

## Returning

### Chapter 1

Paulie stopped by his room at 7:00 a.m to ask if he could help with anything. Jason blinked grainy eyes. He'd been up all night with his brother whom he'd taken to the hospital. Again. He told Paulie it looked liked he was all set.

But when he tried to pull up the wiki, he couldn't find it, which meant that his lesson agenda and accompanying visuals disappeared, too. He went to his list of wikis and saw that it wasn't there. He restarted his computer on the odd chance that some goofy glitch had made it disappear. Nothing. Jason had kept a draft of the lesson agenda on a document file, which he

would project. It was devoid of the whiz-bang visuals that he'd inserted on the wiki, and he now would have to tab clumsily back and forth to a graphic organizer when he was explaining a reading analysis strategy, but it would have to do.

Also, he had photocopied an article with the paragraphs numbered for easy reference, but the folder which held the copies that he'd put on his desk next to his computer was gone. He printed out a fresh copy, but did not have time to number the paragraphs. He ran next door to his fellow social studies teacher who had a planning period. He made a desperate plea for him to photocopy them for him. The man exuded impatience, but once cajoled finally said yes. Ten minutes into his lesson, at the point Jason was ready to admit to McKenzie and his department chair that he didn't have his all of his materials, a damning sin for an observation lesson, in walked the snooty fellow social studies teacher who'd wanted to see him sweat for some reason. He made a point of signalling with rolled eyes to the two observers that Jason had forgotten to photocopy an article, and here they were, delivered by *moi*, the hero.

Jason ground through the lesson. When he asked students to form small groups, they balked. He'd been doing small group work with them all quarter, but they were a low performing group and some days--was it a phase of the moon?--they put their heads into turtle shells and had to be cajoled, nudged, and at times threatened. Perhaps they picked up on his nervousness. Perhaps they didn't want to seem vulnerable in front of the department chair and principal who madly wrote notes.

He waited them out, and finally, reluctantly, fumblingly they shifted the desks into small groups as he'd taught them.

They read about how opposing leaders from the North and the South used Founding Fathers' beliefs to justify their positions in the years before the Civil War. They would write questions about the article using Bloom's Taxonomy as a way to measure comprehension, then they would begin a personal narrative about their own beliefs.

Sweat prickled his scalp. His mouth went dry. He had a weird sensation of hovering above himself as if jolted into a near death experience.

He halted the momentum of the lesson and helped them develop some ideas during the pre-writing phase of their narratives. Finally, in the last fifteen minutes of class, the lesson took on an internal rhythm. Each group of students generated a list of beliefs which they put on newsprint. They would revisit it next class, then before starting on their opening paragraphs, they would look at some writing samples from nonfiction texts and come to conclusions about what made the opening paragraphs stand out.

In the post-ob the following day, the principal went through a list of suggestions for Jason on how to tighten up the lesson. He offered nothing Jason didn't already know. He was given an effective rating, this in his non-evaluative year, so no big harm done.

"I'll be stopping by your room for informals, Mr. Foxx, so stay on your game."

Rod Warner, the department chair, concurred with the principal, but remained a passive if alert presence. Jason felt Warner scanning him behind his black frame glasses.

When Jason left, the principal turned to Rod. They both sat at the end of the conference table. Gronk had his suit jacket off and his shirt sleeves rolled up. About his office were framed diplomas, awards, and certificates. Matthew Brady's photos of Civil War scenes, portraits of

famous American military men, reproductions of Revolutionary War paintings, and black and white photos from the battlefields of World War II lined the walls.

Rod Warner played on a hockey team for men over forty. He imagined himself checking Gronk hard into the boards, maybe smashing Gronk's head through the glass. His wife told him he had problems with authority figures.

He said to her, "Do you think?"

She said to him, "One of them's going to kick your ass one of these days."

"Did you vet that lesson plan?" McKenzie said.

McKenzie had already established a reputation for being harder on department chairs than teachers.

"Not as well as I should have," Rod said. He hadn't seen it at all. Jason was one of the go-to members of the staff. He never laid an egg on an observation so he hadn't discussed it with him.

He didn't like teachers making him look bad.

"The deputy superintendent and a bunch of other knobs from the curriculum office are going to be up my ass about this Humanities position, and I need somebody in there who'll get the job done. Matter of fact, only two principals who are suffering staffing cuts are trying it. That golden girl principal up in Central North High and me. That's it. Nobody else is taking it on because they see it as a no win. I've heard that the superintendent is having second thoughts about the distribution of the money for the position, but she and I qualified for it, so it's a mute point. This year anyway."

“Jason had a bad hair day.”

On second thought, he wouldn't waste time putting Gronk's head through the glass. He'd skate up ice and put a shoulder into Jason Foxx. Make him chuck up lunch.

“Then send him to a hairdresser.” He pointed at Warner. “Make sure Foxx is on his game all year long. Every staff member needs to believe in him one-hundred percent. I'm letting Social Studies and English off easy by cutting only one position between the two departments. I got other department chairs coming in here crying about how unfair I am. Foxx is your man. I want him to be the first Humanities teacher for that new position.”

“I'll go over it with him. It won't be a problem.”

Warner went by Foxx's room, who stood at the back of his class watching his students discuss group presentations.

He caught Foxx's attention. “Come by during your free period.”

Jason locked his door then went to the lounge with his coffee cup before going to Warner's office. For years, the music teacher had made a fresh pot of coffee at 10:00 a.m. He needed fortification.

A young woman who taught a remedial math class in a first floor classroom came up to him as he poured himself a cup. She wore dresses too short and her eyes glittered when men were present. Jason avoided her. Her cackling laugh and predatory arm clutching unnerved him.

She stepped one step too close and held out her cup. Then she leaned even closer and whispered, “I heard you had a bad observation lesson.” She shrugged her shoulders and offered a cartoon grimace. “Oops,” she said. The makeup covering her face had an oily sheen.

He poured her a cup.

“It was all right,” he said.

She clinked cups with him and snapped a wink over her shoulder as she walked away.

“Not what I heard,” she said.

He stepped into Warner’s cramped office. Warner sat hunched forward behind his desk. His severely cut hair and black rimmed glasses on a face with scars on his chin, right eyebrow, and left cheek suggested an ex-boxer who strived for intellectual heft.

“Jason, what the fuck was that?”

He spoke to women with a prissy courtesy. With men, sailor talk.

“I got jammed up from the start. Everything was on point when I left Tuesday. I come in Wednesday morning, early by the way, and I couldn’t get into my wiki. So I had to bounce back and forth between docs.”

“Visually lame. You look like shit, by the way.”

“I didn’t get much sleep. I was in the ER with my brother till 4:00 a.m. Anyway, I also misplaced copies of the article I wanted them to read. Then the kids acted like they’d never done group work before.”

“They didn’t act like anything. They saw you were shitting the bed so they froze. Most of the units in that class are at-risk kids, remember that. You send out weird signals, they pick up on it. And stick to social studies. What’s this personal narrative shit?”

“Cross-curricular thinking, Rod. I worked with Paulie Rastik to put an English component in there. McKenzie said he liked that part of it.”

“Paulie Rastik.” He shook his head. “You’re a goddamn cherry, aren’t you?”

“What? He’s an experienced English teacher. I asked two other English teachers, but they were busy. He said yes, so I went with it.”

“You asked the guy you beat out for a teaching job to help you?”

“Why not? I would have.”

“You’re right. You would have.” He shook his head again. “Do we need to go over this lesson plan brick by brick or do you know where you screwed it sideways?”

“I got it.”

“Paulie Rastik.” More head shaking.

“You going to tell me?”

“No, I hate cherries. You’re on McKenzie’s radar screen now, which you don’t want to be. So keep it tight every day. And for God’s sake don’t go asking advice from Paulie Rastik.”

By the end of the day, three other teachers stopped by his room wondering what had gone wrong during his observation lesson. He noticed a lift to their step.

Then, the last of them, Julie Wang, walked in and sat in a student’s chair. She was English, he social studies, so they occupied different fiefdoms. He was surprised to see her.

“What the hell’s going on?” he said. “How does everyone know about my observation?”

“Who was involved with it? One of them is your rat.”

Julie Wang taught 9th grade English. She requested the standard students, schoolspeak for the lowest performers. No one did that. Teachers gravitated to honors as soon as they could. Students came away from a year with her well-organized in their thinking, knowing how to structure an essay, and able to read with comprehension.

“You’re a golden boy around here so you irritate people. Sibling rivalry. Nice to give the prince a kick.”

“Golden boy? People think that?”

“You go to every workshop known to man. You give professional developments at staff meetings. You’re willing to help any teacher who asks. You stay late working on your lesson plans. You have a great rep as a social studies teacher. You’re humble.” She cocked her head at him. “Sort or sickening when you start listing it like that.”

He laughed.

She rode a bike to school every day. Rain, freezing temperatures, smothering heat. He’d heard people tease her about not riding during ice storms. *I thought you were hard core.*

“But there’s more than the usual schadenfreude,” she said.

“Look who’s fancy.”

“Wonder why that is? What happened in the lesson?”

He went through it step-by-step. They had never before had a conversation that lasted more than five minutes.

“Why all the technological snafus? And your article disappeared? Doesn’t that strike you as strange?”

“I always get nervous before an observation. I figured I misplaced it.”

“Tell me how you planned this lesson.”

He told her that he wanted input from an English teacher. Paulie Rastik was available, so he worked with him.



She wore fingerless gloves and a long sleeved black shirt with chartreuse yellow reflective stripes on the outside of the sleeves. Bike gear.

“You’re now in a situation with Paulie. You do know that, right?”

“That’s the second time today I’ve heard about Paulie. What’s he got to do with it? He helped shaped the plan, improved it in my opinion. I executed it badly. I’ll do better next time. End of story.”

She stood, looked at her watch.

“Paulie doesn’t work like that.”

Celine Wallenda  
Theater  
Rm 022

That poor baby savant. My lovely child Jason.

I saw the wolves prick up their ears needing meal and Jason Foxx, with his endless *fucking* questions at faculty meetings and his *goddamned* insistence on professional development for the staff on all sort of matters irritates absolutely everyone. When I saw Paulie start orbiting, I thought, you poor dear, you are absolutely *fucked*.

I *adore* the child. He is so earnest and eager to help, and where do you find that anymore? But my God, he *can* be a pain in the ass.

## Chapter 2

Boyd Green, a fellow social studies teacher, came to his room on Friday.

Jason was in the middle of typing up his lesson plan for Monday. He needed to get home so that he could take his brother Bryson to his appointment with the neurologist.

Boyd sat in a student's desk chair, scratched the top of his head, and said, "I need your help, Jason. I got my observation on Tuesday. I've got a pre-ob on Monday, and I don't have anything. I'm dry. God *damn it*. It's with one of my 9th grade American government classes and they don't give two shits about anything I'm doing. Last year Jones gave me an overall rating of

Developing. *Developing*,” he mocked. “What Orwellian bullshit. Thank God we got a new principal this year, because you know and I know that Jones was out to get me. I--”

Jason glanced up at the clock. “Boyd, it’s 3:00 o’clock, man. Why didn’t you stop by earlier?”

“Why do we still have observations?” His face was childlike in its outrage, as if at age forty-seven he’d been caught unawares by adulthood.

“Tell me what you’re thinking about doing?”

“I don’t know! That’s just it,” He thrust out hands in prayer. “I do not know what I should do. What I want to do is show a movie then hand out a worksheet.” He laughed, humorlessly.

Medicated? Jason wondered.

Jason looked to his computer screen. Boyd wasn’t going to let him finish. He shut down. He’d have to do it at home.

“Listen, let’s exchange phone numbers. We can talk about it.”

“These...observations. They’re *designed* to make us look incompetent. Sweat the peons. Make them think they can’t measure up.” Hands to head again. “Jesus fucking Christ. Class warfare.” His voice amplified. “That’s what this is, class warfare.” He raised eyebrows and opened hands.

“Look, Boyd, I’ve got to drive my brother to a doctor’s appointment.” He stood, got his backpack from the closet, slipped the laptop into it. He put on his hoodie.

Boyd hadn’t moved.

“If I get an Ineffective this year, I’m on probation.” He put face to hands and started crying.

“Boyd, that’s not going to happen. Call me over the weekend and we’ll work through it. Now, stand up, walk me over to your room so I can get the text they’re working with. We’ll pull something together from the book. Stand up, right now.”

Boyd stood.

“Let’s go.” Jason locked his room and they walked to the social studies wing of the building. He set the pace. “Principals love reading strategies. That’s my sweet spot. I’ll figure out which one to use, and we take the next skill or concept you’re working on, and apply it. You’ll do fine.”

“Reading strategy,” Boyd repeated. He inhaled and exhaled, shoulders rose and dropped.

Boyd unlocked his door, stepped into the room, and stopped. “Why are we here?”

“You’re giving me a 9th grade textbook. You will call me Saturday at 11:00 a.m.--that’s tomorrow--and we will figure out how to approach your observation lesson. You will then work on it Saturday afternoon. If you hit a snag, you will call me again. You will call me on Sunday if you still don’t get it right.”

“Okay,” he said. He sat at his teacher’s desk.

Jason stood in the doorway with the textbook packed in his bookbag.

“When will you call me?” he said.

“Tomorrow, Saturday, at 11:00 a.m.”

“Good. I’ve got to go.”

### Chapter 3

Jason nodded to Merrick Spintz, a math teacher, halfway down the hall, after he left Boyd's room. His shoulders tensed waiting for a barb. Merrick had let him know that his professional development (PD) presentations bored him to tears. He tried to ignore Merrick, but Merrick gloried in zingers. After the last PD at which Jason presented on student centered teaching and learning--a big initiative by the system--Merrick waited until Jason asked everyone if they had questions, comments, or concerns. People sat dazed by the new information.

Merrick raised his hand. Jason called on him. Playing the house misanthrope, Merrick said, "One concern here. Why don't you give us some PD that we can actually use?"

A few people laughed. Mostly a collective in-suck of breath.

Jason usually ignored Merrick. But that day he said, "Merrick, can you give the next PD so I can learn from the master?" That amounted to rapier wit repartee for Jason.

Jason's fellow teachers drowned out whatever comeback Merrick attempted with calls of "Looking forward to it, Merrick." "Can't wait." "Let's put it in the books right now."

Jason winked at the crowd of teachers and played like he twirled a six shooter, blew across the bore of the barrel, then holstered it.

Merrick wouldn't give a PD if he were tortured by waterboarding. He was a roly-poly marsupial who nested under cover and rushed out to bite people in the ankles before retreating.

Merrick stuck his head into Paulie's room.

"Thought I'd check in before I left the building."

Paulie worked at his computer. "The walls have ears in the social studies and English wing. Let's go to your room."

They went up to the third floor.

Merrick opened the door and turned on the light. He forever dated a stream of interior designer boyfriends and got them to perform their magic in his math classroom. Administrators loved the displays of math concepts, inspirational sayings, student work, small group areas, and a bookshelf with sci-fi and science thrillers from which he could glean math applications. The classroom space could have been featured in a catalog.

Merrick waddled to his desk and sat in his comfortable ergonomic chair with rollers. He pointed to a student chair for Paulie.

Merrick looked around his classroom for a moment. Students had departed for the day an hour ago.

"Fucking happyland," he said.

Paulie watched him, elbow on the student desk. He didn't particularly like him. He certainly didn't trust him. But he needed allies. He wanted to stay right here in Central South High School. He'd been exiled from two previous schools, tagged as a troublemaker for getting

into squabbles with administrators and fellow teachers. Now here he was in the middle of this staff contractions business.

Merrick put his pudgy hands flat on his well-organized desktop, and said, “Paulie, you seem contemplative today. Come, come. Out with it.”

“I’ve got to sink the good ship Jason Lollipop before it gets too far out to sea. I need to know you’re with me.”

“What’s in it for me?” he asked, ever the libertarian.

“Jason is a thorn in everyone’s side, and I plan to see he’s out the door by June. This place used to be the right kind of dysfunctional. Has it ever occurred to you that if it weren’t for Jason Foxx we wouldn’t be workshopped to death? We wouldn’t be subtly forced into these PLCs?”

“Professional Learning Communities. Who generates the language, what I want to know,” Merrick said.

“McKenzie chose Foxx over me. Every person in this building knows that. I’ve been shoved into the recycle bin.”

Did he see malicious glee creep into Spintz’s expression? Spintz enjoyed another person’s distress like no one he’d ever met.

“Paulie,” he said. “You look positively defeated. You know how much I dislike losers. What do you plan with Jason? Maybe I’ll come aboard, but you’re asking me to sacrifice what little positive capital resides in the staff about me. After all, my job isn’t in jeopardy. They would box up and ship out two crash car dummies before my number is up.”

“I want to see Jason humiliated.”

“Well, well, my kind of sport.”

“I’m already an irrelevancy in the English Department. Marjorie Smith, that middling old crone who’s the department chair, told all of us English teachers in a meeting the other day, that we have to start planning around my departure. Quote unquote. And there I sat, the object of everyone’s sliding eyes.”

“All of this started so early this year. The system usually makes staff changes in February or March. My God, it’s only October and the sons of bitches are chopping off heads.”

“I need to show McKenzie that I’m the best man for the Humanities position, or someone else in English, which would save my job. Warner, the social studies department chair, would back me. Smith will fight it, but if I get Warner close in, he could do some horse trading with Smith. I’d get spared this round, then Smith could choose the next two rounds, or whatever deal they work out. Warner doesn’t think much of Smith and if he could stick it to her, that would suit him just fine.”

Merrick tapped a finger on the desktop and looked about the room.

“Paulie, I didn’t know you had it in you. This is my sort of game.”

“I don’t want to return to the cesspool of excessed teacher candidates again.”

“Ah, your unfortunate departures from your previous schools. A misunderstood genius.”

He had the lipless smile of a carp. “What do you need from me?”

“I queered hi observation lesson.”

“How?”

“Trade secret. Let’s just say he ran into some technical difficulties.”



“My God, the man is the last of the true innocents. Maybe we should try to keep him around for fun.”

“I need you to amplify whatever whispering campaign I start. He’s a marshmallow. The golden boys always are. Once he feels the tide turn against him, he’ll see it as his destiny that he leave the island.”

Janet Meadows  
Math  
Rm 201

Jason Foxx causes his own problems. First of all he teaches social studies. What kind of intellectual discipline is that? I've never figured it out. If you cannot do simple algebraic equations, what good are you?

Richard Roland  
Counselor

It took me three years, but I finally got the office I wanted. Look around you. I sit in the room adjacent to the nurse's office with my own air-conditioner, in an un-air-conditioned building mind you. I bring my newspaper from home, I get the tech guy to help me when I get a message from the people in the assessment office about online testing, I'm friends with the principal from when he first came into the system at another school after his military career. I'm forty-three years in. I want to get to fifty. They'll throw me a party and I can look that son of a bitch in the eye who exceded me from the last school and say to him, "You thought you could make me retire? I'll piss on your grave."

Son of a bitch told me that I had lost a step.

I take medication makes me sleepy, right? An English teacher, Paulie Rastik, some little smart ass been teaching what eight, nine years, sneaks in here. He takes a picture on his phone and sends it around to everyone in the school. Then it leaks out and I'm getting calls and emails from people I haven't heard from in years. Funniest thing they've ever seen. I'm doing a face-plant on my newspaper, drool coming out of my mouth. Why is that funny? Let me tell you

*Returning/Lavey*

something. Get old in this profession. See how you're treated.

Jason Foxx. What subject he teach?

## Chapter 4

He went to pick up Bryson from the hospital on Thursday after school. Bryson sat in a chair in his room with clothes on, hands atop his cane, looking the part of a crankish, uncooperative patient. A nurse was present. She handed Jason the discharge papers on a clipboard.

“I can handle my paperwork,” Bryson said. “Thank you very much Nurse Ratched.”

The nurse didn’t acknowledge him.

“Sign here and here for us, would you?” she said to Jason.

“Do I need to see the doctor before he leaves?”

“No, but I would encourage you to call within the next forty-eight hours.” She pointed to the telephone number at the top of one of the sheets. “There’s some follow up medication the doctor would like him to take.”

“*Hello,*” Bryson said. “I’m right over here.”

The nurse left the room.

An attendant showed up at the door with a wheelchair.

“I don’t need a goddamned wheelchair,” Bryson said.

“It’s required, sir,” the man said. “If you give me grief about it, I call security.”

Jason wanted to hug him.

“Shit,” Bryson said. He sat in the wheelchair.

In the car on the way home, Jason wished *he* could call security.

“I want my own place,” Bryson said. “I want to pay my own bills. I don’t like everyone treating me like a child. I don’t want little taps on the bathroom door from you or Ellen asking me if everything’s okay while I’m taking a crap.” He yakked nonstop about how independent he was.

Jason pulled into the carport across the lot from the entrance to his townhome. He turned off the car and said, “See you inside.” Then shut the car door and marched away.

Behind him flared Bryson’s muffled, “Hey! Hey! How do I get out of here?”

Inside, Jason took off his school clothes, slipped on a pair of dark green house pants and a white t-shirt and washed his face. In about five minutes, his phone rang.

“Get your fucking ass out here--”

He hung up. He went into the kitchen to make himself some rye toast. Another phone call.

“Enough of this bullshit you mother--”

Jason hung up again. He put a thin layer of almond butter on the toast and leaned against the counter and ate.

He finished and fired up his tablet while sitting at the kitchen table. He flipped through *The Baltimore Sun*’s webpage. The phone rang.

“Jason, for Christ’s sake. I need your help.”

Jason stood. “I don’t want to hear your goddamned complaints one more time today. You have turned into an asshole,” he said with a coldness that surprised him. “You feed your shit to somebody else, you got it? You tell me you hear me, you ungrateful piece of shit, or I will let you sit in that car all night.”

Bryson paused for a minute. “I hear you,” he said. “Come on out and get me before I piss on myself.”

Jason hung up and laughed at himself. It was if he released a flock of doves into the wild sky.

In the middle of the night, Bryson knocked on his door.

“I don’t feel right,” he said. “My head hurts bad.”

Jason pushed the light on his alarm clock. 2:57 a.m. He helped his brother put on his shoes and took him back to the hospital four miles away.

At 5:45 sitting in his brother’s hospital room waiting for the doctor, he went to the school system’s website and created an absence. Family illness. They would have to use one of his emergency lesson plans.

## Chapter 5

During their shared lunch periods, Paulie waited until his fellow teachers settled into places in the faculty lounge or nested with colleagues in someone's room. Paulie wanted as few eyes following him as possible.

He slipped into Merrick Spintz's math room. Merrick sat at his teacher's desk. Open in front of him was aluminum foil wrapping littered with the droppings from his over-stuffed egg salad sandwich which he ate with prison elbows out and an almost detectable low growl in his throat.

He looked up at Paulie. Mayonnaise filled the corners of his mouth.

Paulie sat down. "Can I have a bite? That looks appetizing."

Merrick had mean, black, crab eyes.

"You're interrupting my meal."

"I need to compare notes. Jason is out of the building today."

Merrick put his sandwich down and wiped his mouth with three tissues he pulled from the box.



“I want us to keep up momentum. My job’s at stake here. We continue to talk up the bad observation, but we also start talking about what a relief it would be to get Mr. Sunshine out of the building.”

Merrick eyed the remaining half of his sandwich.

“People like this guy.”

“You think we would be getting these ominous visits from the curriculum offices if it weren’t for Jason Foxx pushing our school to be an Exemplar? No, he needs to go. I need your help on this, Merrick.”

“You don’t care about any of that. You’re trying to save your ass. You’re boring me.”

Gronk had informed them that staff cuts were being made across the county. Paulie was low man on the seniority pole in the English Department.

“I backed you when you hit that kid in the hallway. Defending yourself,” he sneered. “I helped get that kid expelled for you.”

Merrick tongued his mouth. He folded aluminum foil over his malodorous sandwich as if to protect it from picnic flies. “Let’s not turn this Jason Foxx thing into a religion. I’ll help you put him on the run, but he’s your boy. Figure out a way to kill him off yourself.”

“With pleasure. But you owe me one. And by the way, I know about one of your little boyfriends, the nurse, who writes you doctor’s notes when you get sick, quote unquote. So I want your best effort.”

He got up and left.

Merrick spread out the foil and finished his sandwich. He wondered who he liked less at the moment, Jason or Paulie.

Paulie glanced at the clock in his room. He had about a half hour before his next class started. He took out his teacher's manual bound in a three ring binder. He made copies of the pages listing all of the teachers in the building then highlighted the names of those he knew disliked professional development that cheerleaders like Jason Foxx forever advocated. Surprised to see that he came up with ten teachers. He thought there would be fewer. Then he identified teachers that were chronic complainers. No matter what new policy or change or principal directive or alteration of the schedule, they whined. Fifteen more names.

He laughed out loud when he saw all the green highlighted names.

“Poor sods, still crying about not getting their diapers changed on a regular schedule. They need to get in touch with their infant selves. Maybe Jason could hold a workshop on that.”

He would show the list to Merrick and step up the whispering campaign with his new tribe, the highlighted teachers.

Karl Marks  
IEP (Individualized Education Program) Chairman  
Rm 111

First of all, no Karl Marx jokes, all right? You think you might know one I haven't heard. You're pissing yourself because, really, you got something different. Right? Stick it in a Mason jar and put it in on a moldy shelf in the basement with all the other originals.

Paulie Rastik comes and visits. Don't see him much up here. All of a sudden Jason Foxx's name comes up. Foxx is one of these guys people in school talk about because he's an over the top do-gooder pain in the ass. You know what a pain in the ass does? He becomes an advocate.

Paulie is telling me that Jason's trying to turn Central South into an Exemplar School. Let me tell you something, you don't want to be an Exemplar School. They give you carts full of computers, lots of money, training out the wazooski. But they spring the trap with new ways of teaching quote-unquote and visits from higher ups. All of a sudden, you're goose stepping to some educational philosophy you didn't know you agreed to. Exemplar schools get people from other schools to take learning walks--I kid you not, that's what they call them--through your

school because now it's a model. And let me tell you something else. The IEP team which includes yours truly all of a sudden has got people poking around their business. No, that doesn't work for me.

We got to talking. Paulie Rastik. You know he's working some angle, but you can't help getting drawn in.

I started telling him about how Jason came up here a few weeks ago pressing me about this Spanish speaking kid in his social studies class who shows "promise," right? Shows "promise." He comes up to me and wonders if he can get the kid's IEP changed so the kid can get more ESOL services. The kid doesn't know much English, plus he's got a speech problem.

But that's not the point, right? It's Foxx coming up to my office wanting to retool some kid's IEP. You know what has to happen to change a kid's Individualized Education Program? You meet as a team--parents, teachers, therapists, IEP chair. Anybody who's got a stake in the kid's well being. Then if everybody agrees that he needs services, you got a ninety day window to start the assessment process. Then you get the results of the assessments and you meet as a team again. You try to figure out what the assessments indicate. You figure out strengths and needs, then what services would help the kid. Then you get the parent onboard, 95% of the time it's the mother, to sign off on it.

Point is, you dig into a kid's IEP before the annual review and it's a crazy ass pain in the ass.

What did you do? Paulie asks me.

I tell Paulie I went the soft route, right? I see Jason around, listen to him at the once a month meetings. He's a missionary, okay? They usually burn out by the time they get to Jason's

stage. What's he got eight years in? The missionary phase usually lasts for six, maybe seven years. So he's tie-dyed in it.

Okay, every place needs an advocate. Keeps everybody going in the right direction. I got it. I don't pay it much mind beyond the sixty minutes we're in the once a month meeting, but it's all good.

Then he starts to come up to my office during his free time. He likes to get up close. I'm at my desk and he scoots his chair so we're looking at the monitor together when I pull up the kid's IEP, right? I'm thinking, garlic for lunch? He's up in my space. He's on my sleeve, right?

"This kid," he tells me, "he's smart. He just needs more one-on-one speech therapy." And he says, "He needs more hours with an ESOL teacher."

"How's that supposed to happen?" I ask him.

"Put it in his IEP and make them beef up the ESOL program again. You know as well as I do that cutting ESOL staff three years ago was a crime."

So you want me to work IEPs as a way to get programs back in the school?

Why not, he says.

I start to explain the timelines to him. He tells me he needs to get back to class. He comes up every day that week bugging me about it. To get him off my back, I write up some paperwork which is all done on a computer program then tell him I'll submit it. I need to give a heads up to people down the line, I say. He leaves my office and I park the request for meeting in an electronic folder and that's that. Wanting me to cause all sorts of noise about one damn kid. Really?

He figures out I'm blowing smoke, so he contacts the IEP chair, Nonna Zharkov, and squawks to her about the kid, telling her that I'm not timely with my paperwork.

She barges into my office. You know, you got people you like, people you don't like. Me and her, oil and water. Her parents came over from Russia in the eighties and she's a hard core ball buster. She said she'd give me twenty-four hours then would check up on me, which she did.

You got some guy coming up in your office breathing your air, pressing up in your business, making your life miserable then wants a lot of sympathy when it's his turn to walk the plank. Have a nice fall you twerp.

But I don't have anything against Jason Foxx. He just needs to find himself school where he can be a superstar. This school? I don't see it.

## Chapter 6

Julie Wang, 9th grade English teacher, sat with John Davidson, a social studies teacher, in Ben's Restaurant in Hampden.

"This is my home away from home," she told him.

"We've been dating for how long and I'm here for the first time?"

"I don't invite just anyone into my home. I had to see if you were trustworthy."

"I'm not taking the bait. I'm the eye of a hurricane."

"Hah."

Ben, a bearish man in his fifties, wearing a white apron over a red plaid shirt, walked around the room greeting people.

He stopped at their table, turned around a chair, and straddled it.

"Who's this guy?" he said, nodding to John. "I thought you and I were in a monogamous relationship. This ain't right."

She put her hand on his forearm. "No one will ever replace you, Ben."

"That's more like it," he said.

“He’s a fellow teacher,” she said.

“In that case.” Ben shook his hand but cocked his head, giving him the eye. “She’s mine. But I like you. You can be the best man at our wedding.”

“Ben!” from behind.

The three of them looked toward the counter.

“Oh, shit,” he whispered. “I forgot about her.”

Bonita, his wife of twenty-five years, called across the room. “We need you back here.”

He pointed at John. “I’m keeping tabs on you,” he said. Then he winked at Julie and whispered. “The wedding is still on. I’ll get to get back to you about a date.”

They watched him return to the kitchen.

“I was in here with two girlfriends one time, and he asked all of us to marry him. Said we could do it all at once. One ceremony. ‘Get three times the gifts at one third the expense.’”

John looked around. “He puts up artwork from locals.”

“Everybody comes in here. He keeps the prices reasonable and makes this place a community watering hole. He and Bonita are my ideal.”

They looked at the menu.

“Get the chicken soup,” she said. “The man has a secret recipe. Makes homemade bread to go with it. I’m eating light so I can have a slice of pie.”

“You’re the boss.”

A waitress took their order.

“Ben loves teachers. He’s got a master’s in American History. Said he almost became one himself before Bonita shanghaiied him, is how he put it. She helps sponsor a Spanish



language magazine out of Nicaragua. She even contributes a poem once in a while. Told me she wrote poetry as a young woman. ‘I was going to be the female Lorca.’”

“They have kids?”

“One of the their own. They adopted two others from Nicaragua. I think they were abandoned by people Bonita’s family knew. I don’t know the full story.”

Booths lined the far wall. Four-tops filled the restaurant space. Mid-Saturday afternoon business was slow. Chess players sat in back. A couple read iPads and drank coffee while their elementary school aged daughter did homework. A few college students peered into computer screens.

Their food came. They talked shop about new initiatives in the social studies department and the baffling, to Julie, English curriculum.

“You been hearing this stuff about Jason Foxx at school?” she said.

“Yeah. McKenzie should have kept the news about staff cuts under his hat until about March. The rumor mill gets vicious.”

“Somebody’s after him,” she said.

“Why would anybody be after him? He’s the school’s favorite son.”

“Because he’s the school’s favorite son? I don’t know.”

“You were right,” he said. “The soup is seriously good.”

“I’m wondering if we can bring him into The Network.”

He sat back. “You’ve got to follow protocols.”

“I know.”

“Otherwise people start freelancing,” he said.

“I know.”

“Besides, what could The Network do? You can’t stop people from talking.”

“I think he’s being set up.”

“For what?”

“I haven’t figured it out.” She ate a spoonful of soup.

Sometimes he wished he didn’t find her so attractive. It was if he were possessed. He envisioned marriage. Children.

“I thought he had the new Humanities position locked up.”

“I thought so, too. But somebody’s trying to make him look bad. I think it’s Paulie Rastik.”

“That frigging guy.”

“Have some bread.”

He broke off a piece and buttered it.

“The best,” he said. “You say they serve pie?”

She nodded, attending to her soup.

“Let’s start the process of getting Jason into The Network,” she said. “We watch him, see how he does. The profession needs people like him. I want him to stay in the school. He’s solid. We’ve got to take advantage of his skills.”

“He helped me with a lesson last year. Why didn’t he ask?”

“He takes the reaching across the aisle business seriously. Remember the edict came down earlier in the year that we needed to make connections with our brothers and sisters in

other discipline areas? I bet he was modelling it for the rest of us. Got his ass caught in turbo blades.”

John Davidson had been married twice before. He had a stepdaughter in college and the first wife and he remained friends. The second wife was a mystery to him. Julie Wang and he bonded when they helped expose a previous principal for egregious ethical violations. The school and the school system had been investigated and only now two years later had the school achieved equilibrium. The new principal, with his military background, had been appointed to help maintain a scrupulous atmosphere of professionalism.

Julie Wang had helped him come back to life as a person and a teacher. They were fellow members of The Network, an organization started decades ago by a group of teachers in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The Network wasn't official. Some scoffed and claimed that it didn't exist. A teacher became a member after being observed by Network teachers for a year. You had to include two other members in your proposal to begin observing a teacher for possible inclusion and write up a lengthy proposal as to why. Once initiating the process of observing, the lead observer had to keep the other two members of the cell up to date on the candidate by monthly log and verbal updates.

The Network had spread during the three decades of its existence to school systems in the eastern half of the United States, and more recently into the midwest and larger systems on the west coast. Its mission was simple. Come to the aid of fellow teachers. Once a member, one was sworn to follow the mission. Aid might come in the form of professional development or working against an abusive principal or helping with the transfer process at a reciprocal school system....or any number of things. The Network was a tribe.

“I’m initiating the process of getting him in. I’m filing with you and either Lucas Banfield or Sofia Rodriguez at Central West High, maybe both of them.”

“You’re not helping him because he’s a baby seal in distress, are you?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

John buttered the last bit of bread. “Because I think he’s got to fight this one. I get your drift. He’s the perfect candidate, but he likes to be petted too much. Let’s see how he does in a fight with that sphincter Rastik.”

“You think he’s soft.”

“I think he’s a pussy.”

“Don’t use female--”

“Cat.”

She laughed.

“I’m the point person, but I’m officially requesting that you be one of my cell partners. By the end of the year I plan on asking him to join. I have a feeling he might want to stay in the school game by being a PDI, Professional Development Instructor. He’s taken his responsibilities as a mentor off the charts anyway. Then who knows, maybe an administrator. I think we need people in administration sympathetic to our interests who have a stake in the survival of The Network. It’s my one bugaboo out it. We’ve stayed too much on the teacher level.”

## Chapter 7

Monday morning, he went to Boyd Green's room. Boyd got to school a half hour early so Jason knew he could catch him. They spoke on the phone twice two weekends ago, the first time for an hour and a half during which he helped Boyd construct a solid lesson for his observation. The second time, Boyd called him on that Sunday night tied in knots thinking that he couldn't pull it off. Boyd's observation was on the following Tuesday. Then he took off on Wednesday because he was an emotional wreck. On Thursday he had a post-ob and found out that he'd got high marks.

Jason had been picking up unfriendly states and turned shoulders, so he wanted to go around and talk to his fellow teachers. Last year, the principal had asked that he act as mentor to new teachers, and he'd embraced the role. He found that veteran teachers came to him because they like his PDs or wanted help with lessons. He'd taken on the role of teacher leader in the school without any official title, following a long tradition of other teachers who had done the same.

As he walked around during his free period, several teachers caught him in the lounge or the hallways and told him not to push for Exemplar School status. As if he had control over whether or not Central South became an Exemplar School.

But why wouldn't you want it? Exemplar Schools got the best professional development, laptops for every student, and more support staff. You wouldn't want it because it would take you off your lame game and make you teach, that's why. Maybe he'd been a little too vehement with fellow true believers about making the school excellent. Maybe they shared his thoughts with those not in the true believer clan who then shared it with decidedly non-true believers. Maybe now whenever anyone talked about an Exemplar school it was like he fed them cold porridge.

It pissed him off that teachers didn't opt for constant professional development. How could you not be a workshop junkie?

But had he overstepped his bounds when he sent out that email to everyone early in the year imploring them to improve their teaching? "Pick one thing. One area. One way of doing things and make it better." He'd been to a three day workshop during the summer and ideas fevered in him. It could be classroom management, he'd written, or learning logs, summarizing a lesson, creating a more project-based learning classroom, fewer handouts, or more choice with graphic organizers. He included some links to articles. He hoped that people would want to form a PLC (professional learning community) around one of his proposed strategies or a book recommended by the school system, or something, anything. Almost no one responded to his email. One teacher made a point of coming to his room to tell him to keep his fucking suggestions to himself.

He wanted to become the full time PDI, Professional Development Instructor, which included official mentor duties. With a recommendation from the principal, he might apply for the job next year. He'd heard rumors that Janine Jeffries, the current PDI, might take another job as a trainer for first year teachers or transfer to another school system

He'd exchanged emails with Boyd Green since Boyd's observation, but he hadn't been able to catch him. Boyd was either dashing out of the building the moment the last bell sounded or not in his room.

