

# Curved Edges

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Love to my collaborator and  
partner  
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## Chapter 1

Ron pulled his gold Nissan into one of the spots reserved for administrators. They were close, alongside of the building. He walked through the kitchen entrance, the first door to be opened in the morning. Ron exchanged a silent wave with guys unloading the food trucks. Moving through the deserted cafeteria, Ron noted that the heat in the room was starting to be retained. He made a mental note to have the chief custodian look at the fans that they used in the cafeteria and the gym when the weather was warm.

The principal's secretary was at her desk. Trudy Bennet was always the first to arrive. She coordinated the daily teacher absentee and replacement information that was called into the answering service. She smiled and said, "Good Morning Dr. Tuck."

Ron grinned and shook his head. No matter how many times he asked her to please call him Ron, as she did during the first ten years of their acquaintanceship, she persisted with the formality since he became a Vice Principal. He countered by reverting back to calling her Mrs. Bennet as he had when he had first met her, and it had become a little gag between them. They had a bond. He had taught her son who was now thriving in college. Ron

did not seem to realize that she liked calling him Dr. Tuck.

Ron gathered yesterday's pile of discipline referrals. He had prioritized them before he went home on Saturday. It was an easy day, there were only twenty six referrals to address.

The first was Tiffany. The referral read fighting. Not disruptive behavior which was code for a fight that never really materialized, but fighting that carried a severe penalty and for the repeat offender included suspension and more. He would deal with this after he got through the routine stuff, that would take two minutes and he could get done during the homeroom period.

It was best to go to those students' rooms during this time and just deliver the rule and infraction and penalty. Sometimes a teacher detention, sometimes a school detention, sometimes more. Ron saw the same students multiple times in a week and sometimes he never got to meet a student.

He scanned through and then his face darkened. There was a repeater than had been added to his mailbox after he went home. It was David again. The referral read, "I stopped the student in the hall and asked to see his pass his response was to say 'Fuck you.' And walk away." This was going to be difficult. David was a special needs student who

suffered from Oppositional Defiant Disorder. He should be in a residential program, which was where he was until this year when the Superintendent had brought back many of the out of district placements as a cost saving strategy.

Ron would see his counselor and she would give him some bullshit response like she would get David to say he was sorry. Ron wanted this to become a manifestation determination case. It was only then that there would be a hearing to determine whether an out of district placement was required. But the Special Ed department was under strict guidelines to keep the problems in house. It would be a battle and Ron was more than ready for it.

Joyce Garrett was standing in his doorway smiling and holding her morning coffee. "Good morning, Doctor Tuck." She was Ron's secretary and a well-organized woman who had the unruly task of keeping him on track. A feat in which she took pride.

Ron looked up with that expression that some believed was anger. Joyce had learned that it really meant that he was concentrating. She liked his ideas but they always meant more work, and he seemed oblivious to that. He would be willing to shoulder most of it, but not everyone had that kind of feeling about their job. It was a pain in the ass to work for him. The other secretaries had nicknamed

them Beauty and the Beast, which she liked because she enjoyed thinking of herself as a beauty. He did pick her for promotion. She liked that grin that he had when he allowed anyone to see it. But he surely was different and the differences never allowed for peaceful coexistence with the other administrators.

“Hi Joyce, how was your weekend?”

“It was good. It was predictable. Cheerleading practice followed by taxi mom duty. The problem is that it is all almost over.”

Ron smiled. “That isn’t so bad. It’s been a long haul for you. Today is going to be busy, Joyce. When Frankie and Lois get in from morning rounds, let’s have a meeting.”

Joyce nodded. “Do you need me there?”

“Always,” said Ron. It was his way. He decided when he got this job that he needed someone he could count on to be in on most everything. That meant he had to trust that person. He had picked Joyce out of the secretarial pool when he got the job. She expected it to be more work because it was more money and a different salary scale. But the amount of work and time that he expected was unbelievable. Luckily, he was able to listen when she said that she was tired or needed a break.

Then Ron was out in the hall with his pile of referrals in his hand. It was a strange system. Although the high school had twelve hundred students, and two vice principals, Ron was in charge of all of the non-attendance related infractions. Some weeks that was more than 500 referrals. He started on the third floor and worked his way down.

When he stepped into the doorway of a class, the level of conversation would drop. He would nod to the teacher and call out a name. Sometimes there would be the obligatory laughs and snickers as a name was announced, and so Ron would try to make eye contact. Most kids figured he was coming, and he would nod them out into the hall. That was what happened with Bill Hancock.

Ron leaned his shoulder against the wall and read, "Says here Bill that this was the 5<sup>th</sup> time that you were unprepared for gym in two weeks. What's going on?"

"I just hate it there and the teachers pick on me."

"Why do you think that pick on you, Bill?" Ron watched his face and tried to project an attitude of wanting to know what the boy said.

"Because they know that I hate being there and make me pay for it."

Ron knew it was true. Kids that did not get with the program were picked on. All of the gym teachers were also coaches. Ron had been a coach. He knew it was in their DNA. "Look, you gotta change for gym. Your graduation can be in jeopardy for not passing gym. I hated math. I still had to go to math class. You still have to take gym. You can't win. You get screwed if you don't do what the rules say. Right now I'm supposed to take one of your Saturday mornings away, but I'm going to give you a shot. Let's say one warning, but you screw me, it's two Saturdays and you make it to my 'keep an eye on you' list. That's not something that you want." Ron looked full into his face and waited till the kid met his eyes. "Understand?"

Bill looked a little rattled. He didn't know Tuck, but had heard about "being Tucked" and he figured that was what the list meant. "I understand." Ron gave the kid the referral to sign, took it back and was off to the next one.

Six into his group of eleven, the bell rang and the halls started to fill up. He would have Joyce look up the other kids' schedules so he could pick them off later in the day.

Frankie Martin was a retired detective whose face led Ron to believe that he was a constant sufferer from prickly heat. Lois Mc Fee was a quiet woman

who Ron tried his hardest to make laugh. Sometimes he could get her to loosen up and relax, but more often than not he could not accomplish it. They were waiting in Ron's office when he got back. Joyce met him at the door and took the stack of referrals and handed him a fresh stack. He stopped and thumbed through them quickly. Nothing urgent.

Joyce asked, "Do you want a moment to get some coffee before we start?" She could read the answer on his face. He wouldn't be stopping for coffee. He just shook his head no, and she followed him into his office.

