kids. Her grandmother took her, her brother, and her mother in when her dad left, but when she turned eighteen, Renee found a full-time job and moved out on her own. She married, had three kids, and worked hard to make life easier for them. She returned to school and got her teaching credentials once her kids started school. Circumstances made her an overachiever and a bit chippy at times. That plus the fact that she could talk at length about any subject made her perfect for the role I needed her to take on.

The plan depended on Lee's acting experience. While he had played roles that ran the gamut of types, his experience in performances as athlete-turned-entrepreneur would come into play. He would be the only one to play

a role in this piece, and he needed to be slick. His real knowledge of college sports would help, too.

Whether I had convinced myself or exhausted myself, much-needed and much-appreciated sleep came after one final thought. If everything fell in place, if everybody stayed tough, if we had a little luck, Parks would be history. It seemed so, anyway.

As best I could remember, I had never gone through a week like the last one since I had spoken with Lee. Besides the self-reproach I was already feeling over the incident with Ginger, I experienced the gamut of emotions from anxiety to elation to guilt to listlessness to zip.

Once I had enlisted the participation of Renee, Lee, and Nikki, apprehension became a daily, even hourly, state. Visions of all the possible ways it could go south visited me. My mantra “Don’t think about that” entered my brain each time one of those images did.

Worse than the thought of failure, the question of ethics popped up. Throughout my career, honesty guided my behavior. The plan I designed to expose Parks relied on a lie to succeed. I had obeyed authority, competent or not, for twenty-five plus years. Now I shifted into rebellion mode. Is it right? Moral? Ethical? When is defiance the path to take? The future held the answers. The present required me to be steadfast and careful.

I wanted to avoid giving any hint of something brewing, so I spent no time with Renee or Nikki. If we pulled into the parking lot at the same moment in the morning, I would wave from inside my car, then pretend to be on the phone rather than walk in with them. That cell phone trick never got old.

At times I felt silly, but in the past Parks seemed to know a lot about my team and its activities. Comments made at E/LA meetings thought to be for those walls only somehow found their way to Parks.

During a time when the principal insisted that E/LA staff officially recommend the removal of average-performing students from their advanced classes, teachers had expressed the concern that the administration would not back the teacher if a parent objected. Experience and history had shown that, despite good intentions by the staff, parental pressure often resulted in administrative override. The E/LA team did not object to the cave-in as much as worried that the teacher who made the recommendation would be hung out to dry. An administrator could fall back on deflection with the line “Mrs. So-

and-so should have ..." or "Had the administration known, we would not have let Mr. So-and-so do that."

A few days after one meeting, Parks had called Sean Ackerman into her office and questioned him about his failure to recommend any of his low-performing students in his advanced class levels to be rescheduled. She asked if I told him not to make them if he felt administration would not support him.

"Are you afraid to be left out on a shaky limb by the administration?"

"She repeated the phrase I used at our meeting." Sean's hands still shook even twenty minutes after he had left Parks. "When I heard that, it took every ounce of self-control I had not to take her *BestofBurgers* soda and pour it over her head." He clenched his fists. "Kassi, do we have a mole?"

Since that conversation, I believed that someone had ingratiated himself or herself and provided information from team meetings. So as not to jeopardize the Parks' plan, I made sure no one overheard our talk about it. Neither Renee nor Nikki needed any further instructions on their roles. I trusted each of them completely, one from years of having each other's back and the other from working with me in the mentorship. I had been in tight jams with Renee, and she never wavered. I had seen Nikki respectfully stand up to Laurent and his unfair evaluation. They each had the pluck to play their parts. Still, I worried.

At home each night as I strode through my workout on the Glider machine, I reviewed the plan. With each glide, I moved farther from concern about the potential negatives. I gauged my anxiety level by the number of strides the counter showed. By the end of an hour, I found a happy place by thinking about life with an inspiring leader, not Parks, and I had totaled seven thousand, two hundred and eighty. While some might find ecstatic too strong a word to describe my feelings when I found that cheery corner and that overall count, I used it and felt it.

I had to wait for the right time to put people in motion. It took two days to talk with the major players and to set elements of the plan in place. Lee played his role and set up a meeting with Parks for the following Monday. That left Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and a weekend to back out, like the three-day cooling-off period law that lets consumers cancel door-to-door contracts. I compared it to the rule in dating when the guy waits three days to call back after a date because he believes the girl will want him more, and the girl is left to wonder about the first meeting—good or bad? She also has time to like him and hate him and like him again. I reasoned that the scheme

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would succeed, then judged it to be too risky, then thought it had to work. The ping-ponging of positives and negatives danced through my brain several times each day.

Then a phone call interrupted the guessing game on Wednesday afternoon. Rather than let it go to voice mail like I usually did when I didn't recognize the caller ID info or wanted a few minutes to myself when I got home from school, I answered it.

"Good afternoon. Is this Kassi Stanton?"

"Yes, it is." I used the cold, expect-it-to-be-a-sales-pitch voice.

"This is Charles Hager. I'm the Human Resources director at *Absolute Media* Incorporated."

I stopped in mid-step, drew and held a deep breath, and tuned in to the voice. I had sent my resumé to the company.

"We received your resumé and application and would like to talk to you about the position we have opening up next month. Are you still interested?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

Interested? I am beyond that.

Absolute Media advertised for an in-house video producer, the type of work I had intended to do before the glamor of teaching enticed me to get my certification. I had opted for the safe public servant career, tenure and a pension, rather than take a risk on a job in the private sector.

"Great. Is it possible for you to come for an interview Friday? I know it's soon, but I will be out-of-town next week, and I'd like to get the interviews for this position done before then. Can you make it Friday morning?"

"Friday." I could take the morning off, go to the interview, and still meet a couple of classes. "Friday is good for me. What time?"

"Come to the HR office for an eight-thirty interview. That will give us time to talk, and I'll also be able to show you around. Sound good?"

Show me around? I thought. That usually doesn't happen until they offer you the job. This could be my out from BS High, and it couldn't come at a better time.

"Sounds great, Mr. Hager. I will be there."

"Great. Good night."

"Goodbye and thank you."

I touched END and exhaled for the first time since I heard him say *Absolute Media*. I paused for a moment to process what had happened then pumped

my fist in the air, did a victory dance, and let out a scream of delight. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Right away, as though a switch had been flicked on, my mind raced. An interview? I hadn’t been on one in over twenty-five years. What’s he going to ask? What should I wear? Do I need to take anything besides my resumé? How about a portfolio? But of what? Friday? How in the world can I get it together in a day? I would, that much I knew. A chance to move on presented itself, and I embraced it.

When Zach came home, I shared the news with him. He flashed a smile, high-fived me, and appeared more delighted than I would have guessed. Though I had already decided to go to the interview, his encouragement made me buoyant. We agreed we both needed a change—I from teaching at BS High and he from listening to me share frustration about teaching at BS High.

I labored through the next day in school. Anxiety combined with delight to make the clock stand still for the first time since I had started teaching. Several times during a period I looked at it then my watch, sure that both had stopped. More than once during a class, I found myself daydreaming, or rather, students found me daydreaming.

“Is that okay, Mrs. S?” Nick’s question shook me back into the real world.

“What?!”

“Is that okay? Shall I collect the laptops and check them in? We have about five minutes left in the period.”

“Wow! Sorry, Nick. This, this, uh, essay I’m reading is so interesting that I was riveted to it. Thank you for noticing the time. Yes. Collect them. Okay, everyone, time to log off and return your laptops. We’ll finish tomorrow.”

I appreciated students like Nick. Though sometimes his awareness of time annoyed me, especially of time left in the class period, his nonstop clock-watching made sure I finished before the bell. With Nick in class, I never had to worry that I wouldn’t have time to fit things in, whether it be to collect laptops or give the homework assignment. It worked for both of us. Win-win.

At the end of the day, I couldn’t resist sharing the good news with Renee. Once the halls cleared of students who rushed to their lockers, their cars, their buses, and their boyfriends or girlfriends, I walked down to Renee’s classroom.

“Hey, Renee. How was your day?”

Class, Coffee, & Confrontation

“How was it? I’d say the best thing about today is that tomorrow is Friday.” Renee grabbed her head with both hands for effect.

“Another tough one? Well, not only is tomorrow Friday, but graduation day is not far away.” I tried to offer a happy thought.

“Bring it on, please,” Renee said. “What’s up with you?”

“I have some news. Remember I told you I had sent out resumés? Over the Spring Break?” I kept my voice low-key as I introduced the information I didn’t want out there yet.