Jason tried to leave people alone in the morning as they got themselves sorted to begin the day, but he wanted to check in with Boyd to try to figure out why he was avoiding him.

Boyd sat behind his desk watching a YouTube video on some historical epoch. The voice of God narrator indicated importance. Boyd had become a YouTube addict since he discovered it as a content delivery vehicle.

One time Jason suggested he have his students read more, which elicited from Boyd a long harangue about how these goddamned kids don't read anything these days, "And I'm not going to hit my head against the wall..."

Boyd didn't look up, though he could obviously see Jason over the top of the monitor.

"What's up, Boyd? I've been meaning to drop by."

Boyd raised his eyes without moving his head. "Jason."

"Glad your observation went well."

"Thanks." Boyd, a white man, sometimes wore a kuffi, as he did today, as a way of declaring solidarity with his Muslim brothers and sisters. Jason had seen him wear a dashiki, though black kids gave him grief. He wore Free Tibet t-shirts, buttons with clenched power fists,

wildly colorful serapes, and handcrafted turquoise and silver bolos bought from an online Indian jewelry site.

“How’s teaching in general going?” Jason asked.

Boyd made an exhaling show of pausing his video.

“Teaching’s going fine, Jason.”

Jason saw Boyd Green as a weather vane to the school’s mood. Why was everyone giving him subsonic grief?

“Just wanted to check in.”

Another big exhale. “Obviously.”

Jason nodded. “What do you think about--”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Jason!”

Boyd stood, lifted the kuffi, and rubbed his head. He came from behind his desk and went to the blinds and adjusted them then came back to his desk and leaned back in his chair.

“Are you trying to get me fired?” Boyd asked him, hands interlocked resting on his stomach.

“What are you talking about?”

“I know people,” he said. “Who know people.”

Boyd’s eyes smoldered. He set his mouth.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said.

Boyd leaned forward and put his head in his hands, elbows on desktop, and started crying. “I can’t lose this job. I can’t.”



“Boyd, you have got to tell me what you’re talking about.” He handed Boyd the box of tissue from his desk.

Boyd blew his nose with an elephant honk. Jason looked at his watch. The opening bell would sound in twelve minutes.

Boyd leaned back in his chair. “Don’t fuck me up, Jason. If I lose this job, my wife will leave me. She hates me enough as it is.”

Why did men wear rings on their middle fingers? Boyd once told Jason that it was the totem of a wolf, sacred to northern plains Indians. It looked more like a kangaroo’s face.

“Why would I want to mess you up? I thought we got along fine. I just helped you with your observation lesson plan.”

“Classic strategy. Soften me up before the kill.”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Word on the street. Listen, crunch time.” He pointed at the clock above the doorway.

“Who talked to you?”

“I’ve got to put a few finishing touches--”

“What’s going on here? Who talked to you?”

“I try not to judge,” he said. He stood. “I’m best when I’m like the Dalai Lama.” He put his hand to his heart and looked skyward. “But you and Paulie Rastik need to sit down and find your way to harmony.” He smiled his toothy, passive-aggressive, liberal smile.

Boyd Green  
Social Studies  
Rm 216

These kids are OUT OF CONTROL. I've been teaching for fifteen years. Every year I begin thinking, you know what, I'm not going to let them get to me. They act the way they do because they are wounded, they don't have stable home lives, they live in a predatory environment.

I don't understand why they don't understand that I am on their side. Sure I'm "old" to them, but I'm only forty-seven. I'm hip. I play lead banjo in a folk band. We don't get many gigs but that's beside the point.

One of my favorite artists is Pete Seeger. God forbid ask them about Pete. I played a YouTube video of him singing "We Shall Overcome" with a montage of stills of people marching, protesting, holding signs. Blacks and whites walking hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder. I started singing along and I'm telling you, I cried. That old footage, it's deep. Real deep. It's like Martin's spirit hovers above whenever you show scenes from the struggle.

All of those sisters and brothers with their solemn faces, glowing from inside with righteousness. Then the montage cuts to stills of white people wearing flood length pants, white gym socks and loafers, holding up signs that say, “Race Mixing is Communism.” Just so antithetical to the struggle, to the moment, man. When I watch that old footage, I’m right there with all those black people. I’m their brother. They’re my brothers and sisters. You get scenes of Rosa on the bus, Martin smiling while looking over a sea of people with the Washington Monument in the background, and Malcolm holding up a newspaper with the large headline, “Our Freedom Can’t Wait.”

I showed it to let them know we’re in it together. I’m down with it. I understand. I wanted that film to percolate in the background of their consciousness. I wanted to try to crowbar some discussion out of them. The Civil Rights struggle, man. It was the beginning of a new day for them, for all of us. Yeah, early in the school year, let’s just open it up. Talk Civil Rights.

The Civil Rights Movement, they said. What’s that?

I thought, teachable moment. We’ll circle around to Civil Rights. I’ll start with something they could sink their teeth into.

Civil Rights by way of the criminal justice system. I gave a lecture about the criminal justice system’s bias against black people. Seventy-five, eighty percent of the students in our school are black, so I thought, how can they not take notes on what I’m saying, get engaged, want to learn more? They didn’t care. They kept saying to me, “Niggas don’t need no white man telling them about racial bias.”

“We’re going to deal with America’s bias against people of color using statistical analysis rather than wallowing around in ghetto emotions.”

What do you know about the ghetto, they asked me.

Bias against blacks entailed a class bias as well as a racial bias. I pointed out that white people work in organizations like the Innocence Project and Amnesty International. I wanted to work our way toward a dialectic in which the concept of color is at times a negation of the reality in which effort, both in time and space, determines greater agency for the oppressed, though oppression comes at the hands of whites. I laid it *out* for them.

A white kid stood up and said, “What the fuck are you talking about, you white motherfucker. Greater agency for the oppressed? We’re here to learn, not listen to your white ass.”

“How are you supposed to learn?” I *calmly* asked him. I’d said to myself in August, before school began, that I will remain *calm*. These people I teach live on a lower rung, and I need to help them elevate themselves as citizens so that they can join this beautiful experiment known as democracy.

“How are you supposed to learn anything if you don’t listen to what those of us who are educated have to teach you. Do you want to stay ignorant your whole lives?”

Some of them started screaming at me. “We’re not stupid! Stop calling us stupid!”

I stood in front of them, hands together in a prayer-like gesture to indicate calm and humbleness. “You’re not stupid,” I said. “I would never call you stupid. You’re ignorant and I want to help you out of your ignorance, but I can’t do that if you act like, what, ill-mannered thugs.”

Then I did an imitation that was pure send up, no harm intended, of an enraged black male ranting against The Man. “Yo, can you feel me, yo. Like the white man, he do not do

nothing for me. That's an ofay far as I'm concerned." I specifically used the anachronistic slang "ofay" to indicate that I was winking at them in self-deprecation. I really got into the role. I did hand gestures that I've seen black rappers do on YouTube. I strutted around using my body to express power, as a mimetic and celebration of The Street which confers validation to people without money. As I finished, I thought, finally, I know I've broken through the black-white construct between us. By my executing a situational scene, ritualizing *and* decontextualizing it, making it "performance," I knew that I laid the groundwork for a year long trusting relationship. I awaited their applause.

Instead, the boys in the back laughed in that savage, mocking laughter of teenage males. "You is a clown, yo," one of them said. Then I realized I might have made a mistake. I watched as numerous students turned to one another with cell phones in hand showing each other videos of my performance. In the timeless consciousness of performance, I forgot about ubiquitous recording capabilities on cell phones. I considered my performance a demonstration of my unclothed desire to reach out to them. To this day, I feel that everyone who recorded me violated a tacit agreement that we shared sacred space. Well, they didn't agree.

"Mr. Green," Aquella, a black girl, said with tears in her eyes, "why would you disrespect us like that?" She sat in the front row and against all odds got A's and B's in her classes. She lived in a group home, was overweight, was so poor that for weeks at a time wore the same sweater.

"I would never," I began.

"But you just did," she pleaded. "You just did."

A group of mouthy girls started shouting in that aggressive, high pitch, hand gesturing

way employed by black females which I find so hard to combat. One said, “You is nothing but a arrogant asshole, Mr. Green.” A chorus of females joined in.

“Stop it!” I shouted. “You’re all acting like a bunch of niggers!” I froze.

Students had backs of cell phones aimed at me. “Before you stop recording,” I said, “I want to provide a framework for my emotional outrage.”

But they flattened their cell phones and thumbed them which meant they sent out their videos and posted them on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and wherever God else.

I retreated to my desk. Like some crazed Greek chorus, they shouted at me.

“Get your ass fired.”

“Never show you no respect again, Mr. Green. Nah, not after that.”

“You need some counseling. You got issues.”

I sat there and let them go crazy. I thought to myself, I can’t get fired. I can’t be out of a job again. What if an irate parent finds out about it? I’m a gonner.

Nothing happened for a couple of days. I thought, my God, I’m the luckiest man alive.

Then Paulie Rastik catches me during lunch.

“I heard what happened in your class, Boyd. Tell me all about it.”

So I did.

“Look,” he said. “I want to help you tie this off. These kids, they’re brutal. Total misunderstanding on their part, obviously.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Total.”

“Listen, there’s talk. I’ll help you contain it.”

“Should I be right out front with the principal. Give him a heads up?”

“God no. We’ll keep it contained before it gets to him.”

He left, and you know what? I got no blowback. I wonder if it was Paulie who did me a solid. I never trusted that guy, but who knows.

Then we find out that somebody’s got to go from each department and all of a sudden Paulie shows up in my room again telling me that he’s picking up all sorts of information. For one, the school might become an Exemplar. I don’t want any part of that. I want to finish out my time as a teacher doing the best I can with a group of students who don’t give a rat’s ass about education.

“You want to know somebody’s who’s behind all the push to go Exemplar? And who manipulated McKenzie into creating the Humanities position?”

“Who’s that?” I said.

“Jason Foxx. That guy has stepped out of his pew. I say let him go to another school where everybody is wagging their tail trying to be innovative.”

“Jason Foxx? Jason Foxx is good people,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. “You want to be a Humanities teacher one of these days? Because that’s where English and Social Studies are going. Foxx and his band of merry followers will move all of us out of here.”

“I think it should go back to being History. What ever happened to History teachers?”

“Jason Foxx,” Paulie said. “Think about it.”

When Foxx comes in and tries to get chummy, back of my mind I’m thinking, this is not the right school for you. I never liked the sound of *Humanities*.

## Chapter 8

He went down two flights then walked to hallway where the music and theater teachers had their classrooms and knocked on Ms. Wallenda's office door.

She had written him an email filled with exclamation points insisting he come down to see her.

"Come in!" she said after he knocked.

"Dear Jason." She clasped her hands. Then opened her arms. He leaned to hug her. She wore a bright headscarf.

"A cup of tea? I insist."

She maneuvered her huge body and poured hot water from an electric kettle on a small table at the end of her desk. She handed him a cup.

"Herbs meant to reduce stress. *Don't* we all need that in these trying times."

He smiled. He knew enough to let her talk.

Her office was filled with figurines and pictures of dramatic scenes from plays she directed and all manner of books and scripts on a handmade wooden bookcase.



“My God, what is going on in this mad school? Tell me! Whenever I happen to visit the faculty lounge or sit in one of our group meetings, I hear *whispers*. What have you done? Have you started eating *babies* for Christ sake? Tell me. What have you done?”

“I didn’t listen to you about Paulie Rastik.”

“*Correct!* You didn’t listen to Mama Wallenda when she told you to stay away from that viper in the garden. Tell me again!”

“I didn’t listen to you about Paulie Rastik.”

He’d mentioned that he wanted to work with an English teacher for his observation, and Paulie agreed to it.

She’d said, “*Immediately* and I mean *immediately* tell him that you have changed your mind. That man, she continued, is ill-conceived. He has nothing, *nothing*, but dark entities attached to him.”

“No!” she thundered. “You did not.”

A female student stuck her head in the door.

“Ms. Wallenda, I have to go to class now. Do you need anything?”

“Thank you, dearest. Do you know Mr. Foxx?”

“No. Well, I know who he is.”

“One day Mr. Foxx might have the privilege of teaching one of the most *brilliant* actors to grace this school. Mr. Foxx, meet the lovely Dame Maria Sandoval.”

They shook hands before she left.

“They love you,” he said.

“Ah, my children.” She clasped hands to her breast. “Schools are shutting down theater departments. I’m in a struggle for the very *survival* of the art form, but my fear is that it’s a lost cause. The barbarians occupy the thrones of power. But to the point.” She held out her left hand. “Kiss my ring,” she said.

“What?”

“Don’t be wayward or oppositional. I want you to kiss my ring. It assures me that you recognize the superiority of my insights.”

He grabbed her hand and kissed her ring.

“Now. I want you to say the following: I was wrong to doubt Mama Wallenda’s judgment about Paulie Rastik, who is a fucking weasel.”

He began.

“No. Chin up. Imagine the back row.” She pointed behind her. “Say it.”

He stood. He lifted his hand outward in front of him, the actor’s gesture. He cast eyes back row-ward. “I was wrong to doubt Mama Wallenda’s judgment about Paulie Rastik, who is a fucking weasel.”

She clapped her hands once and bent over in shoulder-rocking, stomach-squeezing, eye-tearing laughter.

“My God,” she said, when she surfaced. “The utter *sincerity* you bring. You are a *treasure*, my child. An absolute *treasure!*”

She dabbed her eyes with tissue, looked at the clock, sighed.

“Class starts in a few minutes. Why do you think Paulie is operating against you? Did you give that any thought?”

He shrugged. “Jealousy?”

She looked to the heavens. “Was I ever that innocent? Of course, he’s jealous of you, but jealousy is the coin of the realm. Anything else?”

He lifted empty hands. “I don’t know.”

“He’s attacking you because he can. He’s a jackal, an opportunistic omnivore.”

“Look, I try to be good to people--”

“Which *precisely* defines you as a target.” She gave him a shockingly ferocious stare. “I am in the disastrously unhealthy position of loving you no matter what you do because you are one of my children, but you must go forth in the world and learn how to *maneuver*. How to *operate*. Not one more second of your kumbaya philosophy. We *need* you here at this school, Jason.”

“Maneuver? Operate? How do I do that?”

She reached over and put his head between her loving hands and with tears glistening said, “Learn.”

Patricia Coupling  
Science  
Room 129

I remember Foxx did a staff development in which he demonstrated a technique on how students can more skillfully read non-fiction texts. Brilliant.

I asked him to follow up with me so I could see how it was done with the specific science text I was using. We got together after school let out and analyzed one of my lessons. He urged me to think about it as an arc that spanned three days. When I looked up it was 5:15. Remember, we dismiss at 2:30. For the rest of the week, he stayed and nailed down a series of lessons for me. My teaching, my thinking about teaching, changed after that. I learned the fine art of scaffolding lessons, yet getting out of the way of my students' learning.

He's the guy that people will cite as the teacher they want to be. Generous to a fault. Helpful. Always telling you that you're the best person for the job. Amazing really.

## Chapter 9

He asked Julie Wang to stop by his room at the end of the day. McKenzie had scheduled staff presentations for the year, and he'd assigned Jason the new grading policy. Jason worked up a PowerPoint and wanted her opinion.

He heard the soft clicking noise from her rear derailleur hub while she pushed her bicycle down the hallway. She turned it into his room, rested it against a wall, and put her helmet on a desk. She'd already packed her pannier.

He brought over his laptop and they put two desks together. He'd memorized his script. After three slides, she stopped him.

“Don't use words like grade value enhancement.”

“It's how the Office of Assessment is presenting it.”

“That's why nobody reads emails from the Office of Assessment.”

Two slides later, she said, “Stop. How are people supposed to understand that infographic?”

“Right here is the student. He enters school with hopes, dreams, etcetera and acquires skills to make that happen.” He pointed to symbols and arrows. “What occurs here,” he tapped his forefinger against the screen, “is that in the old grading policy there is an arbitrary, subjective ceiling put on her which...look over here...causes self doubt and disempowerment. In contrast right over here, you see, is a situational context in which empowerment flows naturally out of a philosophy of constructivism, a self-determined--”

“Jason, that’s a flaw in your PD’s. You sent out signals that you’re smarter than everyone. That you know more than we all do.”

“I’m giving the PD.”

“But you don’t know any more than any of us. You just know the language. Stop being the grand instructor. Think of it as telling us what you happened to overhear at a meeting you were forced to go to.”

“I like going to those meetings. I wasn’t forced... Why are you giving me that look.”

“You’re didn’t listen to what I just said.”

“Okay, tell me again.”

She crossed her legs and tapped on the desk, looked to the ceiling.

“Follow me for a second. In the cafeteria, tell me the groups that you see hanging together.”

“Really? Let me see. Jocks. Weed smokers. Skaters. Brains. Goths. College bound straight kids. What else? Uncategorizable Weirdos. Nerds. Theater people. Artists. The cool popular kids. There’s probably more.”

“Where would you be sitting right now if you were their age?”

“Good question.” He looked to his left and thought for a moment. “Probably college bound straight kids.”

“No. You’re a nerd. Actually, you’re part of a subset. You’re a teacher’s pet nerd who loves being right. You ever know anybody who likes a teacher’s pet, much less one’s got all the answers?”

“You’re making me feel like an Uncategorizable Weirdo.”

“No, they wouldn’t accept you.”

“That hurt.” He glanced at his screen.

“Present your material. We all need to hear it. But there’s no reason you have to own it so hard or be its spokesman. Talk to us in a way that tells us you’re one of us. You always have good information, but you don’t do anything groundbreaking. Nobody does. And haven’t you realized yet that teachers don’t like to be professionally developed?”

“It’s necessary.”

“So is getting a colonoscopy. When McKenzie gives you an assignment, be like a hitman. Walk up to the target, take your shot, then get out of there as quick as you can.”

When she called John Davidson that night after school, she said, “Jason’s a good man. But he still believes that movie version of teacher. The savior guy. The guy who parts seas. The guy who makes lesser mortal believe.”

“Yeah. But what if the school didn’t have people like him? You need a few of them.”

“But they get beat up after a while, then turn cynical like the rest of them.”

“Right,” he said.

“He needs to stop shining. He’s too shiny,” she said.

“He’ll learn.”

“He’s got eight years in.”

“That’s a long time for him to still be acting like a new guy, isn’t it?”

“What I’m trying to get him to realize,” she said.



Edward Thoreau  
Geometry  
Room 319

You got a teacher in this building named Jason Foxx who's the real deal. Ask him about anything related to new technology. I needed a program that puts buildings to scale so my students can see applications of geometric principles applied in the real world. He didn't sleep until he found something for me. Is it his job? No. He's just another teacher on the block like all of us. He just wants school to be something better. That's it.

I worked in real estate before becoming a teacher. You either did the job or you didn't eat. I don't know what the Brains want in education any more. They send down a new proposal one year. You don't like it? Give it a couple of years, you'll get a new one.

The principal told the staff we needed to give presentations on various topics. Foxx chose the new grading policy that will go into effect next year. Now tell me, you want to sell that to a staff of forty teachers at the end of the day who have been hearing about this innovation, that innovation for years running? He did it. Clean, crisp, right to the point. He gave us a one page handout that explained everything. Got us out of there on time.

What are you complaining about?

Maria Sanchez  
Biology  
Rm 124

A new grading policy? Are you serious? And of course it's Jason Foxx who gives the presentation. I mean, shoot the guy, okay? He doesn't know when to shut up.

They'll send down a new grading policy next year, then the year after that they'll tweak it. Then the year after that you'll start hearing about another grading policy altogether because they got this one wrong.

Just leave us alone. Let us shut our doors so we can teach.

## Chapter 10

Nadia Powell knocked on his door while he sat at his teacher's desk during his lunch period.

He'd been watching teaching demonstrations on YouTube on various ways to contextualize historical data so students remembered it. How does a teacher create an emotional experience around learning? Always elusive. He'd become interested in casting history as narrative, which was one reason he wanted to work with an English teacher for his observation. He hoped that by tapping into the archetype of people around the campfire telling stories to one another he could make his classes more engaging. Some students loved history. What he hoped to do was capture the attention of the bored and inattentive. Teenage boredom was a solar system, a galaxy, a universe. How does a teacher tap into one's innate desire to learn, yet get "school" out of the way?

He looked to his soft-sided, unopened lunch box holding his uneaten lunch.

"Hi Nadia."

"Am I interrupting your lunch?"

“No, come in. I was doing a little teacher research.”

He had let the lunch period while away. He'd meant to try and catch Paulie. They'd never had a conversation in the aftermath of his observation.

“What's up?” he said.

She came into the room and took a seat at a student's desk. He got up, turned around another student desk, and sat across from her. He glanced to the door to make sure it was open. Every year staffs around the county were given stern warnings about maintaining one's distance from students. What made him especially nervous was that Nadia, a girl of model good looks, had a reputation of being sexually adventurous with girls and boys. Her wealthy African American father had married a wealthy French Canadian woman, and the family was a mess. Her father had discovered that the speaking circuit brought attention and riches that dwarfed his medical practice. Her mother's commercial acting career demanded that she jet to New York and other locales. Nadia and her brother fended for themselves.

She was like so many teenagers, searching for adults who could offer her protection, safety, and guidance. “They used to be called parents,” he'd heard a teacher say. Teachers described Nadia as a Klingon--she clinged to any adult who paid slightest attention to her.

“I need help with the research paper. Why don't we just pick somebody and write about him in a report.”

“Because it's boring and nobody learns anything. What's causing you problems?”

“I don't know how to write a story.”

“Do you have a fantasy life?”

She blushed. “What are you asking me that for?”

“I mean, do you ever make up stories about people, about yourself? Make yourself the hero or villain? Come to the aid of someone or throw someone off a cliff if he or she is bugging you?”

“Sure. Who doesn’t?”

“That’s my point. I want you to do a little research on someone from the Reconstruction Era. Then you write from that person’s point of view. Sometimes it’s more fun to write about an evil person, say somebody from the Klan. Maybe you could be a klansman who infiltrated the Freedman’s Bureau. You could then write about what the Freedman’s Bureau was set up to do and how you subverted its efforts. You could write about going to klan meetings and raiding black sections of the town or village. You’re making up details of his life, but you have to get the facts straight. Historical fiction.”

“Can I write about a woman?”

“Sure.”

He saw her eyes shift to someone in the doorway. When Jason looked he saw the person’s left foot as he turned away. Footsteps receded.

“Who was that?”

“I don’t know. Some teacher. Who should I write about?”

“That’s up to you. Let’s face it, much of our understanding of history has had a male focus. See what you can come up with in your research. Let’s say you can’t find someone, but you want to write about the Freedman’s Bureau. I’m sticking with that just because it’s an easy example. Instead of being a male klansman who infiltrated it, be a female infiltrator. Convince me by doing good research that you know about the era, and you’ll do well.”

She stared with large, anime eyes.

“I’m an artist,” she said. “Can I do, like, a graphic novel?”

He rubbed his chin. “Okay,” he said. “But I want historical data to support everything you do.”

“Mr. Foxx, you’re my favorite teacher,” she said. More staring.

“Thank you.”

I wish other teachers were as cool as you.”

“You’re very kind.” His scalp prickled. “Listen, if you run into any snags, stop by during coach class.” He got up.

She fussed with her purse, glanced at her cell phone, then stood. She beamed a smile before leaving.

He made a mental note to talk to her counselor, see if she could get Nadia into the girls group she moderated. Otherwise, pregnancy by the time she was eighteen. That might get mom and dad’s attention.

## Chapter 11

He tried to catch Paulie in his room during his free period, then after school. He'd emailed him, but got no response. They didn't share the same lunch period, so that was out. The one time he managed to find him in his room, he was huddled with Merrick Spintz, the math teacher. They both looked up at him like cornered raccoons. He said he'd come back later.

"Sure," Paulie said. "Anytime."

He wrote Paulie an email saying he'd spoken with McKenzie and had some news for him. 'The Way of war is a way of deception.' When he taught World history he got his students to read Sun-tzu.

Paulie wrote back that he should stop by today on their shared B-Day free period. For once, he wrote breezily, I will plant myself at my desk and catch up on some work.

On the way over, Jason stopped near the boy's bathroom where three students congregated. They stared at him. He stared at them.

"Tell me, gentleman. Do I write it up or are you heading to class?"

They ignored him. Jason didn't teach any of them so he didn't know their names. The custodian happened to be pushing his broom through the hallway. He leaned toward him.

"Mr. Casey, can I use your walkie-talkie a second?"

"Sure." He pulled it from his belt.

"Naw, we're good," the ringleader said.

He watched them walk down the hallway and enter a classroom.

"You got that evil eye," Mr. Casey said.

"I wish," Jason said.

He took the long way around to Paulie's room, in part because he didn't want to confront him, but also he liked walking through the school for information grabs. Sometimes you heard tonal signals from students meaning a fight was brewing. Sometimes you stumbled upon a red eyed, bunch fisted marauder you could give a pep talk to or guide to a counselor.

Sometimes listening to teachers and students in a classroom talking about an issue that focused their attention was joy, was enough. He liked going by the art room and math classes to overhear their discipline specific language. He like the hallway banners with positive messages. He liked the otherworldly, bottom of the ocean low hum of empty hallways while students were inside classrooms.

When he became the principal of a school, and that was his secret wish, he would turn the little red schoolhouse upside down and have it be a place of collaboration among teachers, a place of projects and interdisciplinary learning, a place where outside business people and academics routinely came and spoke to the staff and students.



Right in front of him was the stepping stone of being a Professional Development Instructor for an Exemplar school.

He wasn't being entirely deceptive with Paulie. Gronk McKenzie had called him into his office yesterday at the end of the school day. Two high schools needed a Social Studies chair and they'd asked Gronk about him. Jason had a good reputation and McKenzie wanted to encourage him to put his name in the pool.

"Have you thought about being a chair?" McKenzie liked to lean back and stretch his legs out on a short, four-legged stool to his right. He'd played linebacker for a Division III school and had the middle aged athlete's aches and pains. One always talked to him sideways.

"I have, but I want to be a Professional Development Instructor. I'd like you to consider me for the job. I'll have eight years in at the end of this year which give me some street cred as a staff developer."

"Okay," he said.

"I think we should be an Exemplar school."

"You got a staff here that doesn't want any part of it."

"What can they do about it?"

"In the final say, not too much. But if someone or someones get vocal enough, if they stir up the union, it turns into a hornets' nest. The system announces Exemplar status the second half of the school year, then starts it up the following September."

"It can happen for us next year?"

“Could. We’d be perfect for it with our mixed population of high achievers and at-risk students. The big wigs have come through here and considered it. But remember, the Exemplar Schools program is only three years old. We would be one of the first high schools to do it.”

“Why don’t you push for it?”

“I was thinking it would be best for us to try the year after next.”

“Why?”

“Truthfully? I want it to get into a couple of other high schools and have them work out the kinks. Being the new kid gets your ass kicked.”

“I think you should do it.”

“Our staff is still going to shrink.”

“Okay, but if we’re an Exemplar, they’ll send a lot trainers and every student in the building will get a computer. We’ll be the beneficiaries of lots of PD. Like I said, I’d want to be the PDI.”

“What about Janine?”

“Janine’s a technophobe, and Exemplars are technology oriented. I’ve heard she might want to get hired as Teacher Consultant so she can work with new teachers.”

He nodded. “They’re expanding that program. She’d be great at it. What about the Humanities position?”

“How about one A-Day class, and one B-Day class. Janine teaches one class a day and I’d do that just like her.”

“Keep this between us. I got two assistant principals who would be be fine with it, and one who wouldn’t be. I’ll see if I can get you included in the Exemplar Schools meetings that come up, but I’ll tell you this, nothing gets decided until after Christmas break.”

“You do know that teachers are already talking about it.”

“I know. Scared all to hell, aren’t they?”

He circled around to Paulie’s room. McKenzie had given no indication that his underwhelming observation concerned him.

Jason knocked on the doorjamb. Paulie looked up from his computer with an alert, wide-eyed, canine stare.

“What’s up?” he said. “You have news from McKenzie?”

“Actually, I thought it would be a more far reaching conversation. He gave me a few updates. Nothing substantial. Hey, listen, I wanted to touch base with you about my observation.”

“Okay. Seems like ancient history by now.” He drummed fingers. Sniffed his nose.

Jason took a seat. Paulie tucked himself to the back of his chair, elbows to arm rests, fingers in a church steeple to mouth.

“You know I got in there and couldn’t up my own wiki. Thankfully I kept a copy of everything on Word docs or I would have been screwed.”

“Wikis are notoriously fickle. Same thing happened to a friend at another school.”

“Never happened to me before. And photocopies of the article I had right on my desk mysteriously disappeared.”

“You sure they were there? What could have happened to them?”

“I don’t know. Did you take them? Maybe by accident. ”

“Nope.”

“I got Mark Cain to make me copies at the last minute.” He tried a laugh. “Wasn’t happy about it.”

Paulie sat forward, elbows on desk, fingers interlocked. “I guess not.”

“I’ve still got people coming up to me asking what went wrong on my observation and giving me grief about this place turning into an Exemplar. Word got out fast, Paulie.”

Paulie’s smile stretched. He scrunched his nose. “People love drama, don’t they?”

“I liked the lesson. Weird stuff started happening.”

“That’s why we’re teachers, right? Always the unexpected. Listen, I--”

“Maybe we can work on my observation in the spring.” He watched Paulie closely.

Paulie unintentionally raised his eyebrows. He picked up a pencil and rolled it in his fingers. “Well,” he said, “we could. We could.” He examined the eraser.

“Anyway,” he said as he stood. “Live and learn.”

He managed to hide his shaking hands as he walked the hallway and went to his room. Inside, he exhaled. Paulie had done it. You never, ever tried to sabotage a fellow teacher’s observation lesson. He was playing Paulie’s game now, and he didn’t know the rules.

## Chapter 12

He left to run home and check on Bryson who had been in a foul mood this morning. Something was brewing.

He and his sister, Ellen, had to consider getting Bryson into some sort of program or institution for recovering head trauma victims. He seemed to be all right for stretch, but now he couldn't get through the day without raging or tripping on something or falling down in the shower.

"Bryson!" he called into the house as soon as he opened the door. No answer.

He'd imagined the day when he would find his brother crumpled up at the bottom of the basement stairs or scalded by hot water while fixing himself a cup of tea.

"Bryson!"

He checked the house. He called Bryson's cell phone and heard it ringing on his upstairs night table.

He called Ellen who worked from home three days a week.

"Bryson over there?"

“No, not till Friday.”

“He’s not here, either.”

“Maybe he hitchhiked out west, you know, to find himself.”

“Funny.”

“I’m sure you’ve tried to call him.”

“His phone’s upstairs. He’s been moaning about being independent. Maybe he jumped on a bus or Uber-ed somewhere.”

“Oh boy.”

“We need to have another sit-down with him. Figure out what’s next. I’ve been keeping notes for the next appointment with his neurologist. Maybe there’s a pattern. Maybe it’s a matter of retooling his meds.”

“Billy and him got into the other night, which I didn’t tell you about. Billy’s starting to do the hunter-gatherer thing of making sure we’re solid on all fronts when the biscuit in the oven is ready for arrival in the big bad world. Having my crazy brother around is concerning him.”

“Not to mention the unmentionable fact that our older brother has always been a son of a bitch. I think Sheila and his kids have been here one time to see him.”

He put phone to shoulder and made coffee.

“How many times did he cheat on her? A hundred? Remember that party I went to in Towson with two girlfriends five or six years ago when I saw him? He was stupid drunk, trying pick up anything that would fog a mirror.”

“The night he took a woman home to his house?”

“Sheila and the kids were at her cousin’s place in Pennsylvania. She kicked him out, but that lasted about a week before he sweet talked his way back in. He’s my brother and I won’t abandon him, but what women see in creeps like him I do not know.”

“Hold on,” he said. “I’ve got an incoming.”

He spoke to a police officer from a precinct in Baltimore down near the Harbor. His drunk brother had caused a scene at a bar and the manager called the police. Jason said he’d be there in a half hour.

“Speak of the devil,” he said to his sister. He explained the phone call.

“Meantime, he’s under strict orders not to drink alcohol,” she said.

“We’ve got to come up with a plan. I can’t do this anymore.”

At the police station, an officer took him back to the drunk cage after he filled out paperwork. His brother sat on a chair in the corner. Vomit covered his shirt front and down onto his pants.

“You got a hose?” he asked the officer. “Son of a bitch.”

Jason happened to have a large beach towel stuffed in the trunk of his Honda which he lay across the back seat. He guided Bryson into it and told him to not get his mess all over everything. Halfway into the twenty minute ride home, Bryson vomited again, soaking the towel and no doubt the seat beneath. Jason smelled the yeasty tang of regurgitated beer. He rolled down the back windows.

“I’ll be goddamned,” he said, sniffing the air. Bryson had shit his pants.

Home, he yanked him forcefully out of the car. He pulled the blanket onto the carport floor and marched Jason through the basement door and told him to strip in the laundry area. He

pushed him into the shower stall. Jason was unsteady, so he had to climb in with him and clean him.

He put him to bed then went outside and tossed the towel into the green dumpster near the carport. He cleaned up his car as best he could and kept the windows cracked four inches so it would air out. He threw Bryon's and his clothes in the washer then went upstairs and opened a beer, rare for him on a school night.

"This has got to stop," he said aloud. But he had no idea how to make that happen.



### Chapter 13

Tom Sorenson, an assistant principal, came to Jason's door ten minutes after first period had begun. He waved his hand signaling Jason to join him in the hallway.

"McKenzie needs to see you in the office."

Jason did a whole body, bent at the waist vaudeville turn to the class. "I'm a little busy here."

It took his students about five seconds to get untracked and begin talking to each other.

"I'll cover until McKenzie sends a teacher who's got first period off."

He stepped into the classroom. Jason followed.

Sorenson was a lackey and a snitch. Like a wood beetle bored into whatever school he'd worked in, he survived by saying yes to everyone then running to the principal and tattling on people. He liked to pat his stomach to reassure himself he wasn't gaining weight, which he was. Nothing juiced him quite like seeing teachers get pulled up by the principal.

Sorenson kept turned his back to Foxx and scolded a student.

"No need for that," he said to Sorenson. "It's a good class."

“Why don’t you--”

Foxx stepped in front of him and gave him instructions on what the students needed to do next. Before leaving, he leaned close and whispered, “Don’t flex your muscles in here, all right?” Sorenson smirked.

Jason left the room shaking his head. Sorenson was a middle school bully in an assistant principal’s body. How many times had he seen students be disrespectful toward him just to see him get red faced?

Jason headed toward the office, no doubt needing to sit one-on-one with a parent pissed off about Johnny’s interim grade.

Whenever he walked through the halls during a period when he should be teaching, he felt floaty, untethered and, truth be told, liberated. He couldn’t wait to be an administrator. The ship’s captain.

He looked at his watch before pushing the office door. He’d forgotten to write the proper date on the board. December 1. The administrative assistant stared at her computer screen then picked up her ringing phone, ignoring his hello. The counselor’s door was closed. He walked by the large, two month school calendar and daily sign in sheet through the short hallway to McKenzie’s office.

Gronk McKenzie sat at his desk. “Shut the door, Mr. Foxx.”

He sat in a chair.

“You’re being put on administrative leave. Paperwork will come to your home in a day or two giving you instructions about where to report.”

“What?”

“That’s all I can tell you. Mr. Mitterling will accompany you to your room. Get your belongs then leave the building.”

“What am I being accused of?”

“That will be in the letter. I can’t say any more.”

Celine Wallenda  
Theater  
Rm 022

No one can say *anything* of course. No one knows a thing. The administrators won't even admit that Jason was exiled. Everybody is running a goddamn CIA black ops.

You know what I do? I ask the kids. *They* know. They *adore* rumors so you have to smoke out the truth, but if you ask enough of them, you get some semblance of reality.

Did he hit someone? No.

Did he verbally abuse, threaten, intimidate, belittle, or harass anyone? No.

Did he steal something? No.

How would they know? They *know*. Teenagers *vacuum* up information. They will tell you they love money, the voracious little consumers, but what lights up their dials is drama.

At a certain point I stopped asking and realized there was one thing left. Some sort of *sexual impropriety* charge. Some *goddamned weasel* must have accused Jason of crossing the line with a student.

*I'll* be in touch with him. I don't give a monkey turd if the administrators warn us off.

## Chapter 14

In his car in the school parking lot, he called Ellen.

“What?” she said. “Why?”

“I don’t know. They’ll send me a notification in the mail then I’ll report to the Warehouse on the east side of the county until it gets cleared up.”

“Do you get paid?”

“Yes. We’ll talk about it later. Can you take Bryson today? I know he’s not scheduled to be over there till tomorrow, but I need to go home and clear my head.”

“Matter of fact this is a good weekend. Billy had to go up to Boston on Wednesday night and he’ll be gone till late Sunday or Monday some time. I hope Bryson doesn’t get pissy about his schedule change.”

“I’ll go pick him up then drive him to your house if that’s okay. You’re home, right?”

“Will be in an hour. Bring him over. He knows what to do.”

For some reason, Bryson didn’t argue with him when he asked him to pack up for his stay at Ellen’s.

“Something happened to you,” he said.

“It did.”

“Okay.”

The world turned upside down. He was asked to leave his job and Bryson was agreeable.

He drove downtown and couldn't figure out where to stop or what to do, and realized he didn't want to go back home. He went over to Patterson Park then decided to take 95 south to 695 to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway into Washington DC. In forty minutes he was on New York Avenue. The Capitol Building swam by in the distance to his left. He took Massachusetts Avenue to Dupont Circle where once upon a time he would sit on a bench with Adele Davis and hold hands and people watch.

