

Bashed

by

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For all the slandered teachers

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Chapter 1

Jean Kosciuszko stood waiting outside her door, monitoring the hall as all teachers were expected to do during the four minutes of passing time between classes. It was the last period of the day on the last day before a two week Christmas break, and the hall was empty and quiet. No other teachers stood on duty, but that was not unusual.

The silence suggested that the whole school might already be empty of students. Even on normal days, eighth period seemed to exist to be cut, but the halls would still be full of kids at their lockers or on the roam, looking for trouble. Today the absence of a single sound was almost eerie. Jean wondered if the other teachers were even around, or if they'd found some way to leave early. Since the school had stopped using signatures for attendance, she'd often noticed some teachers running more than one ID card through the machine that took attendance. Since she didn't join the cliques that went drinking after school or partied on weekends, she was, like other loners on the faculty, out of the loop when it came to knowing how practice differed from policy.

Leaving early was dishonest, but in her mind it implied nothing about how hard a teacher was working; everybody put in many hours at home, giving evenings, weekends, vacation time, always looking for something that would work better. Nobody could survive in the classroom

without preparing lessons and grading papers, and not turning in the reams of required paperwork, of no use whatsoever in actual teaching, would lead to a low rating for the year and probable job loss, with seniority no protection.

Monitoring rule or not, on quiet days like this one the halls required less attention. On normal, chaotic days, the four minutes of time for passing from class to class could fly by without a teacher even making it out into the hall. The problem was that students lingering in the classroom and entering for the next class also required attention, not only to prevent mischief but because they had questions and comments. In the hall, students you didn't know wouldn't show their ID's, which might not be their own anyway, so that when they broke rules or cursed at you, your supervising couldn't accomplish much in the way of consequences. At least inside the classroom, a teacher knew the names and would eventually decide who would pass and with what grade, although some days it seemed no one cared much about that.

The bell rang for classes to start, and, sighing with relief that no one had shown up, and she would not have to see her difficult eighth period class again until January, she went back in her room, not bothering to close the self-locking door as she normally would.

Fifty minutes till freedom, she thought. She was more than ready to go. She had already taken down the few holiday decorations that had not been vandalized, and her brief case was packed with papers to grade and materials to plan January's lessons.

One of the fattest folders was for paperwork supposedly showing teacher accountability by way of forms on which every moment of every day was to be coded to match goals and skills, with every detail described. There were two sets of goals, one for the city and the other for the state, and unfortunately they overlapped but did not match each other or the available textbooks and materials. Worse, they could not match what went on in class, since the poor attendance provided a different set of students each day, none with homework and all needing individual help to catch up. In her Biology class, for instance, state plans for a genetics unit might include a very interesting lab related to Mendel's work, and that is what her lesson plans would have to

show. But the school didn't have the materials for the lab, and it was very likely that fewer than half a class would show up for a lab anyway. Of those, maybe two or three would have read the text or attended previous classes on genetics or Mendel. So teachers had formal plans and contingency plans, trying to offer whichever students showed up some kind of profitable lesson that would give them some understanding of the subject. That was if they would listen. All too often students who could not read or write well enough to handle the class would disturb and distract, gaining a different kind of esteem by making the class laugh at what were essentially gangster tactics.

The multiple and unfortunately conflicting forms were the brainchild of a reforming superintendent named Saul Callas, much admired for supposedly ferreting out bad teachers, considered by the press and much of the public to be the root of all evil in the educational system. What the Callas measures really did was divert teachers from actual teaching by burdening them with clerical work which simply could not fit reality. Callas had also earned praise for closing schools and making everybody reapply for their jobs, and —surprise! surprise— it always turned out that the innovational or “hard” teachers were bad and lost their jobs, while the teachers considered good enough to keep their jobs were those who just happened to be friends with influential administrators. This is the reason why teachers have always been suspicious of merit pay and cling to unions and civil service employment conditions; they know that in most schools politics and favoritism would decide who earned merit pay.

Jean sighed and tried and shook her head, trying to clear it of anger and frustration. She, like most other teachers, saw no solutions. It was not a question of too low expectations but of working at the highest level possible under the circumstances. It had been better, at least for teachers, before the best students had been skimmed of the top and sent to special schools. Those good students began to excel, which was great, but back in the classrooms of their former schools, poor students were now at the top, and disruptive students too often decided what happened in class. Without a core of normally achieving students to set standards and possibly

reach high expectations, motivation to do well in classes seemed to be missing.

Ah well, Jean thought, sighing, at least she could do what was possible, and at the moment that meant putting some order into the place where she worked. The classroom was untidier than usual because today she had not gone around and picked up the garbage students left stuffed in their desks or on the floor, mostly junk food wrappers and soda cans, some overturned and dripping out their sticky, sweet contents. The school sold the stuff in machines, to make money, and would not back up any teacher who objected to eating in class. Some kids would at least clean up their mess, but with others it was not worth starting a confrontation that could escalate into something worse. So she asked them not to eat and cleaned up after them when they did it anyway. Telling students it would affect their grades was useless when she was having trouble getting them to care enough about grades to come to class and do some work.

She picked up some candy wrappers, and threw them out, then stopped herself. The room was supposed to get a major cleaning over the holidays, which meant it might at least get some kind of cleaning, and so this once she left the mess. She was tired.

She sat down at her desk and looked at a pad of paper. On the first sheet she had written, "To-Do's for the Vacation." Several lines had been skipped, and then she had written "#1. Figure out how much I can afford to pay for Alice's gift and write down ideas about what to buy," and then on the next line, "#2. Go shopping for the gift on the way home from work." After some thought, she skipped another line and wrote, "#3. Call Alice and make sure she still wants to do Christmas together at her place on Christmas Eve."

Alice was her 25 year old daughter, and their relationship was better than it had been during Alice's high school and teen years, when Alice had gone from sweet to mean-spirited and rebellious, but it could not be called warm or close. They loved each other, and polite consideration was the rule for their interactions. But they shared few tastes or interests, which made it hard for Jean to think what to buy. Alice worked on Public Relations for a chemical corporation and made much more money than Jean. She bought herself anything she wanted,

making gift-buying still harder.

Jean had started the list at lunch but had gotten nowhere. She would have to look around when she got in the stores, but she didn't even know where to begin.

She had been a little nervous all day because she had more cash in her purse, stashed in the adjacent equipment storeroom, than she liked to bring to school. She intended to make a lot of small purchases after school, as well as to shop for Alice's present, and she didn't want to have to write a lot of checks or max out her credit cards. She was not always good at remembering to write down debit card purchases and had already forgotten to note two checks in her checkbook, just in December. She hadn't been able to balance the thing in months. She needed to get it right before she got herself overdrawn. She'd like to change banks to one offering a debit card, she thought, but she was afraid of forgetting to mark down those purchases too. After teaching, she always felt stressed, unable to focus and get herself to work on common tasks. All she wanted to do was escape into books or music or television, any activity in which she could forget about herself and her life. But during the break, she promised herself she would balance her checkbook. Her goal was to avoid more fees for being overdrawn, hard when her expenses almost equalled her income and her records were usually inaccurate in some small way that could cost a lot.

She sat staring into space, elbows on the desk, head propped up in her hands, unable even to decide what store to go to first to find a gift for Alice. She often felt like this at the end of a school day, too tired to move or think. She thought about a magazine article she had read on clinical depression, the kind of article where you could check yourself for symptoms and causes. She had them all, as far as she could see, fatigue and headaches, crying jags, recent negative life changes. Within the last year, her divorce had become final, after a long separation and a court battle over property. And her daughter had rented a place that was a long commute away, adding to the mental and emotional distance between them, as well as the miles. And she had gotten this job transfer, which was supposed to be an improvement over the last teaching assignment,

but which was getting even more unbearable than the one she had left. She sighed again.

She felt that every time she tried to do something to make her life better, it turned out to be making her life worse. Even completing her college degree and becoming a teacher had not put her ahead financially, or in any respect, of a friend at her first job after high school, a friend who had stayed at the same corporation and never gotten a degree. She would be getting together with Darla sometime during the break, but it would not be as much fun as it would be if Jean could stop comparing their lives. Darla had gone from being a secretary to being a director of sales, at a company whose chemical products hurt the environment, and she made twice as much money as Jean. She had a very happy marriage as well, never divorcing, while during the same time, Jean had failed in two marriages. Darla deserved to be happy and successful, Jean thought, in spite of the poisons she promoted, but did that mean that she herself did not deserve to be happy and successful? Or was life just a crapshoot, so that deserving something, whether rewards or punishment, was irrelevant? The American dream of achieving success and happiness through hard work was something she had observed in people like Darla but had never personally experienced.

The sound of someone coming down the hall broke her reverie. Don't be someone for me, she thought. If just one kid shows up, I'll have to make an attempt to do something constructive. But the kid won't want to. They all have makeup work to do, all need individual help, but she had already spent the day trying unsuccessfully to go that route with the few kids who showed up. Even more than the other days, this one was set aside for goofing off.

The footsteps stopped outside her door.

Damn, she thought, I should have shut that. It might not even be one of my students. She thought about the day before the Thanksgiving holidays, when a tall male who didn't necessarily appear to be a student and who was wearing a ski mask had come into her room during this same period. She had had only about four students out of 20 in the room that day, all looking as frightened as she was. The next week she had found out who it was, an 18 year old

freshman, fresh out of jail, and she had written up the incident, but there was no follow-up from the discipline office. There never was. At least his home room teacher had chewed him out after Jean described to the teacher what had happened.

Thinking of that, as the footsteps paused outside her door, she stood up, annoyed and a little nervous.

Tom Roberson, the student who walked in and stood smirking at her, was the last person she expected or wanted to see. Everyone called him Tom Cat, because he was always putting the moves on some girl.

Anyone who saw him for the first time would be surprised he was still in high school. He looked like a man, not a boy, partly because of a mustache and deliberately heavy stubble, combined with a shaved head covered with tatoos. And, in fact, she had heard he was almost nineteen years old, not quite a senior because of all the times he had dropped out and come back. Three of those breaks had been spent in jail, always for selling drugs.

He was well over six feet tall and surely weighed more than 200 pounds, seemingly all muscle. He had been on the football team briefly, and the girls seemed to go ga-ga over him. The rare times he came to class, even girls who were otherwise good students would stop their work, change their seat to be closer to his, and spend the period flirting with him, totally ignoring everything Jean said to them about the effect this might have on their grades. She chalked it up to hormones and pheromones controlling good judgment, something she had often observed in her own self, and not just when she was a young girl, either.

She had been told that as a freshman he had hung around with blacks, who called him "Redneck." Then he had become a skinhead who had to be told to keep Nazi swastikas out of the school. Nowadays he came on to black girls, Latino girls, all girls, sweet talking them all until somebody said something he didn't like. Then he treated the young ones the same way he treated Jean and other older female teachers who tried to get him to do what he didn't want to do, namely, his schoolwork. They were all bitches to be abused and threatened.

Tom apparently felt that it was his birthright to do as he pleased, anywhere he was, and at the beginning of the semester, before Jean had learned that it was useless, there had been some pretty frightening scenes between them, as she persisted in trying to teach the class without allowing him to disrupt it.

He claimed that she had ruined his chance for a football scholarship by giving him an "F" in Biology after the first ten weeks. In fact, he was barely literate, not, Jean thought, for any lack of intelligence but simply because his truancy and disruptive behavior in class had usurped all the time when he should have been learning, probably from the early grades on. He claimed Jean's class was the only one he wasn't passing, which could even be true, since teachers were under constant pressure both to give sports stars a break and not to fail too many students of any kind.

If he was capable of doing any kind of college work, or even acceptable high school work--make that *elementary* school work, he had never demonstrated that ability in her class. If he came at all, he was late and disruptive. He had either not taken or failed every test, and he had turned in maybe five percent of the work, tops, probably copied and sometimes not even in his own writing. His papers done under her eyes were unintelligible and seemed at perhaps third grade level. He had ignored all opportunities to make up work and tests. He rejected tutoring help. Yet he still blamed her, and not himself, for the "F." And why not, given that the public and press also blamed teachers for student failures—not that he knew that.

She knew very well that others passed students like him, especially if they were sports stars. She was always in trouble for failing too many and was baffled by the conflicting requirements to give good grades and at the same time have high expectations and standards and teach the normal curriculum. That only worked if students worked. And she knew very well, from talking to other teachers and from walking down the hall during her prep periods and seeing empty classes, that other teachers had the same problems with attendance and poor student work. What she didn't know is how they justified passing grades, what they wrote in

their attendance and grade books. Her own subject matter intensified the problem, since Biology was no longer a relatively simple matter of nature study but a challenge to the most diligent and talented students, with topics like cell chemistry and DNA.

When Jean tried to get Tom's mother involved, to get some work done and improvements in behavior, so Tom could pass, his mother just shook her head sadly and said that she had not been able to control him since he got in with a bad crowd in grammar school. His mother seemed to be a caring and conscientious person, someone who did a lot of volunteer work for her church. She said she prayed for Tom every day. I'm the one who needs the prayers, Jean thought when she heard that, trying to deal with Tom in class. But no, obviously the praying wasn't yielding results anyway.

She had written him up and buzzed for Security--who rarely responded--maybe a dozen times, when his abusive language and threatening manner demanded that she try something to get help. But the Security buzzer rang in the office of the football coach, who wore both hats and who was not on her side, to put it mildly.

Tom usually just laughed and slapped his thighs when she hit the buzzer. He had taken on both the mannerisms and the speech of the black thugs he had once hung around with—although he used them inconsistently, when he was trying to be cool, and it was a strange thing to see in a probably racist skinhead. "They not gonna do nothin'," he'd say, "I told them you prejudiced against football players." And sure enough, whenever she went down to the Security office in person, they'd told her there were complaints against her for being unfair to team members. The kids tried that method of negating the work of every teacher, white or black, who demanded civil behavior. "She don't like me," was the first thing a kid in trouble said. Any kid who used that defense in class got groans and laughter from his classmates, who knew the ploy for what it was, especially when racial prejudice was claimed. Sometimes black students even accused black teachers of being prejudiced against them. It was the equivalent of "My dog ate my homework," but unfortunately, in this school, the Security people believed it. Or maybe they

didn't, but found it a very convenient way to rid themselves of disciplinary work, as more and more teachers gave up calling on them. Security people, who if they were also teachers were generally athletic coaches, bought into the public's idea that if a student did poorly, it was because the teacher didn't motivate or teach well or wasn't fair. "She don't teach us nothing," was a common claim of students who worked as hard as they could to create classroom chaos that would prevent any teaching.

Much to her relief, Tom had stopped coming to class after getting the "F." Now here he was. She was pretty sure he hadn't come to get help or wish her a Merry Christmas. She eyed the Security buzzer, which was closer to him than to her.

Tom followed her glance and chuckled to see her looking at the buzzer.

"Go ahead," he said. "The coaches having a little party today. That office all locked up. Not that they would ever answer *you*. They know you prejudiced."

"Are you going to start coming to class?" she asked, knowing that he was not. "Would you like to know what you would have to do to pass?"

In any school system with normal standards, his "F" at ten weeks, his 40 or so absences, and his failure to do work or take tests would have made passing impossible. But in the public schools of the city of St. Richard, the pressure on teachers to pass kids never let up. Jean herself had been forced to change many "F's" to "D's"--considered by many students a fine grade. Under pressure, she had changed grades at other schools and passed kids whose faces she wouldn't recognize, they had come to class so rarely. It was the same here. Lots of teachers didn't have this experience, because, more realistic than she was, they knew what was wanted and inflated the grades the first time around.

So it was actually possible that Tom would pass this Biology class, that his coach would pressure to get his grade changed, by the administration if not by her, whether he did makeup work and tests or not.

Tom didn't bother to answer her question about trying to pass. Instead he started walking

around the room, picking things up and throwing them back down.

"If you're not coming back, you should turn in your textbook, so that a bill won't go on your record," she said. As if he cared, since, like so many other students, he had probably run up a huge tab in unreturned texts. To graduate, he'd have to pay up, but most of those who routinely failed to return books also failed to pass their classes.

He laughed again, then picked up a book someone had left lying on the counter in front of the windows. "Wanna book?" he asked. He threw it hard toward her, knocking over a cup full of pens and pencils on her desk. It all clattered to the floor, the book cracking away from its cover. A plant had been tipped over as well, and dirt spilled over the top of her desk.

She moved toward the Security buzzer. She had to give it a try. There was nothing else she could think of to do.

"Press it, " Tom said. "Be my guest. I can wait."

She reached it and pressed it hard, over and over, so that if anyone was there they might get the idea that this was urgent. Although there was nothing unusual about a student threatening a teacher--it happened every day, and on some days it happened almost every period, and in the halls in between classes as well--the lack of witnesses today made it seem more frightening. Come to think of it, though, witnesses usually backed up kids who were lying, not teachers; it was safer for them that way. The "hard" teachers were the most frequent victims. The more diligently a teacher worked to keep order and engage students in the subject matter, expecting attention and work and trying to deliver appropriate consequences, the more students tested and maligned them.

Tom perched on a desk, relaxed, his arms folded, enjoying himself. He had a big smile on his face. It was obvious that he knew from the way she was hitting the buzzer that he had her scared.

Jean stared at the intercom, waiting for it to crackle and respond. Nothing. Minutes passed.

"Okay," Tom said, standing up, not smiling anymore. "I came to get something you took away from me."

She thought she knew what he meant. It was his ID card. But she hadn't actually taken it away. He'd left it, and she'd given it to someone in the Security office, who must have given it back to him. Otherwise--at least in theory--he couldn't enter the school through the door that had a metal detector, the door all students were supposed to use. Of course the high school had about a dozen other doors that were locked to outsiders and were not used as entrances or exits. Except, that is, all day long when kids sneaked out of them or opened them for someone outside. The school knew but didn't have enough guards to cover it all.

"I told you I gave your ID to the Security office, and you must have gotten it back or you wouldn't be in the building," Jean said, keeping up the pretence that things functioned as they were supposed to.

"Bullshit," he said, kicking over a desk. "Anyway, what I'm looking for is a hat you made me take off. I don't know why I ever did what you told me to."

She thought about that and then remembered. There was an unenforced school rule not to wear hats inside, but she left it alone, preferring to concentrating on enforcing behaviors more related to learning. He had taken off his hat when he got hot and then forgot it. "You left it here," she said, "and I put it in the Lost and Found."

"Bullshit," he said again. "That was my special hat." He picked up a chair and tossed it in her direction. It fell within a foot of her shoes.

"That was six weeks ago," she said. "I kept it in the room for two weeks, but you never came back."

"Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit," he yelled, knocking over or throwing everything he came in contact with, constantly getting closer to her.

He was between her and the door into the hall. She backed away, thinking that surely there must be some teacher left who could hear the commotion and investigate. She thought

about trying to run past him. No, he'd be sure to grab her or hit her. He played football, and she was a graying slightly overweight empty-nester with back and knee problems. Her only hope was that when he was done trashing the room he would leave.

She edged backward a bit, toward the storeroom door, suddenly realizing that it was not padlocked as usual but standing wide open. She had left it that way when she took down the Christmas decorations and put them in there. Her purse was in there too, with all her Christmas money, a few hundred dollars, and her briefcase containing things like her grade book.

Tom was keeping his eyes on her, waiting, she thought, for her to react to his violence, to scream or cry. She tried to look calm, not wanting to give him the pleasure of seeing her any more fearful than she already looked. But she was trembling, and the more she thought about that storeroom the more frightened she became.

The door to it could be shut from the classroom but wouldn't lock from that side without a padlock, which was currently sitting on top of her desk. It was dawning on her that there were more things in that room than her purse, or the grade book, that she didn't want Tom to see, things like strong acids and other chemicals, animals in formaldehyde for dissection or display, dissecting tools, ancient stuff from decades back, when the school had actually functioned as a school. She had not been able to work with any of it with her students, except to do demonstrations, because it was too dangerous and it required at least one working sink in the room, something she didn't have.

If she had dared to try labs or demonstrations under these teaching conditions, she could have used the sink in the storeroom, but even then she wouldn't have wanted to allow kids in that room. Besides the dangerous supplies, and ones that would tempt them to do stupid things, like the animals preserved for dissection, there were a lot of personal things in the room, like her radio and hot plate and coffee pot, and all the personal stuff and food in her desk there, squirreled away for the breakfasts, lunches, and prep periods that she took in the storage room, for lack of a better place.

The storeroom, which kids were curious about anyway, used to connect to a lab in the room to the west of hers. This room where she tried to teach was smaller and packed with portable desks and chairs, more of a lecture room. The connection to the former lab, now another teacher's classroom, was now blocked with storage materials, and the entrance into her classroom from the storage room functioned like an outside door. If you were in the storage room with the door closed, you needed to use a key to get out, or else have someone in the classroom open the door for you.

The key, however, was lost. She had found all this out one embarrassing day when she wanted to prepare a demonstration lab while another teacher--who had to find other rooms to use after a kid started a destructive fire in her room's wastebasket--was using her classroom. Jean had shut the door for privacy and then realized she couldn't get out and started pounding on the door. Luckily, the other teacher heard the noise just as she was leaving the room. Jean's face was red, but both teachers thought it was pretty funny. No kids were present at that moment, thank goodness; they had gotten tired of waiting for the passing bell to ring and had walked out on their teacher a minute or two early.

After that, she was careful when she went in the storeroom to put something like a book in the doorway, to prevent the door from closing. She glanced at the doorway. Yes, there the book was, a fifty year old and now shockingly incorrect earth science text still stored on her shelves.

Tom had noticed her edging toward the storeroom and was starting to move toward it himself. If he goes in there, Jean thought, I'll kick the book out of the way and slam the door. With him safely locked in, I'll call 911. He'll mess with things, but he can't go anywhere with them, and he'll know he won't be able to deny anything he does in there.

As soon as she thought it, she realized it probably wouldn't work. Tom would do tremendous damage, maybe even accidentally kill himself with the chemicals and alcohol in there. He often said that he didn't care all that much if he went back to jail, where he had a lot of

friends, so he would do whatever he felt like, with no thought of consequences. But when the police came he would lie and accuse her of assault. Ludicrous as it was to think someone her size could physically overcome someone his size, without using a weapon, the school would back him up, not her, and she'd be out of a job. Right now, being out of this job didn't sound so bad, but it would when she didn't have any money.

Besides, her purse was in that room, with all her Christmas money, her credit cards, her driver's license, her paycheck stub. He could copy her information, even if he didn't steal, although she doubted he'd think of it. He could burn the place down if he started messing with the chemicals. Then she'd probably get charged with manslaughter.

She walked as calmly as she could over to the storeroom and stood in the doorway. "You know," she said, "I'm going to go straight to the police to report this, not to the school. Are you still on probation?"

"None of your fuckin' business," he said, but he stopped throwing and kicking things and stood looking at her.

"You know what I think?" he said next. "I think the bitch has something in that room she don't want me to see." He walked up close to her, face to face, except she only came up to his neck. He looked over her head into the room, then laughed once again. He was thoroughly enjoying this whole thing.

"You worried about that cheap little purse, bitch?" he asked. "Nothin' there I want. I got more money than you anyway. I make more in one night dealin' drugs than you make in a month. I seen what you drivin'. No, I don't want that little plastic bag. What I want is my special hat." He gave her a little shove, so she was part way in the room. "Maybe it's in here."

"It's not," she said. "I told you, it's in the Lost and Found. I know it's still there because I took something else there this morning." That bit about this morning was a lie, but just on the off chance he really wanted the hat, she tried it.

"Naw, you not gettin' rid of me that easy. I can't leave you alone for the holidays, can I?"

He was laughing again, but then he stopped and his face got serious, ugly. "Besides, you took something else from me."

"No, I didn't!"

"My scholarship. You kept me from getting a football scholarship, bitch! Tell me something. Why do people like you always try to keep people like me from getting somewhere? Huh? Why?" He gave her another shove. They were now both in the storeroom.

She tried to push by him and get out of the room. She was starting to feel she had nothing to lose. Taken by surprise, he backed away. Now he blocked the doorway. He kicked the book on the floor out of the way. It had almost tripped him.

"You seem to have forgotten," he said, "that teachers can't touch students." This cracked him up, and he chuckled for a while. "Sexual harrassment. I can't wait to tell the principal how you tried to get me to have sex with you in this closet. Or whatever it is."

He looked around again, taking in the contents of the room, turning slightly so that the doorway was not completely blocked. Jean thought he might be distracted and tried to slip past him. Again he was surprised and backed up and out of the room, but this time he grabbed the door, which opened into the classroom, to use to block her way. He slammed it into the side of her head, and she staggered backward.

"Where you think you going, bitch? We not done talking. And I thought I told you not to touch me."

He pushed her again. Already dizzy, she lost her balance, a knee buckled, and she crashed down, hitting the back of her head on the edge of a table in the storeroom as she fell.

"Get up," Tom said. "You not hurt."

She looked up at him through a haze of pain.

"You go to the police with this," he said, "and you dead meat."

She believed him.

"Maybe I should kill you anyway," he continued. "It would be self-defense, of course."

He nodded toward a bottle of acid that had a skull and crossbones on it. "You were gonna throw that acid at me because I wouldn't come in here and fuck you. I was trying to get away, and you tripped and fell when you were chasing me." He considered the story. "Oh, and another thing, you promised to pass me if I'd fuck you."

Even in her pain she was able to think, the sad thing is there are people who'll believe your absurd story.

He continued. "By the way, my story will have a witness, a friend waiting for me in the hall who heard everything. Maybe two witnesses, I don't know yet." More laughter. He was so pleased with himself.

And then he did the unthinkable. He turned and left, slamming the door behind him. Locking *her* in, although he probably didn't know it. "Merry Christmas," he called, laughing. "Your New Year ain't gonna be all that happy, bitch!"

Jean listened to his footsteps recede. She saw the light change under the door, indicating he had turned off the classroom lights. He was one of many students who routinely turned off classroom lights as they left a room, just to be annoying. Then she heard him slam the classroom door, locking that as well, but just from the outside, not that it mattered, since no one was likely to come by her room anymore today. His footsteps faded, and it was quiet.

She did not feel able to get up, but she shifted a little to move away from something poking her in the neck. It was the corner of the book that was supposed to be blocking the door. She had a terrible, dizzy headache and felt as if she were drifting off to sleep.

I must try to stay awake, she thought, just in case the janitor comes to empty the wastebaskets. They were supposed to do it every day after eighth period. But she knew the janitor wasn't coming today, before the holiday. If he had come to school at all, he'd be at the party Tom had mentioned. Still, he was scheduled to wax her floors, after giving the room a good cleaning. He would surely do that next week. Or would he? It could be that he would be doing the cleaning and waxing in the week between Christmas and New Year's. That was too

awful to contemplate. She gave up and let herself sleep, wondering vaguely even as she did, whether, if she had a concussion, maybe she shouldn't sleep. Might this not slip from sleep into something permanent, a coma? She couldn't help herself and moved into a dream that had nothing to do with anything real.