“I remember,” Renee said.

“I have an interview tomorrow.” I almost whispered it.

Renee paused, a surprised half-smile on her face. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I stopped abruptly when I realized for the first time that if I took a new job, I no longer would see Renee every day. Suddenly it didn’t seem all that wonderful.

“Good for you. I wish you luck. I wish I could get out of here.”

“You know, I was happy until now. When I said the words to you, it hit me that I wouldn’t work with you if I got the job. It kinda puts a damper on it.”

“Sort of. But we’ll still see each other. And we’ll have different people to complain about.” Renee tried to lighten up the scene.

“Definitely. And it’s only an interview. It’s not a job offer.” I decided not to share Hager’s comment that he would show me around. Renee would pick up on that quickly as an indication of their serious interest.

“Good luck. Turn it into a job offer.” Renee made me feel better about it.

“Thanks. And could you do me a favor? I’d like to keep this low-key. Could you keep it between us?” As I asked, an eye caught a figure as it passed by the classroom door. I suspected that the figure may have heard the conversation. I peeked out into the hallway. I looked to the right in the direction the figure seemed to go and noticed the other classroom doors closed. All except one. The fluorescent lights from Ginger’s classroom lit up the otherwise darkened hallway. I turned back to Renee about to say good night but preceded it with, “All good for Monday?”

“All set.” Renee gave me a thumbs up.

“Great. I have to go. Good night.”

I went right to Ginger’s room. Since the locked door/dropped crate incident, I had not spoken to her at length about anything other than school-related topics. I had stopped by a few times to try to patch things up but found the door closed each time, because Ginger had students, or she busily

worked at her desk, or she found it a good avoidance strategy. When we met in the copier room, Ginger made her copies and left. When we met on the way into the building in the morning, she always had to talk with someone else about something important. When I texted her an invitation to a Happy Hour drink, she had a rough week and needed to go home to rest. Our relationship had soured, and I finally gave up trying to sweeten it up. Ginger had masterfully detached herself from any involvement. I guessed I definitely would not find *BestofBurgers* coffee on my desk anymore.

However, I needed to cover all the bases. I suspected that Ginger had overheard the talk with Renee about the interview, and I decided to be proactive. I would tell her, sort of.

“Knock, knock,” I said. “Do you have a minute?”

“Oh! Oh. Sure.” Ginger raised a hesitant voice. “Yes. Of course. Come in.”

“Hi. How are you?”

“I’m good. Thank you for asking.” Ginger remained at her desk, pen in one hand, student paper in the other. Her eyes looked over her glasses perched halfway down her nose as though she stopped in the middle of reading a sentence.

“I wanted to apologize for being rude the other day.”

“When? What do you mean?” Ginger’s eyes looked awkwardly but directly at me over her glasses.

“The morning I carried a heavy load.” I spoke in a monotone.

“No hard feelings here. I wanted to help the student I saw next door whose hands were full. I had forgotten about it.”

“I’m sorry I reacted that way,” I said, sure I would remember an incident like that for a long time. Ginger wouldn’t, it seemed.

“Of course. All’s forgotten.” Ginger’s voice sounded like artificial sweetener tastes.

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time.” I leaned back on one of the student desks, careful not to touch Ginger’s. I sensed an invisible barrier in front of it and didn’t dare violate it. “I can see how busy you are.” I still tried to find that common ground—Ginger the Busy—to win her trust. “There are two things I wanted to talk with you about.”

“Sure. Go ahead.” Ginger continued to focus on the paperwork in front of her.

“First, I know you don’t like to talk about Jake, but you should know something I suspect.”

She perked up at the mention of Jake and looked up from her work.

Extremely competent. Now that I have your attention I confined sarcasm to my thoughts.

"It's more about a friend of Jake's. Ben Worthen?"

She returned to her essays.

Hm. Not as interested. Emerging.

I hesitated. Ninety-nine percent sure I was looking at the woman Ben couldn't forget, I knew the strongest motivation she had to date him came from his connection to Jake. But that had not proven beneficial to her before. Why would she still be interested in him? I still hadn't figured out the Ben-Parks connection though I had tried all the possible sources, which meant I asked Hank Broadbent. But he had nothing. Could it be romantic? Could it be business? Maybe Ben worked as her realtor. And the image of Ginger as she stared at his car that day suggested an interest beyond curiosity. Did I want to go there? I did. "I think he might be the person behind the bomb threats."

"What?! Oh, Kassi. No!"

"I can't be sure. I've seen him in the area a lot, and my guess is he is doing it because of you."

"What?! That can't be."

Interested again.

"I'm only making an educated guess. But be careful. That's all." I can't believe I went there, but there's no going back now. Onward. "Take it as you will. And I also wanted to let you know I've sent my resumé out, and I have an interview tomorrow." I shifted topic quickly but counted on Ginger being Ginger.

"Kassi, that is news. You will be missed here." She wielded flattery like a weapon. "Where, um, where are you interviewing?" As she said it, she looked down at the paper and held her pen in her hand as though about to write a comment on the essay.

I verged on telling her everything when I noticed Ginger's left eyebrow raised in an upside-down U that quickly formed a V, and her upper teeth softly bit her lower lip. I recalled the *Suiseki* film. Since the time I heard the part about how the rocks took time to develop into their true character, I had wondered if the same applied to people. I observed, noted, waited, and observed once more. Over time I noticed that raised eyebrow trait, sure that it meant that her brain moved on one track while her mouth verbalized on another. The story behind *Suiseki*, rocks that reveal their true character as they

develop over time, reminded me that people did, too. The question: where did Ginger stand in that development?

"In the Felton District. It's about a half-hour from here." *Absolute Media* is in Felton, I told myself. I'm not lying. If Ginger fills in her own details, I have no control over that.

"Felton. Yes. Good luck, Kassie." She smiled then looked down at her papers, a signal of the end of the conversation for her.

"I almost forgot. I've been cleaning out files of books and handouts I don't want to take with me. It's good stuff, but I don't have any way to move all of it. If you'd like to look through it, you might find something you can use. Feel free to—"

"Oh. Thank you," Ginger cut me off. "But I have my own collection of materials. I don't know if I'd even have time to go through yours. Someone else, a new teacher, might put your things to use. Most of it would sit in the cabinet until I'm ready to leave, and then I'd have to throw it out. And if I took it home, Greg would complain that it took up space. But thanks for the thought."

Ginger's rebuff when I offered the material collected over my years of teaching didn't surprise me. I smiled, swallowed my pride, slid one foot behind the other to back out of the room, and savored the sweet and sour tastes of humility. When I reached the doorway, I raised my right hand in a limp wave and said, "Thanks. Good night."

As I continued the backwards exit, I almost stumbled over a piece of pink granite Ginger used for a door stop. *Suiseki*, I thought. Rocks are like people. When you think you're free and clear, one gets in your way. I kept myself from falling and laughing out loud, then sidestepped, turned, left Ginger, and headed down the hallway with a lighter step than I had on the way in. The talk had generated an upbeat feeling about the events soon to unfold.

I sought a quick exit after I spoke with Ginger. I hustled to gather books, papers, and bag and head out of the building with no further conversation. Hank Broadbent, though, had other plans for me.

“Hey, Kassi. How are you?” Hank stepped out of the classroom he had been working in.

“Hi, Hank. I’m good. I’m heading out. How are you?” I wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t talk with him.

“I’m good. I noticed you cleaned today. Are those books you left on the floor by the window for the trash?”

“Uh, no. Not yet anyway. I straightened things out a bit. Some of that may go to other teachers, Hank. Can you leave it for a while?” The files and books I had offered Ginger might be appreciated by someone else. I thought it best not to throw them away yet.

“No problem. Are you going somewhere?”

“We-e-ll, maybe. I know I can trust you, Hank. I have a meeting tomorrow that might lead to something else. Right now, it’s preliminary. And between you and me, okay?”

“Sure. My lips are sealed. Hey, with that one in charge I get it.” He pointed towards Parks’ office. “I’ll bet a lot of people are looking. Good luck to you.”

“Thanks.” I remembered that he knew about what went on in the school more than teachers did. “Hey, Hank. Has anything happened with the bomb threat investigation? Any idea who it was?”

“Ye-e-eah.” He squinted his eyes and wagged his index finger in the air. “Something’s gonna break soon.”

“Sounds like you know something. Care to share?” I hoped to get the scoop.