He parked on P Street then went to one of those same benches on this warm December day. He pulled out his phone and looked at its reflective face. He thumbed to his contacts then touched her number.

“Jason Foxx,” she said.

“Adele Davis,” he said.

“I thought you and I broke up.”

“We did.”

“So anyway,” she said. “How are the folks? Your job? The weather?”

“Did it ever occur to you that I didn't do it right?”

“Did it ever occur to *you* that you didn't do it right? Of course I know

you didn't do it right, you moron. Why are you calling me?"

"I'm at Dupont Circle and I need to talk."

He heard her tapping at her keyboard. "I'm looking at my Google calendar," she said.

"Yes. Still looking. Okay, I can see you in three months. How's March 14th sound, say 11:30?"

"Let me take you to lunch."

"I'm thinking about saying yes only because there's a new Asian restaurant called Bamboo in the courtyard off of Connecticut Avenue that people have talked about. Quite expensive. Meet me there in twenty minutes. I can take an hour then I have to be back in the office. Did I mention it was expensive?"

He got there before her and sat at the bar. He watched her walk in. She loved fake fur coats and jackets, one of which she had on today. She wore two inch heels and black slacks with a sharp crease and a long sleeved purple top with bursts of geometrical patterns and a beret tilted at an angle which she kept on during lunch.

She gave him a hug then still holding him stepped back and said, "You looked stressed, teacher."

The hostess took them to a table. He asked that she send the waitress right over since they were on the clock. They ordered two of the suggested dishes from the waitress who stepped aside to let a busboy place a white china pot of tea on their table.

Jason poured tea and asked about her son Steven.

"He's taking martial arts and I think he's found his goal in life. He wants to kick people's ass. So do I, actually."

"Which martial art?"

“Tien Shan Pai, Northern style kung fu,” she recited. “So he’s told me countless times. I wish he were here to tell you. It’s good for him. He’s a nervy little thing.”

“Eight years old now, right. Isn’t his birthday in November?”

“Well aren’t you the sensitive male.”

“On the way down here, I realized I never apologized in the right way.”

That brightened her eyes. She sipped her tea. “So, apologize the right way.”

He let her put her tea cup down and grabbed her hands across the table and said, “I’m sorry. I couldn’t talk about it. I should have been able to state my case, at least. I shouldn’t have stopped calling.”

The waitress came with their food. They unclenched hands.

“And can we both admit,” she said, “that I was a little haughty, that I was a little bitchy, about the whole thing?”

“Well, aren’t you the sensitive female.”

“We weren’t married or committed. I felt like going to bed with an adorable man who was incapable of not flirting with me. What’s the big deal?” She touched chopsticks to food. “I’m a divorced woman with a child and I go for long stretches, Jason, *long* stretches when men don’t even see me. He and I had a fling, he moved on to someone else, and if you hadn’t seen that note on my refrigerator, you would be none the wiser.”

“I thought you were my girl.”

“Proud owner of a girl, were you?”

“I was jealous. Still am. I fell in love with you and that kid of yours, for God’s sake.”

She finished chewing. “You might have mentioned that to me.”



“I was getting ready to,” he said. “I was right there.”

“Can I be frank with you?” She held a small shrimp above her plate of noodles. “Your throat clearing around the horrors of commitment was irritating me. Having an affair was tonic. You began to be a guy who seemed to me to want the atmospherics of a relationship without the mess, and that was not enough. You’re over thirty years old for God’s sake. Take the goddamn plunge.”

“Give me another chance.”

“Did you come all the way down here to ask me that? Because it seems like there’s something else on the agenda.”

“There is, but seeing you makes me realize that I want to be with you. We’re not done.”

“I wonder if you want to consult me?”

“Well? You’re not seeing anyone, are you?” He felt his stomach plunge.

“Actually, I’m getting married in Bermuda in ten days.” She looked at him with the expression of, sorry, guy.

“Fuck,” he said.

“God, you’re gullible. You might have checked my left hand for a ring, you idiot.”

“That wasn’t funny.”

“Yes it was. You should have seen the look on your face.” She reached across the table and plucked a piece of chicken from his dish. “The food is great here. Everybody was right.” She sipped her tea. “Okay, Jason. I happen to believe that we’re not over, either, but we’re going to take it one step at a time. The first thing you need to do is make it up to Steven. If that doesn’t happen, you can’t make it up to me. That guy got hurt when you stopped coming around. His

father's military career has prevented any sort of important male bonding, and you were there with all of your wonderful, attentive Jason-ness, then you weren't."

"Okay. Does he still like hockey?"

"Yes, hockey is right up there."

"Good."

"Then, as you're reconciling with Steven, you and I can begin again. You've got a grace period, but I'm ready to move on with life. I can always date a guy, but you're not a date guy. You're a commitment guy. Sorry, that's just who you are. We'll get things straight between us, but after a while, you're either in or out."

He put noodles to mouth and ate. "Whew, hot. Must have bit a pepper." He held up a finger while he chewed and drank a sip of ice water. "I'm ready," he said. "But you have to back off the commander role and learn how to talk things through before decisions get made."

"I got the kid," she said. "That gives me leverage."

"If I'm in, we're a we," he said. "We're not a you-two-and-me. Our grace period includes your figuring out how to include me. I don't get the smallest slice of pizza every time."

"Damn, boy, you ate your Wheaties this morning."

"I'll go to therapy. I'll take up yoga. I'll do Sufi spinning. Whatever it takes to make it work. But you want me in? You give up some turf."

She looked down at the table and set her jaw. Unbeknownst to Jason, her ex-husband had called from Japan at 5:00 that morning and screamed at her about being a control freak when they were discussing a visitation schedule with Steven when he got back stateside.

She took a breath. "We have lots to work on, don't we."

“Does Steven have a running buddy?”

“He does. A kid right down the block. His mother and I are friends. We’re in the same boat, actually. Both of us divorced. Professional jobs.”

“I’ve got a friend who can get me Capitals tickets. I’ll take Steven and his buddy on Sunday afternoon if that’s all right with you.”

“Aren’t I included?”

“No, it’s a guy thing.”

“You haven’t seen him in six months.”

“He’ll remember me.”

“I’m supposed to let you take my kid from Baltimore to a hockey game in DC then back again after you disappeared from our lives?”

“That’s right. Remember that commander thing we were just talking about? What’s the other mom’s name?”

“Karen.”

“Call Karen right now and tell her what’s happening.”

“This is actually giving me a headache.” She looked off to the side. “I’ll wait till I get back to the office.” She glanced at her watch. “I want all the details before I let Steven and his friend leave with a man I contemplated murdering not many weeks ago.”

“I’ll make sure I can get the tickets. Give you departure and arrival times.”

“Now tell me the real reason you came down to D.C. during the day on a Thursday.”

“I got put on administrative leave then escorted out of the building.”

“Oh, my gosh. Why?”

“They don’t tell you. I was in a state of shock and started driving and realized you were the one person I wanted to talk to.”

“I want to hear all about it. But I’ve got to get back.”

“Play hookey.”

“No. Call me at 8:00 tonight.”

He asked for the check. When it came, he said, “You’re right. Expensive.”

She laughed. “Walk me to my office.”

## Chapter 15

He heard nothing from the school system by the end of the day. About 6:00, he emailed McKenzie asking what he should do about tomorrow. He thought he would hear from him in the morning. Within five minutes McKenzie wrote back two sentences. “Stay put until you hear something from Human Resources. Your case will be assigned to an Infractions Officer.”

He called Adele at 8:00 p.m. and told her about the email from McKenzie and said he knew nothing beyond that. They chatted for a few minutes, but Steven wanted her to read to him, so she got off.

On Friday he went out for two runs of five miles each, sat around and idly watched CNN, and wondered about starting another career.

The letter came on Saturday. He was being investigated for sexual impropriety with a female student, and until the matter was investigated and resolved he was to report to the Warehouse in the east part of the county.

What the hell? He thought about each of his three classes of English 10 and three of English 11. Sexual impropriety? Students constantly talked about hooking up, hitting it, popping

that bitch. Sometimes, to lighten the mood, he would redirect them by using their language, without the curse words, with an exaggerated, white man inflection: “Shall we spend less time talking about hitting it, and hit your assignment?”

Did he veer too closely to boundaries which might have prompted a student to tattle on him to a parent who then contacted the principal?

He emailed his union rep, who wouldn't reply until Monday at the earliest.

He knew of a teacher who had spent a year and a half in the Warehouse without ever having his case resolved. He began taking medication for panic attacks. He went into a depression. He got a letter claiming the system had decided to terminate him for cause, but cause had never been established. He hired a lawyer who pushed back. The case remained in limbo. He went out on sick leave with the accumulated time from his fifteen years as a teacher and got a part time job in Whole Foods, but the system found out about it and said if you're sick you can't be working, and sued for \$5000.00 back pay. He asked the system to stop paying him, so he received checks totaling \$0.00 every two weeks. The case dragged on. There was a hearing. Nothing was resolved. Eventually, he quit after his principal wrote him a sterling letter of recommendation which paved the way for his next job as a teacher in a private school.

He went out on an eight mile run, three miles farther than usual. While running, he felt doors shutting between him and the unaccused, all of the unaccused. The Warehouse marked you. He was an exile. He had to have done something, right? You don't just get sent to the Warehouse.

He got home, showered, called his friend who had Capitals tickets. He needed three.

“Big game with the Flyers,” his friend said. “I can usually get them cheap. My contact needs seventy-five bucks for each of them. That’s still about half off.”

“I’ll do it,” he said. Should he start worrying about money? Was he about to be terminated? “I’m making it up to my former girlfriend’s kid. I want to remove the former label. I’ll look like a star. Does that include the parking pass?”

“That’s an extra thirty. You’ll need it. You don’t want kids walking around downtown Washington DC.”

“You’re right. How often do I do this, right?”

“What I’m thinking.”

His friend didn’t realize he talked to a doomed man. Jason agree to drive up to Cockeysville to get the tickets.

Home, he called Adele. All systems go with the tickets, he said. The game started at 1:00. He gave her pickup and return times.

“I haven’t told Steven yet. I wanted to make sure it was going to happen.”

“Good,” he said. “Good plan.”

“You sound weird.”

“I got the letter in the mail from Human Resources.”

“Tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll hear about it.”

“I’ve missed your abruptness.”

“I’ve missed being abrupt with you. By the way, Karen and I have decided to go into DC with you and the boys.”

“You’re not invited. It’s a guy thing.”

“Not to the game. She and I haven’t sat down and talked in a long time. We’ll go to lunch. Do some shopping.”

“Go by yourselves.”

“We’re going with you. You’re still on provisional status.”

He arrived at the house at 11:00 a.m. Steven greeted him with a hug. He high-fived both boys. Eight year olds. Big worlds. They wore Capitals t-shirts.

“What’s your name?”

“Mark.”

“Where’s Karen?” he asked Adele.

“Her brother needed her to babysit his kids. Last minute thing.”

“My aunt went to the hospital,” Mark said. “She doesn’t breathe right all the time.”

He looked to Adele who nodded. “I’m still going in with you. I called a girlfriend in DC. She and I will go into Georgetown. She’ll swing by and get me when we get down there.”

“I give up,” he said. “Let’s go to the game.”

After driving through town and getting onto I-95 and making sure the boys were settled in back, she said, “Okay, tell me.”

“They’re hitting me ‘with a sexual impropriety’ charge. He glanced in the mirror, kept his voice low.

“Jesus. They give you any details?”



“Not much. The letter said the principal was informed by a teacher who witnessed--I memorized it--‘an alleged inappropriate verbal discussion and close physical proximity to a female student while alone in your classroom.’ The letter explains how the investigation will proceed. I report to the Warehouse on the east side of the county on Monday.”

“Guilty until proven innocent,” she said. “Why is this happening?”

“Six, seven weeks ago, McKenzie announced that schools needed to reduce staffs. One person from each department. McKenzie came up with a plan to keep a teacher by creating a Humanities position, combine a social studies and an English class. I was chosen. There’s an English teacher named Paulie Rastik who thought I took it from him.”

“Did you?”

“I doubt they would have given it to him. He irritates his department chair. I asked for his help on an observation lesson, and the tide turned against me. He helped me put a good lesson together then on the day of the observation strange things happened. I passed it, but after I got over feeling I’d done something wrong, I realized that Paulie tried to make me look bad. Then I had teachers coming up to me telling me how sorry they were that I had a substandard observation.”

“Meaning how sorry they weren’t.”

“Then I got tagged with being the guy who wants the school to become an Exemplar school.”

“You’ll have to explain later what that means. But were you that guy?”

“I’m one of them. Sure, I’m pushing for it.”

“Do you know what they’re referring to with the sexual impropriety charge?”

“Kids make stuff up all the time. I don’t know.”

“Think about it. It had to have happened recently. Did you say something to somebody?  
Could any girl have misconstrued your attention as being out of bounds?”

Two young men sliced by hunkered forward on motorcycles going at least eighty miles  
an hour. The boys in back sat up like hounds.

“You’re innocent, ride it out. Innocent people get blamed for stuff all the time.”

“It hits me right where I live. One, my good name.”

“You have a good name. Your father went to prison, not you.”

“Second, my deep, dark secret.”

“There are no secrets. But what’s yours.”

“I feel like I’m going to be found out. Everybody will wake up and realize I’m  
incompetent.”

“Welcome to the world.”

“I’m serious. Getting sent to the warehouse makes me look like a loser.”

“No, it--”

“Shit!” he said. He looked into the mirror. “Sorry guys. Bad word.” He quieted his voice,  
“You know what, a girl stopped by my room to talk about her essay about a week ago. I was in  
the room alone with her for, I don’t know, ten minutes maximum. Somebody came to the door  
then left before I could see who it was.”

“So?”

“So, the girl has a reputation as being a ‘ho’ as the kids would say.” Another glance in the  
mirror to see if the boys were listening. “Paulie got to her.”

Merrick Spintz  
Algebra I  
Rm 318

Look around this room. Look at the bulletin boards with all the student work. Look at the pods where two or more students can sit, the individual stations, the rug areas where they can plop themselves with laptops or small white boards. Look at the colorful geometric figures on the walls. Look at the anchor charts where they can glance for formulas and sample problems.

My students thrive in here because I make learning straightforward for them. There is no mystery about what it is they have to do.

This is my home. I don't belong anywhere else. I am untethered in the world except for here. I have no friends outside of teacher colleagues. Boyfriends come and go. I was a foster care child who left the system at eighteen. I have a brother, but I don't know where he is. Do I yearn to reconnect with him? Ha.

I forget every student's name who has been on my rolls. I am a technician and get them to do well while they are here. A high percentage of them pass the state test required for graduation. I am actor. I play the part of a teacher with low-key passion who constructs his

lessons for the benefit of all. I am successful. I have a gift for manipulating adolescents into understanding algebra. Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to love your students. You have to care for them while they are on your watch. After that, goodbye.

Paulie Rastik thinks he and I play on the same team. I do not care whether Jason Foxx comes or goes or dies in a plane crash, but Paulie knows that one of my boyfriends writes me doctor's passes when I call in sick, so he holds that over me. He knows I'm a dedicated gambler, and I shamelessly take days off for excursions to Charles Town.

He waltzed in here laughing his hyena ass off about how he would get Jason sent to the Warehouse.

Do tell, I said to him.

He happened to be passing by the room when Jason sat alone with Nadia Powell, a girl who, in the politically correct vernacular of the times, is sexually active. What's the students' term for it? Hooking up? That's probably old school by now. Paulie wrote an anonymous email to the principal from a teacher supposedly too afraid to come forward. Meantime, he got to Nadia. He told her that he would start a campaign to make her look bad if she didn't back him. He told her that teachers would get behind him and flood every social media out there with stories of what a slut she was. I guess he laid it on thick. Paulie could not get one teacher to do anything of the sort.

He laughed. Sitting right there, right over there in a student's chair, he laughed.

He thought I would join him in dark little fairy tale. I said to him, "Now I've got one on you, Paulie. Don't ever come into this classroom again. You're a piece of shit as far as I'm concerned."

*Returning/Lavey*

Why, he looked shocked. Did he think I liked him?

By the way, I think we should be an Exemplar School. Why not? The mediocrity of this place bores me.

Karl Marks  
IEP Chairman  
Rm 111

You got to understand. Jason sicced the Special Ed Department chair on me, and that's never good. That put the Spanish speaking immigrant kid at the top of my list every day. I opened up that can of worms I was talking about by starting the reassessment process on him. I'm in the middle of it as we speak. Then all of a sudden Foxx gets exiled to the warehouse. Best news I heard in a month. Life winks at you once in a while.

I'm glad he's on the shelf. You know why? I got a lot on my plate. Mikey Esposito and I, we got a trip planned for Vegas. His wife's due to drop her bundle of joy in a few months, which is a complication actually. We started talking Vegas last year. Get it in before Christmas break. You go to Vegas over Christmas holidays and you got herds of yahoos. We needed a four day weekend, and that hung us up for a while. Finally, we thought, fuck it. Let's just call in sick. What are they going to do? Arrest us? He works science, I'm Special Ed. Let them connect the dots. If they get pissy, talk to the union. We wouldn't be doing a damn thing wrong.

Jason Foxx? That closes a chapter in my book.

## Chapter 16

He glanced up when a sixty year old guy down the table started whistling “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” Years ago, a teacher played Beatles songs in her room after school when she wrote her lesson plans. He’d learned some lyrics.

The man got looks from fellow exiles so he stopped.

Four long banquet style tables. Five or six people to a table. About them rose warehouse shelves holding computers; old AV, science, and gym equipment; a television studio’s out-of-date cameras; stacks and stacks of books; and whatever other detritus the system didn’t know what to do with. Taxpayers bought it. The system couldn’t throw it in the trash. Someone, someday, somewhere in the solar system of schools might need it.

The supervisors in the Warehouse had closed circuit cameras trained on them. They wouldn’t let them use a computer or their cell phone. The system wouldn’t provide a cozy platform for them to conduct business of any sort while they were on company time. They could do crossword puzzles, play card games, read books, stare into space.

At 10:30 he looked at his watch. Two hours into his six and a half hour daily penance.

They got forty minutes for lunch which began at 12:30.

He'd brought Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* with him. Someone once recommended it. He started on the introduction.

The woman across from him, smelling of sandalwood incense, who had all manner of combs and mirrors and tissues and hard candies in little cellophane wrappers, all of which she pulled out of and put back into her large leather purse, asked him what he was here for.

"I'm innocent," he said. "I don't really know."

"I'm not innocent," she said. She wore a choker with a pentacle. "This is my second stint in here. I'm a science teacher and I teach my students about Spirit, nature consciousness, our pre-Christian duo-theism which honors the Great Horned God and the Great Goddess."

"Okay," he said. He tore off an end of a sheet of notebook paper, used it for a bookmark, then put down his book. "I'll bite. Tell me more."

"Science, I'm putting that in quotes, is rationality's portal to the spirit world. Science comes from Latin meaning to know. How did we know things before measuring and comparing and fixating and analyzing? Which is a male methodology. Women are, in general, more holistic in their approach."

"I suppose I should have seen that coming."

"I make explicit to my students the Sun-Moon-Earth connection. Earth goddess, Moon goddess. Father Sun. I ask them to whisper to us. I teach Earth Science because I passed the Praxis test which allowed me to gain certification as a science teacher. There is so much hunger out there for meaning."



He looked up and saw a camera mounted above the exit door swivel fifteen degrees and point its eye at their table.

“What do you for observation lessons?”

“I have them make a, what?, volcano or do an infographic about the food cycle. It doesn’t matter so long as the principal checks off his little boxes. The rest of my time I focus on Wiccan practices and our pagan roots. I violate their Christian cultism, which causes me problems.”

“Do you think they have microphones so they can eavesdrop?” he said.

“I’m assuming. See? More collecting, storing, classifying. Who comes to understanding that way? It creates a hunger for more. It’s the basis of our consumer society. Piling up information. You always need more information because the information you have never satisfies.”

“This conversation wouldn’t have made sense three days ago.”

“You need healing?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Come and sit next to me for a minute.”

He walked around the table and pulled up a chair. She took his left hand into both of hers and closed her eyes for two minutes.

“You can go back over to your side,” she said.

He did. “Well? What was that?”

“I needed to feel physical contact. Men are so off-center that I find it hard to locate them. I can usually talk to a woman and get a sense of where she lives.”

One of the foremen charged with monitoring the exiles came down the wide aisle. She watched him go to the far end of the warehouse, turn right down an aisle then return. He went back to his office.

“He did a walkabout to check up on us,” she said. “Let us know that he’s been watching.

“Jason Foxx,” he reached to shake her hand.

“Rachel Young,” she said. “I think you should stop eating dairy.”

“Why?”

“I believe you have too much phlegm in your system.”

“You picked that up from holding my hand?”

“No, it’s just a vibe I’m getting.”

“Okay.”

“You’re lonely, aren’t you?”

“Isn’t everyone?”

“No.” She reached into her purse and took out a small, square leather envelope with a snap. She pulled from it a silver chain with with rose quartz stone which she used as a pendulum. She swung it a few times. “You’re weighted down by a responsibility. What is it that’s causing you so much heaviness?”

“Listen,” he said. “I don’t doubt you hear the music of the spheres, but anyone can say about anyone else that they’re weighed down by responsibilities.”

“I didn’t exactly say that. I said you’re weighted down by *a* responsibility. Tell me what it is.”

The lights in the building turned off. The low hum of air-circulating machinery stopped. Submarine silence filled the space. Bright red LEDs glowed at irregular places throughout the dark warehouse. Then power came back on and warehouse sounds refilled the vacuum.

“The grid has fault lines,” she said. “Once it goes dark, we’re in for scary times. Displacement. Tribalism. Are any of us ready for it?”

“No. My responsibility? My brother. He got hit by a car while riding a bicycle and has brain damage. He was a self-centered prick before the accident, and he’s a self-centered prick after the accident. My sister and I are charged with his care.”

“Where are your parents?”

“My father’s in prison and my mother died many years ago.”

“Ah,” she said. She looked through the edge of her bangs at him. “You have so much psychic upheaval in your life. We do an alignment ceremony during new moon. Come and join us. I’m a shamanistic priestess and healer. I might be able to help.”

He looked at the Norton Anthology edition of *Jude the Obscure* sitting on the table. He felt his social studies teacher identity slipping away. His current snapshot profile would be sexual line crosser and warehouse zombie until he could be rebirthed back into the mainstream. Shamanistic priestess? For him, fodder for wisecracks and rolled eyes, until this minute. If he were given a sentence of one week to live, what would he do? What did he believe in? Could he gather even a handful of people around him to celebrate his last days on earth? Rachel would know what to do with her last week.

As if reading his thoughts, she said, “You can’t do it alone.”

“Alignment ceremony?”

“It’s energy work. If I were a doctor and gave you a pill to relieve stress, you would say the pill helped get you back to yourself. Which a pill doesn’t do because most of them deal with symptoms, but that’s another discussion.”

“What do I have to lose except every last shred of dignity? I’ll give it a try. Where do I go?”

“See, you’re more open than you want to believe.”

“I’m desperate. I’m in a cave and I don’t know if I’m lost and going deeper into the labyrinth or if I’m groping toward the light.”

She wrote down the address of a park in Catonsville and drew a simple map.

“We gather around 11:00 to find out who will be in our community for the evening. If there are rowdies in the park, we huddle until they disappear. The sky is supposed to be clear. There are spaces in the trees that are hidden from probing eyes where we do our rituals.”

A slim black guy wearing a blue workshirt, khakis, and steel toed boots climbed down from a shelf twenty feet high. He took off leather palmed gloves and wiped his brow with his sleeve.

He walked over to their table.

“Hey Rachel,” he said.

“Hi Henry.”

“You’re back,” he said.

“I am.”

“You got your Tarot cards?”

“I do.”

He leaned in. “We need to sneak in a reading.”

“You got it,” she said.

He left. Two teachers from farther down the row of tables picked up their belongings and joined them.

She introduced them to Jason. They asked about the new moon ceremony which they planned to attend. They settled into an easy discussion of her case and theirs.

Throughout the morning workers from the warehouse, men and women in suits from buildings nearby, secretaries, the exiles’ monitors, administrative assistants, fellow teachers from two schools not far away stopped by to see her. She would put a hand on their forearm while listening.

The monitors allowed walks back and forth through the warehouse. He thought he would come over here and keep his eyes locked on his book or write in his journal. He realized he could finally get to those books on innovative teaching practices that he’d bought for himself earlier this year that stayed on his shelf. He would become a studious student while cloaked in his shame.

While walking to the end of the block long warehouse, he sensed collective indifference from all the workers and the supervisors. They had seen exiles come and go. Some waved to him, obvious in his teacher uniform of permanent pressed Dockers, long sleeved oxford shirt, and tie. Most ignored him.

He returned to his seat across from Rachel who texted or checked on Twitter or Facebook or other social media. Cell phones were supposed to be tucked away and not used, but Rachel ignored what she found inconvenient. She must have sent out animal signals that she needed to

be alone, because after lunch no one bothered her. She wrote notes in a leather bound book or read from texts on paganism or Wicca practices. She had one of Carl Jung's collections on archetypes.

At 2:00 p.m., a half hour before their daily penance ended, he said to her, "How long does the ritual take?"

"That depends on many things. It could be an hour. Could be two. Just come and be present. We're taking advantage of the mild December to hold our festivals outside. Bring a jacket to stay warm. Take a nap then be there at 11:00."

"You can't shift your ceremony to Friday?"

"We don't tell the moon how to do her business."

When she stood, he realized she wore over her clothing a thin, almost sheer black robe with large baggy sleeves and a hood, as one might expect from a self-identified priestess.

"Don't talk yourself out of it," she said. "Now, leave me alone. I like to transition out of the building on my own. And people like to talk to me without the intrusions of encroaching male energy."

Chapter 17

To his his school email address:

*Fucking pervert cocksucker asshole white ass phony bitch motherfucker. You're dead.*

*I'm killing your white ass.*

*Why are they doing this to you? The only thing you have ever done in this school is to try and make it better.*

*To my colleague, Jason Foxx. I always thought you were a creep. Now it has been confirmed. Maybe you can start an Exemplar School inside the warehouse.*

*To thine own self be true, Jason. I'm sending this anonymously because we've gotten the word not to contact you in any way.*

## Chapter 18

They looked like him. Teacher types. Office workers. Mid-level managers. Women, men. Everyone over thirty. The eldest sixty or sixty-five. They sat on swingsets or leaned against the ladder of the slide or put legs out in front of them while sitting on tractor tires half buried in the ground which formed the perimeter of sandboxes.

The local neighborhood park sat adjacent to Gunpowder State Park so there was a sense of the wild close by in the depths of the trees and the sound of a rushing river.

She alone wore ritualistic clothing, a long robe inlaid with zodiac symbols, the pentagram choker. She passed around candles. Everyone lighted theirs from hers and they walked fifty feet, while cupping their flames, to a stand of trees.

They were here to honor the new moon phase of their own monthly cycles, she said. The time when their inner energies were gathering for later expression. “We renew our recognition that we are on a wheel of life and death that connects to the cosmos. Those energies that make



the earth spin around the sun are latent within us. We come out here to be at peace with our hidden selves.”

Within the boundary of the trees was an open, grassy area where they gathered. She walked the perimeter of their circle telling them that she was cleansing their sacred space with burning sage.

“We won’t have a ritual fire tonight because I want to honor the nourishing darkness within us,” she said. She stood in the center. She had them bow to the four directions, north, west, south, and east toward a shrine at each cardinal point.

He wished he could believe. He felt too tired and weighed down and alone for eye-rolling cynicism. He wondered if he would tell Adele he attended a pagan ritual.

They knew to begin chanting a song to their Mother Goddess. Rachel walked around and put the flat of her hand on everyone’s chest and whispered something to each. To him, she said, “Be present. You belong.”

She went around to each person one more time and blew out the candles. Then she asked them to lie on their backs, heads pointed to the center, feet splayed outward, and told them to stare through the treetops into the vast sky.

She allowed them to settle. She took out a ritual knife and cut the boundaries, she said, between the ordinary and the realms of the gods so that within their sacred circle Spirit felt welcome. She talked to them about the divinity within, about how they were made of the same substance of all of life. They belonged to families of beings, human, plant, animal, of the stuff of gods and goddesses.

Had he overheard someone talking about the very ritual he now participated in, he would have pulled out his cell phone to distract himself. He didn't have much patience with groovy, alter-realities to help avoid facing confusing, bewildering, and unjust life. But here beneath the trees, his back wet from the moist ground, immersed in the odors of the earth, the night sky above, the imprint of her touch lingering on his chest, the sound of her voice coming from a place of conviction and belief, he felt a moment of quietness.

He was in the bottom of a canoe with hands folded on his chest. Water leaked into the boat and inched upward onto his body while he lay in repose. It rose above his jawline. He felt it lace over his hands then crawl across his face until he was submerged. He smiled because he felt like a child playing a game at a neighborhood pool. He knew he could sit up when he wanted to, then did want to, but couldn't.

He was drowning. He'd been slowly drowning all school year. He ached to sit up and breathe, but the heavy press of some unknown thing sat on him and he couldn't roll it off.

The the bottom of the boat opened and he descended into a gloom of dark green water. He grasped toward the wavering, many-sided light, but the fractured moon far on the surface became smaller and smaller. He kicked his legs and reached above himself.

He tried to scream. Water filled his mouth and he sucked it in. It seared his lungs. He gagged. There was no air, he was dying. He lunged against weight of the beast that yanked him downward. It won. It killed him.

She pulled him to his feet with the help of other worshippers. He put hands to knees and coughed and choked and tried to breathe the moist night air. Someone rubbed his back. He throat had cinched to the width of a straw. He clutched at his neck trying to suck in air. He went to one

knee and desperately looked to her. He saw her flattened hand from the edge of his vision. She smacked him across the face, hard. He toppled, but they held him, brought him to his feet again. He lifted his head, and he breathed. His lungs filled with air.

The man behind him said, “There you go.” Others came in close, emanating warmth, patting his back, telling him he was among friends. Rachel kept hold of his hand. He coughed and breathed.

After a while, he said he was okay. They went to their circle.

She chanted to Mother Goddess and Horned God. She chanted to all manner of their divine aspects. They stood at some unseen cue and did a ritualistic bow. She lit a candle, then lit the person’s next to her, who lit the next person’s then around it went. A mild breeze came up. They cupped the flames. She asked for blessings, and people blessed family members, their animals, the healing spirits in their lives. They blew out their candles then again sat on the damp ground. From behind a tree, someone brought out a blue cooler. Paper plates with bread and a tangerine on each were passed around and they ate. People shared stories. They laughed. He closed his eyes while he sucked juice from tangerine slices. He bit into homemade bread which neutralized the taste of the juice, then he ate another slice of sweet tangerine. The pagan’s act of holy communion.

Finished, they bundled up the trash then walked to their cars in the parking lot. Rachel went to each person and hugged them. She urged him to stay. When they had left she took him by the hand and brought him to go the tractor tire sandbox inside.

They sat on the tire half buried in the sand.

“I felt like I was drowning. I was drowning.”

“You were.”

“If all of you hadn’t been here...”

She spread out a blanket and she asked him to lie on his back. She again lit sage incense to cleanse them both and the area that had now become their own sacred circle.

She touched various spots on his head and body. He felt tired and weighed down as if beneath a boulder.

She put her hands above him and seemed to knead or massage the air. He watched. “I’m working with your energy,” she said. He wanted to believe.

His resistance broke, and he quietly cried. Tears slid down both sides of his face.

“Tell me,” she said.

“They’re trying to drive me away from my school home. My island of refuge.”

“You’re surviving. You’re managing to survive. Hold on. Hold on to what’s best in you. Now, quiet. Close your eyes.”

He felt--for the first time in his life?--safe. After ten minutes, she put her hand to the back of his neck and lifted him to sitting position.

“Breathe,” she said. He felt light, as if he might fall into the sky. When she saw he was ready she helped him stand. She folded up the blanket and accompanied him to his car while holding his hand.

They stared into each other’s eyes and for one fleeting moment he was as connected to her as he’d ever felt with another human being.

“My God,” he said.

“It’s Spirit,” she said. “I invite it in. I no longer question.”

“I wish I could believe.”

“You’re home. What’s to believe?”

“Tell me what you felt when you were doing your...I don’t know what to call it.”

The priestess put her hand to his face.

“What do I do from here?” he said.

“You realize that you belong, and you always have only one decision to make.”

Before he could ask, she got in her car and drove off.

Mikey Esposito  
Science  
Rm 313A

The best thing ever happened to me was when the principal three years ago put the science department in A wing off the main corridor, third floor. Better than that, I got 313A, the last room on A wing, which means I can step out any time, take a look-see down the corridor to see who's coming, step back in and get kids on task. But nobody likes going all the way over to A wing, so mostly they leave us alone.

Teaching is the best gig in the world, once you're tenured, which takes three years. You write up kick ass lesson plans during your probationary period, then after that, you sit back and skate. I've been in the teaching business for nine years and I don't do lesson plans any more. Did you get that? I do not do lesson plans anymore. Whenever it's time to get observed, I pluck something off the internet, McKenzie, the principal du jour, tells me how great it is, then hasta la vista, baby, see you next time. He walks through for informals. Who cares? He can write what he wants, but it doesn't hurt me on my end of the year eval. Union rules take care of that.

Last year, Jones, the principal at the time, pulled me in and told me I was now a veteran teacher. He said, "You need to be more of a leader. New people coming in look to the veterans."

Okay, I said. I liked that. A leader. I thought, how can I demonstrate my leadership? First thing I could think of was I borrowed the boxed disc set all five seasons of *Breaking Bad* from my brother-in-law who's a devoted fan.

Leader. Be a leader. I put up a topic of the day on the projector that my science students could research using their laptops. I had them write down the topic on a document file then Google the topic and keep the tab open on their browsers. Then I told them that they can watch *Breaking Bad* with me projected through the overhead onto the screen. I haven't seen every episode and my brother-in-law has busted my nuts about it. I said to my science students, if the principal comes down the hallway, I'll turn off *Breaking Bad*, and you guys play like you're doing research on the topic of the day. I'll project a random Earth Science website which I'll keep tabbed. I told them that if our agreement leaks out, *Breaking Bad* goes away, and I put them to work. We good with that?

They agreed. I didn't doubt Jones knew what I was doing, but he had too much else on his plate. We watched all 62 episodes from March until the end of the school year. Not one time did I make them do work. I gave them grades according to their attendance, and I made up assignments which I put in my electronic gradebook. I handed out packets that walked them through the final exam question by question if they bothered to look at it, which, by the way, most of them did not.

I had no discipline problems. None.

I did have a few brainiacs who complained about not doing science during science class, but I got the others to shout them down. Two of them on a college track threatened to go to the principal. They got their parents involved.

Richard Roland, the counselor, and me, we're buddies. He bets on horses. Lost his ass this past year, so he's got a cash flow problem. His problem, my opportunity. When his car died, I hooked him up with car salesman cousin of mine who got him a used Toyota Camry for what it cost the dealership.

When I told him I needed a couple of kids to get reassigned to a new science class, under the radar type of thing, he gets out his scheduling matrix and voila, middle of the quarter the two college bounders are off my rolls.

Go ahead, tell me teachers work too hard.

Exemplar School. Would it mean we make more money? If so, I'm all for it. If not, hell no. Last thing you want are people crawling all over the school giving you advice. I never listen to it, but who needs the friction?

Jason Foxx? That squirrely social studies teacher always running around trying to improve himself? Yeah, they got him in the Warehouse. No doubt a set-up deal because someone was out to get him. I'd like to get sent to the Warehouse. Get paid for doing nothing? My kind of life.

I should hustle over to see him. Wonder if he knows about the New Amway? I signed up a few months ago. Jason fits the profile of a new recruit. Eager beaver type, a little too desperate to prove himself. I see a lot of potential.

Where is the Warehouse exactly?



## Chapter 19

Throughout the morning he looked at his watch and glanced toward the entrance door. At 12:30, he asked one of the monitors about her. He gave a shoulder shrug. As they left the building for lunch, he walked next to some of the others who had joined them at the table yesterday about her, and they mumbled vague answers.

He sought out the young black guy who whispered to her about reading his Tarot cards. He backed off with palms up.

“I don’t know anything about that,” he said.

He looked through his text messages. She hadn’t texted him nor had she given him her cell number. When the monitors weren’t present he looked her up in the school directory and found her at Westwood High.

“You know. Rachel,” he said to a monitor who yesterday acted like he and she were great pals. Jason was sure that the man was one of the celebrants at the New Moon ritual last night.

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” the man said. He put his cigarette out in the cigarette dispenser tube near the front door.

“Rachel Young. You were talking with her yesterday.”

He shook his head. “You got me confused with someone else. You teachers, you can’t get shit right, can you?”

He laughed and gave Jason a too hard slap on the shoulder.

*Rachel, he emailed, where were you today? I wanted to continue our conversation. Give me a call or text me.*

He checked his email throughout the evening and first thing when he woke up. Nothing. He thought about calling in sick and driving over to Westwood High, but he wasn’t allowed on any System property except the Warehouse unless he were given specific permission.

While drinking his first cup of coffee at home and waiting until he had to trudge to the car and begin his day of penance, he remember that a former colleague, Dennis Machine, from Central South High had transferred over there a few years ago. He shot him an email asking about Rachel.

*Maybe he wrote back at about 9:00. I don’t pay too much attention to anybody else in the building.* Dennis Machine had a home improvement business. He walked into the school house within the minute the union required him to be there and walked out within the minute he was excused from duties.

*Could you hunt around for me?* Jason asked.