Chapter 2

Tom and his sister Doreen were on the same bus going home, but they didn't sit together or even acknowledge each other. Doreen sat alone, reading a short story collection that was not even a required textbook; she would glance out the window from time to time, looking up in a rather dazed way, as if afraid she was so engrossed in her reading that she might miss her stop. Her backpack, next to her on the aisle seat, was full to overflowing with textbooks and papers. She was much younger than her brother and was different from him in every way. A freshman, an honors student, short and slender, traditional and even dorky in her choice of clothes, there was nothing about her to suggest a relationship to Tom. And, in fact, they had different fathers; the one thing they might be said to have in common, other than their mother and their address, was that both had never met their own fathers, although Tom had known—and hated—Doreen's father, who had tried to make Tom behave better but had finally given up and moved out.

Tom looked at Doreen with disgust. If he had known the phrase, "Goody Two Shoes" he might have thought it, but as it was he thought of her as "stupid bitch," his all purpose term for females who irked him. He knew Doreen would have gone to her last class, probably the only one there, sucking up to the teacher and acting interested in the subject. No, he corrected himself, she would really have been interested in the subject, not acting. That was what he hated about her.

Before leaving school, Tom had looked around for his buddies, hoping to find someone who would back him up in his story that Miss K had tried to get him to fuck her. But the halls had cleared, and nobody was hanging around outside, where the wind had picked up, and it was starting to snow. He would have to go to somebody's crib if he wanted a witness. No, he knew

where to go later, a drug house where he was sure somebody would be hangin' out. Thing was, though, it would be better for just one other guy to know, not everybody. And he was supposed to stay away from gang members while he was on probation, not possible anyway. He'd think of something.

He got off the bus a block early to avoid walking alone with Doreen and to stop at the store for some smokes. When he got to their apartment building, he could see his mother still at work in the laundromat below. She was mopping the floor. Some dryers were spinning, but there were no customers. A good time to talk to her without Doreen hearing or butting in. He needed to prepare her for what might come.

His mother looked up as he came in. "You're trackin' up my clean floor," she yelled. "Can't you ever watch what you're doing?"

A bad beginning, he thought. He didn't apologize, because that would have been conspicuously out of character and make her suspicious, but he did stop walking and even retreated to the entrance mat.

"Gotta talk to you," he mumbled.

"Oh, God," she said. "You're not in trouble again, are you?"

"Not really. But there's something you should know."

"I think you *are* in trouble," she said, shaking her head. She sighed and propped her mop against a washer. She walked over to him. "You got cigarettes?" She asked.

He pulled out the new pack. "I knew you'd be out. I got these for us to share," he lied. He lit cigarettes for both of them, and for a minute they just smoked, quiet.

"Okay, out with it," his mother said.

"You know the teacher who's flunking me in Biology?"

"I've heard you talk about her enough. Go on."

"I went to her room at the end of the day to ask what I could do to pass," Tom said.

"So what did she say?" his mother asked, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

“She told me to go into this storage cupboard with her.”

“What for? Did she have some project in there for you?”

“Oh, yeah,” he smiled. “She had a project all right. Under her skirt. The deal was if I fucked her real good, I could pass with a ‘D.’”

His mother’s mouth flew open, and she gasped, then laughed. This set off a choking coughing spell that sounded out of control. “That sounds right up your alley,” she finally said. “Whadya say?”

“Fuck that old bag? Hell, no. But I am gonna get her in trouble.”

“Leave it alone,” his mother said. “It will be her against you, and, to tell the truth, your story sounds unbelievable.”

“I have to say something,” Tom said, frowning and brushing the snow off himself, to thwart an urge to start laughing. “When I said no and pushed her off me, she told me she’s going to report that I assaulted her. Shit, the bitch was pawin’ my dick, but she’s gonna claim I’m the one doin’ the assaultin’.”

Now his mother was frowning. “You pushed her? What’s that about? You wanna go back to jail? You shoulda just screwed her. You haven’t ever been so particular before. Hell, you used to screw a can of Crisco.”

“You caught me doin’ that one time, when I was 14, and you bring it up every other day.” Tom wanted badly to add to that that she was an expert at not being particular who she screwed. Fuckin’ whore she was, with one boyfriend after another, screwin’ right out in the front room on the rollaway bed, where he had to pass them to get to the bathroom. But now was not the time to bring any of this up.

He was trying to put out of his mind those lovefests with the soft creamy Crisco. That had felt good, but right now it was making him want to laugh again. He frowned harder and feigned anger. “You never believe me. If nobody ever trusts what I say, I might as well be who you think I am.” He looked as hurt as he wanted her to believe he was. But he was thinking he

might buy some more Crisco.

His mother was looking at him closely. "You better not be lyin' to me, boy," she said. "I'll stick with you on this, because I don't want you to go back to jail, but if you make a fool of me, they can lock your ass up forever as far as I'm concerned."

He nodded. "That's not gonna happen, because I'm not lyin', Mom." He turned away, to go back out the door, still fighting a crazy urge to laugh at how outrageous his story was. And at that Crisco stuff. When his face was under control, he turned back to her. "What's for dinner?"

His mother shrugged. "Doreen's fixing macaroni and cheese with tuna and peas. Go ahead and eat without me. She's gonna bring some down here for me later."

He nodded and left. That had gone all right. And he was glad Doreen was at least good for getting meals together. When his mother was in charge of dinner, they might have it or they might not. He was going to have to eat fast and then get out there and find a witness for his story. He hoped someone would do it willingly and for nothin', but if he had to get somebody some drugs or maybe threaten to beat out his brains, he could do that too.

Chapter 3.

A polar bear had his big claws curved around the right side of her face, and his sharp teeth were pricking at the back of her neck and beginning to sink in. She waited for the inevitable full bite into her spinal cord. She knew death would soon follow, but that did not seem to be such a bad thing. At least the craving for warmth would end.

It was bitter cold, and she was outside, lying in deep snow under a white sky, with no coat on. The flakes falling on her bare arms and legs were turning them white, building up and not melting, as if she had no body heat. The top of her head hurt the way feet and fingers do when they're unbearably cold, but, strangely enough, her feet and fingers didn't hurt, as if maybe they were already dead, frozen. She tried to move them and pushed against something hard and angular.

There was a clatter and the feel of something heavy falling across her ankle. Her eyes flew open wide, and the polar dream went wherever dreams go, forgotten, inaccessible. The darkness within the storeroom was relieved slightly by a white glow coming from the window, which exposed a view of snow falling heavily. A street light illuminated the whirling flakes, which even under these circumstances seemed lovely to Jean. It will be a white Christmas, she thought, as if that matters right now.

For a few moments she lay there, shivering and trying to remember what she had been dreaming, and then she started to go back over what had happened earlier, why she was lying on this storeroom floor. She wondered if Tom would find somebody to claim to be a witness and then start spreading his ridiculous story of being sexually abused. She wasn't positive, but she

didn't even think he was a minor anymore. And if he told somebody a story that would get them to look for her here, that would probably be better than the alternative. Finally, shaking now with the cold, she knew she had to see if she could get up.

She was afraid of hypothermia, and she hurt everywhere, but her head pain was the most excruciating, and after that, the most painful places were on her back, probably from her fall to the floor. She seemed to be lying on a jumble of hard, pointed objects, all digging into her. On top of all that, she needed to pee, and soon. Okay, she said to herself, you have to move, get the blood circulating again. She tried to raise herself into a sitting position, but fell back, sickeningly dizzy.

Her fingers reached carefully, gingerly, toward the most painful place on her head. She explored with the tip of her right index finger, finding wetness, stickiness, and then a long deep cut riding on a lump that stretched across the back of her head, under her hair. She began to check the rest of her body, starting with her toes, flexing and moving each part in turn. Everything ached or pained, but everything also seemed to work.

What time was it anyway? How long had she been asleep? Or had she been unconscious? What, exactly, was a concussion, and did she have one? Had the janitor ever come to sweep the classroom? If he had, he must not have noticed anything unusual. Disarray, of course, but that was usual. She hoped she hadn't missed the janitor, because he wouldn't come around much. He was probably only going to come the one time and empty the wastebaskets when he waxed the floor. She was certain he wouldn't have done that last night.

She would have to try to get up again soon, dizzy or not, and try to get warmer somehow. The snow that was falling thickly outside was also coming inside, she now realized, whistling in through a little hole, along with some grainlike flakes. The hole was made by a stone, she thought, or maybe a bullet, and it had large cracks radiating from it, like thin ragged petals of a flower. The window was some kind of dingy looking plastic, not glass, and when it had been installed, the film that protected it had been left on. Now, she thought, the film was holding the

whole cracked thing together. Maybe she had some tape in her storeroom desk to put over the hole, she thought, but she'd have to be gentle when she put it on; the pane looked like it wouldn't take much to make it collapse and fall out. But no, if it were that delicate, the wind would have knocked it out. She would just have to look it over and then somehow plug the hole.

She could see her coat hanging neatly on a hanger, on the back of the locked door. Little had she thought, this morning...or maybe, yesterday morning...that her coat would still be hanging there when it got dark. She needed to get it and her hat and gloves and scarf and put them all on, and then make some hot coffee or tea. Maybe that would stop her shivering. She would rest just a few more minutes.

She suspected the heat in the building had been turned down to 50 or so for the holidays. She could see, high on one wall, a vent for heat that had a piece of Christmas ribbon tied to it, which would blow when the furnace was working. It hung limply now, and she wondered who had tied it there, how many years ago, and for what purpose. Nobody decorated rooms for Christmas much around here now. She had put some clinging plastic snowflakes on her door, and they had been pulled off and thrown around the hall within about two hours; the few decorations in her room had also either disappeared or taken a beating. Maybe next year she wouldn't bother to do anything.

All right, she could not wait any longer to find something to pee into. She pushed herself to a sitting position. It made her nauseous, as if she had been whirling on a carnival ride. Don't throw up, she warned herself. You'll have to live with that smell.

Not too far away, probably accessible without getting up, were some covered buckets holding leftover specimens for dissection, evidently from some calmer period in the school's history, probably decades ago. She struggled with the lids of two buckets and then transferred half a dozen crayfish from one bucket into the other, where they mingled with a slightly larger group of frogs.

The buckets reeked of formaldehyde. Coughing, almost choking, she thought that maybe

once she was dressed in her outdoor clothing, she would leave the hole in the window as it was, for the sake of ventilation. The building would get some heat, to keep the pipes from freezing, when it cooled below 50 degrees.

She used the vacated bucket as a chamber pot, grabbing a tissue from her nearby desk for toilet paper, and quickly put the bucket's cover back on. She actually had a new roll of toilet paper in the room, because the teacher's washroom wasn't always supplied; the roll was out of reach now, but it was there for later. Surely she would be out of here before the roll was used up. She had soap and a towel too, and toothpaste and a toothbrush, for after lunches. Thank God she was a neurotic packrat, one of those women who carried too much in her purse, packed too much in her suitcase, and always had too much stuff on hand, "just in case." Well, it would pay off now, because "in case" had come to pass. She would rather not have had her preparedness justified, handy as it was going to be.

She was starting to feel less dizzy. Getting up on her feet was not easy though, mostly because of her back injuries, which restricted her movements. She got her coat and all her other outdoor clothes on, even her muffler and snowboots. She turned on the lights and, squinting and blinking, checked her watch—it was 3:10 in the early morning—and then turned them back off quickly, before she got used to the brightness. She had decided to wait before making the coffee, or doing anything else, other than lying down. She was going to try to sleep some more, and she wanted to stay used to the dark.

Then she made her way to her desk, picking up fallen items as she went, moving very slowly and carefully, and hanging on to something every time she bent over. The room was crowded with storage items, and had been piled to the ceiling with junk when she first came to the school, but now, except for what had been knocked down by Tom, it was orderly, as nice as she could make it.

She was feeling warmer and less queasy. She took off her muffler, which had already warmed up her nose. She cleared off the top of her desk, putting needed items within reach on

the countertop nearby. Then, rolling up a cardigan sweater she kept hanging on the back of her chair, she used it as a pillow and lay herself down on the top of the desk. The desk was hard, but it almost felt good under her sore back. Since the desk was too short, she propped her legs on top of a rolling cart and that way was able to stretch out. She usually slept on her side, impossible in this situation, but she was still much more comfortable than she had been an hour earlier.

Her radio was nearby, in reach while lying down, and she found a quiet jazz station, hoping the music would lull her back to sleep. She watched the window, where the snow seemed to blow heavier by the minute. The music from Charlie Brown's Christmas special came on, and she started to cry, thinking about the possibility that she would still be in this room on Christmas Day.

She made herself stop crying. It would only make her headache worse and start her eyes itching, and it would do no good that she could think of. The advice, "You'll feel better if you go ahead and cry," had never worked for her. She realized that she was hungry and thirsty, and that she could do something about it without getting up again. She kept a little water bottle in her purse, handy for times when her throat got dry and she started coughing. The purse was on the counter by the desk. And in the top desk drawer was her stash of goodies. And the goody she most wanted at this moment was there, a new bag of chocolate kisses.

She drank some of her water and also took two generic painkillers from a bottle in her purse. Then she allowed herself five chocolate kisses. She could have eaten them all and justified it, given that she had not eaten dinner and had been traumatized, but she didn't want to exhaust her supply of chocolate right away. She slowly melted the kisses one at a time in her mouth, savoring them and thinking how they had never been so good. Her psychological and physical condition was wretched, and her situation was miserable, but somehow, now that she was warm, eating chocolate, and listening to jazz, her trouble seemed something she could get through.

Someone will find me eventually, she thought. I just have to wait and try to heal and stay healthy and keep myself fed until I'm found. She made a mental inventory of the food she kept in the room. It was extensive, and she would have been embarrassed had anyone known. But she usually had breakfast here each day during the first period, which was a prep period, and she had lunch here 5th period, and she sometimes had a snack before heading home at the end of the day. And so she had stocked up, replenishing supplies with a grocery bag full of items, rather than bringing food each day. She had coffee and tea and powdered lemonade and boullion cubes to use to prepare drinks. She had instant oatmeal, cocoa puffs, granola, peanut butter, raisins and nuts, mixed dry fruit, pretzels, crackers, canned and dry soups, pudding and apple sauce in cups, packets of Ramen noodles, hard candies, an apple, and possibly some Christmas cookies, if she hadn't finished them off. Not bad. It wasn't a Christmas turkey, with mashed potatoes and gravy, and cranberries, but it would sustain her, and she liked all of it.

The radio was playing an old Wes Montgomery hit. She knew the name of the tune, it was on the tip of her tongue, but it just wouldn't come to her. She would find out when they said it at the end of the song. But by the time the announcer said they had just heard "Goin' Out of My Head," she was deep in sleep, beginning a new dream, in which she and her daughter and her ex-husband would get hopelessly lost in a forest, in a snowstorm, while trying to cut down their own Christmas tree.

Chapter 4

Alice was beginning to be annoyed. She had left a message for her mother to call her as soon as she got home from school, and now it was 8 o'clock in the evening. Since then she had left several more messages on Mom's answering machine, but of course Mom hadn't called back. Typical. Maybe the teachers went out drinking or something, given that it was the last day before the holidays. But Mom had already told her last weekend that the official teacher's after-school party had been planned for the previous Wednesday, because people would just want to go home on Friday. Lots of teachers traveled during the two week break and had to hurry to the airport. But that didn't mean that there hadn't been some informal or private gathering. Or maybe Mom just went shopping on the way home, something she had done a lot when Alice was growing up.

They should have just made their Christmas arrangements definite when they had talked last Sunday. But Mom had wanted to check with her friend Mel and see if he would be with his own family or would like to come along on Christmas Eve, or maybe Christmas Day, to Alice's house. Alice wasn't sure just what her Mom's relationship with Mel was, and she suspected that neither Mom nor Mel were sure either, it was so up and down and off and on. And Alice also had not been sure if *she* wanted to invite her own potential significant other, a man she had gone out with several times recently. So they had left things unresolved until this weekend. But now Alice needed to know what Mom wanted, before her date tonight with Mr. Potentially, At-Least-Partially, Right. He—Jim—would be here any minute.

She dialed the number again. No answer. "Mom? Mom?" she said loudly into the

machine, knowing that her mother usually screened, or just plain ignored, calls. “Mom? Come to the phone. Pick up. It’s Alice. I need to talk to you, but I’ll be going out in a little while. If you can’t get me tonight, be sure to call in the morning. If I don’t call you first. We need to decide about Christmas.”

Her doorbell rang. Alice hung up, took a quick look in the mirror, and went to the door.

Jim was covered with snow. “It’s coming down pretty hard now,” he said. “How about just getting some takeout, or a pizza, and renting a movie? I’d rather not drive too much in this.”

They had not made definite plans anyway, other than agreeing to eat out somewhere. She nodded assent and bundled up. Does this mean he might want to stay the night? she asked herself. Should I let him? Do I really want him to? I have a big zit on my butt; this is not the best night. And I was planning on losing at least ten pounds before I let him see me undressed. Not only have I not dieted, I probably have gained weight this week, with all the Christmas stuff I ate at work. I’m not ready.

As she went out together, he stopped and turned toward her. He kissed her cheek and gave her a little squeeze. “I’ve been looking forward to tonight,” he said.

She smiled at him. “So have I.” *Yikes!* she thought.

* * * * *

Mel noticed, as Jean’s answering machine beeped at him again, that she seemed to have plenty of messages already, more than he had left. Who else was leaving her messages? And where was she, anyway? He didn’t think she was seeing somebody else, but he had never asked, had no right to ask.

He knew what her opinion of his thoughts would be. She would think that it was none of his business who else was calling her, not if he didn’t want to make a commitment, not that she expected he ever would make a commitment. She would also say that if he wanted to do

something with her on a Friday night, he shouldn't wait until Friday night to call and ask. She'd be right. But he just didn't like to be pinned down. He would rather wait to see how he felt Friday night before making plans for it.

He left her another message to call him. It was getting too late to do anything tonight, now. And it might be snowing. He went to the window to check. Yeah, everything was already white, and it was coming down hard. If Jean called back, he'd go out on a limb and make plans with her for tomorrow instead.

They hadn't even talked about Christmas yet. Last year she had hated the gift he got her, he could tell. But she had needed that bigger microwave; hers was too small to warm up enough pizza for both of them. And her gift to him had been no prize either—a book of two-for-one coupons for restaurants and plays, for them to use together presumably, with a note about how she would treat when they used the coupons. If he liked to go out, it would have been a good deal. But he would rather have had her cook for him and then watch television together, while she would rather not do either of those things. In the whole year, they had only used a few coupons.

He'd have to start thinking about a gift, he thought. Christmas was next Thursday. He still had almost a week, plenty of time. What he needed to focus on now was getting himself something to eat, since he and Jean were apparently not going to go out. He got out some chips and dip and a beer, thinking about how he was getting a big gut and really ought to start to eat properly. Tomorrow he would buy some fruits and vegetables.

He plopped down on the couch and picked up the remote. Searching the channels for the perfect program, munching chips and gulping beer, he felt his eyelids getting heavy. He stretched out on the couch, after first plumping up some cushions for his head. He let his eyes close. After a while, as he shifted a little, he dropped the remote, and the television, finally allowed to stay on one channel, droned on as he snored.

* * * * *

When Alice and Jim came back with some ribs and side dishes, and the romantic old movie *Moonstruck*, which was his surprising choice, she checked her answering machine for messages. Nothing there. Not only did her mother not answer her phone, she forgot to check for messages as well. Alice sighed in exasperation. And then she turned her attention back to Jim and forgot about her mother, until the middle of the night, when she woke up, startled at first to see Jim beside her. She could not go back to sleep, for worrying about whether she had done the right thing in letting Jim stay. She didn't worry about her mother, though; she just remembered they needed to talk. She thought to herself that Mom probably just went out with Mel or something. They'd talk later on Saturday. She snuggled against Jim's back. It felt so good she wondered how she had been doing without it for so long.

* * * * *

At almost the same time, Mel woke up on the couch, stiff and cold. One arm was hanging down to the floor, and that arm had apparently at some point knocked over his beer, which was now just a smelly wet spot on his rug. The television seemed incredibly loud, selling him something, he wasn't even sure what. He clicked it off, and then got up, not feeling all that great and intent on getting into his bed. As he passed his answering machine, he took a quick look. No message. Where the devil had Jean gone? Was she deliberately not calling him back? Sleeping with someone else? He took off his shoes and pants and left the rest of his clothes as they were, then plopped on the bed and snuggled under the quilts. It felt good, but it would have felt better with Jean beside him. This afternoon he had been thinking that Jean might be with him here tonight. So much for that idea. He worried about it for maybe a minute and a half, then he was snoring.

* * * * *

In the morning, Alice cooked Jim scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast, and then he left to go pick up his five year old daughter Samantha. He was divorced, and Samantha was with him on weekends. That's inconvenient, Alice thought. We'll have to go out only on weeknights, or he'll have to get a sitter. Or maybe Samantha isn't five. Maybe he doesn't really have a daughter, he has another girlfriend. She didn't know him well enough to trust him. She liked him, and she had liked him staying the night, but now that he was telling her his whole weekend was tied up...That sounded like the kind of thing a man would tell a woman he had on the side.

He kissed her, when he left, and said he would call, but he didn't say *when* he would call. Wasn't that always the way? She assumed the worse and was angry at herself for already getting emotionally involved and vulnerable. Jim hadn't brought up Christmas, and neither had she.

Oh well, she would still have to plan where and when to celebrate Christmas with Mom. She ought to find out what was going on. She checked the time. It was 9 a.m. She hoped Mom hadn't gone out already. There was no telling. Mom still wasn't answering the phone. She could tell from the beeps that there were lots of messages, not just hers, that hadn't yet been heard. She left still another message, knowing she was sounding quite impatient.

Mom could be at Mel's. That would not be unusual. But if Alice called her there, Mom probably wouldn't like it. Anyway, Alice had no idea what she had done with Mel's phone number. Mom had given it to her long ago, for emergencies, and had written Mel's last name and address on it too. Where was that thing?

Just in case she reached the point, later in the day, when she decided to try calling Mel, she started hunting for his number. It was not in the little address book in her purse. Not in the stack of numbers by the phone. Not stuck in the phone book. Not in the stack of things to do,

and lists about them, in a pile on her desk. She had probably tossed it away by mistake. If she remembered right, it had been written on the back of a gas station receipt. She gave up the search. She tried to think of his last name, so she could use the phone book or directory assistance, but the name eluded her. Maybe she would think of it sometime during the day. By that time, she would probably have heard from Mom anyway.

Chapter 5

When Michael O'Reilly woke up on Saturday morning he had a worse headache than Jean. On Friday he had left school early to go drinking with his buddies, all guilt gone when both Coach Bassett and Assistant Principal Jones had told him it would be all right, he had all vacation to empty wastebaskets and spruce up the rooms. Then Mike had come home and taken his Colleen to another Christmas party, this one with his cronies in the ward and Republican Party. That had been as much a duty as a pleasure, since he owed his government job to those friends, and, God knows, with half the factories in town moved out of the country, there were no new jobs to be had. The city of St. Richards was hitting some hard times, and, if you had steady work, you had better damn well hang onto it.

Lots of the kids at the high school were on welfare now, their parents' jobs all gone overseas. The first factory closings had started about ten years ago, and as their families got poorer, the kids coming into the high school had gotten rougher. You couldn't blame some of them. They had been living the American dream, with parents earning good union wages. Now there was lots of divorce, illness with no money for doctors, kids on drugs and in gangs while their parents were always out struggling with multiple minimum wage jobs. He used to feel a little apologetic and ashamed of being "just a janitor." Now it was a damn good gig that he had better protect. There were a lot of good, hard-working men out there who would like to have his job, some of them with college degrees.

Maybe he ought to do a little better job there, especially on the upper floors. He had political connections, all right, but no sense tempting fate. Right after Christmas he would go in and do an extra good job of cleaning, maybe even wax the hall floors. It had to be done before the open house in mid-January anyway. Might as well do it a little early.

Mike slowly got up, his need for coffee and to pee greater than his need not to move his aching head. When he finally shuffled into the kitchen, Colleen gave him her “I told you not to drink that much” look and poured him a mug of coffee.

“What days do you have to go into work?” Colleen asked him. “With my parents coming for Christmas, I need to make plans.”

“I can make my own schedule, as long as I get the work done.”

“Well then, why don’t you try to get it done before Christmas Eve? If not, you’ll have to wait for the 30th, because we’ll be having a lot of family here, and you need to be around. How many days will you be needing to go in?”

Mike thought about it. To do a good job would take most of a week. He needed a vacation and had no intention of going in Monday or any day before Christmas. If he went in on the 30th, he’d just have to do what he could in a couple days. That would be fine. No one would expect more.

“The 30th will be okay. I just need to empty wastebaskets and sweep and mop, no big deal.” The hell with doing more anyway. The desks could stay full of trash as far as he was concerned, and the kids would just throw stuff back all over the floor anyway.

“Don’t you have to check the school at all, just to see that the furnace is still running enough to keep the pipes from freezing?” Colleen asked. “It’s going down to zero tonight.”

“If they freeze, no one’s going to fix them during the holiday anyway. But I’ll check on them Monday and make sure everything is okay in all the rooms. I gave the place a pretty good look before I left yesterday though.” He hadn’t and wouldn’t, but this would be a good excuse to go shoot the bull with the guys Monday instead of going Christmas shopping.

“Oh,” Colleen said, “I was hoping you’d go help me pick out some gifts Monday.”

Mike assumed an expression of regret. “Duty calls,” he said.

Colleen shook her head. “I wonder if they realize how lucky they are to have somebody as conscientious as you. I hope you get a little appreciation for all you do.”

“Not much,” Mike said. “But there’s satisfaction in a job well done.” Or, he thought to himself, in making your wife believe that a job is well done.

Chapter 6.

Jean slept much better than she had expected to, waking at 8 a.m., more than three hours later than her usual time for getting up. She hadn't been comfortable so much as exhausted, but, either way, the result had been a good, long sleep. And then she lay there on her desk another half hour before getting up, planning her breakfast and assessing her situation.

She felt certain that no one would be coming to find her today. Not on a Saturday, and not on Sunday either. Alice might try to reach her, and so might Mel, but both of them would probably just get mad and give up, thinking that once again she had gone off on her own and not let them know. Actually, some people from the Sierra Club that she hiked with sometimes were going cross country skiing this weekend, and she had considered going along, depending on the weather, and not telling Mel, just because he deserved that kind of treatment when he never would make advance plans. But she would have told Alice, at least leaving a message, only because they still had to decide what to do about Christmas.

Christmas had apparently been decided for them, or at least for her, Jean thought. It looked like she would be celebrating here, with the crayfish and frogs and other assorted victimized beasts.

But maybe Alice or Mel would start getting worried on Monday or Tuesday, surely by Wednesday, which was Christmas Eve. Her only hope was that then they would call the police, and the police would come and check her classroom.