"Hope you all had a good weekend," said Ron in his halfhearted attempt to be casual. His weekend was not even a memory at the moment and, at the moment, unless something was terribly wrong, he didn't care if they had good weekends or not. It had only been thirty minutes since he had actually asked that question of Joyce, but his transformation had been rather complete since then. He was all business now.

"The second floor boys room, Frankie, I just have this feeling that more is going on there between classes than the normal have a couple of drags before the next class action. Can you make a point to swing by there at two or three change of periods and tell me what you think at the end of the day?"



Frankie nodded. "I'll make sure they know it's not a free zone."

Ron turned to Lois, "Where is the most heavily trafficked girls' lav in the building?"

I'm not sure," said Lois.

Ron expected her not to be sure but had the suspicion that guys were using girls to pass contraband in their lavs because he could not exactly barge into them, and felt weird hanging around them. If he told Frankie to hang around them, he would say that he would do it, and later tell Ron privately that he didn't really feel comfortable doing that.

Lois brought Tiffany down to Dr. Tuck's office. She sat her down in one of the waiting chairs, went over to Joyce's desk and said, "Here's Tiffany, I'm going to lunch."

Joyce nodded and expected her to make sure she avoided being asked to sit in on the meeting. What she did not know was that Lois and Ron had an understanding. Ron wanted her to be as neutral a character as possible in students' lives. They were both comfortable with this. The unspoken reason was that every once in a while she would hear something important and pass it along to Ron

privately. It was an arrangement that suited her just fine, and it was what he said he wanted.

Joyce ushered Tiffany into Dr. Tuck's office and sat down next to her. Ron wasn't there. Tiffany took out her mirror and checked her makeup for the twentieth time that morning. She touched her hair and adjusted her skirt, which came more than half way up her baby fat thighs.

When Ron came into the room, Tiffany almost thought she caught the scent of cologne but wasn't sure. He shut the door and moved in back of his desk.

"Tiffany, fighting again, really?" He held up his hands in a questioning gesture and a look of feigned confusion spread over his face. Tiffany stared back silently and defiantly. "Why were you fighting with Josie?"

Tiffany spit the words out. "She called me a bitch, a slut and a whore. I don't let anyone get away with that."

Ron cast a swift glance over at Joyce. He was happy that the language didn't bother her, or at least she didn't show it if it did. "Tiffany," he began, "We are just into your sophomore year. You are a 10<sup>th</sup> grader. You are fifteen." Tiffany instantly struck her

pose of boredom and wondered why adults talked like this. What were they trying to prove?

Ron continued, "This is the fourth time you have been in here for fighting."

Had it been four or was he making that up too? She tried to look more bored but stuck her chest out instead. Joyce noticed this but Ron seemed oblivious and was reading through her file.

"In May of last year, you were fighting with Angela DeMarco and the reason for the fight you told me, and I quote, 'she called me a bitch a slut and a whore'. Do you find that odd Tiffany?"

Tiffany looked up at his face in a half startled way. "What do you mean?" Did he think that she was a bitch a slut and a whore too?

Ron continued. "In February, you were involved in a shoving match with Bonnie Pruitt. On that occasion, you told me that she started it by calling you, wait for it." Ron paused in his theatrical way, "a bitch a slut and a whore. So my question is Tiffany, why do you think that the people with whom you have conflicts seem to have such a limited vocabulary?"

Tiffany was frazzled now. She didn't understand what he was saying. She didn't know what it meant. She was mad at herself. She had told herself that it didn't matter what he said or did, she just wouldn't

let it bother her. "I don't know what you mean. Are you saying that you think that I am those things?" Joyce smiled. She was just a little girl sitting and dressing up like a slut, but defensive about anyone noticing and at the same time wanting them desperately to notice. Her clothes were way too tight and she did not have the figure for it. It was obvious that she didn't exercise and she was on her way to the land of the plump. Once she started drinking regularly, she would be well on her way to some trailer park or whatever.

Ron put his head down and moved it back and forth slowly from side to side, and then looked up into her eyes, "On two of these occasions, including this time, the other girl said that you had stolen from her locker."

"That's a lie," Tiffany almost shouted.

"But each time, you used the exact same words as the reason for the exchange." Ron paused and softened his tone, "I think you make it up, Tiffany."

Tiffany was pleased when she felt the tears on her cheeks. She had been trying. It was a lesson. If you felt one thing, you could pin it on something else. "You said that you believed me last year." It was a shot, not a big one, but she had delivered it.

Ron knew he had said that. He knew that he wanted to believe her. He knew he didn't anymore. "I'm going to suspend you for three days, Tiffany. You have to change your behavior here. Whatever the behavior is that is leading to this!" Ron realized that he had raised his voice and almost shouted back at her. He glanced at Joyce. The change in volume had blown them both back. He stopped himself. Lowered his tone. "Is anyone at home?"

Tiffany reached for the tissue that Joyce had instinctively provided. She knew it was an act too, but she felt sorry for Tiffany. "I don't know."

"Stay here with Mrs. Garrett and do your best to reach someone." Ron stood up and moved from in back of his desk and opened the door. The immediate hum of noise and traffic seemed to break the mood of the meeting. "Joyce. I'll be back in 10 minutes."

Ron went off to find Frankie. He could have used the walkie-talkie, but had not been in the halls since homeroom and wanted to make his presence felt. He moved through the corridor whose walls were filled with posters. Some for the football team. Some were for bake sales. Some were announcements of meetings. Ron wasn't looking for any of that. He was inspecting condition and date as he walked passed.

Across a wide, empty lobby that was lined with showcases, Ron glanced at the closed school store and then at his watch. He walked towards the nurse's office and ducked in his head. It was empty except for the secretary. They exchanged good mornings and he learned that the nurse would not be in until noon, and backed out.

He liked touring the science wing because either he heard snippets of lectures or saw the bustle of the lab but it always felt like learning. The halls were empty and the lockers were closed.

Ron found Frankie outside of the cafeteria. "Come with me Frank, we have to drive a kid home."

## Chapter 2

Frankie drove and Ron sat shotgun with Tiffany in the back seat. It was a quiet ride. Ron stared out at the passing scenes. The one time farm land had been sold off and been developed. The new homes lacked uniqueness and were set in even geometric parcels. These lots were approximately an acre in squared dimension. They drove down the winding hill. The town had the highest elevation in the

county and the high school had been built on top of the highest hill in the township.