*Sure. Get back to you later.*

Late morning he heard his phone buzz signalling incoming. Dennis said that a counselor knew Rachel Young. *She left on leave or transferred out of here at the end of first quarter. The counselor didn’t know where she went to. What’s new on your end?*

Jason told him he'd been exiled to the Warehouse. *You? I thought you were in line to become the next superintendent. I told you a long time ago. Stick your neck out, you get it chopped off. Nobody listens to the Machine.*

At the end of the week he received an email from Gronk McKenzie. He'd heard from a reliable source that Jason's case would get taken up by the Infractions Board next week, which was highly unusual, given that these situations can drag on for months, he said. Jason should wait for an email or phone call to find out about the hearing.

McKenzie had a proposal. Why didn't Jason think about putting in for a transfer at the semester break in January? North Central High needed a department chair since the one they had abruptly quit, and McKenzie said he would write a sterling letter of recommendation.

McKenzie said he understood if Jason wanted to wait until the end of the school year. He knew principals and assistant principals throughout the school system so Jason could find himself a situation where he might eventually become PDI.

*I know you harbor dreams of becoming a principal some day. Leaving Central South and putting all of this behind you might help you further your plans.* Gronk went on about how much his contributions have helped the school. *Take the weekend and think it over.*

"They're trying to get rid of you," Adele said. "I bet McKenzie realizes that you got punked and is trying to figure out how to make a bad situation go away."

He didn't want to tell her about the pagan New Moon ceremony. He and her son Steven had a great time at the hockey game, and he was all about getting Steven back on his team before

he would introduce anything that might warp the environment. He wasn't sure how his exile was playing with Adele, though her anti-authority gene worked to his favor.

"I'm not taking him up on his offer. I'll go to the hearing next week, and since it's a bullshit charge, I'll get released back into the school, and I'm making them deal with me."

"Don't burn bridges," she said.

*Realize you belong. You always have only one decision to make.*

They sat together in her front room on the couch. She leaned against him, and they watched a movie that urged sympathy for a protagonist who was a dweeb. He tried to keep his eyes open.

"Steven could not have had a better time at the hockey game last weekend," she said.

"It was fun for me, too. We'll do something else again soon. He wants me to come and watch him practice. Tien Shan Pai, Northern style kung fu. He made me repeat it."

"He does?" She shifted then settled. "He's never invited me."

"You're his mother. You'll think he's cute. I'll tell him that I think it's great that he's learning how to kick ass."

"Be careful," she said. "You're not back on the island yet. Just know what you're getting into with him."

"With us."

"You don't get to sweet talk me yet," she said.

He could feel her fold up into herself. They sat for a while in silence.

"I better go," he said.

"That's a good idea."

## Chapter 20

*Gronk. It was good to hear from you. Thanks for thinking of my best interests. I've been at Central South now for eight years, and I feel like that's where I belong. If I left, I would be abandoning ship. I wouldn't think of doing that. I support your decision to raise Central South to Exemplar School status and I look forward to helping you make the transition.*

*I think that on the immediate horizon we should do much more collaborative teaching between similar subjects. For example, social studies, English, and Environmental Science should have a designated resource person within each discipline to help open doors of communications. I believe that you need to push department chairs to meet at minimum once a week to ensure that teachers within those departments are finding ways to make connections among those disciplines, which are usually within the specific subject domain.*

He stopped and laughed out loud. Gronk would be setting his mouth right about now.

*I think that ideally, teachers should collaborate on at least one shared project together and have students present their findings in a “public” way. You could invite parents and other stakeholders to come in and get students to talk about what it is they have been studying.*

He pictured McKenzie’s face turning red. He looked out of his second floor window from his desk at the parking lot and the facades of the townhomes in his development. No doubt McKenzie and his superiors figured they could buy Jason off by getting him out of the school.

He especially loved the line about the “immediate horizon.” McKenzie used that phrase one time in a faculty meeting then enjoyed the sound of it so much he used it again the following month.

*What I would like to do is map out a strategy of professional development that starts the day the second semester begins in January. We should professionally develop this year with next year in mind. In effect, we’re laying down the foundation of our down range plan.*

*As I mentioned to you previously, I think that right now we should emphasize reading strategies and collaborative, small group work in classrooms. It would show teachers that we’re trying to develop them in the how-tos of rigorous classroom work. Then more broadly, the leadership team can take a larger, holistic view of what we want our school to look like at the end of next year’s first quarter, second quarter, and so on. We don’t want to leave anything to chance given that we have a lot to prove as an Exemplar School.*

*Gronk, look forward to our discussions.*

He reread it, signed off, and sent it. He wondered if Gronk would write back today or spend the time hiring a hit man.

Ms. Wallenda  
Theater  
Rm 022

Gronk storms into my office on Monday, *utterly* beside himself. *Pacing* the room like a leopard. I drink my tea and wait for him to find some sense of himself so that we can talk. One must remain discreet with one's principal. Jason has no *idea* that Gronk comes to me for counseling, and I want it to remain my little secret.

My first thought is that Gronk has decided to leave his wife for the darling Ms. Angel Brown, one of our science teachers up in A wing, in the room directly across from the unscrupulous Mikey Esposito. And *yes* her name is Angel. African-American Angel Brown. African-American Angel Brown who is twenty-nine to Gronk McKenzie's forty-three.

I'm watching Gronk *literally* pace the room of my large office. I absolutely adore men who get beside themselves over a woman. Thank *God* that can still happen.

*Finally*, Gronk sat down in my patient's chair, which I absconded from the prop room ages ago, and sipped his tea.

"Are you going to tell me?" I asked.

“That little weasel Jason Foxx sent me an email outlining his plan for professional development for the rest of the year.”

“My God,” I said to cover myself. I was *floored*. “He’s an absolute go-getter.”

“A go-getter,” he said. He made a face as if he tasted rank butter.

He pulled out his cell phone and read Jason’s email. I thought, *what got into that child?* I promised self to contact him pronto.

Gronk blistered Jason for minutes on end about his ungratefulness, his arrogance, his...he couldn’t spit it out. My role was to listen and express *grave* concern, which I honestly felt. My God, Jason has gone off the rails, I thought.

At one point I surreptitiously checked my watch. He had overstayed his usual twenty minutes and God knows tongues wag in our little village.

“Jason has to go,” he said.

“He’s been one of your loyal soldiers, Gronk. Don’t be hasty. You chose him as your Humanities teacher. Who else could take on that position? Not to mention your plans to make this an Exemplar School next year. You need Jason aboard for that.”

“I can find someone else.”

“But who will be your Professional Development Instructor if Janine leaves. Jason has established himself.”

“He pisses people off.”

“PDIs always piss people off. It goes with the job.”

“He’ll be back in the school next week. I’ve got to make a decision.”

“I thought these things took months.”



“Most of them do. They system is trying to expedite some of the cases and Jason’s is one of them.”

“He got railroaded.”

“He brought it on himself.”

“I would argue, but it doesn’t seem to be the time.”

Gronk looked to his left.

“What is it?”

“Angel is cooling off.”

“Gronk, my *God* you’re married. You should find a way for you and your wife to renew yourselves. When was the last time you got away together?”

He lifted his chin. “She went with her boyfriend to Ocean City in October. We hired a sitter.”

I could feel myself blinking. I was an actor onstage who’d forgotten her lines.

“Did I just hear you right? Her what?”

“We have an open marriage.” He tilted his head this way, that way. “Angel wanted me to leave my wife. She talked about opening a school together. I told her she had misread the situation completely. I would never leave Penelope. Preposterous. I wanted to have an affair. And truthfully? I want a mistress.”

“Gronk, I am absolutely on my heels. You’ve given me *tons* to contemplate. I would like to leave you with this. Jason needs to stay. He’s an asset and a loyal soldier.”

“He should not tell Gronk what to do. Gronk needs to tell him what to do.”

*Returning/Lavey*

On that cryptic bit of third person referencing, Gronk left for things administrative. My head was absolutely spinning.

## Chapter 21

He dressed in his best suit for the Thursday morning meeting. He'd contemplated hiring an attorney, but two people at the folding tables inside the warehouse advised against it. They'll prolong your case. Let them have their say. If you think you're digging a hole for yourself, lawyer-up. But not until then.

The hearing was held in a windowless building in a business park not far from the warehouse. He went inside and signed in at the reception desk. The air smelled of stale popcorn and the lingering odors of perfumes and colognes. He went through a labyrinth of hallways and pathways cut through cubicles areas and industrial sized file cabinets and oddly placed desks facing walls. The pictureless room he entered had banker boxes stacked along one side. More file cabinets made the room cramped.

Three people sat at a rectangular folding table turned sideways. He sat by himself at another with hands folded.

The door was pulled closed by someone outside of it, and the four of them were alone in the gray space of an isolated room inside a building on the outer edges of the county where he worked as a teacher.

They introduced themselves and the Infractions Inspector read the charges that brought him to the warehouse two weeks ago.

He glanced at the two women and one man with the Inspector and realized by their body language and facial expressions that his case was one of many they had that day or one of many duties they had. The man looked at his watch twice. The women attended cell phone calendars or incoming messages. After the Inspector read aloud the charges, he read the from the contract governing teacher standards and behavior. His case, Jason gleaned, had not rung alarm bells. Before the system turned it into a problem whereby the offending teacher got it into his head to sue or start writing editorials on some blog trumpet, the Inspector intended to get it off the docket and release him.

Jason realized the thing he needed to do was stay quiet and endure the procedure.

At one point the two women to the Inspector's right and the man to his left by chance looked up at Jason and stared at him for a moment, as one might an ordinary animal--a llama, a pony, a goat--in a petting zoo, but soon turned back to papers in their folders.

The Inspector's voice droned and Jason, fifteen minutes into his "trial," felt himself in danger of falling asleep.

The Inspector was middle-aged with a paunch and ill-fitting corduroy jacket. He'd been standing but sat down to join his colleagues. He took off his half-glasses and put them back on.

“Young man, you have an obligation to maintain the keenest sense of acceptable standards and behavior with the children in your care. You must understand that the charge against you for sexual impropriety is of the gravest seriousness. You not only represent your school, but the entire school system itself.”

The man had a preening way of regarding his notes, straightening them with pinkies of both hands, pursing his lips, touching his left forefinger to his chin. Jason saw that he loved performing his Inspector duties and no doubt lived for his moment of moral guide to the fallen.

Stay quiet and endure the procedure. Listen. Don't say anything except yes and no at the appropriate moments while the man smiled showing silver dental work on his back teeth.

“I've learned from being the Infractions Inspector that teachers sometimes lose track of themselves in their school worlds. I think that perhaps the system has failed you. We need to tap into our legal department, get someone to go into schools for more professional development once a year that shows the gravity of various actions. I don't think that teachers and administrators realize the legal jeopardy that awaits them with the slightest misstep.”

“Sir.”

The Inspector snapped out of his reverie, an astronaut looking through the window of his capsule at an unexpected alien visitor.

“I don't have anything to apologize for. The incident you're talking about was twisted by someone at school to cause drama. I would do it again the same way. A girl came into my classroom asking for help. What was I supposed to do? The system has set up constraints on teachers that are impossible to negotiate.”

The woman on the end stared at him. She surreptitiously flattened her hand, meaning settle down.

The other members of the table looked up from their distracting cell phones or notes. The hunt was on.

“Young man, you realize I could send you back for more time at the Warehouse.”

“If you feel that’s a productive use of the system’s resources, I think you should do just that. But all of us in here realize the ‘case’ against me is nonsense.”

“No, not nonsense.” He tilted his head.

Jason realized perhaps too late that the vain man in front of him had an outsized sense of his of himself as moral arbiter.

“You’re suggesting that the school system where you receive a paycheck, where you have a found a home for your talents, where one hundred thousand students learn how to become good citizens of the world is trivial in its judgments.” He touched his tongue to his top lip and said with almost emotionless emphasis, “Don’t make ill-conceived accusations.”

Jason stared into the man’s heavy lidded turtle eyes and realized that he could make serious trouble for him. The man patiently waited and watched Jason while bobbing his head to the smallest degree.

Jason nodded and looked to his folded hands on the table.

*Master Sun said: Of old, the Skillful Warrior first ensured his own invulnerability... A skillful defender hides beneath the ninefold Earth.*

Jason remained silent.

“I’m right now deciding to keep you on an at-watch status. You may return to your school and the charge will be dismissed, but I’m requesting a report from your principal at the end of the third and fourth quarters.” He tilted his head regarding Jason. “I don’t want even a hint of any inappropriate behavior in either of those reports. Defending yourself in light of a school system’s need to keep its working teachers above reproach can become quite expensive both in terms of your time and your personal exchequer. Report to your school tomorrow.” He turned to the woman to his right. “We will alert the principal.” She added it to her notes. “You’re dismissed.”

He walked out of the building to an overcast day. He backed out of his spot and drove to a nearby gas station and parked off to the side then called his sister.

“What’s up?”

“Charges dismissed. I’ll tell you, though. I misread the Inspector. I thought I’d school him, but he smacked me upside the head. I ate some humble pie.”

“When do you go back?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Where are you at right now?”

“At a gas station. It’s only ten o’clock. I need to get home. Go out for a run.”

“You know Bryson has a girlfriend, don’t you.”

“No.”

“We got him in that PT/OT program at Union-Memorial. First day he meets his soul-mate, he told me. They’re in it to win it. Quote-unquote.”

“Good thing or a bad thing?”

“I’m shrugging. What are you going to tell him when he wants to bring Elvira home to sleep with him?”

“Elvira?”

“And maybe they want to start partying together. You going to play the bad guy parent?”

“Do we know any back alley doctors so we can get him neutered?”

“Bryson wants to move out and be on his own. Maybe we should let him go. He’s still getting disability, and if SSDI comes through, he can manage financially.”

“You think he can be out there on his own? I think it would be a disaster.” He watched cars pull into the popular local gas station.

“I think it’s time that he decides,” she said.

“What about--”

“Really, Jason. We need to get out of the way. More specifically, you need to get out of the way.”

“Okay, good riddance to the ungrateful son of a bitch.”

She laughed. “He might do himself grave danger,” she said. “But maybe he’ll take more responsibility for himself. Billy and I were talking about it last night. All of us can help him find a place not too far way. We can see if he still wants to stay with you or me on the weekends. Or whenever.”

Jason said, “I’ll talk to him.” He breathed. “Shit,” he said. It came right up like an inside zipper from the middle of his chest. He started to cry and for a few moments couldn’t stop. “I thought I was doing right by him. Ah, shit. Let me blow my nose.”

He pulled tissue from a box he kept in the front seat passenger well.



“We’re both doing right by him. But we can’t protect him any more. Billy thinks we’re holding him back. Let him go, he said to me. We’ve got to realize, Jason, that if the man falls down and kills himself, he’ll be doing it on his own terms. We can’t change the nature of the beast.”

“Famous last words. I’ll broach the subject tonight. Tell him to pack his bags and get the fuck out of my house.”

More laughing from his sister.

“Who names their kid Elvira?” he said.

“Elvira, Mistress of the Dark? Ring a bell?”

“No.”

“Boys need to take classes on what girls find funny. Her mother must have been a fan. I dressed up as Elvira for Halloween. More than once.

## Chapter 22

He drove west on Rt. 40. It was noon on a Thursday. Bryson wasn't home. He'd enrolled in the PT/OT program three days a week and got there by taking Maryland transportation for disabled, MTA Mobility. He ate then napped then went out for a long run.

At 3:00, he went upstairs to the small backroom he'd turned into his office to prepare his lesson for tomorrow and start thinking about school. He'd been bored out of his brain for days. He'd done some distracted preparation, but now that teaching was up on him again, he felt nervous and anxious. While going through files he kept in Google Drive, he came across some video footage of presentations his students had done in front of the class. There was one video file labelled Staff Development from late last year, which he'd forgotten about.

He did a workshop on a reading strategy that fell into a before, during, after framework, and he remembered it as an especially effective presentation. He wanted to boost himself up before getting back into the trenches so he watched it while eating a sandwich.

After a few minutes he put down his sandwich. The person in front of everyone giving the PD was his clone. It could not be him. That guy was a tin horn intellectual talking to the

befuddled masses. He couldn't remember who was behind the camera but he made a point of zooming in on people's faces. Jason witnessed rolled eyes, whispered asides, round-eyed boredom.

A few were engaged, going through the article with him, asking questions, speculating on how they could apply it to their subject discipline.

Then, as he closed out, he watched the clone dominating the PD, not letting others talk, liking the sound of his own voice, wrapping up the PD in a way that celebrated the insights of the clone giving the workshop rather than drawing information from the participants.

He would have been with the eye-rollers, the exasperated, the bored. Who was that guy?

He called Adele.

She answered. He heard rhythmic, rolling sounds in the background.

"What's that?"

"I'm on the MARC train going home."

"I've just spent the worst forty-five minutes of my life." He looked out the window.

"Are you going to tell me or are we sitting here communing through static?"

"I watched a PD that I gave last year. I'm an asshole."

"You just figuring that out?"

"Really? That bad."

"That was supposed to be a joke. Tell me what you saw on the video?"

"You know those guys who run meetings who send out signals that they know more than you? That they have the info tucked away in secret places that you'll never quite get to? Those

guys who might be right about whatever it is they're telling you, but they suffocate you with it? I was that guy."

"You sure it was that bad?"

"Worse. I'm quitting and becoming a monk."

"Listen, Jason--" The connection cut off. The train must have sped into a dead spot.

He lay on the couch staring at the ceiling. He felt like a gaffed seal thrown to the bottom of the boat. After lying inert long enough that light changed in the room, he and his wounded inner seal got off the couch. He trudged back up to his office. He ate the unfinished, dried out sandwich and worked on his lesson plans for tomorrow's classes.

## Chapter 23

People greeted him in the faculty lounge when he went for coffee before classes, but they were hesitant, as if they suspected he carried a contagion.

Mikey Esposito pulled Jason aside. Rumor had it that he sold “found and discarded” school system equipment on eBay.

They both held coffee mugs. Mikey had a bulbous forehead and sour breath.

“Listen,” he said.

Three teachers entered the lounge. Mikey looked over his shoulder.

“Let’s go to your room.”

They walked down the hallway. Inside of Jason’s room, Mikey spoke in a low voice.

“What’s the Warehouse like?”

“What do you mean?” Jason said. “It’s a warehouse”

“I mean, what kind of stuff is parked over there?” He tried to play it cool, but Jason saw his eyes spinning.

“Computers, out of date textbooks, desks, chairs, old radio and TV equipment, conference tables, science lab stuff. Anything you can think of.”

He sipped his coffee. “You make any connections over there? Anybody you can call on?”

“I’m hoping to reconnect with a shamanistic priestess.”

Mike laughed. “You’re a sport.”

“You mean, is there anyone I know who I can introduce you to to help further your criminal enterprise?”

“I’m not a criminal. I take advantage of certain opportunities is all.”

“Why don’t you go over and visit?”

Mikey sat atop a student desk. “You know what, I’m trying to figure out how to do that one thing that will get me put over there for a year long stint without getting me fired. Get paid for sitting around. That I could work with.” He looked out the far windows as if hearing the call of the wild.

“Mikey, I’ve got work to do.”

“Yeah, me too. I guess. Listen, I just got some new business cards made up.” He opened his wallet. Mikey Esposito, Entrepreneur. Telephone number, email address, twitter handle. Everything embossed in gold lettering on black card stock. “I’m doing a presentation at my house on Amway next Tuesday. I want you to come. You got the chops, Jason. You’d be a star.” He winked at him then departed with his coffee cup.

## Chapter 24

Paulie went for a mannie-peddle two days ago girding for Jason's return. His girlfriend-companion, more companion than girlfriend, said he should get a tattoo with her. He agreed to a kung-fu fighter doing a flying kick, though he had never practiced martial arts. She chose it for him. She called it butch.

"You need to get in touch with your yang energy," she stated in the tattoo parlor. "This might help."

Ever since Merrick told him to get lost, he'd been adrift. He thought they were in harmony, and now Jason would return today. Who could he huddle with? He had been visiting the art teacher, John George, who talked with everyone and who was forever enthusiastic about everything and who would listen to Paulie endlessly, but he wasn't a team player like Merrick. He even mouthed the apostasy that he thought that Jason got some sort of raw deal.

"He's the kind of guy every school needs," John George said. "The guy is a workshop maniac. Exhausts me just to think about. He should be the next PDI, get paid for what he does."

He sat on stool sharpening color pencils in the maddeningly slow, methodical way he went about his business.

“They didn’t send him to the Warehouse for nothing,” Paulie said.

The art teacher peered at the sharpened point of a red pencil. “You’d be surprised.”

No, Paulie thought, sitting at his desk the morning Jason returned to school. The art teacher was a lump. What was with the 1964 Beatles haircut? No, he couldn’t count on him.

The morning bell rang, the students filed in, and Paulie watched himself revved at a speed too high. His students told him to chill. He was talking too fast.

“Dude,” Randy, a tall, skinny, skateboarder said, “Why are you crisscrossing the room like you’re on meth?”

He handed out lunch detentions like Johnny Appleseed. During his break, he went to the bathroom and breathed into cupped hands for enriched CO<sub>2</sub> intake because he could feel himself hyperventilating.

What the hell am I worried about? Jason won’t come near me.

He returned to his room. He felt his t-shirt damp against his skin. Somehow it was all going wrong again. Like the last two schools where everyone turned against him. Why did he get attacked all the time? He did a good job as an English teacher, everyone knew that. They just didn’t like a person who fought back when they were trying to get him. People turned into bullies. Sons of bitches. He started crying.

He stood. “Pull yourself together, goddamn it.”



He unbuttoned his shirt and yanked up the sleeve of his t-shirt and looked at his tattoo in the mirror on his closet door hoping for some psychic uplift from the flying kung fu fighter. He felt a teaspoon of resolve fill his chest.

He sat down and swiveled toward his computer. He cleared his throat.

Jason walked in. Paulie jumped.

Jason pulled a chair from beneath a student desk, sat, stretched out his legs, put hands behind head and said, "Paulie, good to be back."

"Jason, I've got so much to do." He touched his keyboard and left damp fingerprints.

"Paulie, I really have to thank you." He sat forward.

Paulie slid his eyes sideways at Jason. "I tried to help is all." He thought Jason referred to the long ago observation lesson.

"What did you do to get her to make that accusation against me?"

Paulie sniffed and blinked. "I don't have the faintest," he lied. His heart thumped.

"Oh, come on, man." He sat back in the chair. "We're old buddies." He was loud. Paulie looked to the open door.

"Jason--"

"But I'm serious now, Paulie. You taught me a great lesson. People will try to fuck you up. Just because. I know, I know. I'm over thirty. I should have learned that by now."

Paulie folded hands on his desk. He felt the old viper come to life. "And you taught me a great lesson, too, Jason. Some people win, some people lose. And you know what, I'm staying here next year." He narrowed his eyes. "I don't care how that has to happen."

"See," Jason said loudly. "We're in it together."

He stood and walked around Paulie's desk. He grabbed him by his nose.

"You're assaulting me," he said nasally. His hands flexed like webbed feet.

Jason tugged his face back and forth by the nose then spun him around on his teacher chair.

He heard Jason give a big hello to someone in the hallway after he left the room. Paulie got out an emery board and filed a snag on his middle fingernail. I will get that son of a bitch, he smoldered. I will not be a victim. Not this time.

Paulie taught the rest of his classes and stayed away from the teacher's lounge. John George visited him at the end of the day, no doubt thinking that he and Paulie were now comrades since Paulie had been stopping by his room for companionship. When he saw George enter his room two minutes after the dismissal bell sounded, he realized that John George had been a happy middle-aged man since he was twelve years old.

"Rastik, we were talking about getting compressor in here so that we could get students to create t-shirts. I know a distributor who knows someone in China who could get us crates of them."

Paulie packed up while John George talked, who then followed him down the hall and out the side door to the parking lot, still talking, still wondering how they could create slogans or quotes from famous writers that the kids could put on the t-shirts which would be cross-curricular way to motivate students. Paulie shut the door of his car on George mid-sentence and drove away. John George would pick up tomorrow, maybe at the syllable where he'd been cut off.

Paulie decided to go to his temple, his refuge, his escape planet: Ikea in White Marsh. He had been looking at their website last night and went on a concept trip. He yearned to make an unused bedroom into an artspace. He loved Ikea's storage bins and organizer shelves. The flat drawers of a mini storage chest, the hanging triangular lamp, the tins where he could settle his scissors and glues.

I am a collage artist, he declared to his therapy group a year ago. He'd been creating collages and entering them into contests and who cared if he never won anything. Collages were his friends. People weren't his friends. Animals weren't his friends. His sister lived in medicated bliss married to an angry doctor on Long Island. She wasn't his friend. His parents retired to North Carolina. They told their children, if you visit, rent a hotel. When he and his sister went to visit four years ago for Easter break and stayed in a hotel, the parents said, "Okay, visiting is over," after thirty-six hours. They weren't his friends.

He purposely drove into White Marsh mall world from the western most entry point and took the road circumscribing the parking lots so that he could see the blue building and bold yellow Ikea sign from a distance. He loved blue and yellow, Sweden's national colors. He loved Sweden if it could produce a store like Ikea.

He parked at the far end of the parking lot which forced him to delay the satisfaction he felt every time he walked through the glass doored entrance. He passed a college aged couple tying a flat box to the roof of their Subaru. They laughed about some secret between them, and he thought, that's it, that right there. That's what Ikea can do for people. He should have been an Ikea executive. Maybe he could still get on their management track.

He entered, passed by Småland, Ikea's play zone where kids jumped around in a mini-room filled with plastic balls and climbed atop child-friendly structures. He took the stairs to the second floor filled with showrooms and showcased items along the journey from bedrooms to offices to living rooms to kitchens to dining rooms.

A smiling woman in a blue Ikea shirt caught his eye as he looked at the couches.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"I'm beyond help," he said.

"You're a funny one," she said. She gave his upper arm a smack.

"I'm here looking," he said. "I'm going to try out your sofas."

"You just go right ahead." She touched his forearm.

He sat on an Ektorp sofa in the corner, smelling the cottony, inky odors lifting up from the materials. He closed his eyes and drifted into a half-awake, half-sleep world. He came here two, maybe three times a month. He should make it weekly. He felt himself relax, relax. Mingled in his nether zone came the voice of McKenzie, the principal. He surfaced, then exhaled. He wished to lie down and fall asleep.

He heard McKenzie's voice again, then a familiar female's voice, but he couldn't place it. He scanned the room, still as an alert cat.

Gronk McKenzie and Angel Brown, a science teacher, walked hand in hand through the sofa show area. They chattered back and forth like a couple.

When she directed his attention to a sofa to their right, Paulie slipped over the arm of the Ektorp and ducked behind it. He peered over the top. She was in his arms. They kissed.

Gronk had invited the staff to his house over Labor Day where Paulie met his wife, who wasn't Angel. He'd seen Gronk sitting in Angel's classroom one day after school, which seemed unusual given that teachers usually went to the principal's office for conferences, but he'd thought nothing of it.

He pulled out his cell phone, lifted it up like a periscope, and started taking pictures.

Gronk, middle-aged white man, and Angel, non-middle-aged black woman, continued hand in hand along the store pathway. Paulie leapt and hid behind a Stocksund sofa and took more pictures. He maneuvered to a Norsborg.

Angel backtracked and he ducked. *Please don't let them see me.*

A little suburbanite about six years old with jet black hair, freckled face, and wide grin marched over to him.

"Get away," Paulie hissed. "Go on."

"No! I don't belong to you. What are you doing?" he demanded. He stepped closer. "I'm telling on you."

"Get back on your leash," Paulie said.

The child bared his teeth like a dog. "Grr," he growled. Then he said, "You're a doo-doo head." He kicked Paulie in the back as hard as he could.

"Get the fuck away from me or I'll kill you."

The kid's eyes popped. He ran away hunched and wide-legged.

"Mommy!"

Christ, Paulie thought, replenish the goddamned gene-pool.

Paulie stalked them through Living Room, then Wall units and Media Storage, then Workspaces. They passed through Kitchen and Dining quickly, then lingered in Bedroom. They sat on beds together. Held hands. Gave each other moony looks. He snapped at least two dozens pictures.

Did they think no one would see them? It was a Thursday. And Ikea is northeast and we work on the south side of the county. Maybe they took their chances.

He scampered down the stairs when he had enough photo evidence then wound around the cashier area and ran to his car. The kid who kicked him passed by with his mouth on the back seat window of his parent's car, as if he were a bottom feeder in an aquarium. When he saw Paulie, the kid widened his mouth and tongued the glass leaving a trail of slobber.

Paulie drove to a parking lot near Sears and turned his car to look at the Ikea building in all of its exuberant Swedish blue-and-yellowness.

"Excess me now, Gronk McKenzie." He sent McKenzie two of the damning pictures through an anonymous gmail account he kept for just this sort of thing.

## Chapter 25

“What should we do? Wrap some Network resources around him? Sit back and watch?”

“That’s a gnarly scene,” John said, standing on a ladder. He adjusted his projector which had got bumped somehow and was no longer centered on the screen.

“What does that mean?” she said.

“It means we don’t know what happened. He gets sent to the Warehouse? That’s never good.” He turned to look at the projected light.

“He got set up. He’s back now. If we don’t do something, the school’s going to lose him. I’ve got it confirmed by one of our people in central office that Central South will be an Exemplar school next year. They’ll officially announce it after Christmas break. Jason should be on the scene to help with the transition. Move it to the left a little bit.”

He did so while looking back over his shoulder.

“He’s your son, Julie. I’ll back you. But he’s got some weird, negative vibes coming at him. What’s he done to get people so riled up?”

“He’s good. He threatens people. He made the mistake of being the unofficial captain of the professional development team, and he’s a cheerleader for PD.”

“That’s it,” he said. “Voila.” He climbed down.

“The system has changed over the past three or four years. Teachers want to catch their breath. But he’s saying we don’t have time to catch our breath. There’s too much to do. I like him for it.”

“So do I,” he said. “He’s done nothing but help out this school.” He sat atop a student desk. “But I don’t know what we do for him. The Network is best when it has a specific issue to focus on. A rotten principal. An dictatorial department head. Finding a way to get a good teacher into a school where he or she wants to transfer.”

“I don’t know, either, when it gets down to it,” she said. “I want him to know I’m around. If I see something we can do for him, I’ll sound the alarm.”

“Wait a minute,” he said. He went to his teacher desk. He pulled out a black marbled composition book wedged between the books standing upright at the back edge of his desk.

He held it up. “My notebook is my brain. If I don’t write it down, it doesn’t exist.” He sat and flipped through pages. “Something’s ringing a bell. Nonna Zharkov and I are big Orioles fans together.”

“The special ed department chair?”

“Right. We were talking baseball a few weeks ago, wondering how the Orioles will upgrade over the winter, what will happen with their pitching staff. She let it slip that her the special ed case manager Karl Marks was giving her heartburn. Jason Foxx wanted a kid



reassessed, and the issue got kicked up to her because Marks sat on it and tried to massage Jason until it went away. Jason squawked so she had to deal with it.”

“You’re thinking that if we give The Network something to bite into, we could make something happen on Jason’s behalf?” she said.

“Right now Jason’s a guy who got a raw deal, but like I said the cause is too dispersed. But The Network likes special ed cases. Maybe we could get do something with that.”

Julie Wang walked down the hallway guiding her bicycle with her hand on the seat. She turned into Jason’s room. He was sitting at four desks pushed together with various piles of student assignments.

He looked up and put his marking pen down.

“I heard you were back,” she said.

He waved a hand at the piles of student work. “I am. I’m looking for gold in here.” He shook his head.

“I thought if you went to the Warehouse you were there for weeks, months, years.”

“I’d like to think they realized it was a b.s. charge and they wanted to clean up their books.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Listen, I wanted to check in. See if I can do anything.”

“Not much to be done.”

“What’s the plan? Keep your head down? Get back into the swing of it?”

“No. I think I’ll go the other way. Cause some havoc.”

“We’re confidants, right? What is said in here stays in here?”

“Of course.”

“I’ve got a contact in central office. We’re on the list to become an Exemplar school next year. I think you should stick around, help out with that. Maybe McKenzie will find a way you can be the PDI.”

He nodded, then stood and stretched.

“I’ll walk you outside. I’ve been cooped up all day in here and I need to get some air on me.”

They went to the back staircase. She hoisted her bike on her shoulder.

The fire door led to a side lot where teachers parked. There were faded markings of a basketball key which suggested that once upon a time it served as a playground.

“Nice out,” he said. “Maybe all teaching should be done outdoors. Use the interior of the building for bathroom breaks, assemblies, that sort of thing.”

He shaded his eyes against the four o’clock sun.

“Before I was banished to Elba Island, I talked to McKenzie about the PDI job.”

“The school needs you.”

“Kind of you to say. I never knew I provoked so much animosity. You should have seen the anonymous email messages I got. I had somebody tell me that I was a quote snivelling little bitch who doesn’t know shit about teaching unquote. There were others like that.”

“Any positives?”

“Yeah, there were. About even actually.”

“There it is. Enjoy the good stuff. Forget about the other crap.”

“I don’t know if I’ve got the filtering software for that. I went into the faculty lounge and I found myself wondering whose thought bubble was saying, *This guy needs to be shivved then fed to the sharks.*”

“I want you to stay,” she said. “John Davidson and I are working behind the scenes on your behalf.” She couldn’t tell him about The Network, not yet. She and John needed to decide on that together.

“Thanks. But my inner child with oppositional defiant disorder is stoked.”

He watched her ride down the ramp that led to a larger parking lot then turn into a back street which she would take to the main drag.

Bonnie Dhawan  
Social studies  
Rm 210

I think it's terrible that people don't pray in school any more. Or even say the pledge of allegiance.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

I'm thirty-seven years old. I have three marvelous children, and I'm pregnant with my fourth. I love my husband more than anything in the world and I would never do anything to harm him, but what am I to do now that I believe in my heart that the child I am bearing which I will bring into the world given God's grace and blessing is that of Mikey Esposito.

Our Father who are in heaven hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Forgive me my trespasses, O Lord!

It would be a blessing if Mikey moved on to another school. My husband, Rakesh, is a

medium-brown skinned Indian man, and Mikey is of fair complexion. I cannot imagine the look on Rakesh's face when he sees this new child of mine enter the world. I don't know what to do. I considered telling Rakesh that it is Jason Foxx's child. Jason is being made a scapegoat in this school, quite unfairly I need to state here and now. But as awful as it might sound, I think his time is up here, so I will raise my voice with others to suggest that he leave while he still has some dignity intact. Maybe he will go away.

Oh, I know. Mikey Esposito. He is a scoundrel and a no good. But he is a man who knows what he wants and that is a powerful draw for a woman. I saw him looking at me that certain way in the faculty lounge one late afternoon. I am by God a faithful wife and companion. I organize fund raising drives for the women's shelter right here in our community. I tutor students who fall behind. I go to church and I love my country. But I am a woman, also, and Mikey is a man. He waited until everyone left and I lingered because I wondered, I truly did, if I interpreted his demeanor correctly.

"Bonnie," he said to me. "You are a fine looking woman."

I don't care what anyone thinks. Of course it's an obvious pick up line. But it's music to a woman's ears who needs to know she can still attract that sort of attention. Rakesh is always so busy. You'd think that computers would, I don't know what. Satisfy him in a way that I once used to.

Mikey works all the way up in A wing so that's where we went. I leaned over his desk and raised up my dress and he came up from behind me, and I don't care who knows. I was a dirty girl for one afternoon and it was glorious.

When I told him today that I think I'm pregnant with his child, he said, "Bonnie, not to worry." He made his fingers into a scissors and cut, cut. "I got a vasectomy after my wife got pregnant this last time. Two kids are enough for me."

You know what? I know this sounds, oh, I don't know, so off, so depraved even. I want to be one of those women who has a love child. I will insist that this bundle of joy I'm carrying will be named Michael even though I now know it is Rakesh's. I can't call him Mikey. That would cause looks. He will be Michael. If it's a girl, she will be Michaela or Micah. I could call her Miki. That would be cute.

Ms. Wallenda  
Theater  
Rm 022

My *God* what is Jason thinking? He returns from his island of shame and wastes no time, I mean, no time, in getting right back into the thick of it.

He comes back on a Thursday. On Friday he marches up to Karl Marks's office and confronts him about the special ed child that he has an absolute *obsession* about. How do I know? Jason came down here and confessed *everything*.

At which time I admonished him about sending Gronk that email suggesting professional development. He shrugged.

After Jason left, I get a call on my cell phone from McKenzie who's sitting in his office. Something was terribly wrong. Otherwise, he would have used the inter-office phone system.

"Gronk," I say. I'm hesitant, the *worst* thing an actress can be. 'When the blast of war blows in our ears,/Imitate the action of the tiger!'

"Goddamn it, Wallenda, who did you spill the beans to?"

"What on earth are you talking about Gronk?"

“Somebody sent me two pictures of Angel and me. They said there’s more where these came from.”

“My God,” I say. “Where were you two?”

“We went to Ikea.”

A girl came to the door, a child in tears. No doubt some tragedy inflicted upon her by an adenoidal brute who didn’t understand her infinitely complicated moods. God forgive me, but I sometimes side with the males. Females can be absolute despots. I brushed her away. She stomped her foot. I struck her with a thunderously ferocious look and she stormed off, not without slamming the door. I would deal with her later.

“You went out in public with Angel Brown? Were there PDAs?”

“What in the hell is that?”

“Public displays of affection.”

“I’m helpless with her.”

“And you have the temerity to call me and wonder if I spilled the beans as you so indelicately put it? If you want to stay in my good graces, you need to apologize right this instant.”

“Don’t try and--”

“Right now!”