The idea that Tom would go to the police with his lies and that the police would then check the school for her was beginning to seem far-fetched. Tom would probably do something to cover his butt before she could tell her own version, but she was pretty sure that he didn't like the police, and they didn't like him. He was on probation and would probably choose to seek

allies within the school, like the coaches or even the principal. But he most likely would have to wait two weeks for that, until classes started again. The coaches might like him, but that didn't mean they would give him their addresses or phone numbers.

Maybe the janitor would have come to clean by Christmas Eve. She would have to plan a way to make a lot of noise if she heard any movement in the building. Nah, the janitor would probably clean at the last possible time, right before classes resumed. Or he might just empty the wastebaskets and lie about the rest. The room had been crusty with years of dirt on the first day of class in August, when it was supposed to have been washed and waxed. He probably had cleaned on the first floor, whatever rooms the principal would walk by, and left it at that, doing just enough to cover his ass. The principal was hugely obese, no longer young, either, and she rarely waddled far. Jean couldn't remember even once seeing her on the second or third floors; the assistant principal, a skinny, nervous fellow, was the one who did stairs. And when he came, it was usually to complain to and about teachers, not to check on the janitor, with whom he was on friendly terms.

Her head still hurt, and her bruises were aching, but, all in all, given what she'd been through, she didn't feel that bad. She'd take another painkiller, make some coffee and maybe some instant oatmeal. Fix some lemonade too. She was hungry for protein and fat, bacon and eggs on a biscuit, but there was not much use in thinking about that. It occurred to her, though, that she did have some fake bacon chips to sprinkle on salads she brought for lunch, along with an oil and vinegar dressing and maybe some croutons.

The radio was playing classical music now, the Pachelbel Canon. She had struggled with that for a while on the piano, and was adequate on the sections with mostly half notes and even quarter notes, but she had never achieved the speed that made the eighth notes, in the measures crammed with them, sound much faster than the quarter notes. She ought to get that music out again and quit fooling around with playing carols. She was tired of them. She wished she could get a new piano too, and stop getting repairs on her old upright. Not that it would improve her

playing of Pachelbel.

Ah well, she should try to get up and use her lovely chamber pot again. And she wanted to brush her teeth and take some painkiller. Thank goodness she had obsessively brought all her necessities here. There was even a mirror placed so the sun shone in on her face, which was probably a nice black-and-blue sight. It was apparently a beautiful, sunny day, dazzling with the snow packed around the window, and she would have bright light to assess the damage done to her face and head. She could even use a pocket mirror to see what the back of her head looked like, where her hair was matted with blood.

She pushed herself up into a sitting position. Still a little dizzy and weak, still sore, but better than she expected. It was good that she didn't have to try to get up again from the floor. Her knees seemed older than the rest of her. It was getting embarrassing when she fell while skiing and had to struggle so hard to get up.

She was shaky when she first stood up, and she sat back down and waited, then tried again. She took her time with everything, using her office chair on wheels as a walker, to move between the sink and desk areas, where almost all of her personal things were within reach.

Her bloody and bruised image in the mirror was frightening. She had a towel, wash cloth, and soap, and using them to clean off the blood made a big improvement. She even put her head under the hot water spigot, to wash the clotted blood from her hair. Then she was cold and had to put on her hat.

As cold as it was outside, she thought, it was not really too bad in here, not with the sun shining in. If she hadn't washed her hair, she might have taken off her coat, or at least unbuttoned it. It was good that she had on pants and a long sleeved turtleneck under her sweater.

She chopped her one apple into her oatmeal and put plenty of hazel flavored creamer in her coffee. Usually she would have read while eating, and she did have a novel in her purse, but with no place to go and nothing to do, she concentrated on how good the food tasted. She even closed her eyes now and then, to appreciate it more.

She thought how glad she was that she had rid the place of the cockroaches she had seen when she first came to this school, in the fall. She had tried killing them by spreading the fine powder of diatomaceous earth around, and—lo and behold!—it had worked. At the microscopic level of a roach's gut, the powder was like shards of glass, ingested when the roach licked its feet and legs to clean them. It was even made of the same material, silica, that was in glass, and was nothing but the crushed shells of tiny, ornate sea organisms called diatoms. No poison. It was safe enough to incorporate into a lesson.

She had even let students come up to her desk one at a time and look at the powder under a microscope. Of course, even doing her best to watch both the class and the single student at the microscope like a hawk, she had had problems. She could not really take in everything that was going on in the room, in every direction, while trying to assist a student at the microscope. When she focused on the room, the microscope took a beating. Concentrating on helping with the microscope, she was at risk of being hit with whatever students were currently throwing at teachers. Sometimes she wondered why she even tried. But she could not let herself do less than the best she could, and there were always a few who really took an interest and maybe others who were interested but thought it would look uncool to show it. She knew that labs were rare in this school, not just because the kids would act up, but because teachers had to buy the materials from their own money. In her room, she had a few working microscopes, and that was it. Actually, at the moment they were stored on a shelf right in front of her. Maybe she would fiddle around with them today, look at stuff just for fun.

She washed her breakfast dishes, humming to the Mozart on the radio. Something from *The Magic Flute*. She sat and listened till the piece ended, then finished the dishes.

She tentatively planned lunch, crackers with peanut butter, instant split pea soup, and raisins. A couple of the chocolate kisses. Thinking of them, she took one now. Then she took a piece of hard butterscotch candy as well, for after the chocolate, to keep her mind off taking more chocolate. Thank goodness last week she had filled a tall glass jar with hard candies,

mostly peppermint and butterscotch.

A long day with nothing particular to do stretched ahead of her. And no doubt another after that. And who knew how many more? She could take care of her meals and grooming, and she could listen to the radio. She even had a harmonica she had been trying to learn at lunchtime on some days, when she was sure adjoining rooms were unoccupied. She could rest, although she wouldn't want to sleep all day and then be awake all night. Without exercise, falling to sleep on a hard desk might not be so easy. There was enough room to do simple yoga and stretching routines, if she moved a few things around and felt good enough. But sometimes sheer boredom, which she might well experience here, could knock her out. So far she was worried rather than bored. If she could just live in the moment, the way they say dogs do, until she was discovered and freed, she had plenty of ways to entertain herself, all much more enjoyable than teaching here. She wasn't exactly comfortable, but she had been less comfortable on many camping trips and while traveling, and this had to be temporary.

She could read her novel, which she had already read twice before but still liked, Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*. She thought she would also like to look over the out-of-date texts stored in this room, biology books from a time before DNA structure was known, earth science books from before the theory of tectonic plates was accepted.

The history of science fascinated her, the way each generation thought they had all the answers, and then some new breakthrough changed the way everyone thought. Well, not everyone. She could never believe how many people—not just students here, either—would have nothing to do with the idea of evolution, even as the pathogens that attacked their own bodies, the bacteria and viruses, were rapidly evolving to outwit antibiotics and their bodies' defense mechanisms. Jean's ex-husband had dismissed the idea of evolution as repugnant, insulting him by linking him to apes. It was the apes who should have been insulted, she thought to herself.

She looked around the room. There was a pile of boxes in the corner that she had barely

looked into. They were full of odds and ends of mostly broken plaster models of body parts, human and otherwise, and of land formations. Specimens of plants under glass or animals in preservative. There were very old flash cards for bird study, an insect guide from early in the twentieth century, lots of battered and broken things she probably would not be able to use to teach, but which could easily give her entertainment for a few days.

Another corner held the television and VCR, on its cart, that she had used to show a video on genes the previous Thursday. She had never used it for anything but showing educational tapes, but there was a small chance she might be able to get public television. She would save that for tonight, when she might want to try to get British comedies. Or she might just keep the radio on. She liked to listen to Prairie Home Companion every Saturday, but maybe she should listen to see what came on public radio after that. If no one came to find her, which was very likely, she would be able to fill her day with activities she usually enjoyed. She sipped her lemonade and thought of all the lemons life had given her.

Since she had plenty of time to do what she planned, and was still bothered by a headache, she decided for the time being to just lie back down and listen to the music on the radio. Since it was still morning, she didn't think doing that would affect her ability to fall asleep tonight.

Lying on the desk again with her feet propped up, she returned to the problem of what to get Alice for Christmas, even if it turned out that both the shopping and the celebration happened at some later time. Maybe she would take her to dinner and a play. Was Alice dating anyone now? she wondered. She could be, as she usually never said anything until she was ready to introduce the man to Jean. If she was seeing someone, then it would be better to give her a pair of tickets, but she had better talk to her about it and not let it be a surprise. Otherwise, it could be a disaster.

And what about Mel? She liked him, could probably love him if he let her, but he was so exasperating. What he really needed for Christmas was a housekeeper or a laundress. Maybe

membership in a fancy beer of the month club, if there was such a thing. Pizza automatically delivered once a week.

The more she thought about it, the stronger her tendency was to just get him what she knew he needed, like underwear and socks and towels, which he was too lazy to shop for. He wouldn't be thrilled, but no matter what she got him, he wouldn't be thrilled. Look how he had wasted that two-for-one coupon book. She just couldn't get him up off his lazy ass.

Maybe all his energy was sapped by his job. She knew he didn't like being a public aid caseworker. It seemed like the paperwork—computer work really—just kept increasing, and so did his caseload, as funds for the program shrank. And he couldn't really change careers, not and make payments on his kid's college tuition.

She did sympathize with him, and he with her. They spent a lot of time commiserating with each other, each believing the other's job was as bad as his own or her own. He couldn't see how she took all the verbal abuse from the kids, but he envied her shorter hours and longer vacations, even if she did have to spend some of that time planning lessons or grading papers. And she thought that the amount of paperwork he had was horrendous, but that at least most people were courteous to him, afraid of his power over their welfare money.

The last time they had slept together, last weekend, it had been so sweet, and then she had ruined it by pushing for commitment. Or maybe he had ruined it by forever avoiding commitment. But it had been ruined, and when he went home they were barely being civil to each other. Of course it had affected her much more than him. He was still looking forward to lounging on his couch and watching sports all Sunday, while she had been barely able to concentrate on anything, thinking all the while about why she should or should not break up with him. He had called Wednesday and talked vaguely about getting together on the weekend, and she had snapped at him, because he wouldn't be specific about when and to do what. Maybe they really were coasting downhill toward a crash.

But there was the fact that she liked to be with him, not just in bed, but in

companionship. Whenever she could drag him away from the tube. She'd probably get more companionship from a pet, a cat or dog.

She thought about that. She had been considering getting a dog. A cat would be more practical, and she thought that sooner or later she would take in a stray or go to a shelter and adopt one, but a cat wouldn't be a good hiking partner, one of the things she wanted. She hiked alone often in the forest preserves around the city, and whenever a man approached or passed her, especially if he was running, she felt nervous. A dog would make her at least feel safer. But she loved dogs anyway, and cats too. She had almost gone to the shelter over Thanksgiving and then had decided to wait, in case she wanted to go cross country skiing over the Christmas break. That was the trouble with having a pet and living alone; it tied you down or at least forced you to make sometimes complicated arrangements.

Thank goodness, she hadn't gotten a dog at Thanksgiving. It would be waiting frantically at home right now, peeing and pooping and chewing things up, worried sick about where the alpha member of his abbreviated pack was. Or more likely, the dog would be alpha to her beta. She would be crazy with worry right now if she had a dog waiting at home, hungry and maybe even out of water. If she got a pup, maybe she should wait until summer vacation. A pup would need a lot of training. For a while she thought about what kind of dog she would like and whether an older dog would be better than a puppy. She knew that the decision would really be made at a shelter and would be based on emotion as much as logic, but it was still fun to speculate.

She thought about her friend, Judy, also a biology teacher, already off on a cruise. She and Judy had taught together before Jean had made this move, and since then they had tried to maintain their friendship. But it had been easier when they could eat lunch together every day. Still, if Judy had not been traveling, they would have gotten together during the vacation. But in these circumstances Judy would have never been able to reach her, and, like everybody else, would just think Jean was out and about, not courteous enough to return calls.

The morning passed quickly, and then there was a leisurely lunch, a short nap, and the Huxley novel. Then she listened to A Prairie Home Companion on the radio and ate a supper of Ramen noodles, with a small V8, and some granola and dried fruit for dessert. She added up the calories she had consumed for the day and was quite proud of herself when she saw that she could consider herself to be dieting.

She gave up on the television, which seemed to need either a better antenna or a cable hookup to rid itself of the jitters, but she was happy enough just lying and listening to the music on public radio. She had a pile of VCR tapes, and nature programs for her class were not the only things on them. She thought there were some movies and music specials; she would check the tapes tomorrow. She allowed herself a few more chocolate kisses before stretching out on the desk again.

Lying there, she thought longingly of her shower at home, in her wonderful bathroom with a flush toilet. She thought of her full refrigerator, of her comfortable bed. Of her piano. She thought of how she didn't have to wear a coat to keep warm at home, although she did dress warmly and keep the thermostat low to conserve energy.

Even so, she was surprised to realize that she hadn't had a bad day. She had done nothing but relax. There had been no pressure to accomplish anything but the most simple tasks, like making her coffee or brushing her teeth. She had not been bothered by anyone and had been interested in everything she did. It was almost like a retreat, the kind where you live simply and keep a vow of silence. Only she had not been silent. She had been singing or humming along with the radio most of the time. Almost as if she were happy.

Chapter 7

Mel had fallen asleep too early the night before, and so he woke up too early on Saturday morning, about 4 a.m. This put him in a bad mood, which he directed toward Jean. He would not leave her any more messages. He had left enough. He would just wait for her to call him.

He thought about getting up and making some coffee. But if he did that, he really ought to use the time to clean the place up and do his laundry. If Jean were here, she would not be able to stop herself from tidying up and helping him fold the laundry. She did see through him, though. She had accused him many times of saving all his house cleaning and laundry for her visits. He knew she did just the opposite, and always gave her place a good cleaning if she knew he would be coming over. He knew that because it always looked worse when he just dropped by, or called at the last minute, than when he planned in advance to come over. Not really dirty or badly cluttered, like his place, just not in apple pie order.

He wished he had the newspaper to read. He decided that as soon as it was light he would go get the paper and some breakfast. He would walk through the snow instead of driving, the whole two blocks to MacDonalds, to burn off some of his breakfast. By the time he came back, maybe Jean would have called.

He turned over and closed his eyes again for a few minutes. The next thing he knew, it was 8:30. He took his time dressing, and then he followed his plan, reading the entire paper while eating the biggest breakfast on the menu at MacDonald's, which was on sale and

therefore justifiable, and having a free refills of coffee. By the time he got back home, it was 10:30. Jean had had plenty of time to call him, but she hadn't.

Okay, now he was getting angry. But he'd be damned if he'd call her.

He looked at the piles of dirty laundry he had accumulated. He had put on his last clean underwear. He would either have to wash clothes or once again just buy more underwear. But his sheets were dirty too. Bite the bullet, he told himself. Do your laundry and clean your house. Reluctantly, he set to work.

* * * * *

Jim called Alice in the early afternoon and said that Samantha wanted him to get a Christmas tree. They were going to go out and buy one, and get decorations too. He wanted to know if she'd like to join them.

In Alice's mind, Jim had been on the way out. This put him back in, she thought, way in. She dropped everything and drove to his house. By the time she got home, at about 11:30 that night, she was thinking she might be in love.

She was happy, and she didn't even think about checking her answering machine for messages, or where her mother might be. She was thinking of nothing but Jim. He was going to visit his parents in New York for a week, catching a plane on Monday, and he wouldn't be around for Christmas, so Alice could do whatever Jean wanted to do for the holiday anyway, either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. And when Jim came back, they had a date for New Year's Eve. Alice had been alone on New Year's Eve for two years running, and the year before that, she had been miserable, with a man she didn't much like, at a party she wasn't enjoying. This year would be different. She had a hard time relaxing, and lay in bed for hours before she finally fell asleep.

* * * * *

On Sunday morning, Mel was steamed. Jean should have called him back. Unless she had gone on a weekend trip with a new lover, which he didn't really believe, she was deliberately ignoring his messages, probably to get even with him over imagined injustices. They had had quite a few words lately about his inability to commit to even a particular evening together, much less to a married life. She was getting even, but it wasn't fair. She knew he was still paying child support, putting kids through college, and she herself had just been officially divorced, although she'd been separated for years. He thought she ought to let him enjoy what little freedom he could get.

Nevertheless, they were friends, and when she left messages for him, he called her back. He decided he had to know what was going on, but he wasn't going to call her again; instead, he would go directly to her house and find out firsthand. And if she was shacked up with some new guy, so be it.

Driving to her house, he muttered to himself the whole way. He would tell her this; he would tell her that. Then maybe they could make up and figure out something to do for Christmas. He didn't like making a big deal out of Christmas, but he didn't think he wanted to be alone either. He and Jean had fun together.

By the time he got to her house, he was thinking more about making up, and spending Christmas together, than he was about being angry. He was ready to make some kind of joke when she opened the door.

But as soon as he saw two newspapers on her porch, the mail still in her box, and her sidewalk unshoveled with no car and no tracks, he knew she had gone away some place. Without even telling him. He felt hurt. Was she just gone for the weekend? For her whole vacation? She liked nature study weekends and trips and had gone on several since she and Mel had been together. She went hiking and skiing with people Mel didn't know. But she had always told him she was going. On the other hand, they had been fighting a lot and maybe she

didn't think she owed him any kind of explanation. It also wasn't impossible, just unlikely, that she took a trip with another man. He knew that in the past she had taken a few vacations to warm places during the Christmas break, but he felt sure that she would have told him if she were planning something like that. But maybe something came up at the last minute, some teacher had paid for some tour and then couldn't go. He doubted it, but, again, it wasn't totally impossible.

He admitted to himself that he wanted to know where she was, and that he didn't want it to be with another man. He did care for her. It was just that he wanted things to stay as they were. He wasn't ready for marriage.

He got back in his car and started back home. Then he had a thought. Jean's daughter Alice might know if she had gone on a trip. He didn't know Alice well, or have her phone number, but he knew where she lived, because he and Jean had helped her move there a few months earlier. He turned the car toward Alice's house.

* * * * *

"I don't know," Alice said. "Ordinarily Jean tells me if she's going on a birding weekend or something, but not always." She was surprised and a little embarrassed by Mel's visit. She had been reading the Sunday papers in her bathrobe, her hair not even combed. He was looking around at the mess from her breakfast. She'd really like to get rid of him. She thought he was over-reacting.

"You don't think there's any chance that something could have happened to her?" Mel was starting to look a little worried. "At work, maybe, or driving home?"

"I think I would have been notified." Alice was starting to wonder if her mother had maybe found a new guy and was giving Mel his walking papers. The last time Alice had talked to her, she had complained a lot about Mel. He was a slob, he'd never make any plans, he never

wanted to go out, stuff like that. And if Jean had met somebody new, she wouldn't necessarily say anything to Alice until she thought it was going to last. Just like Alice might not have mentioned Jim if she had continued to have doubts about seeing more of him.

"Yeah," Mel agreed. "The school would have called you. And I know she has emergency information in her purse and car. But it's still strange. Somehow, I think it wouldn't hurt to call the police."

Alice was doubtful. "There have been plenty of other weekends when she's gone to something, and I didn't know where she was. She might not like it if we have the police asking everybody about her." Particularly, Alice thought, if she met someone new and is with him.

"But what if something bad has happened to her," Mel persisted, "and she's missing or something?"

"I don't think that's very likely. It would be different if either of us always knew her every move, and she wasn't where she's supposed to be. But most of the time I don't know what she's doing. And I don't think you do either."

"I suppose you're right," Mel said. "But I'm starting to get worried. I just have this gut feeling that something is wrong."

"I'll tell you what," Alice said, "we'll keep trying to reach her, and if she's not home by tomorrow, maybe we should call the police together, and both give them any information they want. But if she comes back from some little trip and is mad about us calling the police, I'm blaming you."

"Okay."

"Now you've got *me* worried a little," Alice told him, "but I really think she just decided at the last minute to go to some event and didn't let either of us know. Maybe when she heard the forecast of snow, she decided to go cross country skiing. Anyway, here, take my phone number, and give me yours." She wrote her number down and handed it to him, taking his number in exchange. "We'll talk tomorrow." She stood up, so he would know it was time to

go.

Chapter 8

Doreen turned the water pressure in the shower as low as possible and then got out of the shower and pressed her head against the wall above the toilet. Her brother Tom was in the adjoining bedroom, talking low on the phone, and she wanted to hear anything he said about the business with Miss K. She had no doubts at all that he was lying, but he might tell the truth to a friend.

“Stop laughing, bro,” he was saying, laughing himself. “That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it. Come on, you owe me one. All you have to say is that you were waiting in the hall for me, and when you looked into the room, she was throwing her arms around me. Is that so hard to do for a buddy?”

There was silence. Then Tom continued. “It don’t really matter if you can’t say it with a straight face, because it’s funny that the old bat would come on to me.”

More silence. “I know you’re on probation, but I can make it worth your while.”
Silence. “Yeah, man, I can get you some of that. Just think it over fast and let me know. I need a witness.”

Still more silence. “I thought we were tight, man. You know what? You can forget it. Plenty guys would jump to do me a favor. Just don’t come runnin’ to me when you need shit.”
The phone slammed.

Doreen got back in the shower and started to wash her hair.

Tom banged on the bathroom door. “How long you gonna be in there? I gotta go.”

“What did you say? I can’t hear you,” Doreen said. She didn’t want him thinking she might have heard him. She’d love to expose him for the liar he was, but she was afraid of how

he might get even. She had given up tattling on him or arguing with him long ago, because he could always find ways to really hurt her for it.

“I said to hurry the fuck up,” he yelled, giving the door a couple of bangs for emphasis.

“I’m almost done,” she said, and she quickly rinsed her hair and threw on a robe. When she came out of the bathroom, she was surprised to see him dressed in a standard, almost preppy way, with his pants in normal position instead of falling off his butt.

“What you lookin’ at?” he growled, shoving past her into the bathroom.

She could hear her mother coming up the stairs from the laundromat, dragging herself slowly up. The stairs were steep, and her mother always made heavy use of the handrail and arrived panting at the top.

“Where’s Tom?” she asked Doreen. “I told him to be ready and waiting for me. I gotta get back to work.”

“In the bathroom.”

Her mother motioned for Doreen to come close, by the front door, and then whispered to her. “I’m making him go to the police station. I figure it’ll call his bluff if he’s lying. You think there’s any chance this teacher would do what he said?”

Doreen emphatically nodded a “no,” making a face that indicated she thought the idea was ridiculous.

The bathroom door opened, and Doreen pretended to be brushing hair off her mother’s shoulders.

There was a lot going on at the police station, with a rowdy and drunken husband and wife each claiming to be a victim of domestic abuse. From the looks of them, they were both telling the truth. Tom and his mother were told to sit down, and for a while they became

engrossed by the show.

An officer came up to them. "What're you here for?" he said.

"My son wants to report that he was sexually abused by a female teacher."

The policeman's eyes looked Tom up and down in disbelief. "Hold on," he said.

He went over to a desk and came back with a form. He spoke to the mother and handed her the form as well. "I've seen Tom here before," he said, "although it looks like he doesn't remember me. On a drug bust that involved prostitutes. So if you really think your son is an innocent victim in this case, the thing to do is fill out this form here and give us a copy and the original to the principal when school opens up again. Then the principal can decide if he wants to call us in. We'll hold our copy until school starts again."

Several other policemen had stopped to listen, and Tom's mother could see them smirking at each other and rolling their eyes.

"Thank you," she said, grabbing the form. She and Tom sat at a little table as far from everyone as they could get. She filled it out, quietly asking Tom questions, very aware that others were trying to hear. She wrote hurriedly, and when she was done tore off a copy and handed it to the officer. Then she took Tom's arm and propelled him toward the door. "Nice," she said to him when they got outside. "Nice that you've gotten such a reputation that I'm ashamed to be seen with you. Can't even read and write well enough to fill out that simple form yourself."

Tom just shrugged, and they walked back home in silence.

Chapter 9.

The first thing Jean noticed when she woke up on Sunday was the smell of the chamber pot. She looked over to see if its cover was on. It was, and it did hold in the smell. But every time she opened the pot to use it, the odor seemed to fill the small room. The little air hole in the window brought in a draft and let some of the smell out, but it wasn't enough. She tried to think of some way to solve this, but nothing came to her except to try to force open the window that wasn't cracked, which she thought was nailed to stay shut.

If the room stank like this after one day, she thought, what would it be like if she were in here for the whole vacation? She could just imagine the scene: The kids can't get in the room, and the principal or a security guard comes to investigate. She bangs on the closet door when they enter the room, and someone comes to open it. As they do, a wall of stench causes everyone in the room to keel over. The story spreads, and from that moment, in the halls or as she tries to teach classes, students call "P.U." and laugh at her. They draw turds on her blackboard.

This scenario, which was possible, except that the students would scream and run, holding their noses, instead of keeling over, put Jean totally out of sorts. She reached into the cabinet under the sink and took out a box of laundry baking soda that she had brought in to clean up the room in August. It was supposed to absorb smells, but this job was going to be too big. What else could she do? She remembered some charcoal in a box with old fish tank stuff. But there wasn't much; she needed to find a way to hang it on the container top.

Cloth was what she needed, to shape into a bag. Maybe she could use a paper bag, or a plastic bag attached in a way that would keep it open. Then she had a thought and looked in the drawer where she kept makeup and toothpaste. She might have a spare pair of pantyhose rolled up, in case she ripped ones she was wearing. No, she remembered she had used those, but there

was something better—a spare pair of knee-length hose. Ideal! She put a paper towel in the foot of one stocking and filled it with baking soda and charcoal. Then she tied the top of the stocking to the bucket handle so that her deodorizer would dangle inside. *Voila!*

Next she looked at the window. Nails on the top corners of the bottom frame went through the top frame and held the two frames together in a locked position. All she would probably need was the little hammer she had used to hang pictures in the classroom. In minutes, she had the window propped open and frigid, but fresh, air was blasting in. As long as she had done this, she might as well tape over the hole in the other window, she thought. So she did that too.

She stood by the open window, gulping in the sweet air. The window faced an inner courtyard, never used as far as she knew, but with the potential to be a lovely garden. Maybe in the school's early days, this space had a function. All that was left now were a few trees around a picnic bench, and paths leading to various access doors. The snow cover and some house sparrows made it look pleasant, but if she looked to one side, she could see the east wing of the building, which only went up two floors. There, she saw boarded broken windows, and a roof covered with all kinds of garbage, concealed at the moment by litter, mostly pop cans thrown up there. She watched sparrows for a while and then started to shiver with the cold.

Satisfied with her work, she closed the window again, vowing to air out the room as needed. She started her coffee, turned on the radio, and washed her hands and face, thinking in the meantime about what she would eat for breakfast. She would have to think seriously about rationing and having small portions, in case she really were here the full two weeks. She was almost certain to lose weight, and she imagined someone asking her if she had been to a spa during the vacation. The idea made her laugh out loud, but then she thought that when she was discovered it might be on the news, and she would be a well known victim. Unlikely. The school would hush it up. If all the outrageous things that happened in the city schools got on the television news, there would be no time for anything else, like inane comments about the

weather. The only times schools were covered in the news were when the union was negotiating a contract or when low annual test scores came out. Then for a while the teacher bashing would be nonstop, deploring tenure and promoting merit pay, never mentioning that tenure was a weapon against favoritism and unfair firings.