He moved closer to me, looked around to see if anyone else might be nearby, then lowered his voice. Only I could hear. “Word is that somebody

with a grudge against Parks did it. Maybe a former student. They're not sure. They're close to figuring it out. Maybe in a few days, maybe next week, we'll hear. That's if they don't want to protect somebody. You know how that is."

"Wow. Can't wait to hear that one," I said. "Is all hell gonna break loose?"

"Ya never know." Hank stretched out his arms with his palms up. "But we can hope."

"Thanks for the info. I'd love to hang around and talk more, but I have to go. It was good talking to you. Good night." I turned to leave, then spun back to say, "This conversation never happened. Right, Hank?"

"What conversation? Good night, Mrs. Stanton."

Before I reached the doors that led to the parking lot, I remembered that I needed to drop a report off in Parks' mailbox. As I entered the office, still with a springy step from the recent conversations, I found myself quietly singing *Better Days*, and the line "Tomorrow will bring better days your way" repeated in my brain. In fact, I suspected a neural symphony played in my head. Since I had decided to do something about Parks, executive functioning skills had sharpened.

Suddenly I interrupted the opus when I almost collided with Ginger who zoomed around the corner as I walked away from Parks' office door. To my slight surprise, she had finished her paper-grading and gotten out of her classroom fast enough to hightail it to the office.

"Whoa. Sorry, Ginger!"

"Kassi! You startled me!"

"I didn't mean to. I didn't realize anyone was still here."

"I'm on my way out. Good night, Kassi." Ginger hurried towards the door.

"Good night," I said, then almost walked into Lilith Chiarello as she came around the same corner.

"Kassi! Just the person I wanted to see." Lilith Chiarello called me over to her desk.

"Hi, Lil. What's up?"

Lil carried a bundle of paper towels saturated with a brown liquid.

"Yuck! What is that?"

"Soda spill. Thanks to your teammate there."

"What? I don't get it."

"Ginger. She brings Dr. Parks coffee or soda almost three times a week. And Dr. Parks spills at least one of them each week. Guess who gets to clean it up?"

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I laughed. At the same time, I filed that piece of information away mentally.

“Sorry, Lil. But why are you still here? It’s late.”

“I almost got out on time. Then Dr. Parks called me in. Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“No. I mean ...” She looked around to see if anyone could hear. “What new job?”

“Huh?” How did Lilith know?

“Dr. Parks asked me to get the Felton Schools Superintendent on the phone. Then she wanted your personnel file.”

“Really? Just now?”

“As soon as Ginger left, she called me in and told me to call him. She’s on the phone with him right now. You didn’t hear this from me.” Lilith lowered her voice. “They don’t seem to know who you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“When Parks told him she was calling about Kassi Stanton applying for a teaching position there, they had never heard of you. Do you think they lost your resumé?” Lilith’s whisper conveyed her concern I would not get an interview.

“Don’t worry. I know they didn’t lose my resumé,” I said to reassure Lilith.

“I’m glad of that. Not glad you’re looking.”

“I’m testing the waters, Lil. Maybe I need to refresh, try something new. You know how that is.”

“I certainly do.” Lilith turned towards Parks’ door and shook her head. “By the way, did you hear the news?”

“What?”

“The bomb threat? Parks thinks it’s someone with a grudge against a teacher. She told me that right before she asked me to call Felton. Crazy, huh?” She shook her head at the thought of a teacher being targeted.

Perfect. My calculations were one hundred percent accurate. Ginger took the bait herself, assumed the interview was for a teaching position, and shared it with Parks who already contacted Felton to try to derail the Kassi train. Ginger also bought my guess that Ben sent the bomb threats and gave that information to Parks who might notify the police to try to derail him.

I still didn’t get the motive. Did Ginger want to boost her own standing with Parks? Derail the Ben/Parks’ train? Punish Jake through Ben? It didn’t

matter. She confirmed my suspicions. But Ben as the terrorist seemed a long shot, and the Kassi train to Felton did not exist. At least not the one to Felton Schools.

Though it saddened me that my on-again, off-again friend probably had cozied up to the principal and fed her inside information about the E/LA team meetings, along with *BestofBurgers* soda and coffee, it also relieved me. Until now, I had questioned whether I should have arranged the Parks' set-up. I had wondered whether I had instigated the deep freeze between Ginger and me. Maybe I, Kassi Stanton, embodied the problem. But I was drained of any sense of interconnectedness with her professionally or personally. I shook my head in almost disbelief as I walked out of the office and a different line repeated. "Et tu, Brute?"

I committed fully to the plan. I dismissed any doubts and waited to hear from the actors. Their narratives buoyed my confidence.

When Renee, then Lee, then Nikki recounted their performances with Parks, I thanked each of them and crossed fingers that the plan's outcome would match its early success. I wove together the three individual stories and silently applauded the talents of my co-conspirators, especially their calmness and timing. It read like a novel without the plot twists. Yet.

On a warm Monday morning outside the main stage, in the school's parking lot, Lee sat for a few moments in his car. He inhaled and exhaled rhythmically to calm his nerves and closed his eyes to focus his mind on the task at hand. He visualized the scene and went over his dialogue in a deliberate fashion. He imagined the responses of his leading lady and his replies. As he continued breathing through it all, he relaxed and entered the region he aimed for, the acting zone. He pictured the final scene, the one when he shook hands, said goodbye, and made his exit. Ready, he opened his car door, got out, and headed for the entrance and Parks' office.

Already in with the principal, Renee laid the groundwork for Lee. "I know you wanted a daily e-mail report on Frankie Williams, and I've been doing that. But I wanted to touch base and talk with you about his progress, too," Renee said.

"Great. What's happening?" Parks face brightened at the mention of Frankie and progress.

"He's not doing his part, and it's going to be too little too late really quickly. Maybe we should look for another avenue for him to get to graduation."

Parks' face lost its glow. "Okay. Any ideas? Because it's not only your class. He's not doing much in his other classes where he needs the credits to graduate, either." Parks picked up the one paper on her desk and read from it.

“Health, Algebra II, Photo Studio, and English, all not making progress to complete work.”

“My suggestion is this.” Renee began to deliver her key lines. “And I honestly don’t know everything about this. There is a consulting group that helps athletes who have been recruited by colleges but are having difficulty completing their academic requirements. They say they help them to graduate.” She raised her voice half an octave and stretched her right hand out palm up. “I don’t know how on the up-and-up they are, but maybe it’s worth a try.”

“Really? I haven’t heard of that. But you know, if Frankie gets into that D-I school, it could be inspirational to the younger athletes.” Parks got a far-off look in her eye. “Make them see they can turn their athletic skills into a college education if they do the academic part, too.”

“Right.” Renee knew Parks wasn’t thinking of helping the younger athletes.

“Okay. Thank you, Renee. I have a meeting right now, but I will look into it and let you know.”

“Great. Have a good day!” Renee breathed a sigh of relief that she finished her part. As she left the office, she smiled at Lee who sat in the waiting area. He would soon get his cue.

Lilith Chiarello’s phone buzzed. She answered it, hung up, then told Lee that Parks would meet with him. She led him to the office, knocked gently, leaned her head in slightly, and introduced him. “Dr. Parks, this is Trent Farley from APSA.”

“Thanks, Lilith. Come in, Mr. Farley.”

“Hello, Dr. Parks. Thank you for meeting with me,” Lee/Trent said.

“Certainly. You’re offering help to our students. I’m always happy to meet to talk about that.” A touch of sweetness blended with Parks’ professional, business manner.

“Yes, I absolutely am here to offer help, specifically to your student athletes.”

“Okay. Tell me about it,” Parks said, as she entered information into her phone. “I’m taking notes as we talk, if that’s okay.”

“Absolutely. What I’m offering, what APSA, Academic Program For Student Athletes, is offering, is a way for your student-athletes who might not be on the right academic track to get on that track and meet the requirements for a college that may be interested in their athletic skills.”

“Really?” Parks sat straighter.

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“Yes. To be straightforward, some athletes are very good students and excel academically with higher GPAs than the non-athletes. Some, however, are not very good students. And this is for various reasons. We both know that.” He had chosen the words that would offer them common ground. “What APSA does is create a plan for those in that second group.”

“And how do you do that?”

He had Parks’ interest because Renee paved the way with the earlier conversation about Frankie. “It’s a process. First, we meet with the parties involved. The student and his or her teachers, counselor, coach, and, of course, parents. Next, depending on how far off-track the student is, we create a plan, provide tutors to work with the student, and keep track of the progress being made. Every situation is different. We give personal attention to each student to meet his or her needs.”