They drove down to the man-made lake that gave the town an amount of notoriety in days gone. Yes, Jackie Gleason had a house on the lake and the town was famous for speakeasies, but that was all gone. The summer homes had been converted into cheap, year round, poorly insulated dwellings that attracted people of little means who could have their own house.

This section of town was nicknamed laketown by the locals. The streets were narrower and in sharp contrast to the more affluent sections of the vast and sprawling township that still did not have its own super market or movie theater. There had been a drive-in that was closed now and had been converted to a driving range.

Ron's thoughts roamed back to when he first started teaching at the school a decade earlier. That had been chancy. He had uprooted Celeste and Angel on a one year contract that might or might not be renewed. For two of the first three years, it wasn't renewed until June and Ron remembered the anxiety.

He also thought about the male students who were conspicuously absent at the beginning of deer hunting season and had chafed under the familial

pressure that was placed on them to get their first deer. It had all been very new and strange to Ron.

Frankie pulled into the driveway of Tiffany's home. Ron got out of the car and saw the discarded hot water heater and bathroom tub that seemed to almost be placed like lawn ornaments beside the house.

Tiffany followed and then moved ahead and wordlessly pulled open the screen door to the back of the house, hollering out, "Ma, the school is here." Then she disappeared and left Ron standing in the kitchen. Ron tried to stand still and not touch anything. It was not a well-kept home and had a shabbiness that spoke not only of poverty but of neglect.

A bleached blonde woman, with roots showing through an old dye job, eyed him suspiciously.

"Mrs. LaFarr, I wanted to make sure Tiffany got home safely. She is suspended for three days and you or another guardian will have to accompany her to her reinstatement conference."

"What am I supposed to do with her for three days," said Tiffany's mom. "The only peace I get is when she is up at that school."

"She can't be fighting at the school, Mrs. LaFarr."

"Was the other kid suspended too?"



"I can't discuss another student with you, but I can assure that I will deal with the situation fairly."

"You're Tuck?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm the vice principal."

"Well, if it was up to me, I'd pull her right the hell of out that miserable school and put her to work. Those kids don't learn anything anyhow."

"I'm sorry that you feel that way, and we can discuss her schedule at the reinstatement conference. I just wanted to be sure she got home safely."

"Well, she's here."

"I'll see you in a few days Mrs. LaFarr."

Ron turned to leave. Moving alongside the house he heard the woman scream, "You ain't gonna sit on your ass for three days. I did not raise you to be a bitch and a slut and a thief."

Ron couldn't get back into the car fast enough. "Get me out of here, Frankie."

The detective shook his head knowingly and backed out into the street and pulled away with practiced swiftness. Ron lit a cigarette and rolled down the window. How was anything that he did going to ever have an impact on kids like this. It was a hard

truth and it was breaking down his door of optimism. It wasn't.

"This is a good community," said Frankie. You're always going to have to deal with the losers."

Ron nodded and tossed the cigarette out the window.

### Chapter 3

Ron was all over the building when he came back. He wanted to exhaust his stack of referrals and got the number down to two by the time he was ready for the meeting about David.

The meeting was in the guidance counselor's office. Ron joined Shondra Peters, David's case manager, and Bert Pouri, the guidance counselor. Each of the three had a thick file on David.

"I asked for this meeting today because we have an untenable situation here. David Carpenter's behavior is totally out of control and unless we can come up with some kind of solution that is better than the one we have now, a kid who is totally unmindful of any boundaries will continue to have free reign to act out."

His intro was followed by silence. Both of the counselors waited, as was their practice, to see if there was more coming. Ron waited too. He knew what the story was. He knew he was putting both of them in an uncomfortable position. He didn't care. It was time for them to do their jobs.

"There haven't been any problems yet today," said Bert in a weak attempt at humor.

Ron was in no mood to laugh. "In the seven weeks of this school year, David has managed nineteen discipline referrals. Each time he has been given a teacher or school detention, he has cut it and just waited to be bailed out."

Shondra Peters spoke in distinct clipped tones and her body posture was that of someone who did not wish to be there. "David is still adjusting to a new surrounding and a new set of rules. I think we need to give him more time to settle in."

"And in the meantime, what do you suggest that I tell the faculty members that he tells to 'go fuck themselves'?"

Shondra at first was nonplussed. Then she said softly, "Tell them that this is a sick child who needs patience."

Ron forced eye contact. "Even though we both know that he is in the wrong spot and, that as long

as this situation continues, the chances of a real danger to David and others exists and is obviously extant, and we are doing nothing about it.”

“I don’t know that, Dr. Tuck. I know that you are saying it, but that doesn’t make it true.”

Ron began writing. They both watched. There was a stiffness in their posture. “So your expert opinion,” said Ron, “is that we do nothing?”

The obvious challenge to her showed no visible signs of impact. “That’s not what I said. What I said was that this new change in David’s environment requires an amount of creative thinking and a bit of patience.”

Ron finished writing and looked over at Bert. “Do you agree with that assessment?”

There was an air of conviviality that the guidance counselors always tried to convey when talking with other staff. It was part of the job description. They did not wish to appear too earnest. They felt that a relaxed atmosphere and tone was the best way to get things accomplished. Ron rarely exhibited a relaxed atmosphere and tone. There was an awkward friendliness between them, but they did not trust Ron, who might go off on some kind of campaign that never worked out well for them and always required more work. “I agree with Shondra that David needs a lot of patience.” Bert smiled and

Shondra smiled. Ron did not. "But I could arrange for a parent meeting to try to get everyone on the same page." He was throwing Ron a bone and if he did not take it, Bert would contend that Ron had rushed through the process.

Ron said, "Do you agree with that, Dr. Peters?"

"I agree that relaxed communication is a good starting point," said Shondra. "I'm not sure what we hope to gain by meeting with parents at this point."

Ron stood. He closed his pad. "It is a way of avoiding a manifestation determination conference," said Ron, "which is my next step if the behavior does not change."

A manifestation determination conference was a big deal. It was an enormous amount of work. It required a meeting with the Learning Disabilities Testing Coordinator, the parents, the school principal, the student's teachers and those of them in the room. Shondra felt Ron was using it as a threat.

"Set up the parent meeting, Bert. Have Joyce put it on my calendar please."

And then Ron was gone.