The day before, she had discovered something in a back corner of the cabinet under the sink. It was a bag of canned goods, probably collected for the annual Thanksgiving food drive, and then for some reason never turned in. But it clearly was not for the last food drive before she came, a year ago, because the food was in a grocery bag imprinted with the name of a chain of groceries that had been out of business for many years. And in that bag were some cans containing the protein she was finding herself craving. Among vegetables and soup cans, there were cans of tuna, corned beef hash, chili, Vienna sausages, and Spam.

What would she find if she opened them? She wondered if it would be food that was still usable, if perhaps less tasty, or if she would see a mass of decayed material. Perhaps it would look and smell fine, but botulism would lurk within. Theoretically, having been sterilized in a sealed and airtight container, the food should still be fine. There were no stamps on them that said "Use before such and such a date." She was tempted to open a can, but she thought about what would happen if she got very sick, or even got diarrhea, in this little prison.

She tried to put the meat out of her mind and pulled out her box of granola, also allowing herself one piece of chocolate and an apple. She looked at her container of powdered lemonade and tried to decide if it there were enough to give her a glass a day for two weeks, if it came to that. Only, she thought, if she used it sparingly. So she made some weak juice. At home, this is the time when she would also have taken her vitamins, and she didn't feel right about skipping them.

Munching on her breakfast, sipping her coffee, she began for the first time to think about what had happened with Tom. She had been trying not to think about it, because it was so upsetting. Not all that surprising, though. The fact that she had been trapped here, unable to call

the police and make a report, was due to the strange setup of the door locks, which Tom didn't even know about, as far as she knew.

But even if she had not been locked in, she would not have been able to go from the third to the first floor and make a phone call, provided the offices with phones were still unlocked by the time she got downstairs. She had been semi-conscious, dizzy, unable to help herself. Her anger grew as she thought about the fact that when she pressed the buzzer for help, school was still in session and someone should have come. She must stress that fact when she finally got a chance to report this to the police.

She didn't feel much one way or another about Tom, at least not until she had to be near him again, when she would certainly feel fear and revulsion. She had seen so many desperate and hopeless young men in her classes, turning all their bad experiences outside the classroom into aggression inside the classroom. Or maybe he had not had bad experiences. His mother seemed ineffectual but not unkind. Jean didn't know if his character was malformed by social conditions and poverty or not. There were plenty of malicious people with loving parents and wealth who held high positions in governments and corporations, and who did more damage than Tom could imagine. Some people just seemed to be no good. But even they, she mused, probably had people they loved and treated kindly, people who loved them back. Was it a craving for power, or maybe for money, that made people behave badly? Revenge? Ignorance? Some flaw in human nature? It was beyond her.

She believed that she herself tried to be good and fair to everyone, to be a good and helpful teacher. And yet day after day she was almost reviled by students and administrators alike. Maybe she should have stayed at her old school. She had been a science teacher within the special education department there, with small classes of high school students who had primary grade skills. Attendance had been poor at that school too, and if a dozen students were assigned to a class there were days when she would have less than half. But here she had 25 or so enrolled in a class, and there were periods of the day, like 8th, when only three or four would

show up regularly, and the rest would come once or twice a week, or even once or twice a month.

She had transferred because she wanted to teach biology more fully than she could to the special ed students who couldn't read. But in fact, she had been able to do regular lab work, using her own supplies there too, with the special ed kids, even though their behavior had sometimes been far out of line. Here, the majority could read at about a 5th grade level, or at least that's what she estimated as she listened to them stumble on the words in their text. The test scores the school claimed, though still very low, were somewhat better, but she didn't know any teacher who believed those scores were honest reflections of reality. Somewhere along the line, things got doctored, maybe by throwing out really low tests, maybe by not counting certain kids, maybe by not having absentees make up tests. Nobody knew, but what the teachers did know was that their students barely understood the textbooks, if, in fact, there were even texts available. Two of Jean's current groups had to share a single in-class set of books, and that set was dwindling, no matter how hard she tried to keep track of every book.

What really bothered her about these kids was not that they were poor readers or that they didn't show much desire to learn; it was that they were far ruder and more openly rebellious than most of those she had known in her special ed classes. Ganging up on teachers day after day was a favorite activity here. If she tried to explain a lab to some of them, their response might be to tell her, "Shut up, bitch." From black students, it might be, "white bitch," which made her wonder how it had come to be that expressions of racial prejudice from students were no big deal. She had been called plenty of names in her last school too, and all through her career, but in most places it stood out a little, as an incident, once a day or maybe once a week, something that might make a teacher call a parent. Here, it was routine.

Here, kids wandered the halls all day long, dropping into classes and walking out of them at will, sometimes not even their own classes. Many teachers found that the only way to have a semblance of order in their classrooms was to assign lots of writing, usually answers to

chapter questions, or maybe copying something from the chalk board that they would otherwise never look at, due at the end of the period. At least some students would do this, and others might simply leave the room or put their heads down and go to sleep. Trying to actually teach, giving even short lectures, having discussions or group work or labs, all of that excited the students, but not necessarily in a good way, academically, so that they did the work. It made them act worse. Still, Jean would not settle for giving assignments that were better than nothing but not really the best. She was excited by her subject and had to try to pass on her enthusiasm, even if it only worked one time out of a hundred.

But the kids needed more than to listen to her. They needed to read and study, and the book problem was going to be worse here too. In June, as lockers were cleaned out and books thrown all over the hall, she knew she was going to find that she would have to write out bills for close to half the books she had given out, books that had not been returned. Some of them would be lying in the halls, but most would be in student's homes. In theory, the students would have to pay for these books before they could graduate, but the dropout rate was so high that the students who didn't use or return their books were unlikely ever to graduate. And so teachers like Jean would be blamed for the book loss, and next year all her classes would probably be sharing an in-class set. But she would still be expected to assign homework, homework that was rarely done even if students did have the books. Amazingly, she would also still be told to give each student a book, just as if she actually had books.

And amid all this chaos and disruption, the sports teams and their players reigned supreme, functioning under their own rules. She was surprised that Tom had been put off the football team; that usually didn't happen. She knew it wasn't because of discipline and truancy reports she had made, since it was obvious nobody paid attention to those. He must have been smartmouthing one of the coaches, or maybe a friend of one of the coaches.

The public and legislators seemed to be clueless about what went on in the low achieving schools. They talked about incompetent teachers and created elaborate testing

schemes to make these teachers accountable. In fact, there were good and not so good teachers in these schools, as there were everywhere else, but if the students didn't show up and then spent all their time misbehaving, and they did this year after year, they would not make progress, no matter who was their teacher. It seemed so obvious.

She thought back on her own high school years, at a school which in those days had a good reputation and sent many students on to college. It was a very orderly place, and she fondly remembered a few outstanding teachers, but only a few. With the rest, she had learned mostly from studying her texts and doing assignments, exactly what the kids here never did. She had never expected that her own learning depended on anything other than her own studying; if a teacher was motivating or made a subject exciting, that was great. But the responsibility for learning was hers, not theirs.

Jean made herself another cup of coffee, thinking that there was not much sense in going over and over these problems. She had already spent so much time doing that, every day as she drove home, and then again with Mel or Alice, who were probably sick of listening to her. She was tired of problems without answers, which is why she was eating lunch in her room this year instead of sharing in the lunchroom gripe sessions. What she ought to do is get out of teaching altogether. Find a job where she got a modicum of respect and had a fair chance of success. Like what, though, she wondered. She had sent in lots of resumes to businesses over the years without even getting responses.

Now things seemed to be getting even worse, she thought. The violence here was certainly worse, even before this catastrophe with Tom. And the hypocrisy was worse, brought on even at her old school by the pressure for standards and testing, which eventually led to an illusion of success for those who cheated.

When she had started teaching, it was a given that if you taught at a school where the students had tremendous social problems, terrible attendance, and the resulting poor skills, you worked with each student at whatever level he or she was at, doing everything you could do

engage interest and improve skills and understanding. So she had individualized, made adjustments, started clubs, organized special trips, improvised with available materials and spent a lot of money on more. The work was demanding and creative, but individual small successes motivated her.

All that was out. There was no time, only a pressure for all students to perform at a standard level, no matter where they started. And if they didn't, it was the teacher's fault. And strangely, as if by miracle, though teachers saw worsening rather than improvements, scores did rise. Students dropped out, or were thrown out, or were sent to alternative schools out of the testing range.

As if the standardized tests in reading and math weren't enough of a debacle, the St. Richards board also had decided that the city schools would have additional tests in the other subject areas, written by city staff. Teachers would have daily plans to follow, also written by staff, but not by the same staff, so that the tests that emerged didn't match the daily plans, which incidentally were based on texts and lab materials that could not be afforded and were so far nonexistent. Crowning all this, the teachers had to write individual plans as well, which were supposed to show what part of the city's plan they were fulfilling, and also what part of the state's plan, which did not match any of the other plans, or the textbook.

It was a farce, a scam, leaving a paper trail of conflicting goals and achievements where few existed. Jean lied on her lesson plans, doing what every other teacher did, except perhaps in math, where goals and skills were more standardized. Her lesson plans faked coordination of what could not be coordinated, lessons which could not be accomplished because the only thing that made sense in her classroom, faced with students who just dropped in once in a while, was to work with each student where he or she was, trying to find something that could be accomplished. That is, if the class would settle down and do any work at all.

She sighed. Enough of dwelling on what couldn't be fixed, at least not by her alone. She was doing her best, everything she could think of, helping some students on some days,

once in a while seeing a student happy or proud to understand something or get a good grade, Spending her own money to try to at least have some simple hands-on materials once in a while, when behavior permitted.

Teaching had always been hard, but there had been better years. For a few years, a long time ago, she had been at a school where the kids came with all the same problems, but there had been a good principal, a man who kept order in the school and supported his teachers. She had been happy there, and had organized all sorts of extra things, like camping trips. And then there had been a budget crisis, and, after cuts in staff, teachers had been shifted within the system, based on seniority. She had been sent to a dismal school, a lot like this one, and had suffered there until she had transferred to the special ed assignment.

The more she thought about the gap between what was possible for these students and their teachers, and what they got, the angrier Jean became. It was time to stop thinking about it. Every time she went to the doctor, her blood pressure was a little higher, and she was a little more stressed out. She hated to think what her blood pressure might be now, with her medication inaccessible at home. She was burned out, ready to quit teaching if she could find something else, and, at the same time, if somebody offered her a teaching job in an orderly school, with ordinary supplies and books, she would jump at it, as excited about teaching as she had been in her twenties.

It was already lunch time. She thought of that meat again, and once again she rejected it. She wanted it a lot, but she just couldn't risk food poisoning. She treated herself with more chocolate and again spread some peanut butter on crackers. She wanted still more chocolate, but settled for a handful of cocoa puffs.

She needed to find some practical task to do to raise her out of this funk. She knew what she should do, which also happened to be about the last thing she wanted to do. She had a briefcase full of papers to grade, records to update, and lesson materials to prepare. She would have to type the plans on her computer at home, but she could make longhand notes now, and

she could work on papers and records.

The disgraceful attendance report for December would be due the first day back, January 5th. She would probably have about 20% attendance, if that, and it would be considered her fault. She knew for a fact that the other rooms on her floor were just as empty when classes were in session. Were they all in trouble with the principal, like her, for low attendance? She didn't think so. The only thing she could see was that teachers didn't report the truth that would get them in trouble. And she couldn't blame them. She was the perfect example of what would happen to you if you tried to be honest.

She decided against doing her paperwork. She was in a bad enough mood already. She would be better off finding something to play with.

She dug in the box with the old bird flash cards and tested herself. Still bad on the confusing warblers and flycatchers, and horrible on the shorebirds, which was no surprise, since she was never close to any shore.

The box also had an insect collection, only partly eaten away by beetles, and an antique field guide to the insects. And she had the microscopes. She made some more coffee and settled down to an absorbing afternoon of trying to identify insect species under magnification. After a while, she was feeling pretty happy, and the time flew.

At dinner time, she thought about those cans for quite a long while, but she cooked some more Ramen noodles and opened a chocolate pudding container. She was feeling like she might have dropped a pound or two, but it was probably too soon. It would be really nice if she at least got a little weight loss out of this experience. Not worth it, of course, but nice.

After what passed for dinner, she decided to try some simple stretching exercises and maybe do something aerobic, like jogging in place. Her head was feeling normal, unless she touched the sore place, but she was still very achy. She had bruises in quite a few places, but nothing really debilitating. She found an oldies station playing rock and roll, and she decided that dancing would be more fun. So she stretched a little, danced a lot, singing along as well,

and then she stretched some more. She had been dancing on a Sunday night, she thought to herself, something Mel never would have wanted to do.

It was almost time to sleep. She read for a while, sipping an herbal tea, and then found some quiet music, brushed her teeth, and lay down. She had been wearing her coat all this time, except for during her exercising. The coat was all the more necessary because of her periodic window openings, to air the place out.

She wondered if Mel or Alice had been trying to reach her. She hoped so. Maybe tomorrow they would get worried and call the police. Or maybe the janitor would actually come in early Monday to do some cleaning and find her. Maybe cows would fly.

She thought about lying in bed with Mel, spooning, with her back to his front, hugged and comfy. She missed him. She hoped the son of a bitch was missing her as well, but he was probably lying on the couch, clicking the remote, his mouth reeking of beer and some form of unhealthy, fatty snack.

She got up and took a few more chocolate pieces to melt in her mouth, which was foolish after brushing her teeth, but what the hell.

Chapter 10

On Monday morning, Alice decided to leave a message warning her mother that she was going to go to the police. There was just the slightest chance that her mother had come back tired, seen all the messages, and just put off calling back until she'd had a chance to sleep. Or maybe she was mad about something. Or had the volume all the way down on the ringer and answering machine, so she wouldn't be bothered. Anyway, it was unlikely that Jean realized how worried her daughter and Mel were.

But from the number of beeps Alice heard before she could leave a message, it seemed that Jean hadn't listened to any of the earlier ones yet. "Mom?" Alice said. "If you're there, please pick up. Mel and I are really worried about you and are ready to go to the police. Call me right away." Could her Mom be lying on the floor, maybe hurt from a fall? Her blood pressure stayed high lately, even with medication. Her job was driving her crazy. What if she'd had a stroke? But there had been no footprints in the snow when Mel had been there—she remembered him emphasizing that, no car in the driveway or car tracks to show that she had been home since the snow started Friday evening.

While Alice was leaving her message, Mel was dialing Jean's number too. Because Alice was on the line, he heard a busy signal. She's there now, he thought, but she's not calling me. At first he felt relief. She's safe at home, probably just still mad at me because of our tiff last weekend. But she ought to know, from all the messages, that she needs to let me know she's all right. Maybe she has another guy there and hasn't even listened to the messages. Who knows what's going on.

He stewed about it all for a few minutes, then dialed the number again and this time got the answering machine, which still beeped at him many times before he could leave his message.

“Jean, I know you’re there. Alice and I have been really worried, even thinking about calling the police. For God’s sake, have the decency to let me know you’re okay, even if you’re mad at me about something. Or with another guy.” He put the receiver down hard, not quite a slam, but loud enough to let her know he was upset.

While he was leaving his message, Alice called Jean again, wanting to tell her mother to call on the cell phone, because she was going out. When she got a busy signal, she shouted, “She’s home! What a relief!” She waited a few minutes, then called again and got the answering machine and all the beeps. “Listen to your messages, damn it,” she yelled into the phone. “We’re worried.”

She called Mel to let him know Jean must be home, but she got a busy signal there too. That was because he was trying to call her with the same news.

Alice got into her car and headed across town to her mother’s house. It was time to get to the bottom of this.

Mel waited about 15 minutes and then called Jean again and got her machine. He too got in his car and headed toward Jean’s place, ready to give her a piece of his mind. Since he lived much closer to Jean, he was already pounding on her door when Alice arrived.

“There are still no car tracks or footprints except ours,” Alice said as she joined him. “But I was sure she was home, because I got a busy signal when I called her.”

“So did I. What time did you call?” Mel asked.

“About 9:00. When did you call?”

“About 9:00 too,” Mel answered.

“Oh,” she said. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“That we got busy signals because the answering machine was in use?” he asked.

She nodded. “So do you think it’s time to file a missing person report with the police?”

Mel pondered. If she were with another guy, he’d look like a real fool calling the police. But with Alice worried too, it wouldn’t look so bad. But neither one really could be sure she

hadn't just gone on some kind of long weekend vacation. It wouldn't be the first time, and the police would want to know why they should get involved. "Let's give her one more day," he said. "If she's not back here by tomorrow morning, we can go to the police together and ask them to at least see if she was at school Friday and signed out."

Alice nodded assent. "If we don't get phone messages in the meantime, let's meet here tomorrow—at about 9:30?—and go to the police station closest to the high school. Do you know where it is?"

"Yeah. This is my neighborhood. Jean and I pass it every time we head toward the mall."

"Okay. See you tomorrow. But let's hope we hear from her today. You'll let me know if she calls you? You still have my regular number and my cell phone number?"

"I do," Mel said. "And you'll do the same for me?"

"For sure," Alice said.

They turned and went to their cars, each one hoping that they would not be meeting again tomorrow and not be going to the police. Worry about Jean and anger toward her as well, for worrying them if she were off on some holiday, creased both their foreheads.

Chapter 11.

“Damn, damn, damn,” Mike O’Reilly muttered to himself as he hung up the phone. Who would have expected the principal, that fat, lazy, Dr. Malone, to call him at home during the vacation? Didn’t do much of anything herself except chow down. And made everybody call her “Doctor,” even though the whole world knew she bought her doctorate at a Florida diploma mill. She had an M.A. one June and came back in September with a fake degree that cost her a whole two months and an unknown amount of cash, which she would quickly recoup from the raise that came with a doctorate.

But she was good at expecting others to do plenty of work. She had her skinny vice principal, Mr. McGee, running up and down the stairs all day long, checking things out, while she kept close to the snacks in her office, with occasional forays out onto the first floor. Nobody had ever seen her climb the stairs, though, which was why Mike never worked too hard on the second and third floors. McGee was too busy pretending to deal with discipline problems to look at the floors and wastebaskets, or maybe he was a slob at home and didn’t even notice the dirt and disorder. Then again, if McGee noticed it, he would have to do something about it, probably just report it to Dr. Malone, since he had little authority. But then she would tell him to do something he probably wouldn’t want to do, like monitor the cleaning.

Usually nobody bothered Mike about the kind of job he did, which was why it was so irritating that Dr. Malone had called him today. She wanted him to check the furnace and pipes, since it was so cold, which he could have done pretty quickly, except that she told him to do it today, Monday, while he was at school cleaning up. And she had asked him what his schedule was for getting all the work done, work he had not been planning to actually do. He had been vague about that, claiming he would have to check with his wife about the family schedule. But

now he would really have to do what he had told his wife he was going to do but in reality had no intention of doing. He would have to work today instead of hanging out with his buddies.

He left the house in a huff. “No,” he shouted at Colleen in response to her polite question, “I will definitely not be done at school in time to help you with Christmas shopping. I already told you that. And I hope you won’t be maxing out the credit cards.”

At school, he could see no problems with the furnace or pipes. It was chilly, at 55 degrees, so he set the thermostat up to 65 while he was doing his work, intending to turn it back down before he left, but not really caring if he forgot to do that, which he did in fact forget to do. Fuel costs meant nothing to him, as they were not part of his budget.

He emptied the first floor wastebaskets and gave each room and the halls a quick sweeping up. He did not mop or wipe anything. Whatever was stuffed in desks stayed there, and in some cases he pushed items into desks himself, when it was easier to get debris out of sight that way. Although he did as little as he could, it was well into the afternoon by the time he was enjoying a beer and a burger with his buddies. He had not noticed anything unusual at the school, and he had not given a thought to shoveling any snow on the walks or stairs or in the parking lot, where Jean’s car sat buried in snow. Maybe, he thought, the snow would melt before school reopened, and he wouldn’t have to do anything about it. If Dr. Malone came in this week, he hoped she would slip and fall on her fat ass.

Chapter 12

On Tuesday morning, when Alice drove up to her mother's house, Mel was waiting in his car with the engine running. He motioned to her to follow him. She glanced at the house, then fell in behind him. The only thing different at the house was that more mail and newspapers seemed to have piled up.

The police station was quiet, with only one officer visible, sitting at a desk and eating a chocolate covered donut. He had a big mug of coffee and took a swallow from it before saying anything to Alice and Mel, who were looking at his donut.

"I know what you're thinking," he said to them, "that I look like the perfect stereotype of a cop. We get more credit for eating donuts than for solving crimes."

"Actually," Mel said, "I was thinking that I wished I had eaten breakfast before coming here."

"Oh well," the cop said, "help yourself." He motioned toward a corner of the room where a table was piled up with Christmas goodies.

"Thanks, maybe before we go," Alice said, giving Mel a look that plainly said that they were not there to party. "We're here because my mother seems to be missing, and we need to talk to someone about filing a report."

"What's her name?" the officer asked, reaching for a form.

"Jean Kosciuszko," Mel and Alice said, almost in unison.

“Huh,” the officer grunted, leafing through a stack of papers on his desk. “That’s familiar. The name sticks in my mind because I’m Polish, and Kosciuszko is a Polish hero.”

“Are those accident reports you’re looking at?” Mel asked. He had turned a little pale.

“No, these are charges that were filed against people that require some follow-up but aren’t urgent.”

“Surely there would be no charges against my mother,” Alice said. “It must be some other Kosciuszko.”

“Here it is,” the officer said, reading one sheet. “First name is Jean, and she’s a teacher at the high school. Is your mother a teacher?”

Alice stared at him. “Yes. But that can’t be right. What are the charges?”

The officer pondered. “I think you’d better talk to somebody else, the detective assigned to this case, and I’ll leave it up to him to decide if it’s appropriate to discuss the charges with you.” He read a little more of the sheet in front of him. “He was going to follow up when school opened again, but since your mother’s missing, and the student who filed the charges had no idea where she could be reached, the detective will probably want to get as much information about her as possible.”

“A student filed charges?” Mel asked, incredulous.

“Well, yeah. You might as well have one of the donuts and coffee, as you’re going to have to wait a bit.”

Mel nodded and went over to the holiday table and helped himself to pastries and a coffee. Alice sat down and stared at him.

“How can you eat?” she asked. “I’m in total shock.”

“You think it will somehow help Jean if I don’t have a sweet roll?” He stared at the roll, as if he were asking for an answer from the roll. Then he took a big bite from it and chewed with his mouth a little too far open for Alice’s taste.

I can see, she thought to herself, how my mother gets exasperated with this man. Mel needed a shave and had wild looking hair, a bed head. His jeans looked like they hadn’t been washed in a while, and he wore a parka and boots that were practical but had seen their better days long ago. Of course, there was no reason for him to dress up, but he looked like this all the time, according to Jean’s complaints, when they went out to dinner, at his social work job, wherever.

Still he was good looking and in good shape for a fiftyish man. And he was kind and intelligent, as far as Alice could tell. She heard a lot of complaints about him from Jean, but the main one was that he wouldn’t plan anything, wouldn’t even commit to most dates in advance. But Alice could see, when Jean and Mel were together at holiday gatherings, that they had fun together, that they fit in many ways. And Jean usually felt she was lucky to be in a relationship with someone like Mel, in spite of his faults, as her experience with singles groups had led her to believe that the men available to a slightly plump woman of almost fifty years mostly made Mel look perfect. Her mother was still attractive, but the men other than Mel that she attracted were not what she considered to be keepers.

Alice had herself had similar discouraging experiences trying to meet a good man, which was why she was so excited about her new relationship with Jim. He seemed perfect, and he seemed very interested. But she had been there before and had been disappointed. And she didn’t feel like any prize. There was nothing special about her. She had a good but unexciting job in a personnel department of a big corporation, and she was not overweight or ugly, but not

beautiful either. She had no special skills or talents and felt very average. Her mother kept telling her that she was special, a truly good and dependable person, and attractive as well, but what else could a mother say? And it was revealing that her mother often added that lots of men didn't want women to outshine them anyway.

A burly officer, who looked like retirement couldn't be far off, shuffled into the room, favoring one leg. He helped himself to a donut and refilled a coffee cup. Then he turned toward Jean and Mel. "You the folks here about the missing lady?" he asked.

When they nodded, he motioned them toward a doorway. "Follow me," he said, "and you can help yourself to coffee or food. We got way more than anybody here needs, especially me."

Declining the refreshments, they followed him to a tiny office messy with piles of paper. He did have two chairs waiting for them, but they were the only clear spots.

"Did your mother ever mention an older student named Tom?" the detective asked Alice after they were all seated. "A big guy, a football player, looks like an ad for a muscle magazine."

"No," Alice said, "but she doesn't say much—nothing really—about students' appearances, except that she wishes the boys would pull up their pants that are about to fall off."

The detective made a note. "Did she talk a lot about their pants being about to fall off?"

"Of course not. What are you implying?" Alice was indignant. "She talked about things like what she was trying to teach, or discipline problems, or lack of materials, but if she mentioned individual students at all, she usually didn't mention their names, just spoke of them as examples of something she was trying to explain to us, like how hard it was to teach students who came to class just once in a while and then were disruptive."

“This student claims she made sexual advances, even offered a passing grade in exchange for sex. He’s a good looking kid, but one with lots of problems.” The detective studied Alice’s reaction and then Mel’s. Both of them had their mouths wide open in disbelief.

“That’s crazy,” Mel said. “She would never do such a thing.

Speechless, Alice could only nod agreement.

“He might not be underage, which would really get her in trouble...if he were, I mean. Is there any chance your mother has a relationship, a history, with this kid?”

“That’s absurd!” Alice shouted, finally finding her voice.

“Does your mother use any drugs? This kid’s prison history indicates he knows where to get them and has been a seller himself.”

“Never in a million years,” Alice said.

“Listen,” Mel said. “I’ve never heard such an unlikely charge as what this kid made. But I do know that Jean had plenty of dangerous kids in her classes, kids who were in and out of jail, kids who bragged about making money on drugs, kids who disrespected everybody and weren’t hesitant to be violent. She told me stories that the public wouldn’t believe, if they knew. So when you tell me that some big guy who’s not even really a kid anymore has some kind of conflict with Jean, enough to file a police report, I get very nervous. Especially when I’ve come here because Jean is missing. Now when are you going to help us with that?”

Alice was starting to cry, and all she could do was nod agreement.

“Okay,” the detective said. “I’m going to ask you a lot of questions about Jean, all her contact information, her description, her habits, why you think something is strange about her not being home, everything you can give us to help us look for her.” He seemed to be looking for something as he talked, but then apparently found what he wanted, a pad of forms.

“Before you start,” Mel asked, “can you tell us where and when the student said the incident occurred?”

The detective checked. “During the final class period of the day on Friday. Now, what is Jean’s home address and phone number?”