He sighed as only a wounded forty-three year old man can sigh. “I’m sorry, Celine. Please forgive me.”

“Your apology is accepted. Forgiveness will take time. Now, tell me.”



“Some little shit in this school I can only assume took pictures of Angel and me when we went to Ikea a couple of days ago. He said there are more where they came from, and I’m sure there are. If my wife gets wind of this, she will serve divorce papers. She’s been wanting to go back to South Carolina since we got married.”

“You told me that you two have an open...I’m searching for the word...arrangement.”

“We do. With the agreement that discretion above all. My wife’s mantra: ‘Don’t embarrass me.’ This would count as an embarrassment.”

“Not to mention that your wife is, how do I put this, from the genteel class. Having her husband chasing around a black woman would not work to your favor.”

“Goddamn it! Why can’t a man do what he was built to do?”

“He can. But that means he’d be riding a horse in Afghanistan with a turban on his head. Now for God’s sake, Gronk, can we leave tenth grade for a moment? Why did you call me?”

He sniffed. “I didn’t know who else to call. How do I solve this?”

“You write back to your stalker and ask him what he wants. One hopes that he has an objective in mind other than causing you misery for misery’s sake, but Lord knows, we live in the age of self-immolation amidst mindless acts of terrorism. Let’s hope you don’t have a nut job on your hands.”

“Who do you think it is?”

I looked heavenward then to a signed black and white picture I have of Audrey Hepburn, one of my idols. I am the furthest thing imaginable from Audrey, but she lives in me and gives me guidance. My *God*, the style and pre-feminist awareness of her world. I bow down. Audrey, help me get through this male mess.

“Who have you pissed off?”

“I don’t piss anyone off. I’m loved.”

“Gronk, do you have a lug-nut for a brain. Think about it, then call me back.”

“I’m going to smoke this little weasel out.”

“Do that. But in the meantime, write him a calm, straightforward message asking him with the *politest* tone you can muster what exactly he’s after. Agree to meet with him. Agree to discuss. Agree that you both want this *business* taken care of and put behind you.”

“You think that it’s some shitbird in this school like I do?”

“I think that’s safe to assume.”

Steven Mitterling  
Assistant principal

He was one of the good guys. You have people in this school ready to stick a shiv in your neck. Not Jason Foxx. He quietly, I mean quietly, advocated for young man who had mild dyslexia and spoke English as his second language.

I worked the paperwork when the kid enrolled in our school. His parents had handed him off to relatives who had their green cards while they had to stay in some godforsaken drug and crime-ridden Mexican city. Pedro was the shining star of the family. I knew he wasn't the relatives' son, but I turned a blind eye. Somehow they came up with a birth certificate for him, which was suspect, but I put it through.

Foxx gets this kid in his class and thank God for it because he sees the kid. He *sees* him. When we get the question of who was your favorite teacher, don't we pick the one who notices us? Celebrates us for being nothing but who we are? He does that with this Pedro. Pedro is frustrated by every other class he goes to except for Foxx's. So Foxx starts advocating for him, and the special ed guy he has to go through is a retrograde named Karl Marks. No jokes please, the guy's not worth it.

The special ed business in any school is complicated. Those people are at the bottom end of an avalanche of paperwork and compliance issues. But most of them recognize it's part of the job. Karl Marks got the position by taking the Praxis and staying out of the classroom because he realized it was too demanding. Marks is friends with the counselor, Roland, and the science teacher, Esposito, none of whom should be allowed anywhere near a school. You talk about what they can do for the students and they laugh in your face. You can't fire them. Schools don't work like that.

Jason Foxx tries to reason with Marks about getting the kid services, which goes nowhere until Foxx squawks to Nonna Zharkov, the special ed department chair and Marks's boss. Zharkov comes down on Marks like a hammer, but that was right when Foxx gets that bullshit charge against him for sexual impropriety, and he gets pitched out of the building for the better part of two weeks.

Meantime, Marks finesses the paperwork on Pedro to cover his ass--you don't want to piss off Zharkov--but what does he do for him? The effort it takes to get a kid reassessed outside of the annual review is a nightmare. You got to go all in. You need to get the stakeholders around the table to agree the kid needs to be reassessed. Then you got 90 days to reassess. You test the kid. Then you meet again and try to figure out whether or not everyone agrees with the test results. There's complications every step of the way. Sometimes you have a kid who balks at all the attention, crosses his arms, and refuses to take the diagnostics.

But you step up when you the kid can benefit from additional services.

Foxx is one of these teachers blessed with the touch. The kid Pedro is getting more and more frustrated. Foxx stays after school with him to help him with his English, but the kid's got some other obstacle. Some form of dyslexia.

After Foxx realizes that Marks is digging in his heels, using the timelines against him, Jason tries everything under the sun, and finally realizes, he tells me, finally realizes that Pedro has a great capacity to understand what's going on if he's got this one female Mexican classmate sitting next to him explaining the lesson. He's just needs verbal instruction in Spanish from her. If he gets that, he can do about everything. But he also needed her to be his scribe (what it's called in IEP language). He would tell her what to write, and she would do it for him. It's the kind of thing that can be written into an IEP, which Pedro didn't have because he hadn't been assessed properly because of the way he came into the country and the school system. Math he can do himself, no scribe necessary, Foxx told me, though he needed the girl next to him. But since the scribe business is not in his IEP nobody can force teachers to employ it.

Foxx goes around to his teachers and gets as many of them as he can to agree to let these two switch schedules and work together. In two classes, he gets the teachers to allow Pedro to tape the lesson so Pedro and the girl can work together later on, but not in real time. Why make it easy for Pedro, right? The teachers who will remain nameless are friends outside of school, by the way.

All of that of course should be the IEP chairman's job, but you got Bozo the Clown up there.

Upfront, everything looks good, it's all in place. And it works for about a week before it starts caving. One teacher starts to complain that if those two can be a pair on every assignment,

other students want to, too, including English speakers. Then another teacher chimes in with the same non-logic. Then they all get philosophical and start spouting off about the nature of education and hard work and we give these kids too many crutches.

A couple of teachers don't have a problem with it, and of course Pedro thrives in their classrooms. But he starts feeling like everyone is against him. He can't understand why some of the teachers stop letting him work with the girl.

Foxx tries sitting down with three of the more malleable teachers. The fourth was so far gone, he didn't try to renegotiate with her. The three scratched the back of their heads and hemmed and hawed and said they would give it another shot. But it broke down again, and it was business as usual.

Pedro's grades plummeted. When the quarter report card comes out, he's failed one class, got D's in three, A's in two. I mean the kid deserved a gold star for effort. Foxx kept his cool throughout.

But when Pedro starts missing school, then when he does come he often has a bad attitude, Foxx really starts making life difficult for Marks, and Marks, one of the laziest people you'll meet, digs in. He's got the protocols and procedures and regulations of the special ed system on his side.

You could have scripted it. Over a weekend Pedro gets arrested along with a bunch of low-lives in his neighborhood. One of them had a gun, so Pedro's up to his neck. They'll probably find out about his faked birth certificate and ship him back to Mexico.

After he finds out Pedro's arrested, Foxx doesn't show up for two days, and the guy never misses work. I heard he tried to post bail for the kid, but the paperwork got snarled.

Ebony Marsten  
Career Development  
Rm 344

If one more teacher drools over a brown skinned kid from Mexico, or Central American, or wherever the hell else, I'm going to scream. What, black kids don't do it for you?

Jason Foxx had one thing wrong with him, and it did him in. He's not a warrior. He does not know how to fight. He knows how to aggravate people to no end, but he doesn't know how to fight.

You want to know how to fight? You get the union on your side and you threaten to bring a racial discrimination suit against the liberals who won't promote you to department head. You hit them in their pocketbooks if you want them to pay attention. He thought he'd appeal to their conscience. That work out for you, Jason?

And he doesn't know how to create allies. Why didn't he come to my door when he needed help with that student he was trying to get services for? I would have shown him how you get things done.

## Chapter 26

Paulie liked to hover about the office fussing with student files or multi-page photocopying jobs so he could sponge up gossip or school news shared among the principal, assistant principals, the admin assistant, and other teachers who floated through.

In the middle of December, when he overheard one of McKenzie's behind closed door rants saying that Foxx didn't know how to stay in his goddamned pew and "Who the hell does he think he is writing up a list of suggestions about how I should run my goddamned school," he decided it was time for a talk. But not right away.

He'd been sending him one or two pictures a week to soften him up, and after listening to the Jason tirade he decided that Gronk needed to boil in the pot a while longer. He would wait until after Christmas break before knocking on his door.

Jason had not, Paulie despaired, folded up and gone away after returning from the Warehouse. Gronk had him present yet another professional development to the staff when by all rights Jason should have covered up like a hibernating critter and disappeared. Why didn't he seem...*wounded*...by being sent to the Warehouse? That pro-Jason cheerleader Celine Wallenda



announced to one and all that the dear boy Jason had found himself in a hailstorm of troubles not of his own making and now we must, we *must*, open our arms to him.

He'd actually heard that in the faculty lounge the other day. Paulie had had people email the *dear boy* vilifying messages while he was exiled, but they didn't seem to hit the mark. Meantime, Paulie marinated in the understanding that Gronk still hadn't pulled the trigger to dethrone Jason from the Humanities position. Which meant that he, Paulie, would be exceded, and Jason would rise from the ashes and no doubt be applauded next year by those same people this year who spoke so passionately to him, Paulie, about how they would resist turning Central South into an Exemplar school. I mean to the death, they told him. To the death. We're with you. We will *not* be an Exemplar school.

He needed to connect the dots for Gronk after the break.

## Chapter 27

The admin assistant called to McKenzie on the phone intercom. Paulie was waiting to see him. McKenzie put a pad of yellow paper on his desk and lifted his leg to the stool and said, “Send him in.” He never understood why people like Paulie became teachers. He should have been a politician or worked in some mean spirited private enterprise. He operated on the edges, just out of sight, like a raccoon living in a gully that made raids on suburban trash cans.

McKenzie had been stewing about those pictures of Angel Brown and him at Ikea. Two more showed up in his email inbox last week. He finally figured out it was Angel’s brother who’d stalked them. That little no-good no-count still lived at home at age twenty-seven and called himself a performance artist. His greatest performance was conning everyone into believing he was an artist.

“Don’t ever say anything bad about Donnie,” Angel told him. “It’ll get back to my mother. I don’t care if you move to Antarctica and whisper something to a seal. She’ll find out about it.”

Gronk waited for Donnie to send him a note with a dollar amount. He would strangle the little shit. He hadn't told Angel about the pictures but he intended to. Maybe she could sweet talk Donnie out of sending them to his wife and anyone else he could think of who could cause him maximum embarrassment.

He tapped his pencil. What if Angel and Donnie were in on it together?

"Shit," he said aloud. He'd never thought of that. How could Donnie have possibly known they were there if Angel hadn't tipped him off. She and Donnie would squeeze his nuts about whatever it was they were after.

"Goddamnit!" he said and pounded the desk just as Paulie walked in.

"Bad time, Mr. McKenzie?" Paulie said, but he didn't hesitate at the door. He shut it behind him and took a seat.

McKenzie cleared his voice. "What can I do for you, Rastik?"

For a fleeting moment, Paulie considered calling him Gronkster, see if he could throw him off-center.

"I think the question is, what can I do for you?"

Gronk peered out of his anger-fog. What was with this Paulie Rastik? He always came at you wonky. The Paulie Rastiks of the world smirked like hyenas at everyone. He would lay money that Angel's brother Donnie was a smirker, the son of a bitch.

"Mr. McKenzie, as you know you put me on the excess list."

"Yes, Mr. Rastik. I don't like losing staff. Worst decision a principal has to make. Your department chair went strictly by seniority. You're low man on the pole."

"Yes, I'm sure she was wounded by that."

He cleared his throat. “Mr. Rastik, as much as I would like to keep your position open, my hands are tied. I involved every department chair who was affected to come in here and help me pound out a solution. I was given a directive--”

“Mr. McKenzie. Excuse me for interrupting. I’m aware that your hands are tied. I want to be a person who stays.”

“Yes,” he said. “But that won’t be the case. Have you contacted Human Resources?”

“No, I have contacted you, though.”

“I realize we’re having this meeting.” Gronk always felt like he was in a rat maze with Paulie Rasdick. *I realize we’re having this meeting.* What did that mean? He would be glad to be rid of him.

He needed speak to him about lingering about the front office. He overheard the admin assistant complaining about him.

“Mr. McKenzie, a little bird told me you’re receiving emails with pictures of you and Ms. Brown meandering about Ikea.”

His first thought was, how do you know Donnie? Then it clicked.

“You little son of a bitch. You took those pictures.”

“Now, now.”

“What do you want?” He took his leg off his stool and faced him. He pointed. “You’re playing with fire, Mr. Rastik.”

“Mr. McKenzie, the only thing I want is to stay here at this school. I won’t demand the new Humanities position, but I would like to be considered. I would make an excellent candidate. But all that is for later. I don’t care who gets the boot, but it won’t be me. I will offer

an opinion about who I think the best candidate is to leave your school, besides the others that have already chosen.”

“You’re making a bad decision Rastik.”

“Jason Foxx. He’s become rather tiresome to the school, don’t you think? Always some sort of drama.”

“Foxx is one of my go-to people. It’s the worst kept secret in the school, but we’re going to be an Exemplar next year. That should be official any day.”

“Well, it’s your choice, Mr. McKenzie. I’m trying to help. What I do want to make clear is that if I am not chosen to stay here, I will forward the pictures to your wife, to the Assistant to the Superintendent, to every faculty member here at the school, and to members of Ms. Brown’s family. I know Ms. Brown is a churchgoing woman. I wonder what her pastor would think?”

McKenzie put his foot up. “Don’t be too smart, Mr. Rastik.” He shook his finger at him. “And stay out of the office area. You don’t belong there.”

“You know what I’m deciding right this minute.” He stood to leave. “I will go wherever the fuck I want to.” He turned and walked out the door.

## Chapter 28

Paulie felt his hands tingling as he walked back to his room. He would finally turn his career his way. The battering he took in those other schools! Over. Done.

He would be a proud staff member of Central South Bulldogs for years and years. He had never thought of being so pro-active before. Get the dirt on whoever your boss is and voila, you have job security.

He wished Merrick was still on his team so he could go up and tell him. Merrick liked sticking it to the inflatables that were administrators. Why didn't Merrick like him any more? No one ever liked him.

Karl Marks  
IEP Chairman  
Rm 111

I found my path in life. I was an English teacher before working this special ed gig. Teach English for a living if you want to live with permanent heartburn. Grade papers for weeks, months, years, see if you still sit right with the world. See if you're still a happy guy.

Esposito and me we went off to Vegas for a four day weekend the week before Christmas break. I'm strictly a gambler. Strictly blackjack except for jerkoff time when I play slots. Esposito? Let me put it this way. He was out of the cage. If his wife doesn't get some sort of STD, that would count as an official miracle. A miracle!

He told me about how he wired his students so they were watching every episode of every season of Breaking Bad. I nearly fell off the barstool I laughed so hard. That guy, he's going to get himself fired. Fired! Dereliction of duty. He doesn't give a shit. Makes me wonder if he's got a lump sum coming if one of the elders in his family bites it.

I'm up there in my office wading through paperwork as usual when Paulie shows up. Paulie, now he's a funny guy. From the corner of your eye, you'll see movement then all of a

sudden you got Paulie sitting in front of you with that paranoid look stamped on his face. You'll be talking to him and he's checking his flanks left and right and you're thinking, maybe somebody really is after you.

He looks like an alley cat in a cartoon that just got dunked in a big tub of water who's hoping it won't happen to him again.

He pulls up a chair.

"Hey, Paulie, what's up?"

I like him well enough. He came up here to sympathize when Zharkov was frying my nuts about that kid Jason Foxx had a hard-on for.

"McKenzie took me off the excess list. He's choosing somebody else."

How the hell did that happen, I thought. Rumor has it this school is going Exemplar next year. McKenzie had his staff cuts all lined up and I'll tell you a secret, nobody's going to bat for Paulie, right? He's not that kind of guy. You want him off the island, not on.

"I thought the staffing got sewn up already. They knew we were going to be an Exemplar school a year ago. They don't fool me. Wheels inside of wheels. It's a way of clearing the schoolhouse of the veterans who make life difficult in two ways for the administration. One, they make higher salaries. Two, they don't roll over when the Brains are selling some freshly minted program that's got a shelf life of two years before they catch hold of the next one."

Paulie scratches his neck. "I guess," he said. He sniffed. "But I got something else. You know Ms. Brown in science, right?"

"Sure. She new this year?"

"I think last year she came aboard. Two years ago? Can't remember."



“Right, well, those science people are up in A wing now. I don’t get up there much.”

He takes out his phone. Opens up some pictures, hands it over. He’s got Gronk and Angel in Ikea holding hands and sitting on beds. I’ll tell you what. I haven’t had much contact with Angel. I look at her. She’s a good-looking woman. A good-looking woman.

I scroll through the pictures.

“Connect the dots for me, Paulie.”

“Gronk’s a married man,” he says. I hand back his phone. “And Angel’s not his wife. I went into his office yesterday and showed him what I have.” He sat back, grinned at me.

Well, well, well, now he’s a big time player. What’s he going to do next? Video record me if he gets his panties in a twist? Right?

“He rolled over for me,” he says. “I intend to stay here.”

“Paulie, can I give you a little piece of advice? You took your shot, now stay humble. You’ll need Gronk to play nice with you when observation time comes around.”

A funny look passes over his face. His eyes get shifty. He sniffs again.

“I know that. But I get to stay. Gronk can’t touch me. I told him I think he should get Jason Foxx out of the building.”

“That’s right. Good on you, as my Australian buddy would put it.”

“No, but what are you saying?” he says.

All of a sudden we’ve walked into tar. You see, when I go out to Vegas with Esposito, we violate. He’s bringing girls up into his room, and I’m at the blackjack table spending money my girlfriend gave me to carry me over while she thinks I’m at an education conference. But it’s

clean. With Paulie, he's clinging all over you. I thought about bringing him with us to Vegas, but Esposito nixed it. He said, "He's not self-contained."

Anyway, I say to Paulie, "I'm not saying anything. The only thing I'm saying is there's an aftermath on one of these deals and you got to manage McKenzie now he knows you got something on him. That's all I'm saying. You get him in your camp then you work with him, right? You let up on the screws. Let him know you're not there to torture him. You get what you want, he gets what he wants. Life is good."

"Okay," he says. "Whatever you say." He shakes his head. "Shit," he says. He gets up and leaves.

I don't understand a guy like Paulie. Listen, the way I see it is this. You're a band of thieves going down the highway until you're not. Then you find another group of like minded associates. You give each other the secret handshake, form another band of brothers, get away with what you can. You repeat the process and hope you stay ahead 51% to 49% until Father time leans over and plucks your number.

## Chapter 29

Mikey Esposito and Karl Marks met at Ringo's in Towson on Friday for Happy Hour.

They sat at the bar. Marks tapped the side of a single key on the bartop and looked around. The place was flooded with teachers, which meant a lot of women in their twenties, and young men who flocked there because of them.

“Remember when bars used to be bars instead of theme parks?”

“No,” Mikey said. He looked around. The staff wore red polo shirts with “Ringo's” embossed on the left breast and dark blue pants and athletic shoes. Pictures of famous movie stars lined the walls. Giant rectangular monitors played various athletic games. One broadcast CNN. “I like it here. It attracts an upscale crowd.”

“I got a buddy I'm meeting in an hour at Cross Street Market in south Baltimore. That's more my style. Why don't you join me?”

“I'll stick around here.” He shook his head. “Look at all the trim in this place. Downright unfortunate a man's got only one life to live.”

The crowd increased. The noise of the room amplified. The bartenders' faces glistened with sweat from hustling to keep up with drink orders.

“Aren't you married?”

“Proud papa second time in a few months. You should get married. It's bliss.”

Marks laughed. “How many times you think you'll be married?”

“Three maybe. Four tops.”

“I'm sure there's a twelve step program out there for you.”

“Probably is, but that's for later. I need to make more mistakes right now so I got something to talk about when that time comes around.”

“You know what Rastik told me?” He had to shout.

“What's that?”

“He caught McKenzie and Angel Brown at the Ikea all up on each other.”

Esposito stopped scanning the room and turned to him.

“No shit. McKenzie's stock just went up in my book. Good man.”

“Says he's got pictures.”

“What?”

“He's got pictures. He's turning the screws on McKenzie so he's not the one excessed.”

“How's all this going on and I'm just an innocent bystander,” Mikey said. “I'm losing a step. Knowing this kind of thing before everybody else is my specialty.” He rubbed his jaw.

“You know what, I can use this. Give me the details.”

They huddled. Karl told Mikey what he knew.

“How are you using that?” Marks said.

“Information is an aphrodisiac, my brother.”

“Who’s your victim?”

“I should be discreet, but I don’t do discreet. Julie Wang.”

“You do not know that young lady if you think you can wrinkle the sheets with Julie Wang.”

“I need an in-school conquest so I can feel good about myself. Been too long.”

“Dude, you need to get a grip. Julie Wang isn’t stupid.”

“Of course not. Why she won’t be able to resist.”

## Chapter 30

Colognes? He liked Versace Eros. *Versace Eros is a fragrance for a strong, passionate man, who is master of himself.* No truer words. He sprayed his chest once then shot a small spritz into his underwear. Yeah, he thought, game time.

He drove to work trying to figure the right approach to Julie Wang. Why would he be stopping by her room? He was up in A wing and all the English teachers were over on the other side of the building.

He saw her walking her bike with a front flat tire about a half mile from school.

The gods want this to happen, he thought. He pulled over and said, “Hey stranger,” through the window.

She stopped and gave him a smile. She can feel heat from the Mike man, he thought. But she’s got to act stand-backish. What else are you supposed to do as a female? Give it up the moment the best looking guy you’ve seen all morning happens to stop his just washed SUV and offers you a ride?

“These are new tires, too,” she said.

He got out and walked to the rear and opened the hatch. He didn't even ask. That's what you do. Don't ask. Just make it happen.

"Let's put that baby right in here." He lifted her bike and fit it in then closed the hatch and said, "Saddle up."

She smiled and shook her head. He liked the way this was lining up.

She hiked herself up into the car and he kept his eye on her to watch the way she used her body. He made it a habit to go to restaurants and diners around college campuses so he could watch waitresses work it.

They talked Orioles baseball. She knew her business. The hell! An authentic female baseball fan. Once this thing got going, he would take her to Orioles fanfest. Then escort her home for some big magic, Mikey style. He pulled into the parking lot, got out, and opened the hatch.

"Listen," he said. "You mind if I come by today? I heard something about a teacher here in the building I don't know what to do with. I need a fresh pair of ears."

He would meet her after the students loaded up on the yellow buses.

She stood at the front of the bus line. He stood in the middle. After students had embarked and drivers waited until the go signal from the assistant principal in charge, Mikey thumbed his phone for messages. He'd hit a dry spell as far as the fairer sex was concerned, and he wanted a market correction right now.

Not that his dry spells resembled the average Joe's. But he hadn't had what you might call a quality encounter in too long.

Not to mention that Vegas trip cost him a thousand bucks more than he budgeted for. Not to mention that his wife was giving him grief about their finances. Not to mention that she informed him last week that it was her lifelong dream to be a stay at home mom. Why didn't he start thinking about getting into administration, she said, so he could bring in more money with a twelve month salary? Why was he hearing, "You have to grow up" so often these days? Maybe he should have clocked out of this one when she started squeezing his nuts about having another child. "You're thirty-four, Mikey. We've been married five years. It's time for number two."

Like every male moron on the planet, he succumbed. Now he had a young'un working its way toward light, while he'd been needing time away from the bundle of love he married.

Teachers and other staff headed toward the front door as the buses wheeled away from the front drive. A few teachers stood outside and chatted.

"Hey there," he said as she walked toward him.

"Hi," she said. She walked right up into his personal zone. Yeah, he thought. She put her hand to his forearm "You have some news for me?"

He winked. "Sure do." He looked around. "Let's go up to my classroom. Too many eyes and ears right here."

"No, my classroom. I've got to take care of a few things."

"You're the boss," he said. His smile felt stretched. He never liked it when a woman made such a crisp return shot: *No*.

He winked and joshed with teachers as he followed her through the halls.

"Got to be a good day, you're here," and "Hey, man, where'd you get such an ugly tie?" and "There she is, teacher of the year" and "How can I be the man when you're on the scene?"



He gave people pistol shots with his hand.

Julie stepped lively and he had to catch up. He could tell she hadn't entered his climate zone. Usually, a member of the fairer sex liked to be up close when he did his celebrity walk. And here he was hustling to keep up with her all of a sudden.

Bam! It hit him. He needed to get her off premises. She couldn't be seen caving into the master's magic. Make her look bad. He had to figure out what she liked to eat. Some women loved roadside diners. Some liked a window seat at a funky, hipster, vegan place. Some of them needed white tablecloths. You see, taking a woman to a restaurant was like going to an amusement park. You treat them to their favorite ride and they think you got the satin touch. *He knows me*. Women love strong on the outside, soft on the inside. Yeah, he had the sensitivity thing cornered. Julie Wang. Where would she want to go? She was Oriental, half anyway. Maybe she'd like sushi.

He'd have to figure that out as the game worked itself. Right now, he had to rope-a-dope. Take whatever she gave him and bounce back. Show her he could be a man of many means.

But he had never yet put her into hard focus. Every once in a while he sat next to her at faculty meetings and got her to laugh at his jokes. That was usually enough to reel them in if he himself didn't cut the line. Maybe he should have got some specs on her before making his play. He didn't want to scare her off, but he had the hot news from Karl Marks about the Paulie photos, and that made it game time.

She unlocked her door and they stepped into her room. She had taken off the rear tire of her bike to fix the flat. She'd placed the frame, with the front wheel, on its side atop pushed together desks.

“Well,” he said. “A regular bike shop.”

“I was hoping to fix the flat during lunch. Didn’t happen.”

She sat in a chair and picked up the rear wheel and with a bike lever tool removed the tire. She put the tube atop a desk and felt the inside of the tire.

“There it is.” She pinched the tire and pulled out a thin piece of sharp metal, slightly thicker than a needle. “Got you, you little sucker.” She continued to feel inside the tire for any other sharp objects.

She sat back. “Okay,” she said. “What do you got for me?”

He was too far away. He moved to the opposite side of the student desk where she sat.

“Yeah, it’s sort of disturbing me,” he began. He couldn’t find his groove. Everything felt forced and off line. He cracked his knuckles. “Karl Marks told me something disturbing.”

“I guess that’s why it’s disturbing you,” she said with a poker face.

“That’s right,” he said, too quickly. “Karl told me that Paulie took pictures of our fearless leader working it with a teacher from this school.”

“Working it?”

“That’s right,” he said again. Was she making fun of him? “They were all up on each other in Ikea. Paulie happened to be on the scene, took pictures, and now he’s blackmailing McKenzie so McKenzie won’t excess him.”

“Hmm,” she said. “Weird.”

“Paulie threw out that he wants Jason Foxx excessed instead of him.”

Mikey saw her perk up for the first time. There it is, he thought. Finally. He’d reel this one in slowly, slowly.

“Jason Foxx? Why would McKenzie listen to Paulie about Jason Foxx?”

“Paulie’s got the pictures.”

“Yeah, but why Jason? He’s done nothing but right for this school. The kids love him.”

He shrugged. “You know we’re going Exemplar next year, right? Maybe Jason drinks the Kool Aid too quick. Maybe that rubs Paulie the wrong way.”

“Does Jason rub you the wrong way, too?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I guess maybe he doesn’t have any chill in him.” He sat back, felt that good glow come over him which beamed out to all nearby receivers that he was the soul of chill.

*Versace Eros is a fragrance for a strong, passionate man, who is master of himself.*

John Davidson, tall and lean, came into the room with a bike pump in his left hand. He walked over to the desk with the deflated tube and pumped it up then felt around it. “Here you are you.” He circled the hole with a blue pen.

“Where’d you get that pump?” she said.

“Told you I thought I had it in the trunk. I never took it out after that ride up the NCR trail two weeks ago. Where’s your patch kit? Hey Mikey.”

“John,” Mickey said flatly. He didn’t like when another man came in and took your bounce away. No, that wasn’t good.

“Mikey here was just telling me about a situation with Paulie and McKenzie.”

“Yeah?” John said. He cleaned the area with a piece of sandpaper from the kit, squeezed a dab of repair liquid onto the tube, and rubbed it in with his pinky. He blew across to dry it. Then he took the circular patch and pressed it onto the tube and held it tight. While holding it he looked up at Mikey.

Mikey couldn't have known that Julie had asked Davidson to come by her room at the end of the day. Mikey wanted to see her about something, she said, and she didn't want to be alone in the same room with him. He sent out creepy man signals.

No, Esposito didn't like Davidson taking over the script.

"Well, I don't want to be indiscreet," he tried.

Julie said, "Don't be shy. John here, he's a concerned citizen. Things go awry in a school. You need people who notice. John's one of them."

Esposito, realizing that his tidbit of information was no longer Julie-bait, dutifully told John about Paulie trying to blackmail McKenzie.

"You're a good man," John Davidson said, "coming to Julie. See if she could do something about it."

"I do my best," Mikey said. If Marks had overheard that lame comeback, he would have laughed out loud.

John and Julie seemed to separate themselves from him as their focus turned to getting the tube on the back wheel then mounting it to the bike correctly. Their voices lowered and they kidded each other. He became audience.

He got up to leave before she embarrassed him by a fake sounding, "Thanks, Mikey."

But he heard behind him, "Thanks, Mikey," before he could get out of the room.

She waited two minutes then went to the doorway.

"He's gone," she said.

"He has it bad for you," John kidded. "You cast a voodoo spell on that poor boy." As she has on me, John thought. They had been going out for a year and he still felt jittery around her.

He held up the back end of the bike while she spun the tire slowly to see if they had mounted it properly. She gave it a few more pumps of air. Both went to separate bathrooms to wash their hands.

Back in her room, she said, “You ready to make Jason a member of The Network now?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s time.”

### Chapter 31

He called Adele on Saturday. They didn't go out last weekend and he wanted to get into a rhythm with her. He knew she was toggling through a yes/no process with him.

In the middle of the phone conversation, he got an incoming from Julie Wang. He put Adele on pause and told Julie he would get back to her.

"Who was that?" Adele said.

"A fellow teacher. Julie Wang."

"Why is she calling?"

"I don't know. Let me see you tonight," he said. "You've been keeping me at arm's distance."

"Why don't you go out with Julie?"

"I might," he said. "But I would rather buy dinner and bring it over so that you, Steven, and me could sit around and watch a movie together."

"He has soccer practice this afternoon."

"You're stalling."

“Steven doesn’t really know if you should be back in our lives.”

“You know that I know that you know that Steven knows.”

“Okay, it’s Adele who doesn’t know.”

“How about if we find out? I’ll make pizzas.” He could make a pizza. A roommate in college taught him, guy who dropped out of college and became a chef. He would give him a call, ask him to help him ascend to a higher summit of pizza making.

“I remember your pizzas.”

“I’ll make the dough this afternoon then bring it over and you and Steven can help put them together. We’ll make two.”

“Make three. Remember Steven’s friend Mark who you took to the Capitals game? I’ll invite Karen and him over, too. She’s lonely.”

“I’m lonely.”

“That’s why you’re coming over.”

“That’s why it should be just Steven, you, and me.”

“I’m not ready for that. I’m ready for tribal gathering, not clan forming.”

“You, Steven, and me. We could be a clan. Is that what I’m hearing?”

“What I’m hearing is that you’re making dough this afternoon then coming over and we’ll make pizzas together. Karen and I are good friends. I want her here. I want her to feel included. Her husband was an asswipe. Is an asswipe, and she needs a tribe, and so do I.”

“Okay then, we’ll stay on the tribal level with possible clan evolution.”

Silence.

“Adele.”

“We’ll have pizza tonight, that’s what I’m looking forward to.”

“Best pizza you will ever have. Guaranteed.”

He called Julie while looking through his refrigerator. He needed to run to the store.

They exchanged hellos.

“You know Ben’s in Hampden?” she asked.

“One of my favorite places when I go into the city.”

“Come on down for a cup of coffee.”

“Sure. When?”

“How about in a half hour?”

“You serious.” He looked at his watch. “What’s the rush?”

“You want to keep your job at Central South?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the rush.”

“I’ll see you down there.”

He would go to Mom’s Organic Market, only a few blocks from Ben’s, after meeting with her. He would reach down into the depths of his being, his soul, his inner-innerness and create the three best pizzas known to mankind.

He called Trevor, the pizza roommate, whom he hadn’t spoken to in two years. Trevor picked up. Jason told him that he wanted to impress his future wife and stepson with his pizza making prowess.

“I needed to see if you were around. I’ll go shopping in an hour or so and I want you to talk me through it. A lot hinges on this.”



“I got divorced six months ago,” Trevor said. “She went with an IT guy. She said that I operated too close to the earth. She and I, we were simplifying, until we weren’t. We were talking about buying a farm north of the city and growing our own herbs and selling them at farmers markets around the state. We dreamt about it, planned it for a year. Then she met a gadget guy and got all freaky with our plan.”

“Damn,” he said. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Neither did I when she told me. We went from travelling up to Maine, Connecticut, and Massachusetts checking out herb farms to ‘Trevor, here’s your divorce papers.’”

“Sorry to hear that. Listen--” He drove down to Ben’s while talking on the cell.

“But you know what, her sister came right into the slot she left vacant. Like, bam, there’s her sister. Sister wants to do herbs.”

“Twin sister?”

He laughed. “That would be funny. Nah. Younger sister by a couple of years. Said she’d been sitting back, waiting for it to develop. She’s one of these types, listens to a frequency I’m not dialed into. She’s a teacher, just like you.”

“What’s her name?”

“Rachel Young.”

“The fuck!” He pulled over. “I met her. Been trying to reconnect with her.”

“Yeah? It’s a small world. How do you know her?”

“From the Warehouse.” He told him about the New Moon ceremony and about the energy massage.

“That’s her.

“Tell her I want to stay in touch. I need more massage therapy.”

“I’ll tell her, but I don’t know if she’ll get back in touch. She might, but might not.

Depends on what’s happening on her vibrational grid. She talks like that. Anyway, she told me she’s all in with my herbal farm plan. She wants to get married right away. We’re going to the courthouse. Make it happen. You want to come?”

“Depends on when it is.”

“Tuesday morning.”

“Damn, you’re on it. But I’ve got a job.” He looked to the rear view mirror, then pulled into traffic.

“So does she. She said she needed to clear her head for a week. Told them at school she’s in auto-correct mode. She knows a doctor who’ll give her scripts for that sort of thing.”

“I want to join her cult.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“Don’t say cult. Say tribe. I’ve got tribes on my mind. Maybe I’ll cross paths with her. Maybe see you again, too. Been too long. I’ll call you when I’m in the store.”

He took Charles Street to Northern Parkway, turned right, then left onto Roland and got into Hampden. Rachel Young, she had the right attitude. He worked too hard. He was too diligent. He wished he could be one of those get-relaxed-about-work guys. Say things like, I need to do some deep energy work. I’ll take a few days off.

He backed into the on-street parking, paid the meter with his debit card, and walked one block to Ben’s.

Julie sat with John Davidson at a table by the window. They both waved when he walked in.

He shook hands around. They small-talked then ordered. Bowl of chicken noodle soup for him.

Julie recommended the cheese platter with homemade bread for the table.

“You sounded serious, Julie. What’s this about me wanting to keep my job?”

“I found out something.”

John Davidson watched, sipped his coffee.

“I like this place,” Jason said.

“Ben and Bonita, they’re my heroes,” she said.

“You know about this place?” John said.

“Oh, sure, yeah.”

“He just found out about it,” Julie said.

“Feels like forever,” John said. “That kind of place.”

“Hah,” she said.

“How long you two been together?” Jason asked.

“About a year,” she said.

“Feels like forever,” John said. “That kind of gal.”

They laughed.

“I was talking to Mikey Esposito the other day.”

“He made a play for her,” John chimed in and lifted his cup.

Jason smiled. “He’s got good taste.”

“I’m about ready to kick both your asses.”

“Kick his ass. That would be funny,” Jason said.

“She could, too,” John Davidson said.

The waitress came by and poured more coffee.

“Paulie Rastik,” she said. “He’s running a game, and my guess is that that he’s looking for you to be collateral damage. He’s a bad guy. You did your innocent babe in the woods thing with him, and he’s not the kind of guy who respects that.”

“How do you know any of this?”

“Like John said, he made a play for me. He told me that Paulie saw McKenzie and Angel Brown together in Ikea hugging up on each other, obviously having an affair. Paulie took pictures of them and sent them off to McKenzie. Mikey came around to my room to tell me. Thought I’d get buzzed about it.”

“How did Mikey find out?”

“Esposito and Marks are running buddies.”

“Those two took a trip to Las Vegas right before Christmas,” John said. “Five day weekend. They didn’t ask Paulie along who thought he should have been included.”

“How do you know that?” Julie asked.

“Guy-vine,” he said.

The waitress brought their food.

“I’m starving,” John said.

“Smells good.”

Ben walked over to their table. He turned a chair around, sat down, and addressed Julie.

“You brought two of them over this time. I’m hurting right here. Right here.” He put fist to heart.

“Ben, I’m yours, baby.” She touched his arm. “You know that.”

“Well,” he said. “I didn’t there for a minute. Feel better now.”

“Soup is delicious Ben,” Jason said.

“Thanks.” Again to Julie. “You like these teacher types, don’t you?”

“Blessing and a curse,” she said.

“Tell me again, which one of these two fine looking rascals is our best man?”

“Whichever one treats me just right.”