Bert smiled at Shondra and said good naturedly, "You've just been Tucked."

## Chapter 4

Because the class day started so early at Oak Mountain, it also ended early. Buses for departure began lining up at 1:45 pm. It never ceased to surprise Ron now that he was in the main office. When he had been in the classroom, it was a different world in the same building. You adjusted your day to the order of your classes. Most every day was the same.

It had been before the then principal Adele Becker formed a team that restructured everything. It was a new way of dividing the schedule and creating a rotation of days and periods that drove most of the faculty crazy. What was your first period of the day became your second on the next day and so on. The goal was to create a schedule where a student had no morning class and no afternoon class that did not vary from one day to the next.

Research had shown the team that students learned differently at different times of the day. Some kids did better in the mornings and some did better in the afternoons. So the team instituted a

rotation of classes. Even though the teachers understood the reasoning, by and large, they were disgruntled over it.

Some veteran teachers had secured prep periods at the end of the day and went home ridiculously early. They were not supposed to leave the campus until fifteen minutes after the class day ended, but this rule was largely overlooked. The rotation screwed them.

Coaches notoriously had the last period of the day free to change and get ready for practices. The new schedule made this impossible. Ron was widely seen as one of the architects of this change and there was no small amount of resentment towards those who were publically involved with it.

He was the public face of it as a teacher, but he left the classroom to become Vice Principal before it was implemented. That increased the resentment. "If he wants to run around the building all day like some 'headless fowl' that was his business," said the Union President, "but it is unfair to expect the teaching faculty to do so."

Dawn Flynn was obviously upset when she appeared at Ron's door. She and Ron had been English teachers together. At times, they had shared the same classroom. There was a mutual respect between them. Dawn had encouraged Ron

to take the VP job. "Someone has to step in Ron, and you are an obvious choice. The kids like you. The Administration likes you, for the most part," she had laughed.

She was in no mood for laughter at this moment. She did not say hello. "Ron, I can't have one of my students announce to the class that I am a 'skanky bitch,'" she began.

Ron looked up from some state regulations that he was reading. "Come on in, close the door. Tell me what happened."

"David Carpenter does not belong in my class is what happened. I told you this the first week of classes. You told me that you would look into it. I've given him two teacher detentions, both of which he has cut, and nothing happened. I know that he cuts school detentions and Saturday detentions and nothing happens. What are you doing?"

"I'm trying," said Ron. "It's not that easy. He's classified but he's bright. His test scores are actually above average. I know he's a problem." He wanted to say, you are totally right. He does not belong here and I am working to make that happen, but he could not. It would be unethical.

"You've changed. You used to understand. What would you do with a kid like that in your class?"



The idea struck him like a flash. “You may be on to something.” He moved the file on David from his outbox and looked through it. The incorrigible type of referrals had all come from his female teachers.

Ron felt a smile on his face. Shondra Peters wanted him to be creative? OK. He looked back up at Dawn. “I haven’t changed. I have this other job right now. I promise you, I am not doing nothing.”

It was something, but it wasn’t really enough for Dawn. “OK Dr. Tuck, I’ll believe that when I see it.”

Ron felt the pang. Why was everyone doing that to him? He hadn’t even wanted to be called Dr. Tuck. Silently he cursed Joyce and Celeste. They were the ones who kept telling him that he should be proud of the accomplishment and not be afraid to advertise it. Joyce had quietly had the school stationary changed without letting him see it. He knew that she and Celeste had talked about it on the phone.

Celeste, his mother, and his secretary were a force he could not stand up to, and so he caved. None of them was here when the title was thrown at him like a rotten tomato. “That’s the best I’ve got, Dawn. That and please write up the referral about being called a skanky bitch

“Oh yes Ron, I really want to put that in print.”

Then she was gone. But Ron was on the phone with Bert Pouri. “Bert I want to know how possible it would be to create a schedule for David Carpenter that is all male teachers.”

## Chapter 5

One of the necessary, if sadistic, aspects of the school week was that many meetings were held on Monday afternoons. Full faculty meetings were held once a month. Before Adele Becker, most coaches had been exempt from those meetings. She changed that. If a team did not have a game, they could designate one coach to supervise the athletes while the others were required to attend the meeting.

The coaches had tried to revert back to their old way of doing things after Becker retired, but Ron had encouraged Muriel Bowser to keep the requirement in place. So the athletic department, were surly participants.

Adele had spread the requirement to include clubs and non-athletic organizations as well, so no one actually felt privileged or any more screwed than anyone else. Ron’s counterpart was in charge of

attendance at the meetings. Samuel Dutchman found the assignment distasteful, and was as lax about as he possibly could be. Behind the back of other administrators, he made sure the teachers understood that he was not keeping a record.

Muriel called the meeting to order as Ron was having his first food of the day, a buttered bagel that had been fresh in the cafeteria that morning. Muriel was a well-dressed woman who had been a guidance department chairperson for the important part of her career. She was winding things down with this promotion and change of scenery. Her husband was a newly retired executive, who wanted to spend time on his yacht cruising up and down the east coast and eventually venturing into the keys and maybe even the Caribbean once he gained enough confidence. Muriel had assured him that this was just going to be three years and then she would have a retirement package that contained free lifelong health care for both of them, and a healthy monthly pension. He had agreed but said he was going to be taking the time to learn and would not be home every night. The unspoken message was that she did not have any longer than the three years to fiddle around.

“I’m happy to see all of you here today and thrilled that everything is running so smoothly.” There were eye rolls from the athletic department but Muriel

was not aware of them. Ron was. He watched them as he chewed his bagel that felt spongy in his mouth but at that moment tasted so good to him.

Then she began to read the announcement sheet word by word. Ron watched as the announcements bled one into another but was searching the room for Shondra Peters. He found her sitting off to the side with the rest of the child study team and wondered if she knew about his idea for David Carpenter.

Then Muriel said, "With that I would like to turn things over to Dr. Tuck to give us an update on discipline."

Ron put down the half eaten bagel and moved to the podium and glanced out at their faces. Some teachers did not look up and spent their time grading a stack of papers and displaying their quiet protest about the need for these meetings.

"The halls at change of class, as you know, are our most vulnerable times of the day. I appreciate those of you who step into the hall during this time. Your presence is a calming influence. I do wish that more of you would do this when it is at all possible. Our number of referrals is about where it was last year at this time. I know it feels like more, but that is because we have many new additions this year and that is causing some confusion. But the rest of our

student body, is getting fewer and fewer referrals and that is a credit to you.”