Mel answered the questions for a while, and then Alice regained composure enough to answer what Mel didn’t know, like questions about other relatives who were not local, and her ex-husband. At the end, the police said they would contact school officials and find out if she had signed out. And they would check her room, when they were able to get someone to let them in. They would call Alice when or if they knew anything. It was pretty much, *Don’t call us; we’ll call you.*

Outside in the cold, overcast day, with snow starting to fall again, the two just stood, stunned.

“I guess we just wait now,” Alice said, starting to cry again.

“Yeah,” Mel said, kicking nervously at a snowbank with the toe of a boot. “That charge doesn’t make any sense, if you know Jean.”

“No,” Alice agree.

“Well, I have to go into work. Here’s my card with my work number. Let me know there if you hear anything. You have my home and cell numbers, right?”

She nodded and turned toward her car.

“Keep your chin up,” he said. “That kid’s lying, and she’s probably just off cross country skiing somewhere.”

She nodded. His voice lacked conviction. She felt sure, and she thought he did too, that something terrible had happened to her mother.

Chapter 13.

Dr. Malone stood in wet, grimy snow that was soaking through her shoes and socks and slacks. She should have known, she thought, that Mike would not clear any snow, not even in her saved parking spot, not even in the short path from her car to the back entrance. She had high boots in the car, but it was too late now; she was cold and wet halfway to her knees, and she had only slogged about six feet through the melting mess.

Breathing hard from the effort of hauling her nearly 300 pounds through deep snow, even for just a few feet, she paused to rest a second. There were several cars still parked in the lot, she noted, half buried but with the snow melting off in patches. She tsked in aggravation. No matter how many signs she posted, she could not make this community understand that the lot was only for the school to use. And the police didn't help to keep it clear. She wished her budget would permit her to hire one of those firms that would come and tow away everyone without a sticker of some kind.

Okay, just get to the door now, she told herself, before your feet are totally frozen. She trudged forward, had some of the usual trouble opening the lock, and entered the building.

It seemed warm enough. Was it too warm for an empty building? She should check the thermometer, but if the setting was too high, she would have to call Mike to make an adjustment, as only he controlled the thermostat. She didn't even know its location. After a rash of student and parent complaints that the school was either too hot or too cold, and a teacher's meeting where too much time was spent on wrangling about the proper temperature setting, she had disengaged herself from the whole matter, telling Mike to use his judgment but to tend toward coolness and energy conservation. She herself was usually soaked in sweat, partly from the

effort of moving her weight around and partly from hot flashes.

The hallway, she noticed, was swept but dirty, obviously not even mopped, much less waxed. Even the sweeping was not thorough, with little accumulations of dust and debris in the corners. Checking a big garbage container, she noted that although it was empty, there was garbage stuck to the bottom inside, gum and suckers and unidentifiable lumps. There was new graffiti on the lockers, mostly in chalk and markers, and it did not appear that any effort had been made to remove it. She peered into a classroom. It might have been swept, but it definitely had not been cleaned in any other way. The chalkboards were full of gang drawings and slogans, and the desk interiors were overflowing with garbage and clothing and papers.

She sighed. Mike was a terrible janitor, but he had been picked for her, and she had no choice but to put up with him. But she could, and would, give him a talking to. Still, it was early in the vacation period, and he still had time to get everything done. Don't kid yourself, she mumbled. He'll do the minimum, like always.

In her office, she went to her closet and sighed with relief to see the gifts she had stashed there had not been moved. She did not like to leave anything in the building, but she had left early Friday and completely forgotten gifts she had received from some of the faculty, sucking up, she supposed, as well they should, considering all the favors she had done for them.

She supposed she should check to see how many had signed out early on Friday. She signed onto her computer, which registered attendance. Most people had, according to the record, left at the right time. She knew, of course, that that was baloney. Just because someone swiped a card at the right time didn't mean the card's owner had still been there.

She noted that Jean Kocziusko had not signed out. Probably couldn't get anyone to cover for her leaving early and was going to claim she had forgotten to swipe her card. Teachers never tired of that ruse, although Kocziusko was not one who typically did things like that. Maybe she really did forget. The woman was a nervous wreck, always trying to buck the system and do things her way, never bothering to do the little things like going to games or to parties, things

that would smooth the way for her, make the kids friendlier. Always sticking to the rules, taking things literally.

Oh, well, when school opened again she would ask the woman why she had not signed out properly. Dr. Malone put a post-it note on her calendar to remind her. Not signing out was probably going to create a payroll problem, so it would have to be fixed.

Dr. Malone stuffed the gifts she had come in to pick up into several shopping bags and headed back toward her car. This place was just one problem after another, and she did not intend to think about it again during her vacation. She was on a 12 month schedule and on call during the holidays, but her faculty and staff would not be thinking about school anymore than she would. Besides, they would know that disturbing her would bring the wrath of God down on their heads.

Chapter 14

Already Tuesday, Jean thought, with Christmas Eve tomorrow and her situation probably more hopeless than ever. The janitor had been here yesterday--she was sure of it—and had never come upstairs to her room. Mike was the only one who could regulate the heat, and it was the warmth that had tipped off his presence. She had heard nothing and could see nothing of him through her window, but a thermometer she had found in a drawer had jumped from 60 to 70 degrees, and the only explanation had to be that Mike had turned the thermostat up while he was working. She figured that he would turn it back down when he left, so yesterday she had sat waiting and listening all through the daylight hours for some sign that he might be up on the third floor near her or even in the room below.

She had gotten very excited at first, thinking that with the heat on, he was in the building and might spring her from this jail of a closet. Just as soon as she heard movement that might be him, she was going to bang metal containers together, screaming all the while, to get his attention. She waited and waited, more anxious by the second, like a girl whose prom date was not showing up. When it got dark, she knew he had to be gone, but she banged and screamed anyway before giving up, just in case. It was just like Mike to skip the third floor and to forget to change the thermostat back before leaving.

After that on Monday night, she just lay in the dark, despondent, knowing that now Mike would probably not be back until after Christmas, if at all. She knew she would be better off if she ate something and maybe read a book, but with the expectation of Mike maybe finding her and letting her out of this damn prison, she had lost her sense of adventure. For the first few days, she thought, after the horror of realizing her predicament, she had been like someone in an Outward Bound program, taking on the challenge of surviving and even getting some spiritual benefits out of the enforced simplicity. No longer. Now she was just sick of the whole situation. Tears of self-pity leaked from her eyes and rolled toward her ears, calling unbidden from somewhere in her subconscious an old country song lyric that went, "I got tears in my ears from lying on my back in my bed while I cry over you..." That set her laughing out loud and at the same time, crying harder. Was this what they used to call hysteria?

She had finally fallen asleep, and when she woke up this morning, what she felt was not so much depression as anger. Anger at Tom, at Security, at the principal, at the janitor, at the school system, at herself, at life itself. Where exactly had her life gone wrong? She had started out so hopeful as a child, so convinced by everyone that because she was a good little girl and a great student, considered bright, talented, hard working, that she had a wonderful future ahead, that such things paid off. Yeah. Tell that to all the people with doctorates who were driving cabs or waiting on tables or working cash registers. Tell that to a lot of students in this school and almost anywhere she had taught, who only respected people who made a lot of money, drug dealers as well as celebrities, since getting the money through honest, ordinary work was not something they took as a model or likely option.

She had done all the things a person was supposed to do to be happy and successful, but when she looked at her own life, she saw no reason why any student would aspire to live it. First

of all, it was bookish and intellectual, so to them boring and unappealing. Verbally abused all day long, poorly paid, spending so many evenings and weekends grading papers or planning lessons, she found the job was even minimally worth it only when there was at least one student in all her five classes who was interested in the subject and really working to learn it. You'd think that would not be too much to ask, but since the good students had mostly been moved to a higher tier or special schools, those who were left excelled mostly at malevolence or being the class clowns. One on one, many were likable, but as a group the motto was that learning, or even showing interest in learning, was not cool, but it was definitely cool to "get" the teacher. There were rare exceptions, excellent students who qualified to transfer but whose parents never did the paperwork, and in fact Tom's younger sister Doreen was one, but Doreen wasn't one of her students.

She should never have gone into teaching, and, truthfully, she had not intended to do so, at least below the college level. She had intended to get a doctorate and perhaps be a botanist or science writer, if not an academic doing research. But her first husband, Alice's father, had been the one who went on to get a doctorate, while she worked, with the understanding that when he got his degree and was earning money, she would get a turn to go back to school. But he never finished the doctorate, never earned much money, and ended up leaving her for a freshman in a class where he was the teaching assistant. So her turn never came, and he moved around so much that she never could track him down when he didn't send child support money, which was most of the time.

You would have thought that there would be jobs for someone like her with a Master's degree in Biology, and there were some, but they were all really chemistry jobs as lab technicians or business jobs, working on products or even selling them, and neither chemistry

nor business had ever attracted her. That was probably her main problem preventing success, the fact that she wanted to be interested in her work and proud of it, and didn't care much about contributing to a company's profits, unless the work itself was something she felt served a great need. If she couldn't actually do the kind of biology she liked, she thought she would try to find something where she could make a difference, change the world for the better, which is how teaching is always promoted.

When she was first job hunting, there had been special city programs to help professionals in other fields get certified as teachers; the money was not good, but with Alice to support almost by herself, Jean needed a job right away and signed up. There always seemed to be such programs, always touted as innovation and given a new name, and in fact there was one now, but though they were described as ways to replace bad teachers, they were struggling even to break even, to fill empty classrooms and replace the hordes of new teachers who didn't make it through the first year or quit in the first five years.

It wasn't that teaching didn't give idealistic beginners the chance they wanted to try to help needy kids learn. And there were always a few kids who stole your heart; the trouble was that then they usually broke it, skipping school, not doing work, falling behind, and then belligerent. You could give teaching your all and have a lot to give, but if the students themselves wouldn't give you some basics, like coming to school and paying attention and trying to do the work, you and the students both ended up as failures. As far as she could see, the students had the intelligence, and the teachers were good enough and often excellent, but the environment was chaotic and the kids ran wild, their parents either not trying or not able to convince them that their education was important. In some schools, a strong principal was able to work with parents and teachers to create an orderly atmosphere for learning; in many, the

students acted like they were in charge, which they really were, and would tell teachers they were crazy to think they could make kids do what they didn't feel like doing. And after a while teachers did in fact start to think they were crazy to do this job and moved on to something else.

At first, her struggles to bring some discipline and learning to classes within out-of-control schools had sent her home crying almost every day. And she had tried constantly, but without success, to find better work. But then, eventually, there were students and classes where things finally went well, although it took all her free time to make that happen. In those early days, good students were not siphoned off to magnet or charter schools, and there were always some kids who were both achievers and role models for the others, which made all the bad stuff worth it. And she loved the science, creating the labs and lessons and trying to share her enthusiasm. Yet she kept her eyes on the want ads and applied to more peaceful school systems—where her experience at unruly schools was considered a black mark against her, as if she were personally to blame for the unruliness and failures—but never found good opportunities.

Raising Alice alone and eventually helping her to go through college, Jean had not ever had a chance to go back to school full time to do a career switch, although she took lots of night classes that interested her but didn't lead anywhere. And so here she was, locked into a science closet and locked into a job she was coming to hate, with no options that she could see. Worst of all, she was sure that she would be blamed for this situation, seen as one of the teachers who could not control classes or motivate students, one of the reasons that the schools were so bad. Oh, how she wished she could put everyone who thought that way into her shoes for about a month and introduce them to a little reality.

Maybe she should go back to school now, somehow start all over. Plenty of people like her started second careers in middle age, or even in retirement. But in what field? To do the kind of naturalist science she loved was not really an option, because there were so few jobs, and one got them first of all by being a young hotshot academically and second of all by landing an internship. Interns were not usually her age and overweight, and probably rightly so, for field work often took strength and endurance. She was not in shape, in spite of being fairly active, and was very aware that her knees and feet and eyes, in particular, were getting bad fast and would probably never be what they were. If people over 40 wanted to do field work, they were usually directed to volunteer programs where a person actually paid big bucks, the same as for a luxurious tour, to do menial labor. No thanks to that, although she had gone to Costa Rica on such a trip, a decision she had regretted for a long time. She had gone thinking she would see nature but was instead assigned to work with kids, not a vacation, even though the kids were much better behaved than those she taught.

She was always scanning graduate catalogs, looking for something she could study in a field where she could be sure to get a good job. But it was always the same old story; any field that interested her not only did not lead to employment, it might not even have a graduate program anymore. Academics itself seemed to be a disappearing job category. She would happily study many subjects beyond science, things like languages, literature, history, art, but she had been doing that anyway, at her own rate, to the extent that she was certified to teach English and history as well as science, and had done so, but so what? Those jobs were scarce and in any case would be no better, unless she could work in a school where there was sufficient order to actually teach and where a good number of students were intending to go to college. These schools got thousands of applications, from new graduates as well as from dissatisfied

veterans like Jean; the new young graduates came cheaper and were much more likely to be hired, but even they often switched careers, moreso than ever since accountability paperwork and constant testing had replaced creative initiative in the classroom.

She had been over and over all this in her mind and with others in the teacher lunchroom so many times, to no avail. There was no use in thinking about it now. If she wanted to worry, which she didn't, she had plenty she could think about, like what Tom was telling people, if anything, and what would happen to her when she finally got out of this closet. If she had had junk food, this was definitely a time when she would have been dipping some chips or scooping some ice cream, trying to ease anxiety. But if she were in a place where she could access comfort food, she would not be in this situation and in need of comfort. She would be on a Christmas break, luxuriating in not seeing students.

She wondered if what she was feeling on this grim Tuesday morning was clinical depression. How could one differentiate between that and normal sadness or distress in response to a terrible situation? She admitted to being sad and depressed a lot of the time, but wasn't that a normal response to a school situation where kids swore at the teachers and threatened them so much that it was just accepted as part of each work day, a situation where if she stopped a kid in the hall because he was doing something wrong, and he swore at her, she was the one seen as responsible?

She tried to think about something different. There had been positive things that had happened over the years, individual kids she remembered fondly for their curiosity and effort or just because they were good people. She probably should have stayed in a school where she taught third graders, a mostly Hispanic school that was relatively orderly and where she actually had had to spend comparatively little time on discipline. In a self-contained class, with kids

young enough to grow fond of their teacher, she had had it easy but hadn't known it; she had wanted the intellectual challenge of teaching high school. After the mistake of transferring from there, the schools had almost all been like this one, except for a three year period in a high school where the principal kept order and supported his teachers; at that school, she had sponsored an ecology club and led hikes and camping trips, for once enjoying teaching. But with declining enrollment, teachers were bumped to other schools, with low seniority like hers determining who left in those days. Every October, when enrollment was reconsidered, schools lost teachers and had to reorganize classes; the teachers, like her, either had to substitute or were sent to some hellhole where they couldn't keep teachers from quitting. She had been bumped from the school functioning normally and had then worked at so many malfunctioning schools that she had lost track of all their names. It seemed to her that the principal was key to the atmosphere in a school; most tried to put all the burden on individual teachers, which only worked if kids knew that in the end the principal would back the teacher up in not permitting disruptive behavior. The parents were important too, but so many kids defied them as well, valuing their friends more.

She had tried teaching adults at community colleges, and that was rewarding work, but those jobs were all part time, with each class a separate contract for a set low fee. The work was undependable, had no benefits, and when you divided the fee by all the hours spent, it amounted to slightly more than minimum wage. She knew people with doctorates who raced from college to college, driving long hours and essentially having an office in their car trunks, who tried to survive on this kind of work, just because they loved teaching enough to stick with it in spite of not being respected or paid enough to live above the poverty level. Somewhere she had read that schools had been so drastically replacing expensive tenure track professors with cheap adjunct

faculty that now they represented about 2/3 of all college teachers. Especially in the humanities, the profession of professor was fast disappearing. If she had just gotten a doctorate before she married and had kids, she might have still had a chance for that kind of career before it went away.

Would she try to survive in this academic sweat shop if she lost her job because of this? She would probably have to. Not that she expected to lose her job, although she did expect to be blamed and disciplined in some way. Logically, the kid should be punished, not her, but he would have a story that would be believed by some. Did she even want to stay here after this? She could go to the temporary agencies and try to contract herself out for office work of some kind, maybe data entry. That might work, but it would not give her enough money to live decently or retire someday. Still, it was appealing to think of sitting at a computer in a fairly silent office, with nobody swearing at her, possibly doing boring and menial work but not being verbally abused or berated by anyone. But even that kind of work was competitive these days, as so many bosses typed on their own computers and didn't have secretaries. And the people competing for office temp jobs now often had degrees. So many, like her, were both overqualified in terms of education and underqualified in terms of business practices.

In the end, no matter how she struggled to find other solutions, her conclusion was always the same. She had to stick it out in whatever teaching situation she found herself until she could retire, still many years in the future. She was stuck, and that was that.

As was her habit whenever she was trying to make the best of something and cheer herself up, she decided to think about good things that had happened to her recently. To give herself a challenge and fill the time, she decided to write it down and at the top of a pad of paper scribbled, "Good Experiences I've Had Teaching." After thinking about that, she upped the

difficulty by adding “in the last week” in parentheses. It was too easy if she searched her whole career, as over so many years there had of course been rewarding moments.

Getting even #1 stumped her. Maybe she should have said “in the last year.” Finally she wrote this, “My fifth period class had a great time the day we talked about birds, because they liked the exercise where we listened to bird songs and calls and tried to match them to species pictures.” She didn’t add that only three people had shown up for class that day and that because of low attendance she had done the bird activity instead of following her lesson plan.

She decided to stretch that example out, and #2 was about how a gang banger in that class, a kid who could barely read and never did anything but cause trouble, had turned out to have a great ear for bird songs, much better than her own, and could even whistle them after listening to them once or twice. You would never have known that he had any abilities or a good mind, because all the class work depended on skills accumulated over the years he had done almost nothing. The birdsong exercise was discrete, requiring a good ear. But he had also quickly memorized the pictures and names of the birds, which he could not sound out for himself very well. She wondered what he could have become had he been kept on task and his mind stimulated both at home and at school when he was small and anything was still possible. With that ear and maybe perfect pitch, he should have at least been taking music lessons. Of course anything was still possible, he was just in his teens, and people could turn themselves around at any time, but it was still a shame that so many of those people who did make their lives over for the better had first wasted so many years or even spent them in prison.

It took her a while to find a #3 example, until she remembered Santos, who had come back to school after a time in jail and was trying to catch up and pass. He was in with a bad crowd and had been lookout for a break-in of a store of some kind, she had heard, but his skills

were pretty good, considering Spanish was his first language and his English not yet so good. He was usually polite, though sometimes sullen and quiet, barely replying when she spoke to him. Early in the week he had approached her about making up work and had actually turned in some important assignments, even coming to her for help after school. Maybe the jail time had scared him into taking his life in a better direction. She hoped so.

She could not find a #4 unless she counted things like students who usually misbehaved or swore at her not doing so. Teresa in first period had for once not sworn or thrown some kind of tantrum and had even wished her a “Merry Christmas” the last day she had attended. But she still hadn’t paid attention in class or done any work, just sat there daydreaming.

She pushed the list aside. Every good thing counted, but if she had made a list of what went wrong, it would have taken pages. What it all amounted to was that kids didn’t come to school regularly, didn’t pay attention in class or do the work, and didn’t show basic respect for themselves or others. And although most of their parents said they tried to make their children do better, and some of them probably did, her impression was that many parents had either given up or were themselves bad examples. And that had been the case with these students for so many years of accumulated educational damage, often starting as far back as kindergarten or the primary grades. Most of them showed some interest in something academic once in a while, and they definitely liked some teachers more than others, mostly the ones who spent a lot of time laughing and joking with them and who let them get away with a lot, but it didn’t add up to much. Those so-called experts who were trying to fix the schools glossed over the basic fact that teacher quality or educational strategies didn’t matter if the students were absent in body or mind. Of course, teachers were usually blamed for that too and told they weren’t motivating

their students. That charge didn't even make sense these days, when motivational activities had been replaced anyway by repetitive cramming for tests.

It occurred to her that she had not eaten for a long time, had practically fasted the day before. She still had enough to last her until school reopened, if she was careful, but what she wanted was protein. She had been trying to ignore the food drive bag, with its load of potentially toxic old cans, tuna, Spam, hash, and more. For all she knew, that food might have been collected decades ago. But surely she would be able to tell if she opened a can if it was spoiled. It would be smelly and rotten looking. Or would it? People ate stuff that looked and tasted good in restaurants and ended up with food poisoning. Did the expiration date on cans mean that taste and texture would be best before that date, or did it mean the food might become dangerous? She looked at the cans at the top of the food drive bag. They did not even have dates on them. They didn't look swollen or leaking or even dented.

Without really planning to, she found herself taking the little key off the can of meat that was not actually Spam but some other, similar off-brand. She put the key in its little slot and started turning. As she rolled a strip of metal onto the key, the pink meat product inside could be seen and smelled, moist, salty, fatty, tempting. Everything seemed normal. No, better than normal, more like "enhanced" by her craving for meat. When the can was all the way open, she sniffed, she tasted a bit on her tongue, and then, satisfied, she got a fork and dug in, not stopping until the can was empty. It was wonderful, she thought, and had probably provided a day's calories, but now that she had decided that it was okay to eat the old stuff in the bag, maybe she would try the tuna as well. She got a can opener and a fresh fork and was starting to feel almost cheerful.

While she was eating the tuna, she unpacked the rest of the charity food bag. Before she was done, she had eaten a whole can of baked beans and a can of corn, not even bothering to heat them up. She ended the meal with a can of pears, washing all of it down with lots of powdered milk loaded with strawberry flavoring. She had actually cheered when she found the milk powder box and jar of strawberry flavoring, a sign of how her brief period of deprivation had changed her perception of what was tasty or not. She felt as full and satisfied and slightly nauseous as she usually did after a Thanksgiving dinner and had the same urge for a nap. And why not? It wasn't as if she had anything else to do. She stretched out on her makeshift desk bed and slept deeply for several hours, until fierce abdominal cramps and a need to retch woke her.

Chapter 15.

She had no idea how long she had been lying there in her own filth, hurting, her pants disgustingly squishy and slick inside, filled with diarrhea, and vomit all down the front of her. All the space around her was soiled and reeking, and the container she had been using as a toilet was open and overflowing. It was growing dark outside, so she figured it was late afternoon. She should try again to get up and wash herself, maybe wash her clothes in the sink and put them back on again wet. Scrub away the mess, close the improvised toilet and use some other container. But she was too dizzy, with waves of heat and nausea forcing her back down when she tried to get up.

Obviously, she shouldn't have eaten what she ate, should have taken seriously the possibility of food poisoning, especially with no way to get help. She had a weak stomach anyway and was one of those people who could get this way just by going to a carnival and eating a lot of junk and then going on rides, or even just looking at the whirling rides, although in those cases she would have had access to a flushing toilet. It was stupid to have eaten so much food after not eating for a day, which was probably the problem, she thought. And if it was food poisoning and serious? There was nothing she could do anyway, so no use thinking about it. She doubted she had anything left in her GI tract anymore, so the bad stuff hadn't stayed with her long. But she should drink water, since surely she was dehydrated. She tried to reach for her water glass, and that set off dry retching and then a choking cough. She gave up and let herself sink back into a sick half-sleep.

She thought it was a dream when she heard loud voices, footsteps, banging doors. They got louder, and she opened her eyes wide. One of the voices sounded like Mel. He was calling her name. God no, she thought, don't let him see me like this, don't let *anybody* see me like this. Come back some other day, after I've cleaned up.

But that was crazy. "Mel?" she called in a quavering voice.

"This is her classroom," a voice she didn't recognize said.

Then Mel. "What a dump." A pause. "What's behind that door?"

"Mel?" she tried again.

The door swung open, and Mel stood there with two police officers. All three of them gasped and stepped back out of sight. Then an officer with a handkerchief over his face came into the room. Mel peeked into the room, his hand cupped over his mouth and nose.

Outside the door, the second officer began calling in a report, asking for an ambulance right away.

"Can you talk to us? Tell us what happened? Are you in pain?" The officer inside the room was keeping his distance as he questioned her.

"A student pushed me in here last Friday, and I got locked in. I might have eaten some bad food," she said in a small, weak voice that didn't sound like her own. "I'm too dizzy to sit up, and I might have a fever, but I don't have anything left to throw up, I think." Or to shit, she thought, as humiliated as she was sick.

"An ambulance is coming. They'll clean you up and get you to an emergency room," he said. He paused. "We have a complaint filed against you by a Tom Roberson. Was he involved in this?"

She nodded. "What did he say I did?"

The officer hesitated. "I think someone will discuss this with you a little later, when you've been checked over and feel well enough to file your own complaint. I assume you'll want to do that."

She nodded. In the distance she could hear the siren of an ambulance.

"Got to go show the driver where to go," the officer said, backing out of the room, obviously relieved to get away from the smell.

Mel peeked in again, standing as far away from the doorway as he could and still see her. "You're not looking or smelling your best," he said, smiling a little. "You gonna make it?"

"I'll tell you all about it when I'm not smeared with vomit and shit," she said. "Go away now. I just ate something bad, that's all it is."

"You picked a nice place to do it. If you didn't want to go out with me last Friday, you could have just said so. You didn't have to hide in here." He pretended to pout. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

"Please go away," she said. "I don't want to be seen like this. Go call Alice and tell her I'm okay."

"I just called her while you were talking to the officer. She said she told you over and over that you needed a cell phone in this school."

"Nice. Very sympathetic. And I've told her over and over that they don't let us bring them in here, who knows why. I have one in my car. But tell her again for me."

"You tell her. She's on her way to the hospital. What I told her is that you just might need some clean clothes." She closed her eyes, so she could pretend he wasn't looking at her. He got quiet, and she peeked up to see if he was still there looking at her. He was, and he winked. Then he moved out of the way so that a stretcher could go through the doorway. "I'm going to

drive to the hospital myself now,” he said. “See you in the ER.” He withdrew and then popped his head back in. She was trying not to look him in the eye, but she could see that he blew a kiss.

“If you don’t mind,” he grinned, “I’ll save my hugs for later.”

Chapter 16

“Mom,” Alice said, “the nurses keep telling me you have to get up and get dressed and leave. They need this bed.”

“So do I,” Jean protested. “I’m still too dizzy to walk.”

“They’re supplying a wheel chair to get you to my car. When we get to my house, you’re going to have to try to lean on me.” Alice pulled the curtain closed around her bed and started to pull some sweat pants under the open back hospital nightie. Jean still lay there but did manage to lift her butt enough to pull the pants up.

“No underwear?” Jean asked.

“This is my stuff, not yours, and I only have the kind you hate that gives you a wedgie. Anyway, don’t pretend you don’t go without underwear all the time around the house. I’m your daughter. Sit up now, and help me get this sweatshirt on you.”