“Ho boy. Get me flustered. I better get back to the kitchen.” He winked at Julie.

“I don’t want to rush us,” Jason said. “But I do. I’ve got a woman I’m trying to impress and I’ve got to get at it.”

“How do you plan to impress her,” John said. “I’m always looking for tips.”

“By making pizzas.”

“Good man,” John said.

“No wonder there’s a glass ceiling,” Julie said. “Women get the subtext, but not its expression.”

“So Paulie’s running a game, but you didn’t tell me how Mikey found out about it.”

“I can answer that,” John said. “Paulie told Marks because he wants to be part of the Esposito-Marks club. He must have thought if they saw him as some sort of outlaw then they would open the door.”

“Did they?” she asked.

“I doubt it. You’re in or you’re not. Paulie’s always looking to bite somebody. Marks and Esposito are lazy jokers. I think they realize that Paulie would turn on them like that.” Snapping his fingers.

“So as soon as Marks hears from Paulie about McKenzie and Angel, he tells Esposito.”

“Then Esposito thought she would love him up”--he nodded toward Julie--“for letting her in on what’s happening behind the scenes. That’s how it looks anyway.”

Bonita, Ben’s wife and restaurant partner, came over to them followed by the waitress who cleared their plates.

“The food is great,” Julie said.

“I made a raspberry pie today, but since it was my first one I’m not so confident. I want you to have a slice then tell me is it okay. Okay?”

“We’ll make the sacrifice,” John said.

“Bring them each a slice,” she said to the waitress. “Thank you babies,” she said to them. “You come to our restaurant, you make it feel like home to me.”

She went to the next table to talk.

The waitress brought out slices of pie and more coffee.

“I’m in heaven,” John said after eating the first bite.

Jason forked a piece of pie. “Man, this is good. But tick-tock. I’ve got pizzas to make and a woman to seduce.”

“The thing about Paulie’s game,” she said, “is that he’s working to convince McKenzie that you’re the guy who needs to leave the school, not him.”

“That can’t happen.” He stopped eating. “McKenzie told me I’m the Humanities teacher. Besides, the school will be an Exemplar. McKenzie made noises like I’ll be the PDI if and when Janine moves on. I’m rock solid.”

“No you’re not,” she said. “You’re not.”

Jason sat up.

“You don’t have the seniority in your department. You could be an easy choice for McKenzie to excess.”

He finished his pie in silence. “The tide turned against me this year. I can’t explain it. Never been in something like this.”

John nodded, listening.

“Worst thing of all, I’ve lost my sense of humor. I’m roadkill.” He rubbed the back of his neck. The floor opened beneath him. He closed his eyes. His breath tightened. He felt like he was drowning again, as he did at the New Moon ceremony. He put his hand out, he was falling off the chair.

John stood and snatched him. “Whoa, there partner.”

“I’ve got to go,” he said.

“Where are you going?” she said.

“I don’t know. I can’t breathe in here.” He stood.

Jason saw her look to John.

“We want you to join The Network,” she said. “You need to hear this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sit, Jason. Just sit down for a minute.”

John held his saucer with coffee cup on his lap.

“It’s an organization created by teachers for teachers,” she said.

She gave him a brief history of The Network, from its beginnings in Ann Arbor, Michigan to present.

“Our union should be The Network, but it can’t be, given that it’s an above ground organization. The Network is sub rosa. If a teacher is in trouble with a principal, a school, a bureaucrat, or even if he or she is in trouble at home, The Network calls on its tribal members to bring aid and comfort.”

“But it doesn’t let just anyone in,” John said. “Julie here wanted to bring you in earlier in the year, but we go through an observation process. The candidate has to be an excellent teacher whose intentions are to elevate the professional environment. Sometimes The Network extends an invitation to those people solely on merit. We’re all about bringing in good people to our ranks. Often, though, as in your case, the teacher is in some situation that’s whipsawing him. You check off all the boxes.”

He sat. He touched the tine of his fork to the small white plate that had streaks from the raspberry pie.

“What’s the downside?” he said.

“Once you’re in you commit to helping out teachers who are in trouble.”

“A secret organization that helps out teachers,” Jason said.

John nodded.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.



“You’ll interview with Sofia Rodriguez and Lucas Banfield, two other Network teachers who work at East Central.”

“I know those two. They’ve presented at workshops.”

“John and I will be there. We go through a vetting process when we invite new people aboard. We don’t want anyone on the inside who’s a virus. We want to keep it in the shadows. That seems to make the most sense,” she said.

Jason sat back and exhaled. “I feel like I’ve been hit by a club. You really think The Network can help?”

“It can,” said John.

“What do I have to lose? Thanks,” he said. “Really.”

“It was her,” John said. “Thank her.”

“I’ll set it up for this week, then we have to come up with a plan,” she said. “Turn this thing around. We’ll figure it out. I’ll call you as soon as I talk to Sofia and Lucas.”

He drove to MOM’s on 41st Street and called again Trevor who helped him think about pizzas then went home and made the dough which he took to Adele’s.

After they had eaten, he sat with Adele and Karen in the kitchen while the boys occupied themselves in the living room.

He gave Karen the short version of how events in the school turned against him. Then right before he came over, he said, he found out that he might get exsessed.

“I wish I could figure out how I got into this mess. I’m ready to accept responsibility, I am, but I don’t know how I caused it.”

“Welcome to life,” Karen said. “Try being a divorced woman in her thirties with a kid to raise if you want confusion.”

## Chapter 32

Principal McKenzie announced to the staff that over the summer he planned to update the teacher's lounge. At present, the furniture had been pulled from schools that had discarded it for their own upgrades or bought at Goodwill. The two fabric couches and one stuffed chair had worn, shiny armrests and holes at various spots. Standing lamps leaned off center. The mismatched four-top tables where teachers worked had scars and folded slips of paper beneath legs to keep them steady. There was a sink and leaky faucet and a stove with spiral heater rings and a past its prime refrigerator that last school year stopped working over Memorial Day weekend which provoked a purging of spoiled contents.

Teachers came in waves and settled in the lounge during their separate lunch breaks.

Boyd Green walked through the door smelling of cigarette smoke. He sat at Ms. Wallenda's table. Earnest Chablis, an English teacher, sat nearby, as did Janet Meadows. Janine Jeffries, the PDI, drank a cup of tea and read a magazine devoted to teacher strategies while sitting in the lone stuffed chair.

The gym teacher, Mark O'Riley, followed Roland into the room.

Special ed teachers sat together at a far table near the front.

Mikey Esposito came in.

Roland said, "I thought you were teaching right now."

"I am. I pulled the student teacher from Thompson's room to cover my class. Give her some experience on the front lines."

"What do you got your kids doing?" Roland said.

"High level stuff. You wouldn't understand."

People laughed.

"Anyway," Mikey said. "I'm still taking bets on Foxx going or staying. It's tilting in his favor right now, about one and a half to one, something like that. I've got ninety-three bucks total, which I'll split among winners. We've got about forty teachers in the building. If I can get thirty of you slackers to throw in ten bucks more each, that puts three hundred more in the pot, which makes it about four hundred."

"What's McKenzie in for?" Roland said.

More laughing from his fellow teachers.

"Rumor has it, Jason's on his way out," Mikey said.

"He's staying," Ms. Wallenda said. "Now that it has become official that this will become an Exemplar school, McKenzie will *not* let Jason Foxx leave the confines of this school."

"Don't be so sure," Mikey said. "Anyway, I'm coming around tomorrow to collect money. Hey, what else do we have to look forward to? It's the doldrums, people."

His cell vibrated. He looked at it. "Text message incoming," he said. "That was a mistake giving my number to the student teacher. Looks like they're ready to roast her over a fire and

begin cannibalizing.” He pocketed his phone. “I better get back. A shame. I was starting to feel right social.” He left.

“Jason *needs* to stay,” Celine Wallenda said. “He’s a good teacher and does *immeasurable* good for the school. I mean, my God, I don’t understand any of this. No one, *no one*, in the school is being subjected to such unfathomable scrutiny and judgment as he.”

“Well,” said Earnest Chablis, an English teacher who had not managed to find his way into teaching at the college level, which mystified him, “Jason Foxx is a school nuisance. He pushed us prematurely into being an Exemplar school, and I heard that he’s trying to get McKenzie to rush Paulie Rastik out the door before the school year ends. That’s somewhat extreme, don’t you think.”

“That’s fabrication beyond fabrication,” Celine Wallenda insisted. “Nothing of the sort is going on. I think we should sign a petition stating that Jason Foxx needs to stay.”

“What are you talking about?” Richard Roland said. “He’s a teacher. They come and go. We’re not talking about the Alamo here. If he’s causing everybody heartburn, he needs to go. We’ll get along without him. I’ve got forty-three years in this system. Forty-three years. If it’s one thing I’ve learned is that we’re all expendable, every single one of us.”

Karl Marks came into the room holding an empty mug. He went to the coffee pot, smelled what remained in the pot, and threw it out in the sink. “Anybody else want a cup of coffee?”

Three of them said yes.

He scooped fresh coffee grounds into a filter, poured water into the top hatch, and sat at Janet Meadows’s table waiting for the coffee to percolate.

Janet Meadows, math teacher, with her razor straight bangs and squared up shoulders said, “I don’t think it will make a bit of difference if he stays or goes. It’s not like he’s a football coach or a math department head. He’s a social studies teacher. Cull the heard.”

“My God,” Wallenda said. “What about the Humanities position? If Jason helps shepherd that into being successfully, it could put us on the map. Not to mention our Exemplar status would--”

“Humanities shumanities,” Janet said, waving her fingers. She picked up her calculus text, and located herself in a far corner.

Quiet Patricia Coupling, a science teacher sitting near the faux fireplace, said, “He’s beyond helpful. He has been unstinting in his support of me. I might have left the profession if it wasn’t for Jason. For anyone to think that he’s just another teacher means you have a bag over your head. Schools, good schools, rely on people like Jason Foxx. I wish I were more like him. I meet with him every chance I get.”

“Hear, hear,” Celine Wallenda said.

“Any of you in on Mikey’s action?” Karl Marks said as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

No one responded in the wake of Coupling’s impassioned vote of confidence.

Karl Marks wondered if he should tell everyone about the pictures that Paulie took of McKenzie and Angel Brown. Get it all out there. But he caught himself. How would that work for me, he wondered. He better keep it in his pocket until the time was just right.

“I’m putting in twenty bucks that says he’s out of here at the end of the year. Out of here,” Marks said. He held up his cup in a gesture of toasting one and all. “Got to run,” he said.

### Chapter 33

Marks took his coffee up to his office. He opened the door and saw Mikey sitting in the chair next to his desk squeezing a lime green hand strengthener.

“Don’t you ever teach?”

“I went back in there, calmed the waters, then left a football player in charge who’ll back up the student teacher. He’s on my payroll.” He switched hands with hand strengthener. “There’s something about having a firm grip,” he said. “Goes a long way in this world. I’d guess it gives me one to two percent advantage over somebody else if I needed another job. A firm handshake telegraphs the right signals.”

“How’d it go with Julie?”

He sucked his teeth. “I hadn’t started my firm grip exercises yet, so it was hard to tell.”

Marks sat at his desk chair and touched the keyboard to light up his computer.

“In other words, you took a digger.”

“I came at her with some good stuff. Not my best stuff, but I was on my game. She had Davidson stop by. That wasn’t an accident.”

“So you went Green Beret. Improve, adapt, overcome. What’s your next move with her?”

He watched his right hand squeeze the lime green strengthener. “Nah. Threw that trout back into the stream. I went Kenny Rogers. Know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away.”

“Damn, dude, you let Davidson get inside.”

“It hurts, man. I’m hurting.”

Marks laughed.

“You’re collecting bets on Foxx, right?”

“Yeah, I want the pot to get up to four hundred bucks. Sharpen the interest.”

“What’s your bet?”

“He’s out of here. Gone. Done. Rastik’s got McKenzie by the short hairs. Rastik’s a serial loser in the school game and I know he sees this place as somewhere he can survive. He doesn’t know that when it goes Exemplar he’s got a whole new plate of squid to eat, but that’s down the road. He shouldn’t be a teacher.”

“What’s his job?” Marks was in a lively mood. Expositio entertained him to no end.

He stopped squeezing the strengthener. “That’s a good question. I think he should work for the state. A DMV agent who gets to step on people who have lagged on their insurance payments, who don’t have the right paperwork when showing up for DUI class, who come to renew their driver licenses past the due date.”

“Yeah, he’s that guy.”

“He’s the guy who learns an ancient Japanese way of raising crickets so he can slowly squash them with the tip of his shoe. Listen to the exoskeleton crack and crunch.”



“I don’t want to mess with your relax time, but I’ve got work to do.”

“When did it ever get written into the constitution that we have to work for a living? God in heaven it sucks.”

He hiked himself up out of the chair and left.

## Chapter 34

They went up to A-wing. Jason walked down to 313A to make sure that Mikey wasn't around. The last bell rang an hour ago, so it would be a miracle if he were still here, but nevertheless. Julie waited for him, and they walked into Angel Brown's room together, which was off the main corridor at the top of the stairs.

She sat at her teacher's desk putting grades into school system's approved electronic gradebook.

A natural, Jason thought. Student papers filled the walls. Anchor posters explained concepts. A tripod showed today's objective. Desks were arranged for small group instruction.

She wore a modest white blouse with a collar. A gold cross necklace. Lavender nail polish inlaid with some sort of elaborate pattern.

She stopped making entries with grades and swivelled her chair toward them.

She was beautiful and young and involved with the principal.

"Hi Angel," Julie said.

"Hi," Jason said.

She looked back and forth at them. He could tell she tried not to act alarmed, but her eyes widened.

“Hello,” she said. “You two look like you’re here on official business.”

“We are,” Julie said.

Julie went into the conversation as if pushing a canoe into a river and expertly paddling away from shore. Paulie Rastik had followed her and McKenzie through the Ikea last December and took pictures. He’d been blackmailing the principal ever since.

Jason had wondered if Angel was going to blanch and start arguing or go through some drama that would put them off.

She nodded like a field commander and said, “What am I working with here?”

“Paulie wants to stay in the school instead of being exsessed.”

“Okay,” she said, eyebrows up, waiting.

“If he stays, Jason goes, based on seniority. We want to stop that from happening.”

She turned to him. “Jason, I’ve been hearing all types of rumors about you.”

Before he could answer, Julie jumped in. “Paulie’s been trying to smear him ever since McKenzie made the announcement that he had to cut staff. Jason, here, he’s one of the good ones.”

“You got sent to the Warehouse.”

“It was bullshit,” Julie said. “Slander and lies and a made up confession by the girl. More Paulie handiwork.”

“Well child,” she said. She got up from behind her desk, walked around, and gave Jason a hug. “You been through it, haven’t you?”

She returned to her seat.

His heart pounded. “Yes,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I have.”

“Okay,” she said. “What’s the plan? How did you find out any of this in the first place?”

“Paulie couldn’t keep his mouth shut,” she said. “Paulie to Karl Marks to Mikey Esposito to me.”

“It’ll get around then, won’t it?”

“Maybe. Who knows?” She shrugged. “According to Esposito, Paulie told McKenzie that he would try to embarrass you if that’s what it took. They know you’re a churchgoing woman. Still live at home. He’d try to mess with that.”

“I’ll tell you what the plan is,” Angel said. She had a crooked smile and he could see a glimpse of her front teeth. “I go around to my people and let everyone know. I *am* a churchgoing woman, so I’ll tell the pastor this weekend.” She tapped fingernails on the desk. “That Paulie is a mean little man, isn’t he?”

“I believe he is,” Julie said.

“He’s got pictures on his phone?” she said.

“He does,” Jason said.

She nodded, looking inward.

“I’ll work on Gronk,” Angel said.

“You going to break it off?” Jason asked.

Julie swatted him on the arm. “Excuse his Asperger’s.”

“Why would I do that, honey? He got us into this, now he’s got to find a way out. I have a feeling he’s going to be extra sweet to me now. Jason, I’ll do my best to keep you here, but I

*Returning/Lavey*

can't promise more than that. Now you two go on. I've got to finish up and get home and take care of business."

## Chapter 34

Jason followed her to her room. She powered down her computer, locked up her closet, and put on bike gloves and helmet.

“I didn’t ask,” she said. “How’d your pizza strategy work with Adele?”

“She’s making it tough, but I’m gaining ground with her kid.”

“Where’d you two meet?”

“This is second time around for us. She had an affair. We crashed and burned. We’re trying to make it work. At this stage, more me than her, but I’ll get her in my court.”

“I don’t want to be rude, but is that her thing, having affairs?”

“I think it was a one off. But I’ll find out, won’t I?”

She walked them into the hallway. She locked her classroom door while he steadied her bicycle for her.

They went down the same staircase. He broke off toward his room but decided to go to the office. Students sat about the lobby. He could hear far off echoes of music from the art room. The art teacher led an after school sculpting class which students loved.

Students had band practice and chess club and there was yearbook committee and the school newspaper among other activities in the beehive of the post school day.

The administrative assistant who manned the front desk had gone home. He passed the assistant principals' offices to McKenzie's office. It was locked. No light was on.

He walked through the building to Paulie's room. He, also, was gone.

He went downstairs to the basement level rooms to find Celine Wallenda who rarely left the building before 6:00 p.m. and often stayed quite late when when conducting rehearsals.

He found her in her office drinking a cup of tea.

"Dear child," she said. "My God I was just thinking about you." She didn't get up from her chair. My *knees* she had told him. Now it's my knees.

He leaned to give her a hug then sat down.

"What am I hearing about you, Jason? The wolves are absolutely *circling*. Will you really be leaving?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's in the ether that you and McKenzie have found a job for you coordinating some sort of magnet program on the other side of the county."

"News to me."

"Thank *heavens* it's not true. *Supposedly*, it was a face saving maneuver that would benefit both you and McKenzie and allow that venomous hornet Paulie to remain on premises."

"No," he said. "I'm staying here. I'll put an end to that rumor tomorrow. I'd do it right now, but McKenzie's out of the building."

She considered telling Jason that Esposito was taking bets on whether or not he would be gone at the end of the school year.

“Julie Wang and I talked with Angel Brown,” he said.

“You went right in and grabbed the heart of the tiger, didn’t you? Drink a cup of tea with me, dear child. I think I’m getting close to retirement then a quick demise. One wonders why the end calls so loudly after the age of fifty. I feel as though I’ve just begun to unburden myself from the shackles of ignorance, then all of a sudden here I am, King Lear, running around like a mad person cursing the universe.”

He had grown used to her excesses, but today she really did look defeated. Her face was drawn. Her shoulders slumped. Her veiny hands rested in her lap.

“Why so down?” he said.

She waved her hand.

“Tell me.”

“My doctor *insists* that I’m taking the correct dosage of Prozac for my *goddamned* depression which has haunted me since I was a child. Haunted me. But I don’t believe him which means I’ll have to fight him on it. But more to the point. I get a message from some mucky-muck on high telling me that the system is beginning to consider putting its theater programs in a few schools throughout the county. Husbanding its resources. No, what did he say? Streamlining its assets. Central South High would not be one of the schools, need I say.”

“Is that official?”



“Nothing’s official, Jason. You should know that by now. They creep up on you. You don’t even hear them. One minute you’re an unsuspecting goat grazing on a hillside. The next you’re being swallowed by a python.”

“I’m sorry to hear--”

“So am I!” she said. “And then there’s you. Are you letting this happen to you, Jason? That non-entity, Paulie Rastik, is getting the upper hand. I can tell. I can feel it in the air.” She closed her eyes.

“That won’t happen,” he said, sounding more sure of himself than he felt. Would The Network be a lifeline?

“I don’t think you properly understand that the system works against us. It’s the butterfly effect. Three of them might go to a conference somewhere and get mesmerized by a methodology. All of course researched based.”

“Yes,” Jason said. He wished he’d stayed away.

“Then they fly back to their home schools and inflict upon all of us their destructive brain storm. Oh, they’re awful.” She put her head in her hand.

Two female students entered and saw that their hero was wounded. They gave him sharp-eyed looks.

“What did you do?” one of them hissed at him.

They went to their knees next to her chair like attendants to an Empress.

He managed to leave without Ms. Wallenda noticing.

He walked upstairs to his room, retrieved his backpack, then departed for the day.

## Chapter 35

At 11:30 that night, he rolled over to grab his ringing cell phone. He didn't recognize the number.

"Yes?"

After 10:00 p.m. phone calls meant problems or drunken friends from college.

"Hello, Jason. Sorry I'm calling so late. We had a cleansing ceremony for the brother of one of our members. He's a damaged soul and possibly possessed. We tried to help. I don't know if we did any good."

"Rachel Young?"

"Back from my dream walk. I've thought about you."

"Good," he managed. He looked at his watch again. "Why are you calling?"

"Julie to Sophia at Central East to me. We belong to The Network together."

Up on one elbow. "You're a member?"

"For years. I would have left teaching without it."

"Where are you teaching?"

“I landed on my feet at Northwest. I’ve strained everyone’s patience because this has been a year when I’ve needed to heal. Ancient wounds from past lives. Northwest wanted a science teacher pronto, and I convinced my principal that a change of scenery would be good for all of us. But let’s talk about your case.”

“Tomorrow. I don’t function properly after ten at night.”

“I don’t function properly before ten at night. That’s been a low-level conflict I’ve waged with the world all my life. Hmm. I never quite captured it in those words. I think I’ll spend an hour sending healing energy to your spirit. Julie has told us that you’re in a great battle.”

“I guess I am. It’s been inflicted on me.”

“No, you entered it some way. Somewhere you said yes to it.”

“I wish I knew when.”

“Sometimes we never find out.”

Mikey Esposito  
Science  
Rm 313A

I told Paulie to go ahead and post them. Why not? Stir up a hornets' nest. It would help him get what he wants, I said.

Well, okay. Truth?

The head of science curriculum decided to make a visit to my room. My science department chair doesn't like me, so I have no doubt she sicced the curriculum specialist on me and didn't give me a heads up. Bad form in my book. Very bad form.

Mrs. Grant. Bulletproof blonde hair. No nonsense red lipstick. Back straight like a sergeant-major. Heels I heard clicking down the hallway.

Happened to be a day when eight students were sleeping out of twenty-two students present. The others played video games or viewed whatever websites they wanted to on their laptops. I had last Thursday's date and objective on the board and some handouts on a front table piled with books.

I recognized Grant from the beginning of the year meetings. When she walked in I took a quick scan of the room and thought that maybe I should try to make something happen. She sits

in the back, opens her leather bound notebook, and starts writing. I'd been at my teacher desk with my feet up scrolling around on eBay. Hungover.

No, you don't get it. *Hungover*.

I go up to the front of the room and retrieve the handouts. Even if those handouts had something to do with a lesson I was teaching, they should have been on students' desks at the beginning of the period. I push them at the kids, try to get the sleepers awake. One of the kids held up the handout I gave him and loudly said, "We did this already. I ain't doing this shit again," and went back to his computer.

Ms. Grant stayed in there for thirty minutes. No teaching happened. Big deal. You get work done every day where you're at? *Every day?* Doubt it.

She marches out of there, scoops up the department chair, and they huddle in the conference room. The department chair put me on a P3, professional performance plan, which means I have to submit my lessons for the week to her who then laterals them off to McKenzie and Grant. Grant told them that my humble classroom qualified for dereliction of duty to an extent she had never seen before. Blah, blah, blah. I signed some piece of paper meaning I agreed to the P3, which I didn't even read.

So whatever I can do to get McKenzie's attention going in another direction I'll do it. Paulie wanted to hold back. I told him me and Karl been wanting to take him out for a beer. Wouldn't it be fun to sit there laughing about those pictures being tweeted around by every teacher in the county, I asked him.

His eyes got big for a minute, but he closed up on me.

"No, I'm holding on to these. These are my gold nuggets."

“Paulie,” I go on. “Meet the moment, man.”

But he doesn't buy it. We're standing in the hallway. The bell is about to ring for the last period of the day. He goes squirrel on me and says he's got to get going. He needs to pull up his drill, get ready for his next class.

I see him walk away with that blurry, fast-legged walk he's got going on. I'm thinking to myself, how can I get that phone from him. I'll release the damn photos.

## Chapter 36

Paulie and his girlfriend/companion, Dargo, drove south on I-83 to the Inner Harbor in Baltimore on Saturday morning.

Last night she'd worn her lacy black bra and black panties, but when they climbed into bed together, Paulie said he thought he was getting migraine and that his neck hurt and besides he felt too nervous and anxious for sex.

"Is it because I'm so fat?" she asked. "You told me you liked fat girls. I got fatter for you."

He stared at the ceiling. Everyone knew whether they liked sex or not. He didn't know. Did he, didn't he? He wanted her to tie him up and hit him all over his body with a shoe, but how could he ask her to do that? She was fun and he didn't want to be friendless and without her he had no friends.

He parked and they made their way to the area between buildings where street performers performed.

They sat down together on the top step. He could tell she was unhappy. He wanted to make her happy because he wanted a friend.

She blinked back tears.

“Paulie,” she said. “You and I need to have a talk.”

He looked into her worried, earnest, innocent face.

“I want to love you, but you won’t let me. If you won’t let me, I need to find someone who will.”

“I love your saddle shoes,” he said. “Where did you get them?”

“Online. Paulie you’re not listening to me.”

“What kind of sex do you want?” he asked.

“What kind is there?” she laughed. “I want to make love to you because I’m all woman.”

She pressed her large breasts against his arm. He flinched.

“Paulie, what is it? Do you like boys rather than girls? Or do you like both and you’re in more of a boy phase. Because Paulie--”

“I want you to tie me up and hit me with your saddle shoe.”

“What?” she said.

She had full lips and an upturned nose and big staring eyes begging for love that now filled with tears.

“What did you just say? Are you a bad man who needs psychiatric treatment, Paulie? I one time took a psychology class in college where it was just girls in the class where the professor talked about male perversions and one time she talked about how some men liked to



think about being squished by a large female. Oh my God Paulie that sounds awful, hitting you. It's all icky and weird and I thought I loved you."

He didn't know what to do with his hands. He turned his cell phone face up. "Hey, Siri, what's the best restaurant in Little Italy." He put the phone up near his ear, and as he did so someone ran by and snatched it from his hand and ran down the dock toward the science center.

He stood and chased after him.

"Paulie!" Dargo said. She also stood and managed the three steps down and clomped forward before she stopped, wheezing. "I don't have my inhaler!" she screamed.

The phone thief disappeared.

Paulie returned, out of breath. "Did you see that?"

"No. What? Listen, Paulie, I suppose if you really want me to hit you, I could try."

"He stole my phone. He's got all my pictures."

"Paulie, I'm so sorry. But you backup your photos don't you? Because you can by going into system preferences and--"

"No, I don't. You have no idea what just happened. My future depended on those pictures." He went to his knees and grabbed her around her large legs and cried.

"Paulie, like right now, do you want me to hit you? You're so sad and if that makes you happy I could--"

"Oh my God," he moaned. "My iPhone was my friend. Now it's gone, too."

"Paulie, stand up. Come on."

He got to his feet and held onto her large body. He cried hard into her neck and she cooed to him that he would be okay. Finally, sighing, he pulled away.

“What did your professor say about men wanting to be squished?”

“Oh, baby,” she said. “Does his’ m want Mommy to squish him?”

“Wes,” he baby-talked. “Pwease.”

The runner, a triathlete in training, was a member of The Network. He bolted toward the Science Center then took an oblique right and headed into a parking lot where Jason sat behind the wheel of his idling car parked beside a curb in a No Stop Zone with Julie in the passenger seat.

The runner burst through a stand of evergreen trees and body-tilted toward them with arms pumping and passed off the iPhone like a baton in a relay race to Julie who had stuck her hand outside the window. Jason put the car in gear and like a shark glided out of the lot, and went north on Light Street. He glanced over his shoulder at the runner who had crossed Light and headed into the Otterbein neighborhood west of the Inner Harbor area.

“Craig, man,” Julie said. “He told me he used to snatch purses before he got sent to juvy jail. He got fired up because he could use his old skill set.”

At the big intersection she told him to turn right onto Pratt.

“We’re going to see someone else from The Network?”

“That’s right,” she said.

They drove for a couple of miles. He made his way to Baltimore Street above Patterson Park. He parked then they walked up the grassless, treeless alley block of N. Bradford and knocked on the door of a narrow row home.

A young Indian man in his twenties who could have passed for fourteen answered the door.

“I am so happy to see you Julie. Come in, come in.”

“Prateek, this is Jason.”

“You must come in.”

After they entered Prateek stood on the cement stoop and looked up and down the block. He locked the door behind them.

A statue of buddha sat on the mantel. Incense burned. The small front room had end-tables and shelves filled statues of elephants and various Indian gods and goddesses.

“Jiya,” he called.

“I’m here. Your visitors are hungry. Bring them into the kitchen.”

“No, really,” Julie protested.

“Of course you must. Go, go.”

“Sit,” Jiya said when she saw them. “Sit.”

She put serving dishes and a basket of naan bread on the table. Prateek disappeared then returned with an electronic box with the dimensions of a pack of cigarettes. He cabled a wire from phone to box and a digital readout appeared.

“What’s that?” Jason asked.

“He build it himself,” Jiya said. “I think it is illegal, but he told me that he intends to market it and make us one billion dollars.”

“One million,” he said, distracted by the numbers flashing on the screen.

“Put that to the side,” she said. “Join us.”

She spooned the food onto their plates.

“What is it?” Jason asked.

“It’s called Chana Dal. And that’s Indian rice. You make it with cardamom, mustard seeds, and turmeric. All of this, it’s just a snack. It is nothing.”

“Delicious,” he said. “Can I move in?”

Prateek kept glancing at the numbers flashing on the screen of the small black electronic box.

“Yes, please do. Maybe you can get my husband to think of other things besides computers. Always computers. Introduce him to American baseball.”

Prateek smiled. “We went to an Orioles game last summer. She loved it. We’ll go again. You are a good cook, Jiya.”

She waved him away, and smiled.

They talked about living in the Patterson Park community and her work at nearby Johns Hopkins as an emergency room doctor. Prateek eyed the black box with red numbers flashing. When they stopped he picked up the phone and thumbed the screen. He had unlocked it.

“Look at him,” Jiya said. “He is in heaven. He can figure out passwords.”

“I love naan bread,” Jason said.

“Hear, hear,” Julie agreed.

Prateek thumbed to the photos app. “You are looking for what now?”

“He went to Ikea and took pictures of McKenzie and Brown walking around the store.”

“Yes, here they are.” He gazed into the small screen at the tiles of photos like an entomologist who’d come upon new specimens.

“Delete them,” Julie said.

“No, send them to me,” Jason said. “Then delete them. Make sure that you delete the outgoing email from the send mailbox.”

“Of course.” He smiled. “I am a technology teacher, after all. You are lucky. I am seeing here that he did not have sync activated so he did not back up his photos.” He shook his head. “He does not have a criminal mind. He should have been more thorough.”

“Why do you want the photos?” Julie asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I can squeeze Paulie some way.”

“Now that is a criminal mind,” Prateek said.

They finished eating then small talked a while before standing to leave. On the front porch, Prateek said, “Jason, honor The Network. It will be good to you.”

He drove up to Fayette then turned left and went past the main post office then north on I-83. She lived about two miles from him in Towson.

“Thanks,” he said before she got out. “I really appreciate what you did for me. It’s been a long year.”

“You’re part of us now,” she said. She shut the car door and waved to a neighbor.

## Chapter 37

Four miles into his run, he realized that he was befuddled about what to do with the photos. He wished he were more a man of action type. He read about finding one's center, and as he ran along a suburban street in the easy way in which he could now run, he wondered if he had a center. One of his great fears was to enter his older age and come upon the realization that he was a shell of a human being, someone who didn't occupy himself, but instead was a clever, highly managed put-together person.

He finished the run and showered. At 4:30, he called Adele, who had been gently parrying his attempts to get into her orbit. He thought they were on an arc that would lead to permanence, but her version of the arc had many pause stops built into it. His didn't. He couldn't wrest the remote control wand from her. She had told him that she was the captain because she had the child. The child trumped all. The child liked him, he countered. The child liked you that time before you abruptly left, too, and the child crashed and burned when you were no longer on the scene. Both the child and I, he responded, have mended. What did Hemingway say? 'The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.' Where he and I

broke, we are now strong. Crying, crying, crying, she said. There used to be so much crying when you left. By you or him, he said. Lots of crying, she said.

“Adele,” he said.

“Jason,” she said.

“I’m still feeling good about those pizzas I made last weekend.”

“Delicious,” she said. “You’re a big hit with Karen and Mark. They want a repeat performance.”

“Let’s do it tonight,” he said.

“Mmm, that won’t work. Steven’s feeling under the weather and he needs to lie about and get well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Can I bring over anything?”

“No,” she said. “Nothing. He needs quiet time is all.”

“I’ll tiptoe.”

“Quiet, quiet, quiet time,” she said.

“I think I’ve found a way to stay at school.”

“How’s that?”

“I transferred the pictures from Paulie’s phone to mine, so he can’t blackmail the principal any more.”

“He’s probably got them backed up on his computer.”

“Prateek, a guy I met, hacked his phone and told me that he didn’t have the sync feature on. He said a lot of people don’t. I’ve got the photos now.”

“What are you going to do with them? You realize you and your cowboy buddy violated a bunch of laws, don’t you?”

“Well,” he said. “I don’t like to think of it like that. I like to think of it as preventing something illegal or unwanted from happening.”

“Listen, Robin Hood, don’t--”

“Why are you sparring with me. As a matter of fact, I don’t give a shit about a law or if I hurt someone’s feelings or that I didn’t it right. What’s right? A guy at school has been trying to get rid of me for months. I’ve been accused of sexual impropriety and sent to the Warehouse. I’ve got teachers turning to me in the faculty lounge with guilty looks on their faces because I walk in on conversations about me. I’m swimming against the tide. And Adele, I don’t care if you approve. But those are my problems. Now about us--”

“Jason--”

“About us,” he said. “I’ve made it clear that we should give it another try. Didn’t you say you wanted that also? You wanted a commitment, right? Meantime, I meet a hail of resistance when I want to get together. So this is the deal. When you want to get together, call me. I’ll take Steven around on my own. We don’t need you with us. But don’t make him pay just because you don’t know what to do with me. All right? I like the kid and want to do right by him. So, I’ll wait to hear from you.”

He pushed to stop button. Had he found his center? His world wobbled like a reentering spacecraft.

She didn’t call the rest of the evening or Sunday, the following day.



He wondered if his imprisoned father felt like he couldn't ever get it right with the world. He often thought about that man. As he grew older, he wondered if the man got back at the world for all of its slights by embezzling and cheating everyone around him.

On Sunday night he looked through the pictures Paulie had taken of McKenzie and Brown. They couldn't talk anyone out of what they implied. Paulie had caught them.

He might go into McKenzie's office and tell him he had the pictures, and they could forget about what Paulie brought to the table. Put the plan back on track: he would be the Humanities guy teaching one class a day and because Central South would become an Exemplar school he would be the PDI. It sounded simple to him sitting by himself at his desk looking out the window.

Marsha Carrington  
Music  
Rm 034

Jason Foxx is the best thing to happen to this school. He makes it a point to walk around the school visiting every teacher, getting to know them even just a little bit. There are forty of us and he probably knows us better than the principal.

Last year, I was desperate. There was no money in the school budget to buy new instruments. The piano needed tuning. Someone had snuck in the school during the previous summer and vandalized a lot of the music stands we keep in a storage closet.

I'd planned on getting my students to compete in the regionals, then maybe go on to the state competition. Putting a music program together takes a lot of time, a lot of effort. In our age of the high stakes testing, subject disciplines like music and art get knocked down to third tier status.

The broken music stands, the poorly tuned piano, the drop-off in students choosing music as an elective. I wondered about my job status.

Jason walked by my room. He saw me sitting at my wooden desk with my head in my hands. I

was crying.

He stopped and looked in.

“Marsha, it’s never bad as all that,” he said.

He walked to the back of the room and jumped up on one of the risers. He started singing, “They say the neon lights are bright on Broadway.” He closed his eyes and started scatting like he was George Benson.

The child sang his heart out, cursed with the worst voice you could imagine. Cannot carry a tune to save his life.

He knew all the words. When he finished, he bowed as if he were one of the great stars of all time. His right hand swept the floor then he brought it up in a triumphant flourish while he raised his eyes to heaven.

We laughed together. He came to a nearby student chair in that cavernous, empty room and asked what the problem was. I poured out my heart.

“Let’s write a grant together. We have nowhere to go but up,” he said.

I could have kissed him.

We did. I got seven used violins, which were in excellent condition. A brand new cello. Somebody donated a ten year old Baldwin. The music department put on an impromptu Thanksgiving Day show and the planned Christmas show and a spring show and an end of the year show.

I became department chair after that crazy lady left for a New Zealand sheep farm.

I have wondered all year why they are after him. Someone said it was because of test scores, which I find hard to believe. Most of our students don’t do well on tests of any sort.

There just seems to be a general sense that he's, I don't know, not the right fit. He always *has* been the right fit, but not now. I've listened to Paulie talk about how insistent Jason has become on making this into an Exemplar school, and really, do we know what being an Exemplar school really means? I have a friend who works at one, and she talks about how many tech problems they have over there. Not to mention that you're changing your whole approach to teaching. Jason is an advocate of new ways to do business, and he's a tireless worker.

As this year has gone on, I think that Jason needs to find a new home. Not that he's done anything wrong or that anybody else is right. But it just seems that it's his time to go.

## Chapter 38

He waited until the buses pulled away and after many of his fellow teachers left the building. He waited until two of the the three assistant principals had gone. Mitterling always stayed late. He was a dedicated head, and spent his time after school on the phone with parents or helping unsnarl issues with after school programs or walking the building visiting teachers hammering out lesson plans.