Parks’ fingers tapped continuously on the phone as Lee/Trent talked. When he stopped, she looked up, tilted her head slightly to the right, and sized him up. “How long does it take to bring a student up to speed?”

“As I said, every situation is different. But we guarantee, if the student does what our tutors suggest, he or she will meet graduation and college-acceptance requirements.” He spoke in a steady and strong voice, but his ability to look Parks directly in the eyes, something he had mastered and employed in every audition he had been on, set the tone for the conversation. “We guarantee it.”

“What do you want from my side? What does this cost?” Parks leaned forward.

“That’s the nice part for you.” He pointed animatedly at her to ramp up the interest. “We are a new company. You will find little about us if you research us. We have a website, of course, but you will find little else about us. We’re trying to build our brand, and we are looking for schools and athletes who would be willing to try us out at no dollar cost. We ask that you allow us to document what we do and give permission to use that documentation on our website for our company’s profile-raising with other student-athletes and schools.”

“So, you want to use us for publicity.”

“To put it bluntly, yes. No charge. Just permission to publicize.”

“This would require approval beyond me. School board approval.” Parks covered all her bases.

“Absolutely.”

Parks' eyes sharpened with each new piece of information, an indication that her mind raced. "How quickly could you start working with our students once it is approved?"

"Immediately."

"Say this was approved this week. Could you do anything for our current senior class?"

"Absolutely. As soon as you give me the go-ahead, I'll meet with whatever students you and your coaches indicate will need us. And we'll guarantee graduation this June for them."

According to the retelling by Lee, an avid online shopper, Parks put the package in her shopping cart. She must have viewed it as what she needed for Frankie Williams. Now she had to address the problem of getting approval quickly enough so she could buy APSA's package. The board would meet in two days. If she could get a proposal together and on the agenda as an emergency item, they could vote on it this week. Frankie would graduate, he would meet the D-I school's requirements, and she would have the proverbial feather in her cap, an athlete from her first Bantamville South High School graduating class accepted by a respected university and awarded a full athletic scholarship.

"Mr. Farley, thank you for coming in. I am going to meet with my team and put a proposal together for our board. Do you have some material to leave with me so we can include it in our request?"

"I don't have hard copies with me, but I can e-mail you the information. I also direct you to our website. However, I got a message while driving here that the webmaster is updating it to make it more user-friendly. It is currently unavailable. I'll e-mail you everything you need as soon as I get back to my office. Later this afternoon the website should be up, and you can get more." He was glad that Renee had thought of the web page down idea to give Nikki a chance to do her part.

"Great. You can e-mail me the info. The address is on my card." Parks handed one to him.

"Excellent," he said as he looked at the card. "Interesting. A cobra. Symbolic?"

"Not really. I think it's a beautiful creature in its own way. That's all."

"It truly is. And interesting. It preys on small mammals and lives in rock outcrops, visible yet invisible."

"Does it?"

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“Yes. And when it’s approached, its first instinct is to escape.”

“Kind of like people,” Parks said.

“Like some.” He smiled weakly. “Thank you, Dr. Parks, for giving me your time. I won’t take any more of it. Have a great day!” He stood, shook hands with her, and turned to leave when he noticed the purple cloth covered bird-cage. “What’s this? A budgie?”

He reached to lift the cloth, but she stopped him.

“Please don’t do that.”

“Asleep?” He stood motionless.

“In a way. He’s dead.”

“What!?”

“He was my pet parakeet, but he died, and I couldn’t bear to lose him. So, I had him stuffed.”

“Really?”

“I know it may sound eccentric. He spoke to me. Had quite a large vocabulary. But he only spoke to me.”

“You know, I’ve heard that some budgies sound like a speeded-up recording when they talk. People don’t even realize they’re talking because of that.” Lee/Trent admitted to himself he knew too much about parakeets.

“I keep the cloth over the cage most of the time. But sometimes I peek a look. It calms me.” Parks straightened the covering as she spoke.

“I understand, Dr. Parks. Very touching.” Lee/Trent searched for better words, then his briefcase, then the door. “Thank you, Dr. Parks. I’ll show myself out.” He made his way out of her office, down the hall, and out of the building.

Only when he sat in the driver’s seat and started his car did he let out his own huge sigh of relief that the curtain had dropped on his scene. “We’re gonna burn in hell for this,” he said to himself, then laughed. “Stanton, you are either crazy or a genius. But you’re never dull.” He knew that for sure. “Hope we don’t end up like that bird.”

When Nikki Mallon recounted her scene next, she said that Parks sat absorbed by her phone screen when she popped her head inside the door.

“Hi, Dr. Parks. Have a minute?”

“Hello, Nikki. Of course. Come in.”

“I was wondering if you have time to sit in on my class next period. We’re doing something I think you might find interesting. It involves the students

using that new app we talked about that you were thinking of buying. CoQuest. Can you make it?"

"Nikki, you know I want to see it. But I'm right in the middle of something that needs to be done right away. Are you doing it any other day?"

"Not for a few weeks. The tech cart is pretty busy. I really would like you to sit in, especially after the problem I spoke with you about with Mr. Laurent." The day before she had spoken with Parks about Laurent's evaluation of her and invited her to come into a class to see her performance for herself. It laid the groundwork for this request. "Please try to make it."

As if on cue, Dave Laurent walked into the office and interrupted. "Excuse me, Dr. Parks. I wanted to check. Are we still meeting after school today?"

"Yes." She continued looking at Nikki. Then her head bolted up as though a switch had been flicked and had caused it to move. "Dave, I need you to do something for me before that meeting. There's a company called APSA that I need some info on. Would you go online and see what you can get? I was about to do it, but I want to see Ms. Mallon's class, and I won't be able to do it before the meeting. I'd appreciate it. Here's the name." She handed Laurent a post-it note.

"No problem. I'll get this done, then I'll see you after school."

"Thanks, Dave." Then she looked at Nikki and smiled. "Okay. I'll be there next period."

"Great," Nikki said. Great, she hoped. She couldn't breathe her sigh of relief yet. Not until next period became last period.

On her way to her classroom to get ready for the class, Nikki stopped in my room and let me know Parks would be sitting in. "And you know, Kassi, you owe me. Only for you would I voluntarily invite her in to observe me teaching. Yes, you owe me, sister."

I smiled. So far, the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place.

An unusual calm saturated the main office on Wednesday morning. The check-in process flowed easily. No red slips filled the counter ready to ruin a teacher's day. Administrators were absent, and the three secretaries, Lilith, Claire Dunne, and Jennifer Bentz, casually sat and sipped coffee, each at her desk. They chatted across their computer monitors with Claire doing most of the talking.

"I typed it. That's all I did. As is," she said.

"That's what you have to do." Jennifer reached for a piece of muffin.

"I don't know if that's such a great idea," Lilith said.

"Why not? They don't pay me to write; they pay me to type," Claire said.

"But you could have told him it needed corrections," said Lilith, always the logical and safe one.

"I couldn't. He gave it to me and said he needed it right away, then he left the building. There was no chance to talk to him. He needs to learn how to proofread. In his position, he should know to do that."

I overheard the conversation, a skill I was developing quickly, and I guessed they were talking about something Laurent had given Claire to type. His writing skills left much to be desired, and he needed a good proofreader. In fact, he had given me some of his memos to go over. I usually had to make major corrections. He would have trouble passing the writing section of any standardized test. But I had to refuse when he gave me drafts of reports that had to be done asap so he could give them to Parks. He had become a major procrastinator, and I could not do his proofreading at a moment's notice. I understood Claire's attitude. He must have taken advantage of her, too.

As I emptied my mailbox of a stack of mail, I wondered what the memo said. I hoped it went out to the staff for the humor alone.

"He needed it for his meeting with Dr. Parks right after school. He should have given it to me sooner, but he didn't have it done." Claire finished her

last sip of coffee and turned to her computer monitor. “He’ll have to go with it.”

Hmm, I thought. A meeting. Wonder if it had anything to do with APSA?