The room whirled when Jean sat up. She closed her eyes and obediently moved her arms into the sleeves. Alice’s clothes smelled of dryer sheets, and Alice smelled of hand lotion. Jean, happily, was now smelling only of soap, as far as she could tell. Alice had put Jean’s fouled up clothes in a garbage bag in the trunk of her car and would not agree to throw them away, claiming she would get them clean, just as so many years ago Jean had cleaned Alice’s fouled up diapers. Alice tended to be bossy and sometimes crabby, but she was a good daughter.

“Do I have any medicine to take home?” Jean asked.

“For the next few days, remember, ‘home’ is going to be my house, and no arguments. You need help right now. Anyway, in his great wisdom, after being with you for about three

minutes, the doctor recommended buying some brand of over-the-counter loperamide for diarrhea.”

“Got that already, in my purse, although it didn’t do much good back in the storeroom. So what did I get here for the thousands of dollars they’re probably going to charge my insurance? A sponge bath?”

The wheel chair had been delivered, and the person who brought it helped Alice to get Jean into it and to collect their things, then immediately started changing the bed linens Jean had used.

Pushing Jean down the hall, Alice answered the earlier question. “What you got here, besides the scrub-up—no small thing, by the way--was a diagnosis of ‘probably no food poisoning but a shot of antibiotics just in case.’ Are you sure your insurance will cover it all? Nobody called them to get approval for an emergency room visit. And you did tell me your benefits are being reduced, if I remember right.”

The hall was spinning, and Jean closed her eyes and concentrated on talking. “I think if you come to the ER in an ambulance, you don’t need prior approval. And the benefits go down after New Year’s.”

“Well, if it turns out you get a big bill, you make the school pay. Go to the union. You’ve got to start standing up for yourself or you’ll keep getting pushed around.”

Jean was too dizzy to argue or even to open her eyes and roll them. Alice was trying to be supportive, but it was clear she was furious, furious at the poor hospital service, furious at all that had happened to her mother, and even furious at her mother for being in a position where she was always being victimized.

“What time did Mel leave?” Jean asked, hoping to move the conversation in a different direction.

“After about four or five hours. He was very sweet,” Alice answered, “kissing you good-bye without waking you and even making specific plans to be with you at my house on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas Day.”

“He made specific, definite plans? He never wants to do that!” Jean was amazed. They were outside now, and she opened her eyes wide, feeling much better in the fresh air.

“He did this time. I was surprised too, since one of the few things you had told me about him is that he likes to wait until the last minute to decide what he wants to do. But I guess this is the last minute, with Christmas Eve tomorrow.”

“What are the plans?”

“He will bring a Christmas Eve supper, probably some takeout ribs, and spend the evening with us. Then on Christmas Day, he’ll have an afternoon dinner with us. We didn’t talk about it, but he can stay with you overnight if he wants to.”

“I didn’t buy any presents for you and him yet!”

“Don’t worry about that,” Alice said. “Listen, I’m going to have to leave you here for a minute and go and get the car and then after we get you in it, I have to return this wheelchair and get credit for it, so we don’t get charged for taking it.”

The entire time that Alice was efficiently taking care of everything and getting Jean into her house and then into bed, Jean was trying to figure out how in the world she could do some Christmas shopping tomorrow, in the condition she was in. Maybe she would feel a lot better, now that she was out of that room and in a comfortable place. She was excited, almost nervous, about spending Christmas with Alice and Mel. At the same time, she knew that she would have

to face a very difficult situation when she returned to work, if not sooner. But she was too exhausted to think long about all this and, deliciously cradled in sweet-smelling and soft bedding, she quickly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 17.

When the phone rang, Dr. Malone raised an eyebrow and wrinkled her forehead, but she did not move to answer it. Sprawled on the couch, her chubby feet on the armrest and a pile of pillows under her head and back, she instead moved to get another potato chip, giving it a practiced sweep through some guacamole dip. The phone kept ringing as she munched. She was not expecting a call, and nobody from the Board of Education, and most emphatically no teacher, had better be calling her on Christmas Eve. She punched the remote control, continuing her futile search for something on daytime TV that interested her.

Her own message played on the answering machine, cheerful and helpful, as if she truly cared to hear the damn caller's message. Then she heard the voice of Frederick Brittle, the Superintendent of not just her school district but of the entire city school system, not pretending to be cordial in his usual oily way, but obviously quite angry. She struggled to roll her 300 pounds off the low couch and into a standing position, so that she could run to the phone, but by the time he had finished his command to call him back the minute she heard the message, she had only managed to roll herself into a sitting position, her feet finally on the floor but a lot of shoving up still to do before her huge butt lifted from the couch and she could stand without holding onto something.

Finally on the move, she tottered toward the phone, stiff from hours of reclining and quite annoyed. Unlike teachers, principals worked 12 months a year, with holidays off and a few weeks vacation, but with the expectation that unless they were actually traveling, they were to be

available 24/7 in emergencies. She had two days off for Christmas and two for New Year's but technically was supposed to go into school the other days during the break, unless she was formally using vacation time. She had no intention of either going in or using vacation time and would claim to be working at home, if challenged, but today, Christmas Eve, nobody could expect her to be available.

Maybe she should wait till the day after Christmas to call back. No. Then she would have to call from school. Besides, she was curious, and a bit afraid, to know what was twisting Brittle's britches. She sighed and hit the "call back" button on her phone. Brittle always made mountains out of molehills. She didn't know him well at all, but from what she had seen, the best word to describe him was "anal" and the second best was "clueless." His background was not in education but in management, with a business degree, and he had never been a classroom teacher of any kind. Actually, she envied him that and thought he was lucky; she had been a classroom teacher for a long time, but from the first frustrating day she had known she had to get away from the students and into administration. These days the thing she feared most in all the world was that some situation might arise—like faculty absences and no substitutes-- in which she would have to take over a class for a while. But when something like that happened, she just had kids sit in the auditorium with security guards watching them.

Brittle answered the phone himself. She at first listened to the tale of Jean Kosciuszko and Tom Roberson with a bemused smile on her face. This juicy bit of gossip would give the school something to chew on for the rest of the semester. Brittle himself was not at all amused, however, and his orders for her soon wiped the smirk off her face. Apparently, reporters had been in his face all morning, wanting to know what kind of school Dr. Malone was running and what kind of pervert the biology teacher was. They had a lot of questions about Roberson as well, but did not know much about him and were assuming that he was a minor—which he was not—and that he was therefore to be somewhat protected from publicity. But there was going to be something on the nightly television news and something in the papers, and it was imperative,

Brittle said, that neither Malone nor Jean give them any information whatsoever. Brittle himself would decide what they could be told. Trouble was, he had no control over what was in the police reports or what Roberson or any of the students might say, and when school opened again, if they were still talking about this, he might not be able to stop reporters from investigating the high school. God forbid, they might not wait for school to open again. Either way, school administrators couldn't look like they had something to hide. She had to try to keep all of her faculty from answering any questions at all about the school, even if she had to call them all on Christmas day. Oh, and by the way, he added, the janitor had better start now cleaning that storage room where the Kosciuszko lady had been trapped, if he wanted to get the stink out by the time school opened. With that, he reminded her that their jobs could be on the line, wished her a merry Christmas, and hung up.

Well, one thing was sure, she thought to herself, she was not going to spend Christmas calling her faculty. If somebody talked to the press and she was questioned about it, she would just say she hadn't been able to reach that person to warn them to keep quiet. Anyway, even if she called them, the fools would probably start talking about the Bill of Rights or some other nonsense and spill their guts to the press anyway.

One call she had to make right away gave her a little surge of pleasure. She dialed, an evil smile on her face. "Mike?" she said. "There's a cleanup job at school that Superintendent Brittle is asking me to get done immediately. He may be checking on it personally, so get to it today or the day after Christmas." There was mostly silence at the other end of the line as she described the job. She hung up satisfied that for once Mike would have to earn his pay.

During the next call, to Jean, there was no smile of any kind on her face. That teacher irked the hell out of her, always complaining about the way the school was run, always suggesting improvements that could never happen, always deviating from the lesson plans and trying this or that new thing, and now starting all this commotion. "You are absolutely forbidden to talk to the press about this matter," she said to Jean. "If you do, you will not be working at

my school. And you should not talk to anybody else about it either, because they might talk to the press. Tom will also be advised that it will be better for him if he does not give interviews.” The bit about Tom was a lie, unless there was something she didn’t know, but it might help keep Jean quiet. She did not ask Jean how she was feeling or for her side of the incident, nor did she wish her a merry Christmas before hanging up.

Chapter 18

That night, Christmas Eve, the local channels all featured stories about the teacher who spent days trapped in a storage closet, after being pushed there by a student whom she had been accused of trying to sexually molest. It wasn't exactly in the Christmas spirit, but it had the sex and violence to hold viewers' attention. The stations had only minimal information other than what Tom was all too willing to provide, but newscasters have plenty of experience in taking a speck of information and filling it out with speculation. They showed a picture of the school and gave background on the long and continuing history of violence and gang activities there. They showed a photograph of Frederick Brittle and another of a meeting where Dr. Malone was captured on film just as she was biting into a donut. They gave statistics from recent testing at the school, tests that were a matter of public record, as to what small percent read or did math anywhere near grade level and what the likelihood was (small) that even half of incoming freshmen would graduate four years later.

Other than that, on Jean's side they had only what was in the police report, scandalous enough in itself. They implied that as they gained more information from her, viewers would get the details. Then they showed a brief interview with Tom. Somewhere he had gotten a tee shirt with a picture of Jesus on it and some good pants that for once he wore with a belt and not hanging around his crotch in the front and below his butt in the back. He spoke in a manner that nobody who knew him had ever witnessed before. He was polite. He was shy. He was almost

grammatical. He used “ma’am” and “sir” when talking with the reporting team. He was shocked and horrified by what Ms. K had proposed, but he had no idea that when he had freed himself from her grasp that she had fallen or that the storeroom door had swung shut and trapped her. His lower lip trembled with concern.

At the Roberson house, each of the three viewers had a different take on it. Doreen’s first thought was that if Tom could only read scripts, he might have a future acting in television soap operas. Tom’s mother was tight lipped, watching in silence with an angry look on her face. Doreen couldn’t tell if she was mad at the station, Miss K, Tom, or the world in general, but she was sure of one thing—her mother would stand by her son, right or wrong. Actually, she wasn’t sure about the “right” part, because she couldn’t think of any instances when he had been right and had needed support. As a matter of fact, it was pretty hard for her to think of him being right about anything, but her mother sometimes said that Doreen was just jealous, because her brother was so popular. Still, in this case Doreen didn’t think her mother was really fooled by Tom, so much as she was afraid of being humiliated herself, possibly on television, as the mother of someone so abusive. And like Doreen, his mother showed signs that she was a little afraid of Tom, who could act crazy if he was crossed.

Cautiously, his mother said to Tom, who once again was in danger of losing his pants, “You looked nice, like a young gentleman. I don’t think I’ve ever seen those clothes before.”

Doreen made a sound somewhere between a snort and a stifled laugh. Tom looked back at her in a way his mother could not see and squinted his eyes threateningly. He swiped an imaginary knife across his throat. She understood and put on an apologetic face in hopes that she could ward off repercussions. While plenty of people did that same knife-across-the-throat gesture to be funny, Tom probably had a knife in his pocket right now, and he had threatened Doreen with a knife in the past, not just once but many times. A few times he had actually scratch her skin with it.

“Did you buy those clothes for the interview?” his mother continued.

“Dude gave ‘em to me,” Tom said.

“Dude?” His mother looked puzzled. “Do I know him?”

“Nah. He’s my man. You gotta problem with that?”

“No, no, just wondering.” His mother shrugged and gave up.

Doreen wasn’t sure either what Tom had been thinking as he was watching his interview and the rest of the television report. He had been trying hard to make a victim’s face, like the one on the screen, especially when their mother looked at him, but to Doreen he looked almost like he was gloating, proud of his notoriety, laughing at what he had achieved. She was sure that poor Miss K was telling the truth, and Doreen would have known that even if she hadn’t overheard Tom trying to get somebody to lie as a witness against. What she wasn’t sure about was what she could do. She knew Miss K mostly by reputation, which was good among the students who wanted to learn something, but she knew Tom much better. Tom had done so many painful things to her in the past, fond as he had always been of pulling hair and twisting arms and giving what he called “Indian burns,” that she felt as if she would need to go into some kind of witness protection program if she told what she knew about him getting someone to lie for him.

When the news was finished, they turned on the Christmas tree lights, and Doreen and her mom watched *It’s a Wonderful Life* together, never once mentioning Tom’s trouble. Tom himself went out somewhere, knocking an ornament off the Christmas tree as he passed. Nobody asked him where he was going, knowing what kind of answer he would probably give. He was 18 years old now anyway, supposedly a man. Doreen picked up the ornament, a little plaster angel, and turned a newly nicked place away from view as she rehung it. The best thing for her to do about Tom was to be glad when he went out and she could forget he was her brother. She figured he would be off in jail soon anyway, if not because of this Miss K thing, because of something else.

Her mother looked so sad on this Christmas Eve and cried so hard over the movie, maybe actually crying about Tom and just pretending it was the movie, that when it was over Doreen

offered to go with her to mass. It was a beautiful, starry night, with the last snow still clean, and the church was at its best, fragrant with pine and glowing with candles. She and her mother didn't talk on the way there, but Doreen hoped her mother was also enjoying the fresh air and snowy scene. Doreen wasn't sure she believed the religious part any more, but the ritual of walking to church on Christmas Eve and then listening quietly to the service was a joy. As the music soared and the organist and choir played with faces transfixed, it brought peace to her soul. There was a lot more to her life than Tom, and in a few years, she need never have anything to do with him. When they stood up to go home, she reached over and surprised her mother with a hug. Walking back to their apartment, they talked about the special things they would cook for Christmas breakfast and dinner. Tom's name never came up.

Chapter 19.

In spite of the embarrassing and maddening television coverage they had been watching, which seemed to give some credibility to Tom's outrageous charges, just by repeating them, and in spite of her recent gastro-intestinal misery, Jean was relishing the Christmas Eve dinner Mel had brought to Alice's house. Unashamed, she sucked at the shreds of meat and barbecue sauce on each rib until it was bare as a fossil bone. She piled the butter and sour cream on a large baked potato and didn't spare the salt or pepper. Even the salad seemed the best she had ever had and the dressing the richest. There was a lemon meringue pie for dessert a little later, along with coffee and a splash of brandy. She had only been without normal meals for a few days, but she had been mentally prepared for a few weeks of short rations, and the experience had given her an intensified appreciation of food. Not that she had ever been anything but an enthusiastic eater.

She was thankful for the company as well, and to Mel for being there and for providing the food and for joining with Alice in convincing the police to go look for her. She was not thankful for Tom or for Dr. Malone or for the horrible situation in which she found herself, and she wished she could just put it out of her mind at least until after she had enjoyed Christmas. The three of them had just watched the news, however, and it was impossible not to think about it. But watching her eat, nobody would ever know she was worried.

"It's nice to see you're able to live in the moment and enjoy the meal," Mel said, smiling. "I was afraid you would still be so upset, either physically or emotionally, that you wouldn't be able to eat."

“Yeah, well, it looks as though in this particular moment I’m trying to regain any weight I might have lost during my ordeal. It would be better to keep it off, but what the heck, it’s Christmas Eve, and you brought this great meal.” Jean looked at Mel’s plate, heaped with seconds. “You’re glorying in the moment yourself, but then you always do.”

Alice was not eating much and not paying attention to the exchange between Jean and Mel either. She had been silent for a bit after watching Tom and then said, “He doesn’t come across as such a bad kid. Is that how he always is?”

Jean had rolled her eyes. “I’ve never seen that person before.” And then she told Alice and Mel again what he was really like, thinking all the time that if he had fooled them, he had probably fooled everyone else too. Except those who actually knew him from school and the neighborhood.

“You really need to give your side to the public, as long as they’re giving the story so much coverage and letting Tom give his phony version.” Mel frowned. “I don’t see how the school can legally stop you from talking about this.”

“No. But they can and will try to fire me if I do after they warned me not to. There’s some kind of rule about confidentiality as well and not publicizing anything a student does. I would think that in a criminal situation like this, that rule would not apply, but it won’t matter. If I give an interview, in some way or another the principal, Dr. Malone, will make me pay for it.”

“I really don’t understand about your union,” Alice said. “Don’t they protect you in cases like this?”

“It depends on a lot of things, like, first of all, having a school union rep who is not a suckup to the principal. Check that as negative. It also depends on having a union leader at the very top who is not sleeping, figuratively speaking, with the superintendent and who will support

individual teachers. From what I've seen so far, that's a weak "maybe." But the all-important rule about union grievances is that after the school rep meets with the teacher and the principal, the case goes to the next level, where it usually ends, because at that level a district representative of the superintendent listens to both sides and makes a decision, almost always on the side of the principal."

"And you can't fight that?" Mel was astonished.

"You can, but I've never heard of a teacher winning, and I pay attention to these things. The teacher who fights the system is going to find herself with a bad annual review or a transfer or maybe just suddenly assigned some new duties that she's sure to hate."

"Are you sure you're not exaggerating?" Alice asked.

"Yes. Now can we please have some of that scrumptious looking lemon meringue pie? It's almost time to watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, if that's all right with you two."

"Oh, sure," Alice said, looking genuinely sorry. "I should be trying to cheer you up, and here I am probably making things worse. You get an extra big slice of pie."

While Alice served the pie and coffee, Mel pulled Jean closer to him on the couch and gave her a big squeeze and a quick smooch. Then they became absorbed in the familiar movie that all knew by heart. They all cried, even Mel, when Potter almost triumphed and then again at the end, when everything finally turned out all right. It was still early when the movie ended, but they were all ready to collapse into bed. Mel and Jean, in the guest bedroom, lay exhausted and more or less contented in an affectionate spoon, falling asleep almost immediately.

Chapter 20

It had been a lovely Christmas day for Jean, starting with early morning reveling in sensuality with Mel, which included a massage for her and a promise of a massage for him next time, and then a late but wonderful breakfast served up by Alice. The meal featured her favorite quiche, homemade exactly as she loved it. She had persuaded Mel and Alice to exchange gifts the following week, so that she would have time to shop for them. The presents that were under the tree stayed there.

Then they had all helped to make dinner, which was flawless as far as Jean was concerned. To ward off the urge to take naps, they had gone for a walk around the lake in a nearby forest preserve, taking binoculars in hopes of seeing migrating ducks, which in fact they did, half a dozen different kinds, with the prize, in Jean's opinion, being some adorable ruddy ducks, chubby little rust-colored guys with blue beaks, white cheeks, and a perky black tail. They were only rarely seen in the area, and Jean had only seen them once before. Although Alice and Mel were not birders, they always acted as if they were interested and even amazed when Jean made them look through binoculars and admire what she was admiring. Maybe they were pretending when they seemed to be so enchanted by the ruddy ducks, although she hoped not, but even if they were, that made her happy too.

After eating some turkey sandwiches that evening and watching Christmas concerts until at least she was stupified, Jean saw the little cloud that they had been ignoring above their heads all day get darker.

"You're going to have to make up your mind, Jean," Alice said, "even though I know you don't want to spoil the evening by thinking about it. You have to decide whether or not you're going to give the reporters the interview they requested in the morning."

"They're coming here early, right?" Mel asked. "Even though they know Jean might not

agree to talk to them. So she's got until—what?—about 8 a.m. tomorrow to decide, isn't that right?"

"It is," Alice admitted. "Okay, if you want to give yourself one more night of not thinking about it and make your decision in the morning, Mom, that's of course up to you."

"Well," Jean said, "either way I'm going to worry about it all night. I think I'm going to get up early enough to dress appropriately for a television interview. I can always say no at the last minute."

"Good idea," Mel said. "Maybe I can keep your mind off it tonight and give you a rosy glow in the morning." He smiled and made an exaggeratedly lascivious face.

"I'm still here, remember," said Alice. "Should I leave you two alone?"

"Ah," Mel said, "I keep forgetting. Jean's your mother, and children can't stand to think that their mothers have sex."

"Mothers are not supposed to be sexually active," Alice smiled. "You got that right."

"But mothers do sometimes have second glasses of wine before they go to bed," Jean said, lifting her empty glass for Alice to fill.

They all had a final glass of wine, mostly silent as they stared toward the television screen, where carols had been repeating themselves all night. But Jean noted that the others were as focused inward as she, no doubt also worrying about the reporters coming in the morning.

Chapter 21.

Even though she had been present when the reporters interviewed Jean in her own living room that morning, Alice had already watched it twice before on television and was now going for the third time. It had expanded to national news as well as local, probably because there was so little else going on during the holidays. It gave the stations something to talk about beyond reviewing the past year and making lists about it.

Before agreeing to be interviewed, Jean had requested certain conditions, and the reporters had agreed. She would answer anything at all about the actual situation, how she got trapped in the closet and how she spent her time in there, but she would not comment on other aspects of the school or on Tom in any regard other than in respect to the one incident. She would not predict what would happen next either. And she would not honor any questions about Tom's story other than to say it was ridiculous and that her relationship with Tom was asexual, the professional relationship between student and teacher.

She had narrated the event, exactly as she had told it to Mel and Alice and to the police, and had answered questions about it. And then one reporter broke the agreement about conditions, asking if she had really never displayed even flirtatious behavior toward Tom. With that, Alice had stepped in and told them that the interview was over and they should leave. Watching, Alice laughed at herself. She could be really strict, she thought, although most often she was described as plain old "bossy."

To her mind, except for that last question, which was leading toward blaming the victim and causing her mother embarrassment, the interview had gone well, and both the press and the television stations were presenting appropriate excerpts. But she had looked online, and she had

listened to local radio, and there the story was different, with lots of venom being directed toward both her mother and the teaching profession. She hoped Mom didn't know that was going on. She never listened to the radio, but she did read a lot of news online. Ah well, unless her mother brought up the subject, Alice would probably never know what her mother had discovered, since if she herself broached it, her mother would go straight online or to the radio to find out the worst. Better to say nothing. She would give her mother a call in the morning, just to cheer her up or maybe to cheer herself up. This situation was just beyond belief. Her mother had probably made a mistake in becoming a teacher, but she had always given it her best, which was way beyond what was required. And just look where it got her.

Chapter 22

Now that the neighbors had seen Ms. K on television, and had also seen Tom looking and acting very unlike himself, they were all looking at her funny, Mrs. Roberson thought to herself, like they knew something suspicious was going on and that her son Tom was at the bottom of it, up to no good again. Truthfully, she thought so herself sometimes, but other times she was angry, sure that the press had given Ms. K a more sympathetic treatment than Tom, had let her present herself as a good teacher and a victim without even asking any hard questions. And now she was the one getting asked the hard questions, by every neighbor she talked to, or at least this is how she told it to Doreen.

“Mom,” Doreen said, “you saw and heard Ms. K. Do you really think that she could be the type to do what Tom claims?”

“You never know.”

“Tom is the one always hitting on females, and you know it.”

“Doreen, aren’t you forgetting all the girls who chase after him? The phone’s always ringing for him, and they even come banging on the door.”

“True, but those are silly girls, not mature women or teachers, and most of them are just like him, failing all their classes. Ms. K has a grown daughter, and it looks like she has a

boyfriend too, that guy in the background at the interview this morning. When her daughter stopped the interview, that guy put his arm around Ms. K and led her out of the room. What would she want with an illiterate skinhead?"

"Don't talk that way about your brother."

"How would you describe him?" Doreen asked. "He's not a cute little boy sitting on your knee anymore, like in your old snapshots. He's a great big bully, and he hurts you and me sometimes too. You know that very well."

"He doesn't really mean it, and he's always so sorry. He just has a real bad temper."

"You know what? You always make excuses for him, but you never make them for me. And you never care about what I do, how I always get good grades and help you around the house and everything. You just always say I'm jealous, because he's good looking and popular and I'm not. It's not fair!" Doreen's eyes filled with tears, the way they always did when she was furious. It wasn't just the way her mother always treated her, it was the fact that her mother was right about her not being popular or considered good looking. She knew that her looks were okay and so was her personality, but at school that made her a dork. If she wore sexy clothes and had a nasty mouth, neither of which would ever happen, the other kids would like her better. She should have made her mother do the paperwork so she could switch schools.

"Don't you yell at me, young lady!" her mother was yelling. "And don't you say anything to other people against your brother. I'm going to stick with him on this, and you are too. If his reputation is ruined, it ruins ours too, and don't you forget it."

"In that case, we're both already ruined," Doreen said sadly, "except that I refuse to be lumped with him in any way. I can't wait to grow up and get out of this house and away from you both." She walked to the closet, grabbed her coat and book bag, and opened the front door.

“I’ll be at the library,” she said, wanting to walk out without explanation but too used to doing the considerate thing.

Chapter 23.

Jean had grown used to seeing her name in the newspaper lately, but this time it was in a story that contained information totally new to her, a statement made by the school board and superintendent. She looked quickly at the phone, to see if maybe somebody might have called her to tell her about this. The answering machine was blinking madly. Of course it was, since she had turned off the phone’s ringer and the answering machine’s sound on Friday, when the malicious and threatening calls had started, probably coming from Tom’s gang friends. It had been so foolish to let students know how they could reach her if they needed help. Now, with everything recorded but not heard, somebody could have left her important messages and she wouldn’t know. She had Mel and Alice using her cell phone number, but nobody else knew that.

She read the news item over and over, hardly able to believe her eyes. One part was okay: they had suspended Tom for the time being. But the other part was insulting, infuriating, completely unfair, even though it contained some truth. They said that according to school administrators she was a teacher who was poor at classroom management and who could neither control her classes nor interest them in her subject, resulting in poor attendance. She could

actually admit to this, but only if they had also stated that every other teacher in her high school had the same problems and that she was doing no worse than they. And better than many, she thought, in that I never stop trying.

Her cell phone rang, Mel calling in a rage. “You need to get a lawyer,” he said. “Forget about their smearing you with mud. Forget about their job. You can get something else, I’m sure of it. But you need to sue them for not providing you with the proper security in that hellhole, for putting you through those horrible five days. Ask for enough damages to live on for a long time, especially since they’re ruining your reputation now as well. I’ll try to find you a good lawyer if you want, and I’ll even pay, because I know I’ll get my money back. They’re out of their minds.”

She calmed him down and told him that he could go ahead, if he wanted to, and try to find a lawyer, but not actually hire one just yet. She didn’t think she could win that kind of lawsuit, because the public understandably didn’t want tax money that should go toward schools to go toward awards in lawsuits. Neither did she really. She just wanted a fair system for both her and the kids. She was angry, but, unlike Mel, she was used to the way things were. She had seen a lot of teachers try to buck the system and change it to make it better, and lots of them did it one class at a time or one principal and school at a time, but it never lasted. And then lots of them left the teaching profession for something where they could really have some effect.

Alice called next. “Mel just called me,” she said, “and I think he’s right. But if you don’t want to sue right away, at least call the union and give them a try.”

“Okay,” Jean said. “No harm in trying, and at least it’s free. No, wait, I pay union dues. Anyway, all right, I’ll call my school rep today. I’m pretty sure I have the number in the stuff I brought home, but I might not be able to get anything done during vacation.”