There were some smiles, some stony faces and some who just kept on doing papers. “I want to ask if there are any questions that you would like me to answer in public.”

Ron waited. He was comfortable with the quiet. He was about to say then lets wrap this up when he saw a hand. It was Donna Singletary from the art department. “Is there nothing we can do about the custodians destroying some of the student projects while they are cleaning the rooms?”

Ron did not know what to say. He had heard nothing about it. “Can you explain what you mean?”

“I’ve now had three student projects broken and thrown out by the custodians. I never leave my classroom unlocked, if I am not there to supervise, and there is no other reason that I can find for it.”

“Were the projects all stored away when they were vandalized?”

Donna was an emotional woman to begin with and this had been festering in her for a while. “Are you implying that I have done something wrong, Dr. Tuck?”

There it was again. He guessed that he would have to get used to it. Last year it was a novelty for them. This year it was a weapon.

“No, I’m just wondering how widespread it is.”

“These kids and I work hard on these projects Ron, it’s disheartening when our own custodial staff treats them like they are garbage.”

“I’ll get into it, “said Ron. “I promise to get back to you.”

Donna nodded but then shook her head in a negative way with her immediate circle of teachers. Another hand went into the air.

Paul Presti said, “I have students who cannot possibly make it from their previous class to mine on time. Did that even get considered when you folks were creating schedules?”

Ron looked over at the big Russian guy who was in charge of guidance. Karl Polemnic spoke in a voice that was thunderous, and that was his normal volume. He upped the volume for crowds. “There is no reason that a student cannot make his way from any spot in this school to any other spot in the school during the three minute change of class. I suggest that you are being given a line by a kid trying to get over on you.” Polemnic laughed in his self-amused way.

Presti did not back down. "Then I suggest that you come to the basement and wait for the bell and then try to make it up to the third floor and into my room through a crowded hallway and see if you can do it. I tried it, and I wasn't carrying twenty pounds of books."

Polemnic seized upon this. "If a student is not properly utilizing his or her locker then it is the student who needs a better organizational plan, not the guidance department."

Ron cut in, people were squirming. They wanted to go home. "I'll get into it Paul and I'll get back to you. If there is nothing else, thanks for your time and I hope you have a good week."

They dispersed quickly. Polemnic walked over to Ron and snorted, "That's not the kind of thing that you should be letting go."

"I won't Karl, but they wanted to go home. It's well after three. They've had a long day."

Polemnic snorted again and stomped off.

Muriel Bowser said, "I have an appointment now Ron, but can you make time to see me in the morning?"

"Sure thing," said Ron.

He walked back to his office. Joyce followed him in and handed the day's stack of referrals. Ron asked her to have Frankie see him in the morning. He wanted him to walk a route during the change of class tomorrow and he also needed to make an early spot from Muriel Bowser.

Joyce made the notes on her ever present pad and said, "Done."

"You heading home?" said Ron.

"Unless you need something."

"No, I'm fine," said Ron and sat down to review the referrals.

## Chapter 6

It was late in the afternoon when Ron started home. He was tired but his body was aching for a run. There would be no time today, and he had not yet found a new gym since their move. The drive was an easy one. Down to the highway and west and then a turn-off and north.

The Nissan cruised and Ron was listening to the radio, smoking a cigarette and trying to let the day



wash out of him. A run would do that but there just wasn't enough time.

The greens of summer were being replaced by the astounding colors of autumn. The air was far from dirty at Oak Mountain, but this air had a cleaner, fresher scent. The sun roof was down and the windows open. The tension was beginning to fade.

Ron smiled when he saw his new house ahead on the road. It sat mostly camouflaged by bushes and trees and it looked so much smaller than it was. He liked that.

His house was the only one on the road. Across the small turn into his driveway, were trees and in front of him, a real city block away, was the lake. His property went down to the lake. Celeste's car was sitting in the driveway. He had found a two door Mitsubishi and suggested that they buy it for her. She was so happy that she almost squealed. Ron stared at the rear end of the car and thought about his wife's bottom. He laughed to himself over how one thing could remind him of another.

Celeste had owned sports cars. She had owned fast cars. She loved them, but their finances and the reality of having a child had reduced her motoring choices to reliable and clunky. Secretly, she despised reliable and clunky, but the ever ready aspect of reliable and the loading and unloading

advantages of clunky had worn her down. This sleek little blue Mitsubishi was a step back in an older direction and Celeste felt love for a car rekindled in her.

When he got out of the car, Ron felt dazzled. In front of him was his barn. Had never even ever dreamed of owning a barn. He had slept in them. The mystery of what had been left there, and for how long and by which previous occupants who just did not move everything out, intrigued him like a mystery novel.

To his right was a lake. A medium sized body of water, a little too small for waves but large enough for a sailboat. It made him smile. He longed to see the changes that it would bring.

The foundation of the house was all fieldstone. He always wanted to touch it when he saw it. He wondered what would happen if he washed it. Would it be like wood that revealed its secrets of grain under a sanding? He smiled again and entered in the basement. On the inside he was greeted with the continuation of the fieldstone wall that he always wanted to touch. An old doorway had been cut into it. That led back to a tiny four room enclosure that begged investigation, but also held the powering equipment for the house.

Ron was intimidated by those strange contraptions. He'd never paid any attention in his parents' homes. They had leaks in the basement was all he knew, and he would brush the water down the drain. But this was now his responsibility. Celeste came down here to do laundry. It had to be safe. People all came in this entrance. It shouldn't look ratty. He needed to learn. Ron shook his head and started up the stone lined, magically and beautifully on both sides now, carpeted flight of stairs that led up to the livingroom.

It was all wood, glass and stone. It was huge and had a cathedral ceiling that was supported by two old hand-hewn beams, taken from some older place that had contributed their strength and the beauty of their survival marks to a new, decorative function.

Ron was out of his jacket the moment in hit the top of the stairs. His tie had been taken off and stashed in his jacket pocket during the ride. He could see a partial outline of her form from the top of the stairs. She was still wearing her shoes and the jacket to her suit. Ron grinned. She always needed to wait.

"Hi"

They both said it at the same time. They stopped and embraced. The smile on each of their faces was deep and they just felt each other's bodies. How

they fit, after so many years together, was just instant communication now. The kiss was warm and not in a tempo that either of them had used all day. Their kisses had a demanding tempo that just took over.