He went into the office and asked the admin assistant if McKenzie was in his office.

“He’s power walking,” she said with rolled eyes.

“What does that mean?” Jason asked.

“It means he saw a YouTube video last weekend on the benefits of Heavy Hands power walking and he decided to do it.”

“Heavy hands?”

“You know those weights you have in your hands while you’re walking.” She made fists with her two hands and chugged them.

She was a large woman and tended not to move her body. He recalled that she had surgery to fuse bones in her neck. She compensated for her lack of head mobility by talking from the side of her mouth while staring at her computer monitor.

“Okay,” he said.

“He put on a jogging suit and went out there.” She thumbed toward the football field.

Jason went to the cafeteria where he could look out onto the track. Sure enough, McKenzie was making his way around it in an olive green jogging suit with black stripes down the leg.

Jason waited until he came around the far end. He pushed open the door and intercepted him at the fifty yard line.

“Foxx,” he said when he saw him.

Jason stepped up his pace. Thankfully, he’d worn his New Balance athletic shoes rather than dress shoes today.

“Mr. McKenzie,” he said.

“Call me Gronk out here.” He raised the Heavy Hands. “Low impact, high yield cardio workout. Best thing I’ve come across in years.”

Sweat drenched his flushed face. The back of his jogging suit was soaked.

“I can hear my knee barking at me,” he said, “but I feel like a tiger.”

“Can I take a laps with you?” Jason said, already walking along with him.

“If you can keep up. Hah!” He walked a little faster so that Jason had to step up.

“I know about the pictures that Paulie took.”

He stopped and wheeled on Jason. “Goddamn it. How the hell did you find out? Goddamn that little weasel.”

“He told somebody who told somebody.”

He wiped his brow with his forearm. He charged forward on the track with a burst of energy. Jason jogged-walked until McKenzie slowed down.

“I managed to get them, Gronk.”

“You got the photos,” he puffed.

“I do,” he said.

“How the hell did you get them?”

“I’d rather not say. That should be my little secret.”

“Goddamn it. This situation is out of control. People taking goddamned pictures of me.”

“That situation has been resolved,” he said. “It’s a non-issue.”

“Angel knows about them,” he said. “She told me a little bird told her. You behind that?” he demanded.

“Gronk, I’m not here to be grilled by you or anybody else.” He stepped up the pace. McKenzie kept up. “I’m here to tell you that you don’t have to worry about the pictures from here on in. Now what I’d like to talk to you about is that Humanities position and the PDI spot that we were talking about.”

“Yes,” he shot back. “That needs to be re-examined. Foxx, I need to finish one more time around the track then I need to sit and think.” He put chin out and forged ahead.

Jason peeled off and went around the building to go into the front door. He knew the cafeteria door had locked behind him.

Celine Wallenda  
Theater  
Rm 022

It's only March and already they're coming to our school like a plague of locusts. My God, every day we see them roaming about, visiting classrooms, poking their heads into the faculty lounge. They split off in separate groups of twos and threes then reconvene in hallways and bunch in a pack clogging up choke points making it difficult for students to move around them.

The women wear business blazers with sharp edged pants or plain skirts and shoes with pointy heels. The men wear those godawful blue or charcoal gray suits. I mean who's writing the script for these people? Meantime, the men distinguish themselves by their goddamned ties, as if that bit of peacocking will somehow confer...oh, Christ, what could it possibly confer?

I hear the women's heels on the waxed floors. I hear the men clearing their throats. Some of them carry clipboards, but most of them stare at smartphones and tap notes to themselves or write on their screens with some sort of smartpen.

I've tried three times the past week to sit and talk with Gronk, but he's been consumed by meetings with the Exemplar people or out of the building in meetings with people at



headquarters. Switching from a Status school, meaning a regular, non-Exemplar school (my God, the names they come up with) to an Exemplar means being trained in all of the innovative ideas that the system promotes: small group instruction, a computer in every child's hand, project based learning, higher level questioning techniques, formative assessments, etcetera, etcetera. Teachers and principals in Status schools will visit to see what we're doing once we're an Exemplar. The people in charge of Exemplars will be measuring our progress every moment of every day, so we'll be walking around with a thermometer up our bums all the time.

I hear grumbling from teachers. The poor dears tell me that the girl and boy suits descending on their classrooms sit in back huddled over their techie toys and tap tap tap away. Or stand cross-armed in back with scowls on their faces. Every once in a while one of the visitors deigns to talk with the teacher in the classroom and to a person, the teachers tell me, they get the distinct impression that the lords from headquarters don't believe that they're measuring up. The school is rife with paranoia that all of them will be asked to resign then reapply! Now how in God's name that would pass muster with the union is anybody's guess, but so they believe.

Meantime, *finally*, Gronk comes down here to visit. I have my own paranoia to tend to, thank you. I asked him point blank will my theater department merge with some other school's?

"Where in the hell did you hear that?"

"That's the question a crooked politician flings back at a reporter to buy himself a moment of time to package up a lie. Now tell me, will this theater department be here next year?"

“Yes, Celine, it will be. Unless you can tell me different. Now, no bullshit, Celine, tell me different.”

“I can’t,” I said, backing down two degrees to give the man some breathing room.

He lies on the couch like a patient. Thank *God* it was after school. I could tell he wanted a long visit. So far I have kept his “therapy” sessions a secret from all my loved ones, but recently because of the Exemplar officials nosing their way into our business teachers from around the building are finding reasons to stop by needing healing hands from Mama Wallenda. Christ, the school system is in a shambles.

I sit in my ergonomically correct swivel chair which that lovely man in the computer department unearthed for me and drink my jasmine tea.

“I’ve decided that Jason will be my *de facto* professional development instructor. He’ll work closely with Janine Jeffries until the end of the year. Get people used to the fact that he’ll be official next year. Janine has told me all along that she wanted to be a trainer for new teachers. Now she tells me that she’s accepted a position at a private school.”

“Big of you, McKenzie. Big of you. You’ve decided to call bullshit on Paulie, damn the consequences.”

“Right,” he managed.

Then he abruptly, I mean *abruptly*, got up and left.

I sipped my tea and wondered what he meant by *de facto*. Gronk was becoming a political beast in the political jungle.

## Chapter 39

Jason had written down Paulie's address from the teacher's manual, put his phone in a reinforced manilla envelop, then dropped it into a mailbox after midnight the day he absconded it to removed the photos.

He waited a couple of days after he talked to Gronk then went to Paulie's room where he caught him sitting behind his desk working at his computer.

"I don't have anything to say to you Foxx, so get the fuck out of my room."

Jason cocked his head as he pulled up a student chair so he could sit directly across from him.

"I'll call the SRO," Paulie said. "I swear to God." He had hands on the edge of his desk as if to push himself off.

What was different, Jason thought. He stared at him.

"What's with the Hitler haircut?" he asked Paulie.

His black ferret eyes searched Jason's face.

"You came in here to mock me?"

“I came in here to ask you have you checked the photos in your iPhone.”

“How do you know about my phone?”

“Have you checked it?”

“Of course I’ve checked it.” He glanced down at it which sat next to his keyboard.

“No you haven’t. Check your phone for the photos you took of McKenzie and Angel Brown.”

He snatched up his phone and thumbed the photos app.

“You stole my phone and erased my photos.” He set his jaw. “I have them backed up.”

“No you don’t,” he said.

“I’m filing a police report. You stole my phone.”

“Prove it.”

“I’ll prove it. How did you know about those pictures, you son of a bitch? Gronk McKenzie and I came to an agreement.”

“I found out about those pictures because of your big mouth. But let’s not get caught in the weeds. You can’t squeeze Gronk and Angel any more, now can you?”

“I’m going to the SRO. You stole my phone.”

“Did I? It’s sitting right there. Who’ll believe you? Listen, it’s starting to get late in the year. You line up any other schools yet? I hear Westcox Middle School is looking for a teacher.” Westcox was notorious for its chaotic environment. Teachers didn’t stay there long.

Paulie picked up his phone and left. Jason thought he would turn around and come back, but he didn’t. Jason shut the door behind him but left the lights on hoping no student would wander in when Paulie was gone.

After school he caught Julie as she carried her bike down the stairs. He stepped outside with her.

“Thanks again for your help,” he said. “Getting me into The Network, then snatching the phone, then going to Prateek.”

“We make it happen,” she said. “You’re in now.”

“I saw Paulie today. We had a nice discussion. He hadn’t figured out the photos were gone, but we got to that. I think he’s been neutralized.”

She put on her helmet.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” she said.

“Why do you say that?”

“The Paulies of the world, they don’t have anything to lose. We need to keep an eye on him.”

She got on her bike and wheeled out of the lot onto the street behind the school building.

## Chapter 40

He kept it to himself, but he couldn't have been happier to see the Exemplar monitors come into the building to note what was in place and to get a sense of what needed changing for next year.

And best news, Gronk had pulled him aside after their chat on the track and told him, hush, hush, that he was de facto PDI. He should meet with Janine as often as he could, then step into the position next year.

When he told Julie Wang, she said, "I thought you already were de facto PDI. I'm suspicious."

He wasn't. He tried to get to know the Exemplar people even though they were stand-offish. He found one woman more open than some of the others after she visited his American History class. She liked what she saw. His students had chosen topics about America between the Depression and World War two. For each of the topics, they generated inquiry questions. They would then choose how to display their knowledge--essay, discussion, verbal

summation using PowerPoint, a video, or whatever other means they wanted. He had created a peer review sheet in which students assessed each other.

He and she stood outside his door as students passed through the hallway. She asked about him. He told her it looked like he would be the PDI next year.

She waved over another Exemplar monitor as he looked at a floor plan and considered where to go next.

His monitor told him that she just saw Foxx's excellent lesson then described it.

The forty-something man with the dome of his head in the rounded shape of a lightbulb and a severe, thin lipped mouth nodded. "Good news, finally," he said.

"Are you seeing what you need to here?" he asked him.

"I'm seeing what I'm seeing. This school is characteristic of many schools in the system. It needs to enter the 21st century. Still too much teacher control. And your infrastructure here for computers and tablets is abysmal," he continued. "They'll get it wifi-ed over the summer."

"How much discretion do you have in hiring new staff?" Jason asked.

"A broad range," Lightbulb said, "after the first year of implementation. People need to want to be part of the Exemplar team. You're in or you're out. There's no in-between."

"We're still very much in the evaluation stage," the one who monitored his class said.

"Okay," Jason said. A broad range when it came to hiring new staff? The first he heard. If they could hire new staff, that meant they could let people go they didn't like.

He made it a point to hunt down the Exemplar people when he found out they were in the building so he could talk to them. They regarded Central South as a hard nut.

One late morning he found Lightbulb looking at his watch near the math classrooms. Classes were in session. Hallways were empty.

Two people approached after walking up the far stairway, the king and queen of the Exemplar monitors for the entire school system, Tom Ricks and Barbara Cunningham. They smiled at Paulie Rastik who happened to pass them as walked toward Lightbulb and Jason. Paulie turned to examine them in their wake.

Lightbulb made introductions.

“Hey,” Tom Ricks said. “I hear you’ll be the new PDI next year. Congratulations.” His smile urged others to smile.

Barbara Cunningham said, “That’s quite an honor. PDI’s are crucial to the implementation of the Exemplar school philosophy. In five years there won’t be any more Status schools. You will be part of the vanguard of transformation within the school system. I hope you realize the critical and meaningful role you will play.” She stared at him. He wondered if she were putting him on with all the high wattage language.

Tom Ricks said, “We want growth and expansion of a new philosophy of teaching. We want the dramatic change to happen. We’ve had enough of the slow buildup. We want change, baby,” he smiled. “Change, man.” He almost pulled off the middle-aged cool guy in a suit act. It was almost self-deprecating enough. But Jason felt he should play it straight. He was onboard with the change, baby, but these three gave off carnivorous vibrations.

“We want change agents in schools so that students can be change agents,” Lightbulb said. “Think about student investigators who gain knowledge credibility as they become drivers of their own educational experiences.”



“Think about graduating young masters. *Masters* of their learning. Isn’t that what it should be about?” Barbara Cunningham asked.

He found himself nodding. He found himself picturing next year walking the halls knowing he would be a change-agent in helping Central South become a 21st Century school. Starship Exemplar. He woke up from his fantasizing to the grinning face of Tom Ricks.

“Yes,” Tom Ricks said. “You see it, don’t you?”

He nodded. He started grinning himself. Then like a telescope coming into focus, he zoomed in on four teachers with Paulie standing cross-armed at the far end of the hallway scowling at him and the Exemplar people.

## Chapter 41

He arrived early for the monthly faculty meeting. He passed through the security gate as he entered the library and said hello to Aileen the librarian who didn't respond. He found a table and opened his laptop. Across the room, two 9th grade counselors sat together. He watched them while his computer powered up. Neither looked his way, though he wanted to catch their eye and wave. At the end of the year pot luck last year he sat next to them and cracked them up with his imitations of famous celebrities.

For the first time since the observation when his school-world tilted off axis, he felt like he had ground under his feet. He knew he would be coming back to Central South next year, as the PDI and the Humanities teacher.

He searched the web for a project for his World History class. His students had been curious about how people could follow dictators.

"No one's telling me what to do," one of them said. "I don't care what everybody else is thinking."

“Somebody like Stalin,” a girl said, “he would get on my nerves. I wouldn’t pay him no mind.”

He wished he could get them to make connections between monetary policy and fear and the collective sense of being aggrieved as the petri dish that allowed a demagogue to flourish.

After a while, he looked up from his computer screen. The room had filled with faculty, but no one had sat at his table. Julie Wang wouldn’t have purposefully avoided him. He searched her out and saw that she and the English department head and other English teachers pointed at a monitor and talked shop.

Celine Wallender hobbled in late using a cane and plunked herself down in the first seat at the first table by the doorway and fanned her face with a folded agenda.

He had worked individually with so many of them over the years. Some had written him thank you notes. Many had texted or emailed him with thanks and praise. But except for the vote of confidence from McKenzie that he was de facto PDI, he hadn’t returned to their good graces since the Paulie generated whispering campaign and the anti-Exemplar school sentiment had amplified. No one said anything, of course, but the temperature drop when he entered the faculty lounge or the reluctance of teachers willing to work with him--he had, after all, truly been the de facto PDI for a long time--told him what he needed to know.

He watched the stragglers come into the library, glance around for table, see four open chairs at his, then choose to squeeze in somewhere else.

Mikey Esposito came through the door and looked around. He saw Jason diligently typing. He approached.

“You here?” he said loudly. “I thought you’d be playing with your Exemplar buddies.” People shifted glances his way. “Yeah, those people need a drink. Loosen up a little bit. Take them out on the town with Roland”--Richard Roland, the seventy year old counselor--”get your boogie on.”

“Get your boogie on?” Jason swatted back at him.

“Roland will explain,” Mikey said. “Right Roland?”

Richard Roland sat at the table behind Foxx.

“What?” Roland said. “What?”

“Yeah,” Esposito said. “You’ll have a good time.”

Mikey walked over to where Karl Marx sat. Marx said something to Mikey and they both laughed.

McKenzie came into the room two minutes late for the meeting, and right after him came Paulie Rastik. Rastik walked in with shoulders squared, a departure from his usual ferret-like scanning of the room. He stood to the side while Gronk McKenzie laid out papers at the lectern, looked about, then chose to sit with Jason. Karl Marks and Mikey Esposito smirked.

“Hi buddy,” Paulie said. He tapped his top pocket, then his body, then his pants pockets. He looked into his shoulder bag. “Oh,” he said. “Here it is. I thought somebody stole my phone there for a minute.”

Jason watched him. He tried to make his face expressionless.

Gronk McKenzie cleared his throat and greeted everyone. He gave a quick state-of-the-school overview of Central South, but wanted, he said, to allow time for questions now that people from the Exemplar Schools office had been so present in the school.

“We’ll take care of some housekeeping duties, then get to it.”

Upcoming meetings were announced, particulars connected with the system-wide tests in May, and schedules for final exams after that. Teachers from various departments reminded the staff about field trips. One of the admin assistants was scheduled to have hand surgery next week. “I’m asking for your patience in advance,” McKenzie said.

Before school let out for summer, workmen would be wiring the school and hanging routers in every rooms for wireless internet connections. They would work after the students left the day, but they needed to have access to everyone’s room. Other issues were discussed.

“Okay,” McKenzie then said. “What are your concerns about the Exemplar business?”

Jason listened and took notes since he and McKenzie would be working closely next year. He suspected they would meet during the summer to hammer out a plan for professional development. Maybe they would consider a school-wide book study.

After a while, Paulie raised his hand.

“The English department plans to digitalize some of its texts next year. Will all of them be available on Android, Windows, and OS platforms?”

The English department chair, Marjorie Smith, answered him. She had been to a workshop recently that addressed that issue. Yes, the digital texts would be compatible with all devices out there in the market place.

Paulie's follow up question: "What if students don't have mobile devices and finding reading off their computers cumbersome?"

Various teachers chimed in. Some of their texts were scheduled to be available only online and that was causing headaches for them, too. Discussion ensued.

Jason played the part of the dutiful de facto PDI by taking notes for later discussion with Gonk, but he was dry-mouthed. Paulie had thrown out a question concerning next year which McKenzie fielded and engaged the entire staff. Foxx checked the room. There were no raised eyebrows between people, no perplexed expressions.

Why would Paulie think he was coming back next year? At the moment the thought popped into Jason's head, Paulie turned and chucked a wink at him.

Jason went into a mental fuzz bubble. He focused on the sound of Gronk McKenzie's voice then the individual teachers who responded to questions. He tried to establish a position on the autistic spectrum where he was guided by the blinking blue light of a single voice. He couldn't manage a global understanding. Maybe that would come later.

He did well for thirty minutes, then leakage happened when Paulie stood up and spoke about creating a committee that would meet with the Exemplar people from headquarters to act as an intermediary to facilitate establishing the Exemplar model in their school.

"Mr. McKenzie," Paulie said. "As much as it was necessary from their point of view to come into our school to take its measure, I feel that we haven't properly been introduced to what they're doing. I think that if you're asking us to agree to a culture change in the building, we need a way to facilitate that."

Teachers applauded.

Foxx looked at Gronk who cocked his head as if listening to a visiting dignitary.

“I agree, Mr. Rastik,” Gronk said. “That was my fault. I should have brought all of you together and introduced them so that they could tell you what they had planned for their visits instead of informing you by emails. I apologize for that. Water under the bridge. If people want to form a committee to meet with them before school starts in September, that would be fine. Rastik, why don’t you pass around a signup sheet. We’ll see who signs up then go from there. Maybe you want to head that committee.”

Discussion continued, but the main issues had been addressed. Within ten minutes Gronk thanked everyone then closed the meeting.

Jason stayed focused on his notes. He couldn’t make his legs move to leave, but that served him because he didn’t want to join his fellow teachers who joked with one another or shared last minutes thoughts from the meeting. He hoped to slink back to his room unnoticed.

“Foxx,” Gronk McKenzie said across the room to him. No one else lingered in the library. “I saw you typing the whole time. Taking notes?”

“Yes,” he said. “I thought it would be good to keep a running journal of issues connected with our turning into an Exemplar school next year. If I write it down, I can refer to it if it comes up again. That way we don’t need to revisit the same issues over and over.”

“Well, okay, if you feel it’s necessary.” He put his notes into a manilla folder. “You got a minute?”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“Come on up,” he said. “Take a seat here.”

Jason kept his computer open and joined McKenzie at a table at the front of the library near the lectern.

Gronk sat then hiked his leg so it rested on a chair next to him.

“We got a whole new ball of wax next year with this Exemplar business. A whole new ball of wax.”

“Right,” Jason said. “I think it will be the best thing that could have happened to this school.”

“They’ve been working the numbers for Exemplar schools. They realize if they want successful implementation, they can’t drain staff. Just doesn’t work. All of us Exemplar principals were told at a meeting yesterday that we don’t have to make cuts.”

“That’s great,” Jason said. A weird humming vibrated in his ears.

“Yes sir, it is. So we’re not going the Humanities route.”

“No? A Humanities class would be an innovation. Put you on the map.”

“We’ll be up to our necks in innovation next year. Maybe somewhere down the road.”

“Okay,” he said. Was that an earthquake he felt? He glanced around the room. He remembered the earthquake that hit Maryland a few years ago. No books fell off the bookshelves, as happened last time. He came back to McKenzie who stared at him.

“You all right?” he said.

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay, I see us maintaining current staff at the teacher levels. And they’re talking about allowing us to hire some Instructional Assistants.”

“Okay, would the PDI help manage the IA’s?”



“No,” he said. “Why would you think that?”

“The PDI is your eyes and ears in classroom. I could put them where they’re needed most.”

“It’s an idea.” He tapped a pencil. Nodded. “I like the way Paulie Rastik stepped up just now in the meeting. That’s the kind of thing I want you on top of if you’re PDI next year.”

“I thought Paulie was out of here.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. The kid showed promise this year.”

“Mr. McKenzie, do I need to remind you that he’s been blackmailing you with pictures he took while you were galavanting around with your girlfriend?”

“Galavanting? That’s what we were doing?”

He threw up his hands. “We’re talking past each other. Paulie Rastik has done everything he could to make me look bad the entire school year, ever since you announced that I would take the Humanities position and Marjorie decided that she would cut him loose from the English department. He nearly ruined my observation lesson in the fall after I asked him for help.”

“I didn’t know that, Foxx. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because it was nothing but crap between two teachers. And how would I prove it? He got that girl to say I sexually harassed her. He spread rumors that I’m the one who pushed you into making this an Exemplar school. Not to mention, he tried to blackmail you.” He thrust his face forward. “It’s bad, McKenzie. He tried to ruin my reputation in the school.”

“I don’t know about all that.”

“Ask people what they think about me being the PDI for next year, see what response you get. Until this year, I had a tight professional relationship with everyone. Now? Half of them won’t look at me.”

“A PDI has got to have everyone’s trust. It’s critical to the position.”

“Why don’t you get that guy out of here? He doesn’t do anything but cause trouble. Ask Marjorie Smith about Rastik.”

“We’ve got forty teachers on the staff, Foxx. Not everybody will get along. No, I see a role for Rastik next year. He’s part of the team.”

“He tried to blackmail you!”

“We’ve had a few discussions since then, and I believe that we’ve settled the accounts.”

“In other words, he came and kissed your rear end, and you’re letting him stay.”

“Don’t forget you’re talking to the principal, Foxx.” He sniffed. “Rastik’s had a rough few years. Let’s give him a chance.”

“Paulie Rastik is a cancer in this school. He will undermine the changes necessary for this to become an Exemplar. Mark my words.”

McKenzie touched fingertips together to make his hands into a globe.

“Foxx, Rastik told me you have the photos of Angel and me.”

“I told you I had them.”

“Well, he reminded me. I’d like those back.”

“Well, well, well.”

“You stole his phone.” He shook his head. “I don’t need to tell you about the legal ramifications.”

“Nobody can prove I took that phone.”

With nostrils flared, he said, “I need to have absolute trust in the PDI, Foxx. I want those pictures, and I need to know that you don’t have copies.”

Jason closed his computer lid.

“I need to know that Paulie will be out of here next year. The Exemplar monitors told me the principal will have broad powers of discretion with staffing. Exercise that power.”

“You know as well as I do, that kicks in after year one. I can’t push him out the door. He’s got tenure.”

“Pull him up short then. I need to know you’ve got my back.”

“You’re in a schoolyard fight. That’s your business. I want those photos.” He swung his leg off the chair then stood. “Why don’t we consider your PDI position suspended until I get the photos. Does that work for you?” He left the library.

Jason picked up his computer and carried it like a large book back to his classroom.

He looked at his empty room. It seemed vacant of personality, as if he’d popped into someone else’s classroom and couldn’t get a fix on who the person was who taught the class. He put down his laptop and checked his watch.

Maybe, he thought, he could sit down with the devil, Merrick Spintz, and get his advice on turning the tide.

## Chapter 42

He strode the stairs by twos up to the third floor hallway where the math classrooms were.

Merrick Sprintz and Paulie used to be running buddies. But he'd seen them avoid one another in the office and sit far from each other during staff development and PD meetings. Yes, he could join forces with Merrick, and wrench Paulie out of his socket.

From the end of the hallway he could see that Merrick's door was open, as were two others down near the stairway. The combination locks hanging from locker doors stared like mechanical eyeballs witnessing his slow walk into the lair of the dark gnome, Merrick. He stopped before he turned into the room then retreated.

He couldn't make a pact with Sprintz.

He walked down the stairs and headed back to his classroom. He considered stopping in the staff lounge, which he avoided except for coffee refills and trips to the refrigerator where he kept snacks, but nearing the entrance to that room, he thought, no, I can't absorb any more looks or whispered comments.

What had he done wrong? He couldn't seem to surface, to take a deep breath of air.

Mikey Esposito came out of the lounge right as Jason swerved away. He stuffed caramel corn in his mouth from a red and white striped bag.

He tilted the open bag to Jason. Jason waved him off.

"You sure?" he said.

Mikey tipped it up and let the remains slide into his mouth then threw it in a hallway trashcan. He slurped water from the fountain then wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"You got to be glad we got Exemplar status," he said to Jason.

"It'll be good for the school." Jason wanted to avoid engagement. He walked. Mikey moved right up next to him.

"You think McKenzie's right for the job? The Exemplar office, you know they can get their own principal in here, don't you? Everything's on the table with this Exemplar move."

"They can bring in their own principal? I never heard that." He stopped. They leaned shoulders against the wall near a corner of the hallway.

Mikey saw Jason watch an interior movie on an out of sight sidescreen.

"Yeah," Mikey said, alert. "And I think we need to make sure to get the guy in here who will introduce the Exemplar business in the right way."

"McKenzie wants it to happen."

"But is he the right guy?" Mikey said. "Listen, let's go up to my dojo. You got too many people hanging from the eaves, you know what I mean?"

They went to A-wing. Mikey unlocked his door, stepped in, and flicked on the light. While Jason's room seemed vacant when he went into it, Mikey's seemed occupied by an

irresponsible thirteen year old. And what was that smell? He must have gone to the store and bought chicken wings with vinegary barbecue sauce. On his desk was scattered Almond Joy and Milky Way candy bars and packets of Goobers and a small plastic jar of sour fruit balls. Twisted and torn cellophane candy wrappers lay on the desktop and nearby floor. Student desks were jumbled about the room in no order, as if a large person had walked through haphazardly pushing them aside. Laptops were open on some desks. From the unlocked computer cart, power cords unplugged to computers spilled out like entrails. The posters had nothing to do with science. Three were of MMA champions. One had a provocative woman with a milk moustache stretching her arm up the side of a person size milk carton shooting the camera a smoldering look. The caption read, “Milk makes me happy.”

Various assignment papers lay on the floor or the shelf near the window. Notebooks were jammed into desks. Books had been tossed onto shelves unstacked.

“It took a lot of effort to clean this place up. But it’s ship-shape now.”

Jason laughed.

They sat in student chairs at desks.

“Why wouldn’t he be the right guy?” Jason said. He turned sharply to his left. A mouse ran across the floor then disappeared into a hole in the wall beneath the chalk board.

“I’m a biology teacher,” Mikey said. “He’s part of the local fauna. I was hoping it’d crawl up Grant’s leg when she was in here. But McKenzie. I don’t know if he’s the wrong guy or the right guy. I just don’t think he’s got enough experience. Get an old hand in here. Maybe we can ask the Exemplar higher ups if we can help choose the principal.”

“Doubt that’s going to happen,” Jason said. “Especially the first year.”

“Let’s say we find a way to get McKenzie to leave on his own.”

“How’s that supposed to work?”

Mikey studied Jason who, he could tell, tried not to signal any emotion. But Mikey saw his eyes widen.

“I think we need to get Paulie to release some photos he’s got. I don’t want to see the man lose his livelihood, but I don’t need to be somebody’s project, either.”

“Explain.”

“They got me on that P3 and--”

Esposito was the most unprofessional teacher he had ever met. Not even close. But his art of portraying himself as the victim was masterful. “What’s that stand for again? I can never remember.”

“Professional performance plan. I’m finding out that once you’re on it, it’s a bitch getting off. It’s like committing a felony. You do your time, then you do your time after you do your time.”

Over the loudspeaker came an announcement by the admin assistant that someone’s car was blocking access to the dumpster.

“I thought I could wrap that P3 shit up by the end of this year. Found out it goes into next year, too. Who needs the flak?”

McKenzie had queered his guarantee on the PDI position next year. Even if he gave the photos to him, would that make McKenzie happy? Would he make him PDI?

Maybe Mikey had the solution. Maybe he should release the photos and create enough havoc that McKenzie got the boot. Paulie could squeal all he wanted about not doing it, but who

would believe him? Mikey and Karl Marks would let everyone know that Paulie took the photos. He could stand by innocently while Paulie crashed into a mountainside.

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves. Tell me about the photos.”

“Don’t play dumb. I told Julie Wang the whole story, and you two, I’ve seen you whispering together. She told you.”

“Okay,” he said. “Guilty. They were of McKenzie and Brown at the Ikea. Those photos?”

“Those photos,” he said. “Seems like Paulie managed to get himself on McKenzie’s good side. Looks like he’s staying. But I think it’s a waste letting ripe evidence like that sit there.”

“You think if we release the photos--what you want to tweet them out?--McKenzie will go away?”

He watched Mikey watch him. Mikey Esposito wore the exterior of a clown and a witless teacher, but meantime, he’d scored tenure status. And shrewdly he conferred with McKenzie, and previous principals, before his observations, found out what they wanted, and grooved his lessons accordingly.

He had a side business selling t-shirts, hats, and other sports paraphernalia at Ravens and Orioles games, and Foxx found out through the grapevine that he made good money.

Mikey grinned--he had a wide face and a bowl jaw--but he set his eyes on Jason.

“Maybe,” Mikey said. “I want the whole bunch of them distracted.” He nodded his head, smiled, nodded some more. He shook his finger at Jason. “You’re a slick cat, you know that.”

Jason posted an unwavering expressionless expression.

“You got the pictures from Rastik, and you were going to keep them all to yourself.”

“Rastik should have kept his mouth shut.”



“Rastik, he’s a loser. You know he got kicked out of a school in another county before he came over here, right? Then he got pushed out of two more schools. He’s one of these guys causes himself all sorts of problems. Stay away from a guy like Rastik. You keep him in play because he’s got that hungry look, like he wants to be on the team but doesn’t know what position to play? Right? But you stand back and let him get in his car wrecks. You don’t go along with a guy like that. But anyway, guy like you. You’re a do-gooder. It’s your thing.”

“It’s not just a *thing*, Mikey.”

He put up his hands. “Whoa there, tiger. I respect your business, is all I’m saying. But you got something I could use, and I’m wondering how we can make this work for both of us.”

“I like to keep things above board, Mikey. You work the P3, you’ll get out from under it before you know it.”

“I saw you and McKenzie talking in the library after the meeting. I kept myself out of sight.” He bobbed his head. “You didn’t look happy. What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. We’re in a negotiation is all.”

“Oh, yeah? What are you negotiating?”

“That’s between McKenzie and me. Better let it stay that way.”

“Really. My business is all out on the table, and you’re not showing me yours?” More nodding, more grinning. “You know what? He didn’t look happy and you didn’t look happy. You want that PDI job, I know you do. Janine’s leaving and McKenzie’s holding it from you for some reason. Yeah, that’s it. That’s it.” He looked to the ceiling. “Yes. He holding it from you because he knows you got the pictures, right? He knows you got the pictures.”

Jason turned palms up.

“And you’re busting his balls for some reason. Why are you busting his balls? You give him the pictures he gives you the PDI position. You’re a natural for it. But there’s a hangup isn’t there. What’s the hangup? What do you want? What is it you want?”

Jason got up to leave. “Been nice talking with you, Mikey.”

He stepped toward the door.

Mikey sang:

“All around the mulberry bush,  
The monkey chased the weasel.  
The monkey stopped to pull up his sock,  
Pop goes the weasel.”

Jason Foxx couldn’t help himself. He laughed.

“What do I want, Mikey?”

“You want to be the shiniest penny in the drawer.”

“Okay,” he said. “What preventing that from happening?”

Jason sat on a student desk. He and Mikey Esposito, he could make it work. He could turn around this anti-Jason business with the right guy. Mikey placed bets on horses with Roland and Warner, and right this minute Mikey wanted to place a bet on him.

Mikey rubbed his chin. He grinned and eyed Jason down the length of his face.

“You want Paulie Rastik put in his place.”

Jason nodded. “You’re getting there.”

“You want Paulie Rastik out of this school, don’t you? You want him out of here. Don’t you want that?” He clapped his hands.

“I wouldn’t mind if he found himself another job somewhere in another school.”

“No,” he said. “You want him to pay. He did you dirty this year, and you want him to pay.”

“Yes, I want him gone,” he said. “Let’s not worry about making him pay.”

“You and me, we can help each other,” he said.

Karl Marks  
IEP Chairman  
Rm 111

I'm no fan of any of them. I want people to leave me alone to my special ed duties. Let me go to the damn meetings. Work up the IEPs. Push paper. Make phone calls.

Mikey comes up here after he talks with Jason Foxx. Everybody is stirred up about Central South becoming an Exemplar school, but not that guy. He's working angles. At this point I say let the Exemplar thing happen. What's the big deal? There's schools all over the county that are turning Exemplar. You don't think headquarters got their hands full taking care of business? How much attention are they giving us next year?

Mikey comes in here laughing and joking saying he's got Foxx in play. I half listen to him, but I got paperwork to get to.

## Chapter 43

“You like strays, don’t you?” John said. “How many cats you plan to adopt in the next three to five years.”

“No, two is enough.”

They drove up I-83 to his uncle’s farm an hour’s ride north of Baltimore.

“How many children will you adopt?”

“Ten,” she said. “Then have five of my own.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me a bit,” he said. “I am surprised the number is so low. You feel like getting off and going to the Amish market?”

“No,” she said. “I feel like shooting guns today. Let’s get to it.”

“Foxx is one of your strays. You adopting him, too?”

“Paperwork is in.”

“You think he’s out of the woods?”

“Not even close. I’d say it’s 50-50 on whether or not he returns next year.”

“Really? That bad?”

“Paulie Rastik is a low burn fire that’s gone underground. Jason thinks he’s extinguished it.”

They had left the orbit of the metropolitan area. On both sides of the freeway spread horse farms and growths of maple and elm and beech trees. Deer had acclimated to sounds of cars and trucks hurtling north and south and pointed their long faces into the sunlight from their shadowed world beneath the dense leaves.

“What kind of handguns you have?” she said.

“SIG Sauer P250 and your tried and true Glock 19. My uncle’s got a couple of rifles and a shotgun he’ll let us use. You said you never fired a gun before, right.”

“That’s right,” she said.

“It’s fun. Something about shooting the hell out of tin cans or targets gets me back to point zero. It’s meditation with loud noises.”

She looked out the window.

“Not to mention it will take your mind off of school and your adopted son, Jason Foxx.”

“It’s like tracking a tsunami that starts a thousand miles away,” she said. “You watch it and you know he won’t get his boat to dock before he gets creamed.”

“Why do you think he doesn’t see it?”

She pulled up her legs and sat cross-legged. “I don’t know. I’ve warned him that he needs to keep an eye out.”

“That’s all you can do.”

## Chapter 44

While Jason Foxx taught his World History class on Tuesday afternoon of May 1st, Mikey Esposito came to his door.

“Mr. Foxx, you said you had a book for me?”

Foxx sat working with a student at a desk well away from the classroom door.

“It’s right in my closet,” he said, “on the shelf.”

Esposito stepped into the closet with the sliding doors and plucked Foxx’s phone off the shelf, stuck it in his pocket, and grabbed the book it had been sitting on.

“Thanks,” he said.

Foxx wanted to be able to deny that he had sent the photos to Esposito. Esposito said he didn’t have a problem with that. He would take care of it. I’ll cover your tracks, he said. No worries.

Foxx had made sure to keep back-ups of all photos. He also deleted all other photos from his phone so Foxx couldn’t get hold of anything personal. Mikey agreed to forward the pictures to himself then return the phone. It will take less than three minutes, he said.

True to his word he came back and said to him across the room, “Thanks, I photocopied what I needed from the book.” He stepped back into the closet, deposited the book and the phone, then left.

Jason sauntered over to the closet during the lesson and saw that his phone sat on the shelf.

Near the end of the lesson, he froze. What if Esposito forwarded the photos from his phone to McKenzie with some sort of threatening message? What if he forwarded them to the superintendent? What if he tweeted them out? Jason had forgotten to uninstall his twitter app.

Between periods he checked his phone. Nothing had been sent from his email account except to Esposito’s email. Nothing sent out on twitter. He breathed. He had taken up with criminals and outliers. Why had he even begun that?

He got through the rest of the day in a gloom. He didn’t belong in Mikey’s world, the world Paulie Rastik aspired to. He belonged to the world of do-gooders and helpers and professional developers. The kind of teachers other teachers rolled their eyes at. but somebody they could trust. Now, Mikey Esposito had something on him.

He called Adele on his way home. He wanted to confess. Adele didn’t pick up.

Esposito and Marks would start inviting him out to card games and horse races. They would insist that he was one of them now. If he didn’t come along, no telling what they could do with those photos, right Jason? Mikey got them from your phone. Maybe you were the one who took them in the first place. How do we know? You said they were on Rastik’s phone, but were they?



Listen, Jason would counter, Rastik told McKenzie and you guys that he took the pictures himself.