“Just do it, Mom,” Alice pleaded.

“Okay,” Jean said, and she did. She found the number of the rep, a shop teacher who was buddies with all the coaches who loved Tom. This is useless, she thought to herself, but she

dialed.

“Wassup?” someone answered.

“Is this Charlie?” she asked.

“You got him. Who’s this?”

“Jean Kosciuszko.”

There was a silence. “Oh. What can I do for you?”

“I need to file a union grievance.”

“About what?”

Jean was surprised. “You haven’t heard about what happened to me?”

“Yeah, you locked yourself in that closet. It’s too bad, but you shoulda had that lock fixed. So what’s the grievance?”

“Well, let’s start with the lack of proper security at the school and go on to the way they’re using the media to ruin my reputation.”

More silence. “Whatever you say. Anybody can ask for a hearing. But you probly gotta wait till school starts back. I’ll get back to you. Give me a number where you can be reached.”

Reluctantly, she gave the cell phone number.

“Okay then,” Charlie said, and hung up.

I should have recorded that conversation, Jean thought. Alice and Mel will be thinking again that I’m exaggerating. She flopped down on her back on the bed and stuck pillows under her head and knees and then closed her eyes. Not good for my blood pressure, she thought, to keep beating my head against a wall. Maybe Mel’s right, and I can get some other kind of job if I quit. I can withdraw from my pension account and live on that for a while and then live in a cardboard box when I really retire.

She sighed and switched to thinking of Mel, who had been very, very nice to her lately. She thought that maybe rescuing her, being the one with big shoulders who could help, turned him on a bit, made him feel needed. It was a change anyway from their more usual way of

relating, in which she was the strong one giving advice.

Maybe she should shop today for late Christmas presents for him and Alice. They had decided to exchange gifts on New Year's Eve, so she had a few days, but shopping was therapeutic. And Christmas boxes of chocolates would be on sale now, a little treat for herself that she was more than deserving.

Chapter 24

Alice's new boyfriend Jim was good looking, and he seemed sweet, Jean thought. He had just come back from a long visit to his own family and yet seemed genuinely pleased to be spending this evening with Alice's mother and friend. He was a good sport and gracious, if nothing else, for he probably really wanted a night alone with Alice. Jean had not been taken very far into Alice's confidence, but she knew her daughter well enough to see that this almost new relationship was moving into a hot and heavy, starry-eyed, maybe-this-is-the-real one, stage.

Although Jean could understand why anyone might find Jim attractive and appealing, she was a little surprised that Alice did. Normally Alice's infatuations echoed the sentiments in an old Tom Rush song, "Ladies love outlaws, like babies love stray dogs..." Alice seemed drawn to the bad boys, apparently finding them much sexier than the guy who acted like he would take care of you when you were sick and could probably fix the leaky faucet, the guy who only wanted one thing from his clothes—comfort. Jim seemed to be this kind of dependable and giving guy. But he was divorced, so some woman had found him wanting, or maybe it was the reverse. He was, according to Alice, devoted to his little daughter and prioritized her weekend visits with him, not normally something that would have pleased Alice either. Maybe Alice was finally maturing into someone who wanted substance over style.

They were about to exchange gifts. As they had agreed, Jim and Alice would start, then Mel and Jean, and finally Alice and Jean, sticking to a single gift, although Jean had cheated a

bit with Alice's gift, making one package with multiple items inside—a nightgown, a robe, and slippers, all matching, all more sexy than practical, hopefully useful now that Alice had a lover.

Jim started, while Alice watched with a look that said she just knew Jim would love what he saw. "Wow," Jim said, as he pulled from its fancy box a heavy silk robe, a gorgeous almost iridescent navy; its lining in a lighter silk was in a geometric pattern of blues, beautiful enough to frame, Jean thought. Jim was astonished. "This is really something," he said, "almost too good to wear. Thank you so much, Alice." He leaned over to kiss Alice's face, which had turned slightly worried. She obviously saw when Jean saw, that Jim would hang this robe up permanently and keep on using whatever he already had, probably some old flannel robe from Wal-Mart. Or he might be the kind of guy who never used a robe at all. But he was trying valiantly to act like he loved it. "Wow," he said, "this is really special." The harder he tried, the less convincing he was.

Now it was Alice's turn to open her gift from Jim. It was in a small box, and Jean felt as anxious as Jim looked. She hoped it was jewelry and that Jim knew Alice's taste, which was probably too much to expect. And she prayed to God that it was not perfume, since Alice was allergic to most scents.

Alice had ripped off the bow and fancy paper, and there it was, what Jean had most feared, a fancy bottle of perfume, no doubt a good kind but nothing Jean recognized. Now it was Alice's turn to pretend she was happy. "Oh, I love this stuff," she said.

Jean looked at Jim. He seemed to be buying it. He reached over and said, "Here, let me put a little on your hair, where I can smell it while we're dancing." He reached over and took the bottle from her and sprayed a little on. Alice had quickly closed her eyes, but it probably

wouldn't help. Those eyes were going to itch and then swell, not all the way closed or anything that drastic, just enough to make her seem to have a cold.

Alice gave Jim a big thank you hug, giving Jean a look over his shoulder, a raised eyebrow look that said, *What can I do? I have to pretend to like this.*

She's going to have to wear this perfume every time she sees Jim, Jean thought, unless she can pretend tonight, when her eyes swell, that she is just discovering an allergy to perfume.

"Darn it," Jim said, "I forgot to put on after-shave. This just made me think of it."

"I like your clean, natural smell best anyway," Alice said.

Bet she's at least relieved about that, Jean thought. She looked at the gifts she and Mel were about to exchange. I sure hope we do better than they did. "You go first," she said to Mel. She loved the gift she was giving him, a soft, warm cashmere cardigan in robin's egg blue.

He opened it carefully, putting the wrapping in the recycling bag and then holding up the gift for all to see. "A sweater," he said, "the same color as Jean's eyes. Thank you, Jean." He leaned over and gave Jean a peck on the cheek, then folded the sweater neatly.

"I thought you could use a sweater," she said, "you don't seem to have any."

"You're right," Mel said, "and this one is really soft and probably very warm. Now you open yours." The box with her gift was really large, and he stood up to give it to her.

As she rather nervously took the box, she thought a bit about the fact that Mel didn't own any other sweaters. He was not one of those men who never shopped for clothes, and he owned lots of jeans and sweat shirts and whatever else caught his fancy. The fact that he didn't own a sweater might mean that he didn't like to wear them.

Watching her trying to untie a ribbon knot, Alice reached for the scissors. "Here, Mom, you'll never get it open that way."

Her first impression was that the gift was some kind of bedspread or comforter of quilted paisley, the kind she had worn in the seventies and that she remembered her mother and grandmother wearing in old age. “What pretty material,” she said, hating it, “with little blue bouquets all over it.”

“Take it out and try it on,” Mel encouraged her. “And there’s more stuff under it.”

Try on a bedspread? But when she took it out, she could see that it was an enormous robe. She sneaked a look at the size. 2X? She wore 14. Did Mel think she was that fat? Underneath there was a long sleeved, high necked flannel nightgown, a muted, almost grayish light blue, also 2X. And that was not all. Two of the ugliest slipper sox she ever saw, horizontally striped in shades of blue, completed the clown outfit. She didn’t even know they still made slipper sox.

“You’re going to be warm in those,” Mel said proudly. Behind his back Alice was trying hard not to laugh.

“I sure will. Thanks so much. When you’re here, though, I’d rather you keep me warm.” She got up and squeezed him tightly when she hugged him, managing at the same time to give Alice a warning look. There was no way in hell he would ever see her in those tents, although, truth to tell, when she was alone they actually would serve her quite well, as she felt comfy in oversized clothes that hung on her. But for looks, she would rather wear the robe that Alice bought Jim. Hmm. Wonder if he’d trade. Nah.

“May I open my present from you now, Mom?” Alice asked, probably trying to help her out by changing the focus.

“Sure.” She watched Alice carefully as she claimed to really, really love the things Jean had bought.

On to the last gift, hers from Alice. It was a set of CDs, apparently the complete works of a group she had liked when Alice was growing up.

“I know you love their music, Mom,” Alice was saying, “and I thought that even if you have these albums, they are probably on scratchy old vinyl.”

“You’re right. I’ll listen to these over and over. Thanks, Alice.” She had in fact only ever liked a couple of hit singles by this band, but she had played them over and over at a time when Alice was impressionable. She had eventually bought one of their LPs but had not cared for it. She tried to put on a fascinated and happy face as she looked over the CDs.

Mel was looking at her with a slightly puzzled expression. He had helped her sort out and dispose of unwanted LPs in her basement, and this group’s barely played LP had not made the cut. It was the kind of thing he would remember. Maybe to move on from this part of the evening, he asked Alice, “What time are those dinner reservations for? I’m ready for that steak right now.”

“9:00 P.M. We could probably leave in a little while. Just let me clean up all this wrapping stuff.”

It wasn’t a good night to be driving. Sleet was making the roads slippery, and there were sure to be drunks driving on New Year’s Eve, so Jean was glad to pull into the restaurant parking lot. Unfortunately, there were fewer parking spots than tables inside, and no one seemed to be ready to pull out. In fact, there was a short line outside at the entrance.

Jim was driving. “How about I go to the mall parking lot? The stores are closed, and there will be plenty of spots.”

“If we have to,” Alice said, wrinkling her nose. “But it’s two blocks away, and Mom and I are wearing high heels. It’s wet and slippery too.”

“I’ll look for spots on the way. No, better yet, you two go get the table, and we’ll join you after we park.”

That was the plan, but Jean and Alice were still in that outside line when Mel and Jim finally joined them. All four were starting to feel the sleet through their clothes.

“Did you try going in?” Mel asked.

“The guy at the door said that the problem is that people who didn’t make New Year’s Eve reservations but did make early dinner reservations are hanging on to their tables. They’re trying to straighten it out, but there are more people waiting inside.”

Mel groaned. “I should have eaten lunch. How long is the wait supposed to be?”

Jean shrugged. “They’re not saying.”

By 10 o’clock they were in the building but still standing. To make matters worse, Mel and Jean had been arguing. Thinking he was pleasing her, and was giving her a great New Year’s Eve surprise, he told her that he had hired a lawyer for her, whom Mel himself would pay, to see that Jean was not victimized in any way by the school and that her attacker got what he deserved.

Far from being pleased, Jean was more than annoyed, she was angry. She had specifically asked Mel not to hire anybody, she said, and to wait a bit and see what the union did and the school did.

Mel was then the one annoyed. “Just trying to help,” he said. “I’ll call him back and put it on hold. I haven’t given him the information he needs to get started anyway.”

“Thanks. I know you’re just looking out for me. And I do thank you for that.” Jean knew her appreciative face was not convincing, and she was not really sure herself why she minded him taking the initiative on this. But the evening had just gotten a little colder.

So now here they were at 10:15, in the building but still standing by the door, hungry, cold in their wet clothes, and increasingly irritable. Alice's eyes were red and slightly swollen, and she had already explained to Jim that sometimes she was allergic to the ingredients in some scents. Some New Year's Eve this was turning out to be.

Jim gave a little cough. "You don't realize that you're with a really good cook—me—and that I live not very far from here. If we left now and stopped at the grocery on the way, at midnight we could be full of steak and baked potatoes, salad, whatever dessert looks good in the store bakery, and champagne. And we could actually celebrate this occasion instead of suffering. If you like, we could listen to music or dance or talk or watch Times Square—whatever you feel like. What do you say?"

"Let's go," said Alice, starting toward the door.

"Wonderful!" said Mel. "Alice, this guy is terrific!"

And he was, Jean thought later, sitting contentedly in front of a cleaned plate and sipping champagne. He cooked a meal much better than any at the restaurant and had spent a fraction of what he would have paid just for his own meal at the restaurant. He had insisted on paying for all the groceries, saying he was a host today but expected to be a guest at their homes in the future.

The ambiance at Jim's place needed work, because it turned out that he was a slob—there was just no other word that fit—and they had to clear dirty clothes and books and papers from the living room to use it, but the company could not have been better. They all had become much nicer people as soon as they left the restaurant, and they improved even more after they ate. Alice had helped in the kitchen, which was the only room that Jim kept in good order, and had enjoyed it once she accepted the fact that Jim was in charge and was going to boss her around and do things differently from her. While those two cooked, Mel and Jean had sat in the

living room and, without saying much about it, had made up. They didn't talk about the lawyer anymore, but that was mostly because talking about troubles was no way to celebrate. But Jean never really could forget that on Monday the schools would open again. She didn't know what would happen, but she knew it wouldn't be anything good.

Chapter 25

At Tom's house there was no steak dinner to celebrate New Year's Eve and very little conviviality. Tom himself had been spending much of his time with a woman in her twenties, or so he bragged, who was buying him a lot of new clothes. He hadn't been home for the past two days, but he had called that afternoon to try to get his mother to look for some phone number he said he had misplaced.

Early in the evening Doreen has shared some potato chips and dip with her mother, who also had wine; the only celebration was on the television screen. Doreen had been agitated all day, for she had decided that even if Tom would get even and hurt her, her mother needed to know that Tom was trying to get people to lie for him, to be witnesses to what never happened.

Her mother did not like to be interrupted when she was watching a show, so Doreen had to choose carefully the right time to broach the subject, if she wanted her mother to be receptive. And it had to be tonight, because tomorrow Tom could be back home again.

Finally at 10:30, her mother stood up and stretched and yawned. "That's it," she said. "I can't keep awake any longer. Nothing special about the new year anyway. Happy New Year and all."

Doreen turned off the TV. "I'm going to bed too. But first I need to tell you something."

"What now?"

"I heard Tom on the phone—

"You're not going to tattle on him again, are you? You two are way too old to be still fighting all the time."

"Mom, this is really important. He's bribing fake witnesses to support his story about what happened with Miss K."

"Oh, I don't think so, Doreen. He's not that bad."

"You know he is, Mom."

"Are you really sure? Did you ask him about it?"

"Mom, I'm not crazy. He'd beat me up too, the way he did Miss K."

"No, I don't think so. He's never really hurt you, just done sister and brother stuff."

"He *has* hurt me. You just never have believed it. Why do you care about him so much, when he's mean to you too, and you don't care what he does to me?"

"That's not true. I treat you both the same. But I'm telling you right now, I don't want you to go spreading stories like that about your brother. Whatever you think you know, you don't say anything."

Doreen sighed. It was useless.

"And don't be sighin' like that. I will talk to your brother and ask him myself."

"Don't tell him I said anything. He'll try to get even with me."

"Okay," his mother nodded.

Doreen walked off to bed without saying anything more. Her mother would not talk to Tom, but if she did, she would probably start by saying, "Doreen told me...." Now she had to try

to decide if she should tell somebody else and who it should be. She threw herself down on the bed without even changing to pajamas. What a crummy New Year's Eve.

Chapter 26

Jean was amazed to see Tom's mother on the television screen. It was Sunday morning, and while she and Mel had breakfast they were also looking at a local news special on the schools. First they had been surprised to see a clip of Dr. Malone and the superintendent at the downtown office; they were talking about how hard it was to find good teachers, ones who really cared and knew something and had classroom management skills. Dr. Malone had said ones who didn't have what it takes paid the consequences. She didn't mention Jean, but everybody knew what she was implying. Then there was a clip of the school football coach, who did talk about the incident and did mention Jean, saying that she couldn't handle her class and always wanted special help. The kids didn't want anything to do with her, according to him. Tom, he said, was a talented player, but she was ruining his chances of ever getting a football scholarship. And then Tom's mother had been interviewed at their shabby home, obviously nervous but trying to garner sympathy. She didn't actually say much about Tom but instead talked about how hard she worked to raise Tom right and how hard her life had been.

Mel watched open mouthed. "You know," he said, "you've told me about these people, but it's so hard to believe until you actually see something like this. You're the one they would be interviewing if they were at all fair. It's all about politics and sports, not education."

"You know what especially upsets me about this?" Jean said. "The mother. I do feel sorry for her, but she has another child, Doreen, who does just about everything right, the exact

opposite of Tom, and she never even mentioned her. You'd think she only had the one child, Tom, and that he was practically perfect."

Mel turned off the television, which had gone on to another topic. "You have to go to school tomorrow and face all this crap. Let's not talk about it today. Why don't we do something you like?"

"I can't really put it out of my mind you know. But how about another long hike? It's a sunny day in January with temps almost at 50. We don't get a lot of those."

"Okay, but do you think we can get back by the time the game starts?"

She nodded. Okay, he wasn't perfect and watching sports would still be his priority, but something had changed. Before those days when he had been worried about her whereabouts, before she had needed his help, he wouldn't have even been spending this morning with her. It was if she had been less attractive when she seemed strong and not needy. That was too bad, although the improvement in his behavior was anything but bad. She liked the way things were between them now and hoped that if she changed her life, moved forward with a new career, as he, in fact, was always telling her to do, that he would still want her.

Chapter 27

Doreen saw the shock on her mother's face. "Maybe now you'll believe me when I tell you that Tom is a bully. He had somebody beat up on me because I told my friend about him trying to get witnesses to lie for him. I guess her brother overheard or got it out of her or something and told Tom

His mother stood in the doorway with her mouth open for a moment, then asked the policemen who was supporting Doreen, "Is this true?"

"I don't know, ma'am," the officer replied, "we just found your daughter on the street like this. She didn't want to go to the ER or file a report. May we come in the house?"

"Oh, of course, come in. I'm sorry. Could you help her to her bed?"

"No, mom, just the couch for now."

"I would recommend that she see a doctor, ma'am, in case any bones are broken and to get an x-ray and some pictures. Then she really should put this on record."

"Doreen? Why didn't you go with the policemen to the ER and then a file a report?" She turned toward the officer. "She can still do it, can't she?"

He nodded and looked expectantly at Doreen. "How about it?"

Doreen ignored him. "I keep telling you, Mom, I live with the one responsible, even if he got someone else to beat me up. Your son. And I know him. If I tell the police about him, he'll do something even worse to me. So leave me alone about it."

Her mother frowned and shook her head. “No. I’ve made up my mind. You’re a minor, and I’m telling you you have to go with the policeman. I don’t have any way to get you to a doctor or pay if you change your mind later.”

“Should I call an ambulance or do you want me to help you walk to the patrol car?” the officer asked Doreen.

“I’ll walk. I just have a black eye and some bruises.”

“Officer?” her mother asked. “Can this be kept quiet?”

“If she files a report, the story could be news, because of who her brother is and all that’s been on the TV and in the papers about it.”

“What’s the matter, Mom? You thinking about what Tom will do when he hears that I told the police about this? You know he’s responsible.” Doreen shook her head in disgust. “Be careful. Don’t get him mad when he comes home or he’ll take it out on you.”

Her mother looked at Doreen leaving with the policeman and didn’t say anything, just shut the door.

Chapter 28

Doreen was waiting by the teachers' parking lot when Jean arrived early Monday morning. Jean noticed her as she drove in but didn't realize that the girl wanted to talk to her until Doreen started waving frantically. Instead of parking, Jean drove over to the girl.

"Can we sit in your car and talk for a couple minutes?" Doreen asked.

"Sure." Jean was startled to see that the girl had a black eye and bruised face. "What happened to you?"

Doreen got in and perched on the edge of the passenger seat, facing Jean. "What do you think? You know how my brother is. I came to tell you that I overheard a phone conversation in which he was trying to get someone to lie and and be a witness for him. He wasn't successful, but I'm sure that by now he has somebody. If you need me to swear to that for you, I'll do it."

"What, and get beaten up again? I don't want to ask that of you, Doreen, although I'm very grateful to you for offering. What you need to do, though, is get help from some group that supports abused women, or in your case, I guess that would be abused children. The school social worker is here on Mondays. Go talk to her."

"Maybe I'll do that. But if you need me I'm here for you. I'm going to give you a number to call and leave me a message if you decide you'd like me to testify. It's a friend's house." She passed a little piece of paper to Jean.

“Let me give you my cell phone number,” Jean said, grabbing an old envelope and a pen from her glove compartment and then scribbling the number. “But only a couple people have this, so guard it.”

“I’ll memorize it and then rip it up and flush it.”

“Thanks, Doreen.” Jean tried not to smile, it all seemed so overdramatic, more like a television detective thriller than her life, at least as it used to be and should be. “Look, the coach just drove into the lot. Get out of my car right now, before he notices you and says something to Tom.”

“Okay.” Doreen hurried out and away from the car, heading toward the street and away from the teachers’ entrance. Jean hoped Coach had not been looking in his rear view mirror, where he would have had a good view of her.

She was not surprised about the witness, as she had assumed Tom had access to willing liars. But she was surprised, horrified really, at Doreen’s involvement and vulnerability. She wished there were something she or one of the other teachers could do to improve Doreen’s life, give her the encouragement and challenges she didn’t have at home or in most of her classes either, where if somebody wasn’t disrupting, the teacher was probably having to go over the same material time and time again for the majority, who missed lots of days and all the homework. Most of the teachers knew who Doreen was, even though she was only a freshman and hadn’t been in their classes, because she stood out. Always at the top of the honor roll, she volunteered for everything, and in November had even run for class president, unfortunately to be beaten by somebody more popular whose name had never graced an honor roll but who was big, literally and figurately, on the basketball court.

She had reached the teachers' entrance, but when she opened it she was surprised to find her entrance blocked by one of the security guards. "What's going on, George?" she asked him.

"Dr. Malone said that you are not to be allowed into the school today and should go straight to the downtown offices, where they're expecting you. She said she left you a lot of phone messages, but you never called her back." He handed her a sheet from a notepad. It said, "Report to Dr. Slothman."

Jean sighed. "I can't believe this." Now she wished she had checked her answering machine messages and at least saved herself this little drama. "What about my personal stuff in my room?"

"I don't know, but I know you definitely can't come in here. If it makes you feel any better," George said, lowering his voice, "Tom is suspended and the word is out that he's being transferred to some special school." George was always a good one for passing on the latest gossip, even if he was worthless at helping classroom teachers with security issues.

"Thanks," she said. Heading to her car, she saw only one other teacher, a woman she didn't really know, Eva Gonzalez, who taught Spanish classes, or at least she would until some rumored budget cuts would take effect in February. She waved at Eva, who was somebody who always had something right on target to say at teacher's meetings.

The woman hurried toward her. "Everyone feels so bad about what happened to you," she said. "With that Tom, it could have been anybody here, because he verbally abuses and threatens all of us. Except for the coaches, of course. Where are you going?"

"They sent me downtown. I guess they suspended Tom."

Eva gasped. "Tom should be in jail, not just suspended. But surely you're going to try to get some union help. You didn't do anything wrong. Everybody knows that."

“Thanks, Eva. I have called the union, but you know how our rep is, and the union as a whole is in bed with the school board.”

Eva laughed. “That’s true and not really funny, but I just had a quick visual of a huge bed with all those fat cats packed in.”

Jean laughed. “I might end up getting a lawyer, although I didn’t want to do that.”

“Well, good luck. Let somebody here know what’s going on.”

Jean nodded, but she had been so busy with lesson plans and grading papers and doing all the bureaucratic busy work that she not made any close friends at this new school and didn’t even have phone numbers. She headed toward her car, which she intended to park near public transportation rather than drive through rush hour traffic.

She had to walk several blocks from her parking space to the bus stop at a fast clip, trying not to let herself get tearful as well as angry, and then didn’t get a seat when she finally caught a bus and had to give most of her attention to staying upright on the ride. She was too stunned by what had happened to think straight anyway, but mostly she was trying to keep her mind blank so that she wouldn’t cry. She would think it all over when she found out what they were going to do with her at the main office.

Once she got to the downtown school offices, it was all “hurry up and wait and who do you think you are anyway, wanting service.” Dr. Slothman was late and after all not expecting her anyway, so she sat in a reception area most of the morning. She usually had a book with her to pass the time in such situations, but she had left everything except her purse inside her briefcase, in the car.

Toward noon, Dr. Slothman arrived, for some reason in a very bad mood. He did not apologize for making her wait but seemed to assume she had deliberately created a great deal of

trouble for the schools and that he had better things to do than deal with her. Eventually, he came to the point. "You are on a temporary paid leave, which will last at least until your union grievance meeting and your court date. You will be informed of the times and dates for those by certified mail, and you will also at that time be told the penalties for missing those dates. In the meantime, you cannot go back to your old school because your appearance there would be too inflammatory."

"Excuse me," Jean interjected, "but you're treated me like a criminal. As far as I can see, I'm a *victim*."

"You have criminal charges filed against you. Sexual harrassment of a student."

"Well, apparently I need a lawyer."

Slothman shrugged. "Up to you."

"Am I free to leave or is there more?"

"There should be a final disposition of your case shortly after you go to court and have the union meeting. You will be notified by certified mail. If too much time passes before we can decide what to do with you, you will have to come down here and temporarily help out with the clerical work if you want to continue to be paid. You would receive your normal pay if that happens, until there is a decision about a more permanent resolution to the situation."

"Anything else?"

"No. You may go." Slothman was already done with her and starting to go through his IN box.

Not even "Have a nice day?" More to the point, once again not even a chance to present her point of view, her version of what had happened. As soon as she got home she would let Mel know that she would be needing that lawyer and that he had been right about that after all.

Chapter 29.

Dr. Malone was practically gnashing her teeth, the day was going so badly. The first day back after a vacation was always hell, but this time she had barely had a vacation, there had been so many calls and meetings about the mess Miss K had started. The night before—on a Sunday night!—she had gotten a call from her immediate district boss telling her she was going to have to fire Mike Reilly. The fool hadn't done a decent cleanup, and somebody downtown had come out on Saturday—Saturday!—to check the building, since there was a rumor that PBS wanted to do a feature story on the school, running it down, no doubt about that. Whoever inspected had been horrified enough to start working right away on getting rid of Reilly. But Dr. Malone would be the one who would have to deal with the janitors' union and find someone else and maybe even go without a janitor for a while. She shuddered at the thought. She would give him a months' notice, but he had vacation days saved up and could take them. Things could have been worse, though; the building could have been inspected on Friday, and they would have discovered that she was not on duty, although she had not reported sick or that she was using vacation days.

The coaches had been at her all morning too, wanting to keep Tom from being transferred, though they knew perfectly well that he was guilty and had lied about Miss K, even

if they would never say so any more than she would. But Miss K was still guilty of being a major pain in the ass, and this seemed the perfect opportunity to get rid of her. At the same time, that classroom needed a teacher, and science teachers, who didn't want to come here before, would probably rather wait on tables than come to a school where there was no equipment to speak of and students punched teachers and threw them in closets.

The substitute for Miss K, who had come with a chance of possibly staying on for the rest of the year, would be lucky to last the day. There had been pandemonium in that room this morning, with students running out of the room and then running amok in the halls, banging on all the doors and having a grand old time from their point of view, she thought. She hadn't been up there, but it had taken two security guards to calm things down, and a policeman was sitting in the room now.

She was ready for an early lunch, but just as she was pushing up out of her chair, the phone rang. Edith Higginbottom, her friend from church and a union bigshot. This must be about Miss K.