“You feel so good,” she said.

He just smiled and squeezed that magnificent bottom of hers and kissed her again. “Where’s Angel?”

“I don’t know. Her car isn’t here. There’s no note, no message.”

Ron nodded. He wasn’t surprised. She was at school. She was doing well. Things were better now. If Angel could come through this and be doing well, he would see one of the greater comebacks from a nightmare of a childhood and middle adolescence than he had thought possible. He was sure all in and rooting for it, but he just couldn’t trust it yet. But there was hope and some success.

“There is so much to do here, Cel! Everyplace I look I see a project. This place is just amazing.”

Celeste started back into the kitchen. “I can’t stop staring out of the windows. One wall of the oddly shaped elongated L of a kitchen was windows that also looked out on their lake.

They both stopped for a second to look out.

“I need to get out of these clothes said Ron.”

Celeste had a secretly naughty thought and wanted to say let me help you, but she was cooking dinner so she just grinned and gave the pot a stir.

## Chapter 7

Ron came down stairs in a t-shirt, sneakers and his very first pair of coveralls. They were extraordinarily large on him and had the stiffness of being new and showing it. He felt the scratchiness of the fabric, hoped that Celeste would know of some way to make it soft. There was a blind faith that she just knew things like that.

“Have I got an hour before dinner?”

“We really can eat anytime. I just need about 15 minutes to boil some water.”

“What are we having?”

“The last of our garden sauce from last year at Height.”

“We have some meatballs?”

“Sausage, what kind of pasta do you want?”

“That thin stuff,”

Ron leaned in and kissed her neck and gently squeezed her breast. “Take some time to get into comfortable clothes.”

“Maybe Angel will come home for dinner,” said Celeste.

“I’ll be outside,” said Ron.

Ron walked back through his living room with his eyes trained on the ornately covered wooden door and full length enclosed window that looked out to the side of this place.

The House was constructed into the side of a slope that caused the necessity of the flight up, the foundation was deep. The previous owner and put in a wrap-around wooden porch that spanned the entire front of the house and around the side door from which Ron emerged.

He wanted to explore. About thirty yards in front of him was an outcropping of limestone and trees and bushes. It was a small island in the middle of his property. The land also gently sloped down on both sides of the island.

In front of it was a huge pile, stack on stack, of slate roofing tiles. They were all grey and a little brittle. They had been the roof of the house. The way they were stored was an eyesore. But someone had started to use them to deepen the outline of a large garden that had been left to go to brambles and weeds. The brambles were large deeply rooted stickers. There was no hope to do anything about them until it turned to winter. But he could work on the tiles.

It was exactly what he felt his body needed. A squat for a pile of tiles, a brisk fifteen yards to the far end of the perimeter, and then another squat and placing them, one overlapping the other. He had a plan that was in his eye. There was no sense in fighting these weeds. He would take it down to nothing and cover it with a growth cloth, encircle the garden with the tiles, and then load in topsoil and start over.

Ron grinned as his breathing found that comfortable aerobic rhythm that told him it was working. He could feel it. What would they plant in the garden? That was only nine months away. Ron smiled. It was a gestation.

Ron felt something sticky on his palms and realized it was blood. He would have to start remembering to wear work gloves. He knew that. How had it

slipped his mind? He started thinking about needing some kind of wheel barrow.

Then he looked up, saw Celeste standing on the porch looking at him. She was hungry he was being selfish. When he walked over to her, he felt the euphoria that he got from running. Not as strong, but it was there. He looked down at his palms on the way over. She was watching and then she saw his palms.

He grinned his little boy grin. She took him by the hand and said, "Let's get this cleaned up and have dinner."

## Chapter 8

About half way through dinner, they heard the downstairs door close and Angel was coming up the stairs. Celeste was happy that she has set a place for her at the table. Angel reached the top of the



stairs still carrying her books. She looked a little angry.

“Come and sit,” said Celeste. “I set a place for you.”

Angel put her bag down on the island counter that led into the kitchen. “If you wanted to eat with me you would have waited. I’m not hungry now.”

“Come and sit anyway,” said Ron. “Maybe the sight and smell of the food will make you hungry.”

Angel sullenly sat in front of empty plate. She watched them eating with a half look of disgust on her face.

“How was school?” said Ron.

“It was ok. Listen I want to move out into the barn. I think we’ll all be happier if I stay out there. I’ll be happier anyway.”

Celeste stopped eating. “There isn’t even running water out there.”

“I can come in here and I can get a little apartment sized refrigerator and use the bathroom downstairs.”

“I don’t think the barn is a place to live,” said Celeste. “You have a room upstairs with the most beautiful cross breeze and a great view with plenty of light.”

"I feel like I'm right on top of you. The barn has its own driveway and the office out there has heat and air conditioning and a carpet."

"Won't you feel very alone out there?" said Celeste.

"That's the point," said Angel.

Ron looked up and studied her face. Those eyes still had a searchlight quality. She had become a pretty young woman. Her hair was thick and lustrous and long and gave her an almost wildish look. Ron thought, that was surely appropriate.

She turned her eyes on him. "What do you think Dad?"

"I don't think it's a terrible idea. We would have to do some things, like make sure the heat works and make sure there are no holes. This is the country, where there are holes you will find mice."

A horrified look crossed Celeste's face. "She can't live with mice!"

"I think we need to do some things but it's doable and if it is what she wants."

"I can't see my daughter living in a barn." Celeste sounded resolute.

Ron would let it drop. Angel would not. "If I go out there and make sure it's all cleared out and Dad says it's OK, I want to do it."

Ron quietly thought that he would have loved a place like that when he was in college, but he would not say that. He would not contradict her in front of Angel. That had been their agreement. She knew that Ron had a soft spot for the idea and in her mind that meant it was already done.

"I'm going to go out there and look around now." Angel rose from the table and grabbed her bag and started out the side door.

"You know where the lights are don't you?" called Ron.

"Inside the back door on the left," said Angel quickly.

After she went to look, Celeste said, "You do realize that we will never know if she is here or not and who is there, right?" She was not smiling.

"She wants some privacy, Cel. This could be a really good thing. It will keep her happy here with us where we know that she's safe. How often have we worried about where she is and whether or not she was safe?"

Ron stood up and brought his dish to the sink. Celeste followed with her dish and they cleaned the table, rinsed the dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher together.