Throughout the day, I forced myself to focus on work with sporadic success. Two items filled my mental agenda. If the plan worked, at tonight’s school board meeting the great Dr. Parks would lose some power. Many ifs surrounded that one. The other item, the job offer I had received from *Absolute Media*, had few. They wanted me. I could finish the school year, take a couple weeks off, and start a new career in mid-July. Charles Hager said my teaching background and film production knowledge sparked their interest in me. I would be their go-to person to develop programs in their new instructional video department. Fortuitously, Hager knew Melanie Riley, one of the people I had listed as a reference. She advised me in the TV and Film production program in college, and we remained friends through the years. I had worked with her on a few documentaries in the summers before the *Wet Zone* job came along. Melanie had given a positive reference. They respected each other and their work, and Hager said he valued the recommendation.

I would put together educational video packages they hoped to sell to school districts. My resumé impressed him, as did the interview, and he offered me the job on-the-spot. He showed me around the offices and studio, introduced me to some of the people I would work with, then asked me to think about it and let his assistant know before the end of the week.

I wanted this. It would give me a chance to be creative in video production and still have a connection to teaching. I had decided to take it after I talked with Zach, and he said he was on board. I would let *Absolute Media* know by Thursday, not seeming too hungry, but still showing interest.

If I could see the board sour on Parks, it would be a perfect week. Renee and I did not want to miss the outcome of the Wednesday meeting, but we couldn’t attend. If things went as we hoped, we didn’t want to be anywhere near the board offices. We decided to go out to dinner at *Café Castaway*, a seafood restaurant in Felton. We were not totally cut off from the board meeting, though, as we got text messages from a friend, a regular at the shows.

Midway through our entrees, the first text came.

Parks and Dave here. all board mems too.

That surprised me. Parks made Laurent attend.

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regular stuff over. new biz. ASPA on agenda.

Good news for us. Parks had managed to get everything in place to make the deadline.

“Wait,” Renee said. “ASPA? The company is named APSA, isn’t it?”

I paused, then said, “Yeah. Academic Program for Student Athletes.”

I texted back to the friend at the meeting. *ASPA? Or APSA?*

ASPA is what it says.

“Interesting,” I said matter-of-factly.

While I texted, Renee googled ASPA. “It sure is. Look.” She handed her phone to me so I could see the story.

“Hm. Very interesting.” I glanced at the screen for two seconds.

“Hm. This will be interesting. I wish we were there,” Renee said.

No texts came for about fifteen minutes. It would take a while to get through everything, and Parks’ last-minute item had to be at the bottom of the list. Renee and I had finished our entrees by the time the next text came.

Parks presented. Board mems have questions. discussion going on. Parks answering.

board likes idea.

looks like public discussion is over.

Board going to private session.

Will return in 30.

Dave left. Parks on her own.

We checked out the dessert menu and made our choices. I couldn’t resist the cheesecake. Renee settled on red velvet cake after she had considered chocolate mayonnaise cake, the triple chocolate buttermilk pound cake, or a bowl of plum ice cream. The dishes had arrived at our table when the texts resumed coming fast and furious.

Zacherson is one most interested.

Parks says we have to decide now to help current class.

lawyer says emergency vote could happen.

Delporter keeps checking phone.

Whitley asks lawyer how to do emerg vote.

lawyer looking it up.

Henry says she needs time to research.

Parks says check website.

DelPorter finally off phone. says she remembers company being in news. checked it. wants to know why Parks wants to deal with company being investigated by CRP. Yikes! Is that Collegiate Review Partnership?

Parks says must be mistake. board hired her for her expertise and results in improving school rank. they need to trust her decision-making or they will have to answer to taxpayers.

DelPorter reads from internet.

Parks insists it's wrong. says she's offended they don't trust her decision. asks for time to correct. board says no vote.

I did not need my friend to explain anything further. I filled in Renee on my interpretation of what happened. When Parks gave Laurent the job to research the company, he procrastinated. Most likely, he didn't read his notes or input the company's acronym carefully. Thus, APSA became ASPA. That one letter difference took him to the web page of Academic Success Plan for Athletes, a firm under investigation by the national evaluation board of the Collegiate Review Partnership. The bad news for Laurent was that no mention of the inquiry was on the website.

When I concocted the plan, I had hoped the board would simply vote against it because the company wanted to use students for publicity. They had always shot down any programs that did that for fear parents or taxpayers would accuse them of prostituting the students. Even when local companies wanted to pay to put a sign on the outfield fences at the baseball field, something many districts did to add to their coffers, this board said no. I had hoped that when Parks suggested it, it would start to build a case against her as principal, block-by-block, and put her on shaky ground with them when they considered renewing her contract. I could not control the mix-up created when Laurent researched the wrong company, but I put faith in his carelessness to add to Parks' gaffe. He came through.

"Exactly what I had hoped would happen." I looked at Renee and nodded.

"What? You knew?"

"You know how crazy my family is about sports. I heard a news report about it during one of the games they were watching. I checked it out, thought it might work, and created the fake company's name to be close. That's why we had to get Parks to delegate the job to Laurent, why Nikki had to invite her into her class right after Lee finished his meeting. I know Del-Porter's family background. They're as into sports as mine. If nothing else, the

name would've rung a bell with her, and I know she researches everything with her smartphone always by her side."

I realized Renee did not yet get the connection.

"Remember *The Odyssey*? How did Odysseus trick Polyphemus when he asked who he was?"

"Uh-h-h. Wait. Don't tell me. I know this one." Renee searched her memory files. "Nobody. He told him his name was Nobody. When Polyphemus asked the other Cyclopes for help, they asked him who was bothering him, and he said Nobody. They laughed at him."

"Now you get it. Polyphemus had the wrong name for Odysseus, so he didn't get any support from the other giants."

"Laurent got the name wrong, and Parks' couldn't get the board's support."

"It's all in the name, girl. It's all in the name."

"Wow."

"Ah-h-h-h literature. How you mirror life."

"You know too much, Stanton. But what if it didn't work out that way. What if Laurent didn't procrastinate, didn't do that careless search?"

"Really? Is that really a serious what if?"

"Sorry. Moment of weakness." Renee closed her eyes and tilted her head down.

"You're allowed," I said.

"But Parks. How did you know she would go for it?"

"That was a leap of faith. When I saw Jerry Goldman dressed like his mother to try to get his phone back, something clicked in my head, something about *The Emperor's New Suit* tale. I kinda thought we had an empress with lots of pride that might get in the way of the facts."

"And the board thinks she's the expert. Admitting a mistake and gracefully bowing out would not be on her agenda. I get it now." The proverbial light bulb lit in Renee's brain.

"Hubris can kill you!" I looked at the phone to read another text.

board not happy with Parks.

I saw all I needed to see. My work had ended. Our empress's clothes began to disappear, and the school board watched the parade.

"That was a delicious meal," I said as I looked at the check. "And it's my treat."

"No. You have already treated me enough," Renee said. "Divide it."

“Like divide and conquer?”

“Exactly.”

When we finished the math and were about to leave, we spotted Ginger at an out-of-the-way table in a dim corner of the room. Though we had a view of her, she couldn't see us. We looked at each other, paused, then shook our heads. Neither of us, it seemed, wanted to change the night's happy tone by going over to say hello. Then a tall, lean, athletically-developed man—perfectly groomed from coiffed black hair to tailored suit and bright white shirt to designer shoes—walked towards her table. Despite the dim lighting, I saw something familiar about him. When he reached Ginger, he smiled, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled up at him and returned the kiss, not to his cheek but to his mouth. We couldn't take eyes off the couple.

“That's ...” I hesitated.

“Ginger. Yeah. And a guy she seems to know very well.” Renee stated the obvious.

“The guy. It's hard to see him. It's too dark. But something's I feel like I know him.” I paused, blinked a few times, and darted my eyes from side to side to get a clearer view.

“Kassi! Can you see? It's ...”

“May I take this?” The waiter's voice shook us from our voyeurism.

“Yes. Thank you,” I said. “It's all for you.”

“Thank you, ma'am.”

“What a night!” Renee blurted out.

“Who is it?” That high-pitched voice took over again.

“I don't believe it! Amazing!”

“Who is ...” My eyes finally adjusted to the dark. Recognition set in. “You're kidding me!”

The waiter watched us for a few seconds, then smiled. “I hope you enjoyed your evening.”

It had been a mixture.

We decided we should get out of there and go to the serenity of our respective homes. We quietly left the restaurant with mixed feelings of relief that the Parks' plan had worked, shock at the way Ginger was being Ginger, and wonderment at how quickly Dave Laurent found his way to the restaurant.

The gossip at school the next day centered on Parks, Laurent, and APSA or ASPA. In less than twelve hours, the story blossomed. The principal could be described as any of the following, according to the rumor mill: helpful, criticized, appreciated, demonized, promoted, vilified, rehired, fired. The truth sat not far from the conjecture.