"Hi, girlfriend," Edith said. "I'll bet you know why I'm calling."

"You want to make an appointment to meet with me and Jean Kosciuszko."

"That's right. How about Friday afternoon in your office?"

Reluctantly, Dr. Malone agreed. It would have to happen sooner or later. "Anything I should know to get ready for this?" she asked Edith.

"Well, we'll be sending both you and Jean some forms to fill out and bring to the meeting, and we'll let you both know the exact time. But looking at it now, I'm afraid you don't really have much of a case against her, especially if it's true that she kept calling security and nobody came. Not only could you possibly lose the grievance, but you could be looking really

bad, because the media is all over this. Unless there is a way to prove that Tom is telling the truth, I don't see grounds to fire her.”

“Okay, well thanks for your input. Oh, by the way, I wanted to tell you that what you accomplished yesterday with that Sunday School choir was amazing. The way they sang ‘Amazing Grace’ was...well...amazing.”

“You’re so sweet. I wish we could go out for a drink after work on Friday, as long as I’m out your way, but I guess it wouldn’t look good.”

“No, but how about lunch after church next Sunday? My treat.”

“That we can do. I’ll see you Friday then.”

As she hung up, Dr. Malone’s smile faded. A fine kettle of fish. She really wanted Miss K out of here. She was just too much trouble, and it would be worse now that everybody knew some version of the story about her and Tom. If there were only a way to get her to quit. She thought for a while, but nothing came to her. It was while she was taking her second helping of lunchroom barbecue that she hit on a foolproof way to make sure Miss K would resign.

Chapter 30

Mel had done his best, but the lawyer he had contacted was just not available on such short notice for either the court date on Thursday or the union hearing on Friday. So here she sat alone, in a room mostly filled with possible criminals and their lawyers. Even Tom had somebody with him in a suit who looked like he could be an attorney. The lawsuit had actually been filed from her police report, not Tom's, and was based on the fact that she had been knocked to the floor. Being locked in, the police had decided, had been an accident and probably her own fault, and the police and the school together had agreed that the sexual charge against Miss K would be handled internally by the school administrators and, depending on what they decided, could still be turned over to the police later.

Hours after the appointed time, which had been filled with one dreary or shocking case after another, their turn came. The judge read the charges and asked both her and Tom if it was true that he had knocked her down.

“Yes,” she said.

“She tripped and fell,” Tom said.

The judge looked at her.

“First he slammed the supply room door into my head, then he pushed me, and I got dizzy and my knees buckled. When I fell, I also hit my head, but he had already hit me several times by then.”

The judge looked at Tom.

“She's lying,” Tom said.

“Can you prove that?” asked the judge.

“I have a witness, but my lawyer told me I’d have to ask you first for a chance for him to testify.”

The judge sighed. He looked at the courtroom, full again with people who arrived as others left. He checked through some papers. Then he spoke to both of them.

“It appears that both of you have already been given consequences. Tom, you have been suspended, and the principal is considering transferring you to another school, where you will not be able to play football. And you, Ms. Kosciuszko, have been taken out of the classroom and put on temporary leave, with further consequences to be determined after a union meeting. So I am just going to issue a warning to you, Tom, since this case is about your alleged violence. This incident will be on your record, and if something like this comes up again, the next judge will not be so lenient. This case is closed.”

Jean thought that Tom looked as startled as she did at what amounted almost to a brush off of their case. He shrugged and grinned at the guy who might be an attorney. So, Jean thought, your fake witness will not be necessary after all. And you got not even a single day in jail for what you did to me. She left the courtroom. but, now as afraid of him as he wanted her to be, she waited until he had driven away with his friend before she went to her own car.

Chapter 31

When Mel rang the doorbell on Friday night, Jean was not ready. She could not stop crying. She hadn't changed her clothes either, from those she had worn to the union meeting, but Mel didn't ever seem to care or even notice what she wore. She opened the door in tears and threw herself into Mel's arms.

"I'm just guessing," Mel said, "but could it be that the union meeting didn't go too well?"

"I didn't lose my job," she sobbed, "but I might as well have."

"I don't understand," Mel said, rocking her back and forth sideways and patting her on the back, "and I want to know what happened. Hurry up and stop crying so that I can understand what you're saying."

She looked up at him and laughed. "How selfish of you," she said, "I was just getting into having a good cry and being consoled."

"Let me get you something to drink and a wet cloth to wipe your face," he said, disentangling himself. "You want something like a beer?"

"Only if I can take a nap after I drink it. Maybe a diet coke. Help yourself. I'll go wash my face myself, like a big girl." And off she went, sniffing and choking back sobs. When she returned with a red but newly shiny face, Mel was waiting on the couch, patting the cushion next to him. She sat down and took a sip from the coke waiting on the coffee table.

“Okay, we’ve got cokes, we’ve got smiles, we’re sitting down holding hands. Now tell me what happened. Come on, I’ve been waiting all day to hear.” Mel leaned into her and gave her side a nudge.

Jean couldn’t help smiling. Sometimes he was like a puppy, in that she couldn’t look at him and stay sad. What she actually said to him was, “Stop treating me like a bad little girl.”

“I could say, ‘Then stop acting like one,’ but then you might stop thinking I’m funny.”

“Okay.” Jean said. “The union person was obviously an old friend of Malone’s—I picked up the vibes on that right away—so her presence was irrelevant. What Malone did to me was positively Machiavellian. She didn’t have any grounds to fire me or punish me anymore than she already had, so she figured out what would make me most miserable, to the point of quitting.”

“And what was that?”

“She’s switching me to a chemistry schedule. I don’t know chemistry. My last class in it was 25 years ago, and I got a D grade.” And then Jean could not keep herself from crying some more, so hard that the word “bawling” described it better. “I was really slow at all the math problems, so that halfway through my tests the time would be up. And I didn’t have any interest in things like the properties of minerals or solutions, so I memorized them for tests and then forgot them. I can’t teach chemistry.” Now she was wailing so hard that Mel was obviously struggling to understand her.

“I don’t get it. How can she assign you to teach chemistry if you don’t know it?”

“It’s on my teaching certificate, because the state looks at your credits, not your grades, when it decides what subjects to certify for you. I told Malone, when I interviewed for the job, that I would teach anything on my certificate except chemistry, and I explained why. I could

teach ecology or earth science or English or history or a different section of biology, if she wanted to change my schedule. With chemistry, I would have to teach myself from scratch, trying to keep a couple days ahead of the kids. That's just not possible when you have to plan ahead, and you have to be able to do all those math problems easily enough to explain them to the kids. And there's no chemistry lab equipment. How can you teach chemistry right without a lab? And if there were lab equipment, some of these kids would blow the place up. Malone knows I can't teach it and won't teach it, and she knows why. She just will do anything to get me to quit."

"Even if you're certified, she can't ethically justify screwing the kids by giving them a teacher who doesn't know the subject," Mel said.

"If that lady cares about the kids, she's never shown it. She has no interactions with them whatsoever, and the word is that she hated being a teacher. But the thing is, she doesn't have to justify such a switch, because none of her superiors will even notice it. As for ethics, the word's not in her vocabulary unless she's being hypocritical."

"Malone's superiors will notice if you make a big stink about it, which is what I would do in your place."

"Her superiors are no better than her. Anyway, I'm getting to the place where I'm just too tired of it all to fight."

They sat in glum silence for a while, and then Mel asked. "Who has this chemistry schedule now?"

"Somebody who worked as a chemist in industry and decided he wanted to help kids, even if it paid less, so he signed up for the latest program that's supposed to bring in new teachers by paying their tuition until they're certified."

“So what the hell is going to happen to him?” Mel demanded. “Sounds like he’s the right person to stay in the chemistry job.”

“He would be, in a better world. But he has the same problems with discipline and attendance as I do. As everybody does, only it’s worse in science, because the kids get overwhelmed earlier by the difficulty of the subjects. And unfortunately for him, he is technically qualified to teach biology.” She paused and thought about the poor chemistry teacher and what he must be feeling. “That guy is so smart and wanted so much to be a good teacher, but he’s been having a terrible time, worse even than me. He’s from India, and the kids mock the way he talks and moves at everything about him. He tries to stay calm, but his face just keeps getting redder and redder until finally he blows up and starts screaming at them, which they think is the funniest thing in the world. And if he can ever get help from security, they treat him in a humiliating way as well.”

“Don’t tell me Malone’s giving him your old schedule. Does he want to teach biology?”

“Yes, he’s getting it, and no, he doesn’t want it. He’s in the same position as me, with biology on his certificate because he took enough courses in it a long time ago. But chemistry is the only subject he wants to teach. I know he’s been frustrated anyway, and thinking of quitting, and this might put him over the edge.”

“I really find it hard to understand Malone making this switch that is just about certain to hurt everybody concerned, especially the kids, because they can’t leave.”

“Oh, they can leave, and they do,” Jean said sadly. “In droves. I don’t know the latest statistics, but I’ll bet half of entering freshmen don’t make it to graduation. But if you’re looking for Malone’s justification, it’s simple and obvious. She doesn’t like either me or the chemistry

teacher because we make the school scores look bad. We don't lie when we record attendance or give grades, and so we have too many absences and too many failures.”

“So the other teachers lie?” Mel was astonished.

“I don't know what they do. I only know that when I walk through the halls during preparation periods, I see almost empty classrooms. And I hear teachers complain all the time about the kids not coming. And yet, according to Malone, nobody has worse attendance or grades than I do. And she's told the chemistry teacher the same thing.”

Mel just sat there shaking his head in disbelief. Jean was exhausted by her day and by the effort of explaining it, and she just sat there in silence too.

“Jean,” Mel finally said, “I really want to see you get out of this situation and into a career that makes you happy. The whole damn system makes me so mad, and I hate to see you stuck trying to work within it, especially at that school. If you want to quit and take some time to try to find something better, or maybe even go back to school and figure out another career path, I'll help you. You can count on me. If it comes to the point where you can't afford to live alone, you can always live with me or have me share the rent here. We get along pretty well now. Heck, if you want, we can live together even if you can get another job right away.” He looked at her sideways, as if afraid to hear her response. “I wouldn't be that hard to live with, would I?”

She couldn't believe her ears. This was the last thing she had ever expected. It must be that he needed somebody to need him, to depend on him. So how would that work if she got a new job and was strong again and independent?

She was quiet for so long that Mel seemed to think it meant her answer was negative. “It's just a thought,” he said. “I know you're used to living alone and doing things your own way, and so am I.”

That woke her up. “Oh, no,” she said, “I had a tape recorder going, and you can’t back out once you’ve said something like that. It’s on record.” Mel actually looked around for a tape recorder. “I’m joking about the tape recorder,” she said. “but I’m not joking when I say I’m inclined to say yes to your kind offer.”

“It’s not so kind,” Mel said. “I know I’ve never said ‘I love you,’ but I’m not the kind of guy who says that easily. I could be in love with you, I’m pretty sure I might be already, but I know for sure I like your company, and I like sleeping with you.”

“That’s not the most passionate declaration a woman ever received, but I’ll take it. And you may have noticed that I have also never said ‘I love you,’ even though I might possibly, maybe, under certain conditions, feel that way.”

He laughed and leaned over to kiss her lips, but missed and kissed her nose. She was starting to feel much better.

Chapter 32

With her mom in the hospital now and Tom in jail, Doreen sat alone at home on the Saturday night after the first week back at school. Today had changed so many things for her. After today's awful events, reporters were interested once more and she was about to watch her own personal story again on the nightly news. This time about half the program was being devoted to it, with interviews of everybody involved. It was going to feel strange to see herself on television, openly talking about what she had been trying to hard to hide for the sake of her own safety.

The woman who had interviewed her and put the story together was beginning. Showing a picture of her mother lying in a hospital bed with a broken leg, she said, "Today Tom Roberson, the student who accused a teacher of sexual harassment, and who was himself accused by the teacher of beating her, today pushed his own mother down the stairs to her apartment. She has a concussion and a broken leg, with many bruises. According to her daughter Doreen, who is here with me this afternoon and who says that her own fading black eye was given to her by Tom, the mother was reproaching Tom about beating Doreen and about falsely accusing his teacher. Again according to Doreen, Tom admitted everything after a while and got right up in her face and said, 'Whatcha gonna do about it?' When his mother got really angry and tried to push him away from her, he pushed back, sending her down the stairs. When he saw what had happened, he ran from the building, but Doreen immediately called the police, who came with

an ambulance. The mother is in stable condition, and the son was apprehended within minutes after the call for help was made.”

She turned to Doreen, “Doreen, you have a very different story from your brother’s. You’re an honor student and never in trouble. Your mom must be really proud of you, especially for standing up to your brother and then acting so fast to get her medical help today. Because of your quick thinking, the police were also able to apprehend your brother. You’re a brave girl. Do you have anything you want to say to our viewers?”

“Only that it’s a shame what happened to Miss K and that the principal seemed to blame her more than Tom. Miss K is a good teacher who tries to help everybody.”

“Thank you, Doreen. With all you’ve experienced, would you ever want to be a teacher?”

“I might,” Doreen said.

“Well I hope you do, and I wish you the best. We need good people like you in teaching. Thanks for being on the show tonight.” Then the camera switched views and Doreen was gone.

“This casts a different light on the story we covered during the school vacation,” the announcer continued, showing a picture of Jean and another of the school. “Apparently the teacher was telling the truth all the time and was a victim of violence. However, she was removed from her job and put on paid leave. We asked her principal, Dr. Malone, about this.”

The screen showed Dr. Malone talking. “The teacher everyone calls Miss K was not punished,” she said. “We just removed her from the classroom for her own and the children’s safety, because the situation had become so volatile. Since she was paid, she actually had a free week of vacation.”

“So then is she coming back Monday to her original job?” the interviewer asked.

“No,” Dr. Malone continued. “That didn’t seem wise. We decided to switch her schedule with that of another science teacher, since they are both qualified in each other’s subjects.”

“So she’ll be back teaching something else on Monday? In the middle of the year? You thought that was best?”

“No. Actually Miss K has declined the position. We just found that out from her here in the studio a few minutes ago, after this new situation erupted. I guess it’s all been too much for her.”

The screen went back to the announcer. “We asked Jean Kosciuszko about this. Here’s her version.”

There was a new scene on the screen, showing the interviewer with Miss K. To Doreen’s eyes, Miss K looked surprisingly happy, considering all she had been through.

“Miss Kosciuszko,” the interviewer was saying, “why did you decide not to accept the new schedule and instead are going to resign?”

“When I was interviewed by Dr. Malone, I told her that even though I had taken enough courses in chemistry to receive state certification in that subject, I had not done well in my chemistry courses, earning a D in the last one I took, which was many, many years ago. I said I would accept the position for biology but was also certified in, and willing to teach, earth science and ecology and also both English and history. I made it clear I would never be willing to teach a subject I did not know, like chemistry. Not only would it be cheating the students, it would be close to impossible, because it was not just a matter of brushing up on my chemicals. I

could not remember how to do the math, which is such a big part of chemistry.

“So why would Dr. Malone ask you to teach it?”

“To get rid of me and also to get rid of the real chemistry teacher, whom she switched to my biology schedule.”

“Why would she want to do that? Science teachers are hard to find.”

“Because we would not pretend that we had good attendance or pass students who deserved to fail. We told the truth about what was going on. We expected to be safe in our classrooms. We kept asking for an orderly school where we could do our work. Neither of us was successful, because we lacked students who would attend regularly and do the work, but this was true for most teachers in the school. I should also add that we had no lab equipment or space for lab work, not even a working sink in the classroom, and not enough books for everybody. So I am not just making excuses when I say that the system failed the teachers as well as the students.”

“If you won’t be going back, what are your plans?”

“I only know at this time that I will be looking for work in a situation where my efforts will be rewarded and respected and where I will not be sworn at and threatened by those around me.”

“Thank you for talking to us, Miss Kosciuszko.”

“Thank you for letting me tell people what it’s like to work in our public schools.”

The station went to a commercial, and Doreen switched it off. She hoped Miss K would be happy in whatever she did, but she didn’t think the school would be improving anytime soon. And she hoped that Tom would be in jail for a long time, but she knew that would not happen either.

She glanced at the clock. Soon it would be time to go visit her mother in the hospital. Then she would be spending the night at a neighbor's house, not because she wanted to but because she knew her mother wouldn't want her to stay alone. But right now she had time to do something she had been wanting to do, write Ms. K a letter. She sat down and put into words what she had been thinking.

Dear Ms. K,

When I saw you on the T V tonight you looked happy, even though so many bad things have been happening to you. There must be something else good going on in your own life. I really don't know anything about you, like whether you have family or a boyfriend or what kinds of things you like to do. I know you're not married right now, and I know that you are very intelligent and very kind. Those are qualities that I don't see very often in my life outside of school, and I admire them and want them to be part of my own character.

I believe that right now you are not feeling good about the years you have spent as a teacher. Because you have always cared about students, even ones not in your own classes, I want you to know that your teaching years have not been wasted. I wish I had been able to take your biology class before you left the school, because all the good students who had your classes talk about how much they learned and how interesting you made it. But even though you were never my teacher, you taught me many things by example, by just being the person you are, someone who loves to learn things and tries to pass on what she knows. Students talk about their teachers a lot, and you have a reputation for being hard but fair. Not a good reputation with guys like Tom, of course, who just want to waste time in class, but with students who are honest with themselves and know how much they need to learn.

Besides wanting to maybe cheer you up by telling you the truth, that you really are a very good teacher, I wanted to ask you whether you think I have what it takes to be a teacher some day. I know right at this moment you probably wouldn't recommend it, but my question is really about me and about the practical side of how you get to be a teacher. I don't have anybody I can talk to about such things, and I really have no idea even of how I will get to college. If I have some questions and don't have a teacher at school I want to ask about them, do you think I could write you and you would write me back? Or maybe, if I get a computer, we could email each other? I don't want to put charges on your cell phone by calling you at that number.

You might be wondering why I want to be a teacher. It's because school is everything to me. I have nothing good at home, and everything I am comes from teachers and books. I know the schools I have been to are not good and that classrooms shouldn't be disrupted by kids acting out and insulting the teacher. But I have always been able to shut it out, just keep on doing my work, and I talk to the teachers when there is a good chance to get their help. I have never had a teacher be as mean to me as my own family is. Teachers have always helped and encouraged me and they have given me lots and lots of books, to show me how to educate myself. One teacher used to take me to the library when I was little. And you know what? I know that you are the kind of teacher that a whole lot of grownups remember helping them when they were in your class. I want to be like you and all the good teachers who have given me hope and taught me so much.

I hope you will answer this when you have a chance. I somehow know that you will.

Sincerely,

Doreen

Ms. K's address was on the envelope she had used when she gave Darlene her cell phone number, so Darlene knew where to send her letter. She used one of her mother's stamps on it and put the letter by her purse, to mail when she went to the hospital in a little while.

Chapter 33

When Jean got Doreen's letter, at first she cried. It touched her heart, first of all because she had such a high regard for Doreen's opinion and was grateful that the girl had tried to cheer her up by expressing her admiration. It had been a long time since anyone had thanked her or praised her teaching, and to finally hear something positive was enough all by itself to start some waterworks. But she also identified with Doreen, for she herself had also been a child who got more inspiration from teachers and books than from family, although her own family was just uneducated, not uncaring. She thought a lot about Doreen's letter before she wrote this answer:

Dear Doreen,

Thank you for your moving letter. Of course you may write me, and I will answer. And you can use my cell phone number as well, anytime you like. I welcome any contact from you, and I hope we will stay in touch through the years. I probably can offer advice, as you try to make decisions about college and a career, although you will need to do other research as well, as I have made, and probably will continue to make, many mistakes in my own life decisions.

You are right in seeing teaching as one of the professions where you have a chance to influence children, not just by imparting knowledge but by trying to present an example of how an intelligent and humane adult acts and thinks. Now of course, all kinds of people become teachers, and many of them offer poor examples, which ironically also serve as examples—of what not to be when you grow up! I would never try to discourage someone like you, with so much to offer, from becoming a teacher. But keep in mind that you have not yet seen examples of admirable people working in other professions, and your ideas about your future will probably change many times before you make a final career choice. Sometimes a great college teacher can make a student think she loves a subject, when really what's going on is that she loves the class she is taking. Every career has good and bad days, boring ones and exciting ones, and what one person enjoys another will hate. So don't be too quick to set a career goal. Instead, think about what you would love to learn and to do and focus on that first. Soon enough you will have to make practical career choices, which I hope will relate to what you love. Not everybody is that lucky, because people have to choose fields where work is actually available. If it turns out to be teaching that you choose, I believe you will be a wonderful teacher.

I hope that your mother will be well soon and back home with you. If you should need help while she is unavailable, be sure to call me, and I will do what I can. Never feel shy or think you are bothering me, for you are exactly the kind of student that has made teaching worthwhile for me. Even if you don't need anything at all, let me know how you are doing.

Affectionately,

Miss K

Chapter 34.

It was Valentines Day at Alice's house, with Jim, Samantha, Jean, and Mel once again double dating. Jean and Alice were in the kitchen, preparing a snack, because their plans were to go out to eat only after seeing a play, which meant that a real dinner was hours away. It was going to be a big night, with the possibility of going dancing after dinner, depending on how tired or energetic they felt.

Jim and Mel were making small talk in the living room and munching on some pretzels.

"How does Jean like her new job?" Jim asked. Alice seems to think she's happy. And really lucky to have found something so fast."

"Jean's happier than I've ever seen her. She's a different person," Mel said. "She's working for a company that makes scientific lab equipment for elementary schools, right up her alley. And she's in a job in which she can be creative and try to put together kits that can be used for biology and earth science experiments. The challenge for her is in creating activities that are both fun and scientifically on track. She's made some new, good friends at work too. They work in teams, and it's a sociable atmosphere. She's becoming best friends with the woman her own age who makes the kits for physics and chemistry labs.

“What a change! Nobody swearing at her anymore, I’ll bet.” Jim paused. “I’ll bet it seems like heaven.”

“It does. She keeps talking about the fact that she has a pleasant, busy day, punctuated by a whole hour for lunchtime socializing or quiet recreation or even a quick nap. Her office even has a window and a door, which she usually keeps open. To her these ordinary work benefits, which I’ve always taken for granted, are like miracles. I think she enjoys the company of her fellow workers and boss so much because most of them are also former teachers.

“And how is living together working out? I understand you’re still keeping both houses. Is that just a safety precaution?”

“You know,” Mel said, “I saw it as a big, scary, threatening move, and we’ve had a few rough moments. But by and large the surprise is how easy and convenient it all is. I think that’s partly because Jean is pretty happy now at work, and that makes her calm and easy going at night. We don’t bicker as much, and we make more effort to please each other.”

Mel took a sip of wine and leaned back, and Jim got quiet too. Then Jean and Alice started bringing in the food and setting the table, going all out with silly Valentine’s decorations. They had not exactly knocked themselves out cooking, though, for on special heart-shaped, red plastic plates they were serving up individual orders of Chinese takeout, mostly appetizers. Dessert was to be a heart shaped chocolate ice cream cake.

“Has Mel told you, Jim, that we are thinking about getting a dog?” Jean asked.

“No.” Jim looked at Mel in astonishment. “You are a brave man, aren’t you, taking on all these commitments all of a sudden.”

“It wasn’t exactly sudden, Jim,” Alice said. “These two have been dating for a very long time. And Mom has been planning to get a dog for a long time too.” She turned to Jean. “Are you considering a specific breed?” she asked.

“Well, we’re doing a lot of research, which is actually fun, and a lot of talking about it.

“What will actually probably happen,” Mel said, “is we’ll walk into a shelter and enslave ourselves to some badly behaved mutt who’ll make us feel that its heart will break if we don’t rescue it.”

“That sounds like an accurate prediction,” Jean laughed.

As they ate, they grew quiet. Jean felt contented. She thought how it would be if she were still teaching, spending long hours preparing for lessons that no one cared about. She had recently run into a history teacher from her old high school who had caught her up on what was happening there. It seemed that the many negative reports in the press about the school had prompted an administrative investigation. The first thing that had happened was that the janitor had been fired and an outside cleaning agency hired, supposedly temporarily, but everyone was sure it was part of an ongoing effort to break the janitor’s union. Nobody was shedding any tears for Mike Reilly, as the school was kept much cleaner now, the sole improvement there that anybody could see. It was too bad about the union, but in this case they had brought it on themselves by bringing in people who got the job through political ties and who wouldn’t do the work properly. The chemistry teacher who had been switched to Jean’s biology schedule had also quit, like Jean in not being willing to teach a subject in which he had no expertise. Both biology and chemistry classes were now being covered by a parade of substitutes who usually decided very quickly not to come back or who were not invited back after some classroom fight or other disaster, the worse of which was a fire that destroyed one room and left the school with

a persistent smell of sulfur. Doctor Malone had been transferred to the administrative offices and a new principal, who at least was a presence on all three floors, was trying, with little success, to change the school culture. The rumor was that the school was to undergo another substantial reorganization, possibly being closed altogether and reopened, with mostly different teachers, as a cluster of smaller schools. Jean was well out of it.

The men took over the easy kitchen cleanup while the women sat down to watch the evening news. “Just my luck,” Jean said, “they’re doing a feature on PBS about problems in the schools. I can’t seem to get away from that subject.”

They were discussing the Washington, D.C. schools, where Michelle Rhee had been given almost absolute power as Chancellor to bring about change. Although she herself had only a few years of experience and that was limited to primary school teaching, she was using her almost absolute powers to close many schools and to fire hordes of teachers. She was claiming that while firing bad teachers was not the whole solution to fixing the schools, it was a start. She of course was the one who decided which teacher was bad and which might continue to be employed. Then another talking head came on and said that he thought most of the problems in the schools could be fixed if they could only attract good teachers and get them to stay in the field so that they could replace all the bad ones. Jean reached over and snapped off the television, huffing a little.

“It’s not nice to hate,” she said, “but I hate that woman. Do you have any idea how many lives she’s ruining? Lives that have been totally devoted to helping kids learn, even if the scores don’t show it. These are teachers with years of experience who know their subjects—and their kids—backwards and forwards and who have developed all kinds of teaching tools and strategies. The kids are not scoring well, I know that, but that’s because they don’t come to

school every day or do their homework. They don't think education is important or will get them anywhere. So these teachers patiently work with the toughest, neediest kids and for their efforts they get labeled as failures and fired. In the meantime, the teachers in fully equipped schools where the parents drive their kids relentlessly to achieve, those teachers are called good, when really they just have the easier jobs.

Mel came out of the kitchen then. "What were you watching?" he asked.

"Absolutely nothing," Jean said, stealing a quick hug.

"Is she getting all agitated again about the school systems? I thought I heard the dreaded name of Michelle Rhee." Mel asked Alice, who made a little face that said yes.

"No more agitation, I'm promising myself and my blood pressure," Jean said. "That was the last bit. I'm done. Come on, now, it's Valentine's Day and getting late. Get your coats on. Let's boogie."

And boogie they did, until almost sunrise.