Celeste said, "I want you to go out there and have a really good look around. She won't like it if I do it but if Dad says it's OK?"

Ron finished washing the dishes and when he turned Celeste saw that the front of the overalls were wet from the sink and he had forgotten to button the fly. He was sticking right out. He looked ridiculously adorable.

"You better button that thing up before she gets back." She pointed at his crotch.

Ron looked down and blushed brightly. He put his naked penis back into his pants and buttoned them up. "Oh Jesus, I had no idea they had that opening." He fumbled as he closed the buttons.

"You go and look, I am going upstairs and get out of these clothes and take a shower."

Ron looked disappointed. "Ok I'll go and look."

Celeste gave him a little grin. "I'll be waiting for you."

Ron walked out into the barn. It was dark now and he made his way through this mysterious new part of his home. He saw her moving the more fragile boxes from the enclosed 'office' part of the barn into its general area. They were each marked fragile but she was tossing them.

"Wait!" said Ron.

Angel froze.

"See the fragile written on the side?"

"I was being careful!" she protested.

She wasn't and he knew that if he made an issue of it there would be an argument. Celeste had told him that he just needed to let some things go. This was not easy for Ron, but he knew that his wife was correct.

"Let me come out here and help you on a night when I'm not so tired. This way we won't have to move things twice."

"I'm doing it now," said Angel. "You said I could."

Ron wanted to correct her by saying that isn't what he said but that too would lead to an argument. Something had her riled up tonight. He knew that she was not going to share that with him. Not anymore. Becoming the school 'Narc' as Angel had

put it was the last straw. He could not be trusted.  
“Why are you in such a rush?”

Angel looked at him with an expression of pain.  
“Because I want someplace to sleep tonight?”

Ron was snagged. He found himself responding before he checked himself. “No one said anything about tonight.”

Angel picked up another box and moved it. “If I am not allowed to sleep out here, I am sleeping in my car.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t stand to sleep in the same house with the two of you. I can’t breathe around you.”

Ron suddenly felt very tired. He was not up for another battle today. He had gotten rid of the tension of work. But this was a tension that he felt like he would never lose. “I’ll help you clean out a spot and you can use your sleeping bag tonight.”

Angel smiled. She had won. She slipped into cooperative mode and they made a spot for her.

“Let me tell your mother,” said Ron.

She slipped right back into combative mode in an instant. “Go ahead, I have nothing to say to her.”

Ron shook his head. "Did things go ok at school today?"

"School was fine," said Angel. "You already asked me that."

"I need a shower and then I am going to bed," said Ron. "My day starts early."

Then to his absolute confusion, she kissed him on the cheek and said, "Thanks for helping me, Dad."

The night air was cool. Ron looked down for that last view of the lake. It was inviting. He heard honking of geese across the water. He walked up the outside flight of stairs. He thought that he did not want to lock the door because suppose she needed to come in. Then another thought hit him. Did they have to lock their doors out here?

## Chapter 10

Celeste Tuck slid into her sleek sky blue Eclipse with affection. She liked that she never had to adjust the driver's seat. She was the only one driving this car and truly it felt like hers more than theirs. The distinctions were difficult to make sometimes, but not with her Eclipse.

She looked for Angel's car and saw it in the barn driveway. She turned her head to the lake and saw the mist rising on the water and two ducks paddling along. The Eclipse purred its hello. She did not have to attach her seatbelt and no one was going to guilt trip her about it.

Pelican brief started right where it stopped, the voice was warm and had a flavor of the South as she settled into her seat and, then sprayed gravel on her way out of the driveway, and whipped onto the county road.

The words were soothing and she was listening as a person would to a conversation someone was having that you could stop replay, zip ahead or just relax into.

Ron had been like a little boy who could just not keep his eyes open by the time he came into the bedroom. She was reading but had the TV silently set to the news in the background. He wanted sex with her and she knew it, but he was just unable to stay awake. He was telling her about the barn in one second, and then he just put his head down and was asleep.

Celeste grinned and shook her head with envy. I mean who the hell did that? She gunned the Eclipse and rode on the sound of the voice and the



cornfields that were becoming familiar and that she had learned to watch grow.

She slowed as she entered Hackleberg. She had lived all over this town.

It was familiar. She pulled her car up across the street from her favorite bakery. Peter smiled when he saw Celeste coming into his shop. They greeted each other warmly. "I always forget that Tuesdays are the first day of your week," said Celeste.

Peter grinned and said, "I have some new pumpkin muffins," opened his palms and raised them, "on the house for you today."

Celeste reached into her bag and said, "And a large container of coffee," she took the empty cup from the counter and walked to the urns.

Peter inhaled the scent of her perfume and the warmth of her eyes and the pleasing sight of her backside as she walked to get her coffee. She was a breath of fresh air.

He had the muffin in the bag when she came back. She took her coffee and left two dollars on the counter. When he turned to make change, she was walking away and calling a "see you tomorrow," over her shoulder.

The placard over her parking space read, Celeste Tuck, Social Service Director, Heights Village.

Heidi Kliess was always the first at her desk and today was no exception. Celeste had to walk passed her office to get to her own. Everyone on the management team did. That was one of the ways that she or her secretary Vivian Florencola keep track.

Celeste wasn't even passed sight of her doorway, when she heard Heidi. The sound of her voice had almost a sphincter tightening effect on Celeste. She froze and turned.

"Come in, Celeste, have a seat."

"We've had an unfortunate incident last night and you are to do a full report that includes the gathering of the necessary paper work to track the last 12 hours of Doria Klepper's life."

Celeste was stunned. "The last 12 hours? She wasn't critical yesterday. I looked in on her. She was disoriented by not agitated."

Heidi did not look up until after she delivered her next line. "She went down the stairs in her wheel chair and since she was restrained the fall, severed her spinal cord and column."

Celeste's mouth dropped open. "She was decapitated?"

“Do not use that word in your report. Not anything like it. Keep the description vague to fatal head and neck injuries.”

“OK,” said Celeste. “I better get started. I’m sure you’ll want it as soon as possible.”

“Before you go home, Celeste.” And then she put her head down. Celeste had been dismissed.

She moved in back of her desk to find Doria Klepper’s file. She knew her children. They would be surprised but not find it tragic. Their mother had not known them in two years. She was slightly surprised to see that Heidi had notified the family at 4:15 am.