Details, Esposito and Marks would say. Blood in, blood out. You start giving either of us grief as teachers while you're PDI, we make it known to everyone you wanted Mikey to get those pictures from you and work McKenzie, work Paulie, work whoever you could so you could get the PDI slot.

Jason pulled the car into a gas station to collect himself. The tank was full, so he edged into a parking place near the front door of the mini mart. His shirt was damp. He looked at his freaked out eyes in the mirror.

And you know what else, Foxx, he could hear them say. I took a video of Mkey transferring the pictures from your phone onto his phone. Yeah, I did. You're in our pocket Foxx. So, call up your girlfriend and tell her you're going to the titty bar with us and you are commanded to have a good time.

A sharp knock on his driver's side window.

"Ah!" he yelled. He rolled down the window. "What the fuck are you doing sneaking up on me like that?"

The middle aged woman tilted her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Foxx. Are you okay?"

He got out of the car. She backed up.

He tried to place her. Then, click.

"Hello, Ms. Graham. Gosh, I'm sorry." She was the mother of a one of his students. He and several other teachers recently had a conference with her and her son Gary who had been

coming into school stoned and sleeping through his classes. “I just heard some bad news,” he lied. “I’m...” He flopped his hands down.

“That’s quite all right. It happens.” She stared at him. She had her story for the day. “How is Gary doing since we last talked?”

“Better,” he lied again. At the moment, he couldn’t locate Gary’s performance within the hive activity of all of his students. “Would you send me an email reminding me of us bumping into one another so I can check on his grades and give you an update on him?”

“Sure,” she said, examining him. “I sure will.” She touched his arm. “Thank you for being so kind to Gary. For being such a genuinely good teacher. I know you want the best for him.”

She walked around the front of her car next to his, snuck a last look at him, got in then drove away.

He should go to McKenzie right now and make a clean break. Who cared about the consequences? McKenzie would have ammunition to give him all the rowdy kids next year, maybe even squeeze him out of the school in a way Jason wished he would do with Paulie. But that was all right. He would start new someplace. Create a rep for being a good teacher, an informal mentor, an advocate for students. Since Status Schools were on their way out and Exemplar School on their way in, he could find a way to become a PDI somewhere else.

But what if Gronk tainted him with a bad rep? No, he needed to find a way to redeem himself at Central South High.

## Chapter 45

On Friday, he went to Janine's office on the first floor. Odd how schools were made up of little neighborhoods within the building itself. He rarely went by her room because it was outside the path of his routine stops.

He'd sent her an email the day before saying he would drop by during his planning period.

He knocked on the door then opened it. Her office was in a cubby which contained her desk and a file cabinet. It sat within the larger resource room--holding desks and chairs, the laminator, a photocopier, and three computers--where teachers could work collaboratively with Janine outside their classrooms. She could meet with teachers in groups of ten or fewer.

She came out of her office and they sat at desks.

She looked like a frontier woman. Big boned with a big gregarious laugh. She raised four children by three different men and laughed at herself and the world for providing such a bountiful life.

"Jason," she said. "How the hell are you?"

She had too much black hair that fell over her shoulders, too much stuff crammed into her huge pocketbook, and too many text and email messages coming at her full time. She eyed her smartphone constantly.

“I wanted to check in with you since it’s getting to be the end of the year,” he said. “I’ve been sort of told I’ll be the PDI next year.”

“Why are you equivocating, boy?” she said. She texted a short message then looked up at him. “Goddamned, just go ahead and grab the goddamned thing.”

“McKenzie’s not sure he should anoint me.” He would spare her the drama about the photographs. Since he had allowed Mikey to send them to himself yesterday, he, too, was sparing himself the drama of thinking about them. He knew he would be teaching here next year. Go ahead and let someone else be PDI, McKenzie, if you think he or she can do a better job. I’ll look around for a PDI job somewhere else, or better yet double down on my courses needed to get my administrative certification.

“Yeah, well,” she said. “I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“I thought you were avoiding me.”

“That’s for them other non-entities. I don’t avoid anyone. People have been throwing shit at you Jason. What the hell you been up to to get everyone so riled up?” She punched him in the shoulder.

“I wish I could tell you.”

She put hand to thigh and leaned toward him. “Sometimes you step in it and just stink.” She leaned back and laughed. “But who gives a shit about any of that.”

“I wanted to come down here and go through your schedule with you. You’ve been PDI for a couple of years now, and I’m hoping to be prepared if McKenzie wants to meet over the summer.”

“Well aren’t you the go-getter.” She looked at her dinging phone.

“Are you a drug dealer?” he asked.

“I got so many goddamned kids and ex-husbands who think they need to be in touch every minute of the day. But you know what, son? I wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, let me get my laptop out here and I’ll show you a few things.”

They worked hard. The bell sounded signalling end of the period which caught him unawares. Before hustling up to his room, he said he would come again tomorrow.

## Chapter 46

Mikey wondered if he could put Julie back into play. He had the photos now from Jason.

He could say to her, “Look, Julie, I want to do the right thing by Jason who we all know is the kind of guy that the school needs, the kind of guy all schools need when you think about it.”

Yeah, that was good. He liked the right thing approach. It would make him look sincere in retrospect, when he first made a play for her.

She liked Jason and if she knew that he thought that Jason was the right guy for the PDI spot, then they might create some harmony together.

That child he had coming through the toll gate was starting to concern him. He and his wife, they were getting on each other’s nerves. As he walked out of the building to go to the bar for a quick one before he went home, he checked his cell phone for incoming texts. Nothing. Dry spells were a bitch.

He saw a reminder pop up telling him that he and the wife had some sort of childbirth class at 5:30. Last week, did she say she wanted to have the baby in a birth pool or some damned thing? Like a porpoise or a whale? Did he have that right?

He needed a Julie or a somebody so that she could balance out that home sinkhole which everything seemed to get sucked into.

Not to mention that it pissed him off that McKenzie had a game going on the side and he didn't. What did McKenzie have on him? Being a principal, which, okay, yeah.

McKenzie was old. Mikey had him by eleven years, yet McKenzie was working it with a good looking black woman. Maybe he should make a play for her.

But it got him thinking. He was done being a classroom teacher. He needed to be a principal like McKenzie. He'd have to talk to him about the best route to get there. He didn't need a gold plated certification. He needed to get that cert as quick and clean as possible then work his angles from there. Wonder if he could bribe somebody, get him a cert and make it look legit up in Human Resources. He'd have to do a little digging.

At the bar, he looked around for some possibles, but his heart wasn't in it. Did the bar run a Nobody Special night? He drank his beer and the twenty-two year old good looking frat boy who was the bartender had a smirk on his face like he used to have a smirk on his face when he saw a sod like him sipping on suds pre-5:00 p.m. while scanning a dreary, upscale bar.

He checked his watch again. Might as well as haul it home and work with the wife in the childbirth class. What was he supposed to do? Rent a scuba suit when he was in the birth pool with her and watch the kid exit in a blanket of slime while one of the wife's turds floated to the surface?

While he was looking into the bottom of his glass of the filmy, bubbly, yellowish beer running into his mouth, he realized what he needed to do.

Get Paulie over here, send him back the photos, and urge him to release them right now.

Paulie looked liked he'd been kicked by a mule lately. He'd get him back in the game.

He called. "Listen, Paulie, you need to get over here, brother. You and me, let's cause some damage." He listened. "Okay, but get over here after your pedicure." He checked his watch. Maybe he could catch the end of the class with his wife. Well, probably not.

Paulie showed up in a pair of skinny jeans and ankle high Converse All-Stars with a long sleeve, white Nehru jacket with gold buttons.

Paulie took the seat beside him.

"Where'd you get this?" Mikey said, fingering the jacket.

"A friend was telling me about this group called the Beatles. They went through a Nehru jacket period and I thought, how retro. I love the look."

His eyes sparkled. Finally, Mikey called him to do a guy thing. But he put Dargo on alert for a text message to come and rescue him if things turned awkward.

"Let me buy you a beer."

"No beer," he said. "Too many carbohydrates. How about a spritzer?"

"Whatever the hell that is."

The bartender brought their drinks.



They talked a while. He found out that Paulie had been born in Canada and followed curling. Mikey primed the pump by asking about it but found himself staring into Paulie's face hoping it reflected comprehension. He had no interest.

“Okay, down to business. I got the photos back that you took of McKenzie and Brown. We need to use these to our advantage.”

“Those are my photos. You need to send them to me.”

“I will. I'll do that. But we need to figure out our plan of action.”

“Our plan of action?” Paulie said. “Our? Jason Foxx illegally stole my phone then stole my photos and now you got hold of them and we're supposed to have a plan of action?” His breathed as if he just climbed a long set of stairs. “I want those photos back.”

“Hear me out. We got a gift right here at our fingertips so let's figure out how we can get it working for us. Yes, us. I got the photos right here on my phone so technically they're mine right now. I can tell the world I didn't know anything about you taking the pictures. Capisce?”

Paulie wondered if this were the right moment to text Dargo to bail him out. He knew that somehow the pictures would be turned against him and he would have to leave Central South and be put in the pit, as they called it, and wait to be hired by some unknown school, probably some godawful middle school as Jason reminded him.

McKenzie had decided to keep Paulie, but he didn't want Paulie to get too comfortable, so he hadn't given him one-hundred percent reassurance that he would be on staff next year.

“You know I'm on a P3?” he said.

“No, I didn’t know that.” Paulie looked around. The young bartender smiled at him, and for the thousandth time in his life he wondered if the guy wondered if he were gay. Why does everyone think I’m gay?

“And we got the Exemplar business locking us up. I need to get out from under this P3 crap, get everybody’s eyeballs off of me. And you need to know you’ll be re-hired next year, no conditional bullshit. And not only that, I think you should be PDI, not Jason Foxx.” Mikey nodded, luring him into his circle. “Yeah, that needs to happen.”

“I’ve always thought I could be a great presenter.” The stars were aligning. Just last night Dargo told him he could be his own Superman. He just had to believe.

“So we need to go guerrilla. We release the photos which puts McKenzie on the defensive.”

“No,” Paulie said. “That’s no good. You send them back to me and I go to McKenzie. He thinks I don’t have them anymore. I go to him and show them to him and all of a sudden I can start making my own demands.”

“What about me?” Mikey said. “I got the photos.”

Paulie sipped his spritzer through a mini straw. “You, my friend, need to make sure I get the PDI job, then I can help ease your transition out of P3 status.”

Mikey didn’t like Paulie’s comfort level. All of a sudden it’s “my friend”? He wanted Paulie to release the photos and if necessary he could pin them on him while he, himself, could hide beneath the canopy of confusion that they would cause McKenzie and the administrators above him.

“You want to work out a private deal with McKenzie, just you and him?”

“That’s right. That would benefit me and you. If I get the PDI slot then I can make sure that your lesson plans get approved and you and I can work out a schedule where I can have weekly one-on-ones as per the requirements if you’re on a P3.”

Mikey watched him with tilted head. Paulie smiled too much right now. His eyes glittered. Mikey knew that that quick Paulie projected himself into the school as the guy striding the hallways giving people advice, coming up out of his groundhog hole and turning into a school celebrity as the PDI Guy.

No, that wouldn’t work.

Paulie pulled out his phone. “I’ll text you my home email address so you can send them to me.”

“Paulie, you will never get out of double A ball.”

He put twenty dollars down on the counter then strode out of the bar. He checked his watch. He would rush over to the childbirth class, catch the last half-hour, forty-five minutes. Nab some brownie points with his till-death-do-us-part wife, get back home, maybe watch some of the baseball game on TV.

Paulie called Dargo.

“I don’t feel good right now,” he said. “What’s double A ball?”

## Chapter 47

“Hi, Mr. McKenzie, you busy?”

“Actually, Mr. Esposito, I am.”

He wasn't, but Mikey Esposito intimidated him. McKenzie liked that Mikey was now on a P3 because it allowed him the upper hand during observations. Unfortunately, Esposito had tenure and moving him out of the building would be a pain. And now this Exemplar status business was knocking at his door, which was requiring far more paperwork and meetings than he imagined. A spiteful, constitutionally unhappy fellow principal made it a point to tell him that she heard a rumor.

“Just a rumor,” she said putting hands up, don't blame the messenger, “that they were thinking of putting another principal in your school.”

He thanked her for her concern. He called the Executive Assistant to Superintendent who shot it down. But it rattled him.

“I don't want to intrude,” Mikey persisted, “but I need two minutes.”

McKenzie took a long look at the clock above the doorway.

“What’s on your mind. I’m right in the middle of something.”

Mikey pulled out his phone and showed the shot Paulie took of him sitting on the bed in Ikea with Angel. Both of them had guilty teenager expressions.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” he said. He tossed his pen onto his desk top. “Rastik give you those?”

“No, they came to me by a circuitous route.” He eased into a chair.

“When did everybody turn into a weasel? Taking pictures of somebody and his woman?” He shook his head. “My day, you let people be.”

“It’s let’s make a deal time.”

“What’s that?”

“You get me out from under this P3. I’m not the happy-go-lucky guy I used to be. It’s causing me all sorts of problems. Emotionally, that is. Right here.” He banged his hand a couple of times with the thumb side of his fist.

Gronk laughed out loud, as did Mikey.

“You have to work for a living all of a sudden?” Gronk said. “You know as well as I do that I can’t do a thing about your P3 since it was generated by the curriculum instructor.”

“Next best thing then. You give me the PDI position.”

McKenzie looked to the side and shook his head.

“Mikey, there’s not a teacher in this building who deserves it less than you. You have zero credibility as a school leader.”

“Maybe you could help me with that.”

Gronk interlocked fingers and put his hands on top of his head while leaning back in his chair.

“Okay, since we're eating the innards of the same antelope, what's in it for me?”

McKenzie said.

“I understand that principals got their own problems. Like you might get replaced.”

“Not true,” he said. “Not true at all.” But in the back of his mind he saw the Executive Assistant to the Superintendent stroking his signature on a document that allowed a new principal to occupy his desk next year while he got shuffled off to an assistant principal gig.

“Where'd you hear that?”

“All I'm saying is, you, me, we could present a tight team to the higher ups who come sniffing around here. After all, they got their hands full. Why would they want to hassle with replacing a principal when they got a go to guy like yourself who drinks the Exemplar School kool-aid?”

“There's no consideration I'll be replaced.”

Mikey shrugged. “If you say so.”

“So, you have the pictures as does Jason Foxx, correct?”

“Yes,” he said. He knew McKenzie liked definitive answers, but he had no idea who had the pictures at this point.

“You can guarantee me that Paulie no longer possesses them.”

“Guaranteed,” he said. How could he really know?

“Okay, let's say I make you the PDI. What's your next move?”

“You know those Exemplar people who come swarming in here like bats shooting down a chimney?”

He nodded.

“Let’s say my first move is to convince all of them that you need to stay.”

“My job here is not in jeopardy.”

“Well, I’ll help cement the deal. Then what we need to do is get one of those Exemplars to come in here and stand up in front of everybody and get him to give us some fine tooth details about how this thing will roll out.”

Gronk nodded. “I’ve always been a fan of managing a situation,” he said as if to himself.” He looked up. “The PDI is a high profile position. You’re a guy who likes to hide out, get away with murder, go up to the corner bar and laugh about it with all your buddies.” He leveled his eyes on Mikey. “I’m not stupid, Esposito. I’ve had too much on my plate to make the effort to get rid of you, but if you were in the military you would have been court martialed for dereliction of duty.”

Mikey didn’t pause.

“Gronk, let bygones be bygones. I’m ready to open a whole new chapter in my life. All right? Trust me. I’ll do a good job as a PDI. I just need the right venue for my talents. Now that we’re talking about it, I’m more convinced than ever that I’m the right guy. And remember, I got the photos. So let’s make the deal right now.”

“Under one condition. Those photos don’t see the light of day.”

“We’re going to make a great team,” he said. He reached across the desk to shake hands.

Celine Wallenda  
Theater  
Rm 022

You *what?* I said to him. He was lying right over there, right on that couch. He thought he would come in here and get kudos, *kudos* of all things about pulling off the Mikey promotion.

*Mikey Esposito!*

He said it made sense. He *soberly* said that to me and I said Gronk, if you continue in that vein I will have Jordon Torrington (one of my actors who's a weightlifter) come in here and personally strangle you. *I* would do it but I no longer have the arm strength.

"I get to keep Angel, the pictures get buried, and I got someone whose survival depends on staying in my good graces," he said.

"Your *survival* depends on his discretion for God's sake. Are you incapable of any complexity of thought?"

He assured me that it would work out, then swore me to secrecy. He left in a male flourish of straightened back and smug smile.



## Chapter 48

He got a call from Bryson while sitting in Ben's. Bryson told him that he and Elvira planned to get married in the spring. They came over to his house once every couple of weeks for dinner on Sundays, and he often wished Adele were present. But Adele and son Steven went on journeys together on Sundays--downtown, movies, swimming, hiking. She wouldn't cancel one of them for him.

"Hey, congratulations. I'm happy for you."

"I'm starting over," he said. "I'll never go back to the asshole Bryson. I want you to be my best man."

"Sure, of course. I'm honored."

"That's all for now. I've got a job interview to prepare for. Things are looking up."

His brother was getting married. His sister was due in July.

Meantime, he ate like a lonely prisoner by himself in a land of socially adept, happy people.

He bit into his burger made with avocado and tomatoes on homemade bread. Why would anyone want to eat anywhere else? Two couples played darts. Someone leaned on the bar up front and talked to Ben and Bonita and made them laugh. Every table in the restaurant was filled. Waiters and waitress brought out plates of food. Busboys humped gray tubs of dishes and cutlery back to the dishwasher.

McKenzie would give him the PDI slot next year. He would teach a regular social studies class each day, probably a world history and an American government. He would zero in on taking classes so he could become certified as an administrator. He wished he could get Adele and him maneuvering their bumper cars around the pole in the same direction, but otherwise, life was good. No complaints.

His phone buzzed: incoming text. Call me, she said.

“Hey Julie, what’s up?”

“Where are you at right now?”

“At Ben’s. I’m a bachelor so I do things like eat out on Tuesday nights.”

“Hold onto your hat. McKenzie gave the PDI job to Mikey Esposito for next year.”

“That’s not possible,” he said. “That’s got to be a rumor.”

He glanced at the crumbs on his plate. His hearing seemed cottony and far away. He knew it was true.

“Celine Wallenda and I are tight. She just called me. I was thinking about waiting till tomorrow to tell you, but I didn’t want you finding out any other way. Esposito’s got the photos of him with Angel. You gave them to him?”

He felt a sweat drop trickle down his ribs.

“I did.”

“Why would you do something like that?”

“He made a convincing case of helping me get out of the shadows by squeezing McKenzie and ensuring I would get the PDI.”

“What was in it for him?”

“I’d help him through the P3 process. Look out for him.”

“Not the smartest thing you’ve ever done. Think about how you want this handled. Maybe we can do something about it before it’s too late.” Silence. “I’m going to say it. Stay away from the Mikeys, the Paulies, the Karl Marks of the world. Those kind of people ask you got jump into their playpen with them and they know all the rules and you don’t.”

“Why don’t I just release the photos. Just for the jolly free-for-all of it. See what comes up. Maybe McKenzie gets pushed out and I get the PDI when the new principal comes in.”

The waitress came by. Yes, he would like more coffee.

“You see, that’s why McKenzie said yes to Mikey. He knows Mikey was capable of releasing those photos. And Mikey knows you’re not. You don’t belong to that tribe, Jason. I brought you into The Network for a reason.”

He took a sip of coffee.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“You realize that you belong, and you always have only one decision to make.”

“Does everyone know Rachel?”

Julie laughed.

“End of May already,” he said. “I guess Gronk gives me a Social Studies teacher schedule.”

“And next year we listen to Mikey deliver a PD every two weeks.”

“How long do you think he’ll last?”

“How long does tick last on its host’s body?”

## Chapter 49

Jason parked around back then entered school through the propped open yellow metal freight door. The building operations manager's office sat to the left down a narrow corridor like a passageway in the lower deck of a ship. A thunk sounded from a pipe in the ceiling. The smell of oil hung in the air. In a small room to the right was a table with scattered newspapers and two packs of cards in their blue boxes. A vending machine hummed.

David Boreledder, the building operation's manager whom everyone called Chief, sat at his desk in a large utility room with caged spaces housing various machines, cleaning supplies, and tools. Late 60's, wiry as a teenager, mustache, thick glasses, he had worked in the building for twenty-seven years and prided himself on surviving teachers, principals, and superintendents.

He saw Jason Foxx passing by.

"Hey, Jason," he called.

Jason stopped and stepped into the room. He'd told Chief many times that he was his hero. Boreledder could take apart and fix any machine on the planet. He had built himself a cottage on the eastern shore, brick by brick, plumbing pipe by plumbing pipe. What Jason

especially liked about him was that he believed in UFOs. He claimed to have sighted and video-recorded several.

“What’s up?” Jason said.

“Why you leaving us?”

“I’d never do that. This is my dream job. Who told you that?”

Chief laughed. The idea that someone could enjoy work was preposterous to him.

“Ear to the rail, my friend, ear to the rail. I got it from the horse’s mouth.”

“Once removed.”

He held up his hands.

Chief and Marcia Smith, the admin assistant, along with some other support staff, had formed a clan with their own jokes and language to find sustenance in a workspace populated by people with college degrees. They passed information among themselves. The admin assistant must have overheard something.

“Maybe you could hire me for your staff,” Foxx said. “I’ll be your apprentice.”

“Could be. Could be.” He nodded. “We need somebody knows how to handle a toilet brush. You might be under-qualified for that delicate position. Send me your resume and I’ll get back to you.”

Jason managed a laugh, but he was spooked. The Chief put his reading glasses back on.

He walked up the hallway and took the stairs from the bowels of the school into the aggressive fluorescent lighting of the first floor.

Julie told him that Paulie was given the PDI position. Now the building operations manager asked him why he was leaving.

He checked his watch. He'd left his house later than usual, and had to hustle to get some photocopies made before his first period class.

Halfway through second period, Tom Sorenson, the suckup assistant principal, stepped into his room. Jason sat back in a student chair among his students and watched Justine Bakefield make an impassioned argument about prison reform. Her father had spent sixteen years behind bars. She could never guess they had fathers in common.

During the last days of the school year, Jason departed from the curriculum and let them chose an area of interest and create an argumentative essay, video, speech, or other means to express their point of view. They then had to present to the class.

Sorenson caught his eye with a wave. Students turned to him standing in the doorway. Justine, who was at the lectern propped on a desk, faltered and looked his way.

"Mr. Foxx, Mr. McKenzie would like to see you."

Sorenson was the same assistant principal who came to get him when he was charged with sexual impropriety, and no doubt found joy in doing so.

"I'll see him during third when I'm free. Right now, we're in the middle of something."

"Mr. Foxx, I'm going to have to insist."

Like a tennis match, eyes turned to him. He breathed once then stood from his place across the room from Sorenson. They watched. Sorenson sniffed then cocked his mouth into sneer.

"Well I'm going to have to insist that you get the fuck out of my room."

The class exploded. Teachers locking horns. Utter, sweet thrills.

He sat in his chair and let them hoot and high-five for a minute then asked them to settle.

“Okay, Justine, why don’t you start from the top.”

He didn’t glance to the door to make sure Sorenson had left.

But of course he had to hump it to McKenzie’s office when his free period came around. He stopped in the faculty lounge for a cup of coffee he would take with him. He also wanted to see if there were any hushed conversations or too happy greetings when he entered.

Where had Paulie been lately? He had retreated to his own wigwam. Jason rarely saw him except for the odd sighting in the parking lot.

In the staff lounge, he saw a teacher whom he didn’t know well heating something in the microwave. The smell of breakfast funk pervaded the air, though the two windows were cracked open. Or was it a fetid odor of feet?

A woman who must have been a visiting speech or hearing specialist or a psychologist the system sent for weekly sessions with difficult students sat reading a textbook at the table near the faux fireplace. She didn’t look up.

Thankfully, the music teacher had made a fresh pot of coffee.

He headed to McKenzie’s office holding his cup as if it were a lantern guiding him along a dark path. He took a roundabout way so he could glance into classrooms to catch glimpses of his colleagues teaching.

He went to the third floor and decided to walk by everyone’s room. In some way that was difficult to articulate, the people who made decisions about curriculum and new methods of teaching and class sizes and teachers’ professional development had forgotten or never knew what happened in that mini-ecosystem of the classroom. Teaching was easily managed from afar, even from one step away when you were no longer in the classroom, even if you were a teacher



for many years and now no longer were one and occupied an office with a mission to develop strategies to help teachers. Even all of those former teachers who were now specialists in offices, even they forgot what it was like to teach.

He walked by his fellow teachers' rooms and some of them caught his eye and he raised his coffee cup in salute. Students glanced at him. Then instead of walking by he began stopping and in doorways, and greeting teachers if they approached him while their students worked on projects.

“I have a feeling I’m getting the word that I’ll be excessed.”

Some of them stepped away. *Don’t let the ‘excessed’ virus get on me.* He had worked with nearly all of them one-on-one over the past two or three years and built up a good rapport with most of them, until this year. What happened? Why had his teacher life turned upside down?

Two women burst into tears. A male math teacher said to him, “It’s a numbers game.”

By the time he circled the third floor then went down to the second, teachers stuck their heads out of their rooms looking for him, having been alerted by surreptitious phone calls or dashed-off text messages from their third floor colleagues. He gave female teachers a hug and male teachers a handshake. He would come back to see Julie Wang.

“You sure?” they asked him. “I haven’t heard anything.”

He stopped by Boyd Green’s room, the white social studies teacher who wore black power t-shirts and kufis.

“You’ve been like a brother to me,” Boyd said and hugged him.

Mikey said, “Win or lose, get up and play another day.” He smirked.

He went by Paulie's room, "What are you doing here?" he said. "I'm trying to teach."

"Try harder," he said. His students laughed.

He toured the first floor. Three teachers left their classrooms and gave him a group hug in the hallway. He took the half stairway down to Ms. Wallenda's room. He wondered if she'd been part of the information share announcing his walk-about through the building.

She was alone in her room sitting in her chair, sipping tea. He looked at his watch. He needed to see McKenzie before the next period started.

"I'm getting excessed," he said. He stood in the doorway.

"That is not possible," she said. "If that happens, I will quit myself." She blinked at him through reddened eyes. She held her tea cup near her lips. "Woe, destruction, ruin, and decay; The worst is death, and death will have his day.' Jason, this is awful."

"Strange, eventful history." He tried a laugh.

"You and I will say our goodbyes later. Leave me be. I need to be alone."

He went back to the second floor to stop by Julie's room, all the while wondering why Ms. Wallenda's response had been so muted. She must have known.

Julie Wang's students were working in teams on a project so she had a minute to talk.

"You're being excessed? When did you find out?"

"Nothing official yet, but Sorenson stopped by my room to yank me out of class last period. I'm doomed."

"Nobody's doomed."

"Can the Network get me into a decent school?"

"Yes, but there might be something else. Let me work on it."

They agreed to talk later.

The admin assistant turned in her stiff neck way toward him as he walked in. “I heard,” she whispered then attended her keyboard.

McKenzie pointed to a chair while finishing up a phone call.

When he got off the phone he straightened some papers, put a pen in his top desk drawer. He placed a folder to his right.

Jason could see that he hadn’t got wind of his tour around the building.

“I heard that you and Sorenson had a rough moment. That sort of disrespect directed at an assistant principal in front of the students is intolerable Foxx.”

Jason saw that his heart wasn’t in it. He waited with hands folded in his lap.

“I’ve had to make tough decisions as a principal,” he began, chin up, Washington crossing the Delaware. “We’re slated to become an Exemplar next year, and with budgetary propositions that are in flux I realize that I need to start trimming the crew.”

He looked to Jason as if for help.

“I’m excessing you. The Humanities position was not in the cards.”

“Now you’re excessing? I thought Exemplar schools got to keep staff.”

“It was a tough decision, Jason. Your efforts on behalf of this school are nothing short of commendable.”

“You chose Mikey to be your PDI--”

“Who told you that?”

“You think he’d keep that to himself? He’s having a laugh about it. You elevate Mikey to be PDI. You keep that troublemaker Paulie on board. And you get rid of me. I’m a loyal soldier.”

“There’s a rampant malaise in this school.”

“Have you been studying Jimmy Carter’s speeches? Malaise? There’s no malaise in this school.”

“A rampant malaise in this school. People come and talk to me. They wonder why everyone has turned against you. What did you do, Jason, to cause all of this…” He stopped.

“Malaise?”

“Correct.”

“I allowed Paulie to help me. I was railroaded into a term over at the warehouse. I tried to be your de facto PDI.”

“Maybe you were too present in the school.” He looked to the ceiling and pondered that a moment. “Maybe you needed to dial it back.” He slapped both hands flat on his desktop.

“Anyway. Fresh starts for everyone. I’ll put in a good word with you to two principals I know over on the east side.”

“That’s it? I’m gone.”

“Best thing for everybody,” McKenzie said. He stood. “Lots to do today.”

Jason remained seated.

“I’ll make some calls. Get you in someplace else. Make it work for you.” He winked.

“You’ll do fine. Be calling you superintendent one of these days.”

The administrative assistant said from the other room. “Mr. McKenzie, time for your teaming team-meeting with the Exemplar people.”

## Chapter 49

They had called back and forth through the week, but they hadn't made plans to get together over the weekend. Steven had a martial arts class Saturday morning, and there was a birthday party in the afternoon. He had missed a day of school because of a cold this past week, so she was thinking she would have him to skip the party and try to get him to nap.

A fog crept over their...was it a relationship? He would not allow relationship fogs. He had been in one of those for three years in his early twenties.

It was Thursday and they rarely saw each other during the week, but he drove to her house outside of Bel Air. He didn't tell her he was coming. He would surprise her. Yes, he would say, I would like to come in. Supper? Sure.

Though her car wasn't in the driveway, he knocked on her door. He looked at his watch. 6:30. He sat in his car, played the radio, read some online newspapers, looked at his watch some more.

At 8:00, he drove to a diner he'd been to with Adele. He ate an omelette at the counter and watched a trucker with a plaid shirt stretched over a pot belly and a size-too-small straw

cowboy hat sweet talk a waitress. She tried not to smile at his jokes and winks, but his entertainment value was too high, and she returned to his aura during moments when she wasn't attending customers.

Jason finished eating and stayed to drink coffee and mindlessly roam websites and read email messages on his cell phone. At 9:30 he went back to Adele's house, but still she was gone.

He sat in his car parked on the street, wrist hinged over the steering wheel, staring ahead, stalker style. He would wait until she pulled up with another man who would get out then reach into the back seat and scoop up Steven then the clan of three would step toward the house. Jason would kick open his car door from inside and run crazily at them with a garden brick in his hand screaming at the new man that he would not take what was his. The neighbors would open front doors. The police would swarm with red lights illuminating the underside of tree branches reaching across lawns.

No, he would not do that. If new man appeared, he would watch and let it eat into him like acid and he would lever the car into Drive and slip away unnoticed.

He woke from a light sleep when he heard the stress of her car tires on the pavement. He checked the time. 11:20. She got out then opened the back door to retrieve Steven.

"Hi," he called.

She looked toward him. "Jason? What are you doing here?"

He walked to her car.

"I was out for a drive and thought I'd drop by. Let me help with Steven."

He lay curled in the back seat collapsed in sleep. A hospital band was on his left wrist.

"What happened?" He reached in and grabbed him.

“His asthma bothered him all week, and today his nebulizer wasn’t doing the trick so I brought him in. That was about six hours ago. He’s exhausted and I’m exhausted.”

They walked together clan-unit style toward the front door. He carried him upstairs. She wiped his face with a washrag and managed to get him to brush his teeth before she tucked him in.

They sat at the kitchen table with cups of tea. She ate a bowl of cornflakes with slices of banana.

“I can usually get him in and out of there in three hours.” She glanced at the kitchen clock. “We went in at 5:00. Long night.”

He stood then went to the pantry where she kept her backgammon set.

“Really?” she said. “This late?”

He set up his side first. Two checkers on point one. Five on number twelve. Three on seventeen and five on nineteen. Then he set up her side since she made no move to do it herself. She spooned cornflakes and ate and eyed the board sideways.

She propped her head in her hand. “I’m tired.”

She picked up her cup and they rolled their die to see who would start first. Her four to his three.

She rolled. She moved her pieces and watched and ate.

She finished her cereal while they completed the first game, which he won.

They played two more games. She won the third. He had one checker left on his home board board after she had borne off all of hers.

“You got lucky,” he said.



“In your dreams.”

“That double five saved you.”

“That double five saved me because I hit your blot two turns before that when you were on the run.”

She set up the board again. “Last one. I’ve got to work tomorrow and so do you.”

He rolled first. He liked a fast game, but decided to create a defense to block her. He hit her blots and she lost turns trying to get her checkers back on the board.

She looked up at him after losing a turn, again.

“I got excessed from Central South today.”

She sat up and bunched her hair in back with her hands to get it out of her face.

“I’m sorry to hear that. What happened?”

He told her about the meeting he had with Gronk McKenzie.

“Jesus,” she said. “You got screwed and you’re not even sure why. Usually a person knows why.” She stood with her cereal bowl and rinsed it then put it in the dishwasher.

She joined him at the table again. He rolled then moved his pieces. He had to make a run for it now because all of his other checkers were in his home board. He left a blot. She hit it.

“That’s more like it,” she said. “What are you going to do?”

“Convince you that we belong together.”

“Really,” she said. “You’re going to jump me with that?”

“Yes.”

“It’s late.”

“It’s time.”

“Relationships are hard. You left once.”

“I wasn’t honest, but neither were you. We start again. What else can we do? We have to start again, otherwise you never start.”

How’s it going to work?”

“We start making plans to live together. Get Steven used to it. Make it happen in six months. I love you and want to marry you, so none of this is temporary.”

She reached for his hand. “Come over for dinner on Saturday so we can talk. Right now, I’m going to bed.”

“Tell me you’re in.”

“We’ll talk.”

“Tell me you’re in.”

“Okay for Christ’s sake. I’m in. Now I need to go to bed.”

Celine Wallenda  
Theater  
Rm 022

There we were in the library listening to Gronk welcome us to a new school year. He introduced several new teachers who seemed *deliriously* happy to be among the ranks. God bless the children.

Four teachers retired, six transferred. Two were excessed. More than the usual number of positions opened. Gronk asked the child-teachers to come up front and introduce themselves, so they had their beauty queen moment.

Gronk kept looking at his watch while he took care of some housekeeping business, such as shifting duties among assistant principals and new procedures for computers on carts. The first day was humming along and I *must* admit I went at half speed. They renovated the stage over the summer had left the costume and prop room a mess. I hadn't come by the school as I had planned to because I had minor surgery on my left knee with orders to elevate it up for *weeks* at a time. Not to mention that my sister visited with her two dreadful children and harried husband who is *obviously* having an affair, an unexpected visit of *five days* I might add. She needed a diversion from her overstuffed calendar in that landscape of social sharks where she and her

friends inflict wounds on each other while jockeying for the table closest to the dias. Oh, I'm awful. But they're awful.

After an hour, he pointed to the next item on the agenda: Exemplar Schools. We would get a more fine-grained understanding of what the being an Exemplar school exactly entailed on a day to day level. Mikey Esposito of all boy wonders was the professional development instructor, the position Jason Foxx, no longer with us, aspired to and should have been granted.

Mikey grinned and mugged when McKenzie introduced him to the staff. Mikey, he said, would be vital in helping carrying out all professional development activities and an assortment of other duties in helping fulfill the mission of the Exemplar School mandate. He was met with *dour* expressions. I thought to myself: would he take a large or an extra-large when I fit him for his clown suit. My God, that Mikey Esposito should be given a position of responsibility provides one more piece of evidence that the school system is taking on water.

Again, Gronk with the watch glancing. What *was* it? I thought. I looked about the library to my fellow teachers and saw no indication that anything was vibrating beneath the surface. They paid attention to Exemplar school news. The Exemplar business had tilted everyone's world. Teachers would be assessed on how well they implemented new curricula and their ability to incorporate the technology available to them. Some had been cruising along for years using the same lesson plans and templates, now all of a sudden their little ships were ready to capsize. Knowing the Exemplar policies and procedures were imminent, several teachers had come to me for tea and hand holding over the summer.

"Now of course," he said. "We will have oversight. Let me reintroduce Tom Ricks and Barbara Cunningham."

They had been sitting in back, and I hadn't noticed them. I recognized them from last year when the Exemplar people walked about like vultures on a carcass. Everyone turned around to look their way.

Barbara told us how excited that she was that Central South had joined the Exemplar family. She looked forward to working with us.

Tom echoed her sentiments. "Get used to us. We'll be coming around. Every Exemplar school has a dedicated resource person who acts as a liaison between the school and our office. He will be in charge of helping direct your professional development and will be collecting data for us. He's our eyes and ears in your school."

He lifted his hand to point to the front of the room. In walked Jason Foxx from the hallway.

My God you should have seen the look on Gronk's face. But he knew, he *knew* it would be him, and he had been *dreading* his entrance. And Mikey! For the first time, the very first time *ever*, I saw him frown.

A buzz erupted. Some teachers applauded and shouted out.

The exquisite *joy* of that moment. Jason would be monitoring the school, and the school's progress would depend on the quality of professional development delivered by Mikey the Imbecile which meant that Gronk's fate was tied up with him, his hand picked lieutenant.

Jason in a lovely dark blue suit stepped in front of Gronk at the lectern set up on a library table.

He turned to Gronk and said, "It's good to be back Mr. McKenzie. And Mr. Esposito." He couldn't help himself. He laughed.

My dear child. Where had he finally learned the arts of how to *maneuver* and *operate*, as I insisted her must. He is my loveliest, shiniest protégé. And I will take a *huge* bow for my efforts.