Based on the mistaken identity caused when Laurent googled the wrong name and micromanaging left her too busy to check it, the board did not even reach the point of taking a vote on Parks' proposal to hire the company to help athletes succeed academically. The superintendent mildly reprimanded her, by order of the board, for proposing the idea without doing due diligence in researching it. Parks more severely reprimanded Laurent for his inaccurate findings and his incompetence in writing the report on the company. Laurent tried to reprimand Claire Dunne but had no grounds to do so. As she said, they paid her to type, not to write, and the secretaries' union would support her if he put anything in her file about the incident. Both Parks and Laurent, however, would have a formal report placed in their personnel files.

The plan worked, thanks to events that serendipitously fell into place. Laurent switched the letters of the acronym, Claire concluded she should do only what the district paid her to do, Parks rushed the idea through in hopes of scoring points for her own promotion, and DelPorter had a good memory.

That morning as I walked down the main hallway headed towards the E/LA office, Hank Broadbent jimmied a crowbar to open an unwilling locker for a student. With one pull the door opened, and the student grabbed her book in time to get to her first period class but not before she thanked Hank. "Awesome, Mr. B. You're the best. Thanks."

"No problem. Go on to class. I'll see if I can fix the lock. If not, I'll let the main office know. If it won't open later, check with them."

"Perfect," she said and rushed off to class.

“Do that often, Hank?” I joined him at the locker.

“At least once a day. The contract for these lockers went to the lowest bidder and, boy, is it paying off.” He raised his hands palms up and shrugged his shoulders. “It keeps me working. How are you, Kassi?”

“Good. After the board meeting, very good.”

“Ah, yes. The big guy took it on the chin, eh?” He still referred to Dr. Parks as the big guy despite working for her for nine months.

“Maybe things are turning for us,” I said.

“Maybe. Hey, did you hear the other news? They got the bomb threat guy. There should be some sort of announcement soon,” Hank said as he continued to work on the locker.

“Really? Any idea who?”

“No. No leads there. They’re keeping it quiet. This is Bantamville.”

“Right. Keep me posted, Hank. I have to get some work done. See you.”

“Take care, Kassi.”

I treated myself to fresh air during lunch. I headed over to the driving range to hit a small basket, then stopped at *BestofBurgers* for a cup of coffee. While I sat and sipped a drink, I saw two familiar young men come in and stand in line to order. I recognized them as the guys whose conversation I eavesdropped on a few months ago. As I recalled, Parks had denied them walking in the graduation ceremony at her previous school. One had gotten over it and earned his GED. The other still held a grudge and sounded threatening. I wondered if Berger-man had a connection to the bomb threats. Like Montresor in *Cask of Amontillado*, he wanted vengeance and nothing Lingo said could talk him out of it before. It seemed I would now find out more since they headed towards a table across from me in hearing distance.

“How’s everything, Berger-man?”

“It sucks, man.”

“What?”

“Parks again. I’m in deeper.” He rubbed his forehead as though his head ached.

“No. Man, I told you to let it drop. Why didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t. Then my mom got involved. I had to stick with it.”

“Scott, what did you do, exactly?”

“I ...” Scott emphasized the I. “I gathered some photos and info off the internet and created, sort of, a web page dedicated to her.”

“Like, how?”

“You know how we used to make captions for pictures of kids at school? Funny stuff, nasty stuff, never nice stuff?”

“Yeah. We photo shopped. Just kept them for us.”

“I took the next step. I did it on a web page.”

As I listened, Scott detailed what he had done. Over the course of eight or nine months, he had collected photos of Parks from online, created a web page with a made-up username and made-up everything else, and posted very unflattering photos along with sometimes disgusting but always critical captions, all about Parks. He thought it would be foolproof. But the police showed up at his door a few days ago, and big-time legal trouble faced him now.

“Dude. You’re smarter than that. Least I thought you were.” Lingo fidgeted in his seat as though his disbelief shot through his body.

“I was almost out. Then my mom told me that she was doing something that was way worse. I couldn’t let her do everything.”

“What did your mom do?”

“I can’t tell you. If I do, you could get in a mess, too. It’s explosive stuff. Know what I mean?” Scott’s concern for his friend impressed me.

“Yeah, dude. I don’t need that.”

I continued to listen in and learned that Scott lived in a house that was up for sale. He suspected that, while showing the house to a prospective customer, a real estate agent had seen what he had on his computer.

Lingo went to order another burger, interrupting the conversation. I wondered about the agent, but that ended quickly when he returned.

“Berger-man, do you know anything about the agent? Like his name?”

“Yeah. His name is Ben. He’s a nice guy. I don’t have any grudge against him. It’s the way things worked out.” He sipped on his soda.

I was amazed as I processed the information. What did Berger-man’s mother do to Parks? In the conversation I heard when I saw Scott and his mother at the driving range, she said something about a plan, how things worked out according to it the previous month, how she had access to some technology that made things easier, and she would be in the high school next. The mother-son caring impressed me. Now I wondered whether that woman’s plan had anything to do with Parks, and if it could be dangerous. I recalled Scott said, “Watch yourself. If they find out ...” Who were they and what would they find out? Did the mother help Scott create the web page

with the hope things would blow up in Parks' face? Was she like Odysseus' mother, Anticlea, who couldn't live without her son, and resented what Parks did to him? She thought she had a foolproof plan, but she didn't care what happened to her if it didn't work. Explosive stuff? Were they connected to the bomb threats? I had to get back to talk with Hank Broadbent. Maybe he had heard more about the investigation. As much as I wanted to stay and listen, I finished my coffee and started to gather food wrappers for the trash so I could rush out the door to get back to school when I heard Scott say something which slowed me down.

"Lingo, something happened last night to Parks. She screwed up at a school board meeting, and she doesn't look that great to them now. I'm done with it. Whatever happens with the charges, I'm done going after Parks. And I'm tellin' my mom to stop, too. All I want to do is get my GED and move on with my life."

My heart slowed. A minute before I thought I had solved the bomb threat mystery. It had to be Scott and his mom. But when I heard Scott's about-face, I felt like I did when a student who had been a troublemaker and do-nothing all year finally came around. He was an adult-sized kid. One part of me knew the right thing to do, but the other wanted to let Parks dangle. Did it leave the school in real danger? I wrestled with the dilemma. Turn them in or not?

Only a few minutes passed before I answered that question. The uncertainty left too much at stake. The threat might become real. I had a responsibility to notify the authorities before harm came to anyone. I would tell Parks.

But when I returned to school, Parks had left the building for the day. I could have told one of the vice-principals about Scott and his mom. But then, against better judgment, I decided to wait and tell Parks since the desire for revenge targeted her. The principal would return the next day. I cleared my schedule for that afternoon. I hoped all would remain quiet until then.

Before meeting with Parks about Scott and his mother, I headed across the street to take care of another piece of unfinished business of the good kind.

During the bomb scares when the students evacuated to the church, the priest allowed us to use the building as a shelter, and I needed to see him and thank him for his help. Based on experiences during my time employed at the Bantamville School District, I surmised that no one else reached out to him with their gratitude. Father Jim's kindness when he opened his church and showed a friendly attitude probably had been forgotten about ten minutes after the all-clear to bring the kids back to the school. I wanted to make sure he received our thanks and would not be overlooked when he went out of his way and made us comfortable.

I called and asked to meet with him. When lunch period came, rather than to the driving range, the chapel of golf, I went to the *Prince of Peace* Church to give him a gift to say thank you.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the rectory, that familiar indigo blue sportster sat there. In a weird, backwards way, it gave me a sense that all was right with the world.

I rang the bell, told the secretary my name, and took a seat in the waiting area. I picked up a Catholic newspaper from the table and scanned it. The front page showed a collage of photos from the previous weekend when sixteen men were ordained new priests for the diocese. One headline stated, *Amid Challenges Facing Diocese, Newly Ordained Priests Symbolize Hope*. As I read the story, I experienced a sense of optimism, too. As a sometimes-practicing Catholic, I grasped the seriousness of the priest shortage, so the news encouraged me. Inside the newspaper, individual stories profiled each of the men. Eight of them were middle-aged, three of those widowers with adult children. The Church had changed much over the years and now employed

strategies that welcomed older men to become priests. Maybe women would be next.

The profiles absorbed me until a familiar voice greeted me. "Hello, Kassi."

I looked up from the newspaper to see a smiling Ben Worthen as he stood at the edge of the room. "Hello, Ben."

The moment bordered on awkward. We hadn't seen each other face-to-face in a few years, back to Jake's teaching days. Even then, we weren't great friends.

"How are you? It's been a long time." He seemed friendlier than I remembered him to be.

"I'm good, Ben. And you?"

"Well. Very well. Thanks."

"You look happy."

"I wish I had time to stay and talk, but I have to get to an appointment. A house closing."

"I heard you were in real estate. I guess it keeps you moving. Nice to see you, too, Ben. Take care." I ended the conversation when I realized that he had already stepped halfway out the door.

"You, too. Bye." Ben pulled the door closed.

As I watched him through the window, I remembered Oscar Servis' story about how hard he had taken the breakup with that one special woman. What I saw didn't seem to match the horror stories. Nice, I thought. Ben was healing. Maybe good could come out of the hurt.

"Why, hello, Kassi!" This time the warm, cheerful voice of Father Jim greeted me.

"Hello, Father," I said. "Thank you for finding time to see me."

"You're quite welcome. I can always find time for a friend."

I sensed he meant it. He thought of me as a friend, even after meeting me only twice. Gee, if every friendship could be that easy, and if every friend could be this welcoming, no one would need Facebook.

"I'll only take a few minutes, Father," I said as he led me into his office.

"I have plenty of time. What can I do for you?"

"It's what I can do for you. You were so nice and welcoming to us during the bomb scares and evacuations that I wanted to thank you. And I wanted you to have something to remember us by, as if you wouldn't remember the rowdy group that invaded your church."

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"I wouldn't call them rowdy. Well, maybe I would. But they're kids. No harm," he said.

"Thank you. It's not much." I handed him a package in yellow tissue paper tied with a blue ribbon. "But it is heartfelt."

"Very nice package. May I open it?"

"Of course. I want to see your reaction," I said.

He paused as though he didn't want to ruin the wrapping, then peaked at me out of the corner of his eye. I expected he would gently untie the blue ribbon, but Father Jim tore into the tissue paper, slowed only by the taped ends which he ripped clumsily. He looked at me and offered an explanation. "I'm not very neat when it comes to unwrapping gifts," he said. "With six brothers and sisters, I had to be fast."

"Go for it, Father. I'm glad to see you so enthusiastic."

He examined the present. "A book. Very appropriate coming from an English teacher," he said.

"I hope you like it. It's a favorite of mine. I've taught it every year since I started teaching, and I find something new in it each time."

"I love it," he said. "Dickens is one of my favorites."

"Have you read this one?"

"Yes. In fact, in high school."

"Do you have a favorite character that you remember?"

"Of course. Recently, I have been drawn more and more to Miss Havisham."

"Really? Why?" The choice intrigued me.

"She couldn't accept rejection, couldn't let go, and it ruined her life. I have counseled many scorned lovers. In fact, I'm working with someone now. It's sad what we do to people we once loved."

I thought of the men I had dated and the tough time I had as I tried to get over some of them. "I guess we all love to different degrees. That's the problem. It's not easy to find that balance of someone who loves you as much as you love him."

"Yes, it's sad. It's those who love the deepest that hurt the deepest. They have the toughest time letting go and moving on. The young man I'm counseling has had a hard time doing that." Father Jim's voice drifted as though he pictured his counselee. "He was making progress in mindfully refocusing whenever he thought of her. Then the woman asked him to meet her so they could talk. She suggested they revive the romance. He was tempted and

struggled. To be back with her was what he wanted every day since the breakup. But ultimately, he refused.”

“So, he has healed?”

“Yes. Enough that he knows he couldn’t go through the hurt again. Not enough, though, that he still doesn’t feel the pain of missing her.”

“Father, you must have some heart-wrenching stories stockpiled in your brain from your counseling. I guess there’s a fine line between love and hurt.”

“The human heart, you know. We take a chance when we give it to someone. We can’t be sure they will take care of it.”

Hmm. That sounds familiar.

I smiled, then changed the subject without really changing it. “I ran into Ben Worthen as I was coming in. I know he’s in real estate. Are you planning on selling the church?”

At the mention of Ben’s name, his eyes widened, and his head tilted to the side. “Yes, Ben,” he said. “I know him from a while back. Years ago, before I became a pastoral associate in a diocese, I taught at the seminary in Harris-town. He was a student of mine.”

“Really? He was studying to be a priest?”

“Yes, briefly. He entered after high school. He decided it wasn’t for him after about two years. It happens,” he said. “It’s a tough decision, and one that gets revisited every once in a while.” When he finished, he gazed at me as though he tried to figure something out about me.

I sensed Father Jim’s mindset and tried to put his uncertainty to rest. “I only know Ben through someone else I worked with. And not intimately. I guess we all have our surprises.”

“He’s a good man. He’s finding his way,” he said, then paged through the copy of *Great Expectations*. “Ben is one of those guys who feels deeply.”

When he said that, I recognized that Father Jim had done more than reminisce with Ben. I thought of the several times I had seen Ben’s car parked at the rectory. Father Jim was helping Ben to heal. My trust in him as a counselor made me believe that. And Ben, in all likelihood, worked as Rikki Parks’ real estate agent. Anything more than that between them didn’t matter. That left one question. Who was the woman he couldn’t let go? I’m ninety-nine-point nine percent sure. But he’s healing, I thought. It doesn’t matter, not even a tenth of a percent. In an uncharacteristic moment, I left it at that.

I checked my watch and realized I needed to get back to school, but I still had one more question for the priest. “Father, do you have time to talk with

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me another day? I am struggling with an issue, and I could use your advice.” Sometimes Catholic me thought I might get rid of the modifier.

“Of course. Let’s set something up.”

I left feeling much better about Ben and myself.

When I returned to the school, I saw Hank Broadbent as he sat with the other custodians taking a break. He waved me over.

“I heard some news about what we talked about earlier,” he said. He rose from his chair and motioned me to walk with him. “The bomb threats. The police have charged a woman who worked in the technology department. She used the district tech info and passwords to send the threats and must have left the written notes when she was at a school fixing the computers. At first, they couldn’t trace it, but eventually they did.”

“Wow. An inside job. At least Kinpal’s off the hook.” I breathed a sigh of relief. “And a woman. Do you know her name?”

“Only her last name. Berger. Word is Parks pressed charges against her son for photos he posted of her. I don’t know those details. Must be a connection though.”

My heart sank. For some reason, I hoped to be wrong. I wondered if Scott could handle another setback.

Hank continued. “She must be new. Nobody recognizes it or heard it before.”

“Thanks, Hank. Sad. But case closed, right?”

“Sort of, but not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Parks figured it out.”

“What?!” I stopped and stared at him.

“Yeah. Word is, first she told the police she had information that it was somebody with a grudge against a teacher. An unhappy ex-boyfriend. That didn’t pan out. She must have been so desperate to make herself look good that she probably watched every security camera video from the days before Kinpal found the note in her classroom.”

“That had to take hours. I thought there was no clear shot of the doorway to the room.” I repeated what Parks told me in one of the meetings after the threat.

“That’s what they told everybody. But apparently, they kept it quiet in case it was someone in the building. They really thought it was Kinpal, right?”

“Yes. At least they thought she knew more than she was saying.” My mind raced, and I wondered what it meant for Parks.

Hank provided the answer. “Her timing was excellent. Things didn’t look good for her after the board meeting fiasco. Lucky for her she figured things out and gave the info to the police so they could wrap it up today. The board president just left. Word is he told her he’s going to write a commendation for her. Maybe a raise, huh?”

“Yikes. Not the way it’s supposed to go, Hank.” I leaned against the fence that surrounded the soccer field.

“Sorry, Kassie.”

“Yikes.” I said no more.

CONCLUDE

On a Saturday afternoon, before school ended for the summer, Zach and I joined Renee, Nikki, and Nikki's fiancé on a trip to New York City to meet Lee and his wife for dinner. It was a chance to decompress and talk over the turn of events.

The twist and Parks' ability to solve the bomb threat mystery calmed the perfect storm of events my accomplices and I had created to make the board question the principal's competence. Now I admitted I had been bested and accepted that Parks would stay at BSHS for a while.

"You tried. It was a valiant effort," Lee's wife, Audrey, said.

"I thought I had the answer. *The Odyssey. The Emperor's New Suit.*" My wobbly voice echoed my emotions. "I thought classic literature would solve our problem."

"It almost did," Renee said.

"No. It DID solve our problem." The wobble steadied. "But we didn't go far enough. We didn't take the Montresor and *Cask of Amontillado* lesson seriously enough."

"You mean vengeance?"

"Yes. The revenge motive is too strong. If that kid and his mom weren't in the picture, we had Parks. Darn. We took a battle. She won the war."

"Still, she's a bully, and we have to stand up to bullies," Renee said.

"I'm glad it's over. At least maybe the board won't give her free reign to do whatever she wants. They might keep an eye on her and question things she proposes, and that's a victory," I said.

"Maybe."

"We know she plays with the truth, too. I don't think any of us told her Kinpal knew who wrote the note. It played into my distrust of Ginger, but I think Parks was bluffing. At least we know what she's capable of, what we're dealing with."

“Always look on the bright side, Kassi.” Renee reminded me of her old habit. “Here’s another victory. Frankie graduated. Barely. And he’s on his way to D-I.”

“Maybe it will be good for him. He has the potential and might be forced to put some effort into his academics. Stranger things have happened.”

“I’m happy for him, despite the wrinkles he put on my face. Anyway. Parks has that feather in her hat. It’s going to be tough. We’ll still have to work for her,” Renee said. “Or Nikki and I will. You lucky thing, Kassi. You’ll be off in *Absolute Media* land.”

I paused and looked at Zach who shook his head and smiled. Then I turned back to Renee. “Not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t take that job. I’m staying.” I brought both hands to my face in an attempt to cover my smile.

“Are you sure?”

“I am. Even with all the bs at BS High I can’t walk away. I’m a teacher. And I think I belong at Bantamville. At the least, I can be a literature reference for issues that come up. The Last English Major!”

“I like it.” Renee smiled at the idea. “Kinda like a superhero. I even have a name for you. Your middle name is Isabel, right?”

“Yes. My mother’s choice. She had to give me a Polish first name, so Kassia worked. But she added her favorite—Isabel—to it. My mother called me Bel when it was just the two of us. Confusing at times, but it was our little pet thing.”

“Then how’s this? The CanonBel!”

Everyone at the table laughed, but I gazed at a mental picture as though inspired.

“What was that Japanese rock thing you told me about?” Renee recalled the story I had told her months ago.

“Suiseki.”

“Exactly. That’s you, Kassi slash Bel.”

“How?”

“The more you are beaten by wind, rain, snow, and Parks, the better you’ll get.”

“I’m not sure about that.” I laughed at the comparison. “But you’re right about us facing another difficult year with Parks. Before I left Friday, she let me know that.”

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“What do you mean?”

“She stopped me at the door on my way out. She said I was on her radar. That’s all.”

“That’s a threat, isn’t it?”

“Only the two of us were there. My word against hers? Not a fair fight ... for me.”

“Maybe we can get that mom and her son to help us.” Nikki referred facetiously to Scott Berger and his mother’s attempts to get back at Parks.

“Uh, no. Let’s stay legal,” I said. “Crime is too stressful.”

“Hey, what happened to them?” Zach hadn’t heard the outcome.

“Evidence was kind of flimsy, at least for a conviction. The surveillance cameras only showed her going into the room. They saw no evidence of a note. The prosecutor suggested and the board agreed not to press charges against the mom.” I paused. “They fired her. And Parks wanted no more negative publicity about her past, so she’s not pressing charges. I heard the kid is going back to live in Crayton with his parents and finish at adult school. I’m okay with that. Parks was a bitch to him.”

The consensus at the dinner table matched that conclusion. We had dealt with Parks and knew we had to fight fire with a controlled burn.

Right before dessert, the group started to break up. Nikki and her fiancé held tickets for a show, so they said their goodbyes. Lee had a performance to get to, and he and Audrey also stood to leave. He hugged me and whispered, “Always smile for the birdie.”

“You know how I feel about that parakeet, Lee. It’s next on the hit list.”

“Too late.”

“I know. But it’s stuffed body creeps me out worse than a live one.”

“You keep it interesting, Kassi.” He hugged me once more and made his exit.

Left with Zach and Renee, I watched as the two of them scanned the desert menu. Then my epiphany happened. On my mental to-do list, one item still unchecked would be difficult to cross off.

For two weeks, I struggled to figure out what went wrong in my relationship with Ginger. And as I projected into September when I would work with her again, I blamed myself and realized I had expected and wanted too much. After all, I thought, the world doesn’t revolve around me. My Catholic conscience needed to be unburdened. I didn’t want to wait.

For Zach and Renee, now was the time to order dessert. After they read the menu, looked at the pictures, and discussed the pros and cons of Key Lime Pie and Strawberry Shortcake, they compromised and ordered both, and agreed to share. I opted for Mint Chip Ice Cream Pie, a go-to favorite that made dessert decisions easy.

For me, now was the time to ease the guilt. While we waited for the deserts to get to our table, I asked Zach and Renee what they thought. I felt I needed to apologize to Ginger to soothe my Christian, can't-stand-that-guilt-feeling. Would a text be okay?

"Go for it," Zach said. "It's as good as face-to-face today."

"Is it too impersonal?"

"Who cares?" Renee waved the thought away.

"I do," I said.

"Why? She hasn't exactly been a good friend. Not if what you told us is true. She put her own good ahead of anything else."

"Hey. Aren't you the one who said that was Ginger being Ginger?"

"Okay. Guilty." Renee whispered the words. "But that ver-r-r-y friendly restaurant meeting we saw, if that was Ginger being Ginger, I'm done with her."

"Ginger is family. Work family. Maybe she's worth one last try." That better version of myself stepped up. "Maybe I love her more than she's capable of accepting. But that doesn't change the feeling. I can't act like the relationship, whatever it was, never existed."

But Renee provided the reality check. "Relationships sometimes don't work, and you have to accept and walk away."

"Hm." I paused.

Renee added her final thought. "You know what I think? Maybe it's time for Kassi to be Kassi."

I hesitated.

An incident thirty-five years ago came to mind when Maggie had mocked a poem of mine that had been published in the school's literary magazine. I had worked for weeks to get it right. Thrilled that I finally succeeded, I celebrated being recognized for my talent. When Maggie ridiculed me for writing it, I felt betrayed and swore I would never speak to her. I could not forget the slight. Then I came across a Jane Austen quote that reshaped my idea of Maggie. Austen wrote, "Selfishness must always be forgiven, you know, because there is no hope for a cure." I framed a copy of the poem along with the quote

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and kept it in sight on my desk. From then on, whenever Maggie's slights encroached on my accomplishments, or when someone else's self-absorption caused me pain, or when I recognized my own egotism, I remembered the line. It guided me in that on-going mission to be the best version of myself—despite my natural inclination not to be. Austen inspired me.

I reached for the phone and texted *Can we meet to talk? I want to apologize.*

SEND.

The next Monday morning, the last day at school for teachers before summer break, I cleaned my classroom. I sorted through files, then tackled the mess on my desk. When I had stored what could be used the following year, only my cell phone remained. I wiped off the dust from it that had been kicked up when I emptied the shelves. No messages or calls.

As I sat down, I noticed a yellow paper attached to the bottom of my sandal. The familiar handwriting reminded me it had been on a book Ginger gave me last Christmas, one I kept as a reminder of my friend. I guessed it fell out when I packed items away for the summer. It weathered the heat and the cold of the school for six months, and now it stuck to my shoe, but barely. When I shook my foot, it fell off more easily than I expected. Guess it's time for Kassi to be Kassi, I thought.

With tears in my eyes, I gathered the few folders still on the desk and noticed one with red dots, the one I carried last September when Richard's soda can exploded. I opened it and found the copy of my YIPE, the one in which Parks scored me extremely competent. Ah change, I thought.

September promised its own excitement.

But now I thought of summer vacation and the doughnut I planned to get on my way home. It would satisfy a need for some sweetness in my day. And like the jelly inside that doughnut oozed through the hole, teaching ran through my blood.

Canon Bel would endure.

Emerging.

Literature Mirrors Life

For further reading, works referenced in the novel are listed below.

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Finally

A special thanks to you, the reader.

For me, publishing a book was a leap of faith I finally took
after years and years and years.

Thank you for taking your own leap of faith and reading this work
of fiction, my first novel.

This book was created and published by an independent author.
Thank you for your support and patience as I work toward publishing
perfection.

If you enjoyed this book, recommend it to a friend or family member.
Keep America writing and reading!

“Reading one book is like eating one potato chip.” - Diane Duane

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