She put in the call anyway. “Janice, this is Celeste Tuck from Heights Village. I’m so sorry about what happened to your mom.”

## Chapter 11

The accepted Heights Village response to this kind of an assignment was to spend at least an hour complaining about it and commiserating with other members of the management team about how

unfair it was to pile an assignment like this on top of an already enormous workload.

Celeste was notorious for not doing this. She's been given a large number of chances, but Annabel Pritchard was willing to give her one more chance to really join the team. She rang Celeste's office.

"Social Services," Celeste answered.

"Isn't that something about what happened to Doria Klepper?"

"It's very sad," said Celeste.

She was about to tell Annabel that she would need to stop by her office and get chart notes on Doria when Annabel said, "And I think you've gotten a really unfair deal being made to do this report. I've got all that I can manage and still get home on time to have dinner ready for Joel, and I haven't just moved into a new house like you have."

Instead of taking this opportunity to vent and get some things off of her chest, Celeste said, "Thanks Annabel. I'd like to stop over and collect her chart notes in a few minutes."

There was a long and distinct pause from Annabel's side of the phone. She shook her head from side to side and then said, "Alright," in a hushed and rebuffed tone.

Celeste didn't pick up on it, although she felt it register. "I have to make two other calls and I will collect everything I need in one swoop and then I probably won't have to speak to anyone as long as all the notes are in order."

"Who would you want to speak to?" Annabel felt tension responding to Celeste's plan.

"I don't know yet," said Celeste, "I have to read the notes. But I'll be able to let you know by break." Then she put the receiver down and Annabel, heard the click in her ear. Who did she think she was, the FBI?

Break was a necessary pause in the day's work. It was unusual for anyone to miss break, and they were always a topic for discussion if they were not there. Celeste was a regular but sometimes her attendance at break was spotty. On most days, there were six women who went on break together and they all reported to Heidi, who always attended break.

It would be kind to say that Heidi was portly, it would be more accurate to describe her as shapeless. She had come up through the ranks at Height and knew every aspect of its operation. She also made sure that in her building, or her team, she was the only one who had direct access to the CEO.

Height Village was an Episcopal facility, so there was nothing that she could do about the influence of the clergy, and Dennis Brennen handled the outside investment and fundraising and the all-important internal Friendship Fund, but Heidi Kliess ran all the rest. At break, she held court.

Celeste was teased about any number of things at break. Some of it, like her politics, was just for fun, but some of it, like her appearance had an edge that only a group of women could uniquely create.

Except for Heidi, whose fashion sense was not to be referred to, the women all dressed like a mixture of Martha Stewart and Christine Todd Whitman. As far as these women were concerned, Celeste dressed like Janis Joplin.

To top it off, she was forever spilling something on herself. She simply tried to do too many things at once, as far as they were concerned. It was inevitable that her result was often disaster.

The approved faire was tea or perhaps a yogurt. Celeste was not there for the start of break.

There was some initial talk about who was making what for dinner. Trudy had gotten a new set of Longaberger baskets and she described them and her options for enhancement to accent her new dining room furniture. There were appreciate oohs

and ahs from around the table. Then Heidi said, "Anyone know if Celeste is coming?"

There was an amused silence. Then Alice Malone said, "Maybe she is cooing on the phone with Ron. They haven't seen each other all day." This was said to exaggerated eye rolls that brought chuckles from around the table.

Vivian said, "I don't give Charlie any encouragement until Thursday night, then I make him wait. I get such good meals out on Fridays." She grinned all the girls at the table laughed.

"I discourage Joel whenever I get the chance, and now he's a good boy who takes the hint," said Annabel.

More laughter as Celeste entered the room with her yogurt. "Hi everyone."

Everyone took note of the flowered print loose skirt that Celeste was wearing with an autumn rust jacket. She was clashing seasons, didn't she realize that?

Vivian said, "Did you have a phone call?"

More laughter that Celeste did not understand. "I just lost track of time," said Celeste.

No one answered. Celeste ate her yogurt quickly. It seemed like four large spoonful's finished it, and

she took them one after the other. Then she turned to Heidi "I should have that report by 1:30."

Heidi smiled and said, "That's wonderful Celeste," and then mimicking the words that Celeste had been singled out for by the last state inspection, "Highly efficient."

It brought to mind for the rest of the girls that they had not been singled out and that she was the one protecting them. It kept everything the way that she liked it.

Celeste she turned to Annabel, "I just need to have a quick word with the charge nurse."

"Just a small hole in the log sixty-five minutes before the accident." said Celeste.

"Let's refer to it as an incident," said Heidi.

"Accident could be construed as an admission of liability."

There were bobbing heads and agreeing nods around the table. Then Heidi got up. Break time was officially over.

## Chapter 12



“Dr. Tuck, this is Shondra Peters.” Her tones were clipped. They were not angry but gave off a distancing feel, with sometimes more than a hint of disapproval.

Ron had detected this about the third or fourth time they met. His responses were designed to be in comfortable language and say uncomfortable things. “Good morning, how can I help you?”

“An all-male schedule for David is out of the question,” said Dr. Peters.

“Why is that?” said Ron.

One of the things that Joyce did really well was research and he knew she liked it. Not all of the office computers had access to all of the departments like nursing and guidance and free and reduced lunches, and of course, discipline. Ron made sure that he and Joyce had access and were updated on all changes in these departments.

Joyce had done the work to create the possibilities for an all-male schedule and the ways that it could be juggled, so Ron had in front of him all the possibilities. He had been waiting for her call.

“David is more comfortable with female instructors.”

Ron was not quite prepared for this response. He was prepared for the mechanics of it. Shondra was taking a different approach.

"I am not quite sure how you came to that conclusion," said Ron.

"For one thing, David feels intimidated by male teachers, he withdraws."

Ron said in easy soft and even tones, "Perhaps it will be a catalyst that focuses his attention. Males sometimes need a hint of intimidation to gain a younger man's attention."

Dr. Peters was somewhat aghast. "You are actually suggesting that I place a troubled young man who is finding his way into a situation where he feels intimidated?"

Ron's response was calming, for now. "He is comfortable with teachers that he verbally abuses on a regular basis."

"For right now, that is true. But I think that as he feels more comfortable, he will not employ his inappropriate responses," said Shondra.

"I agree with you," said Ron "He is unable to control his emotional responses, be they defense mechanisms, or a prelude to more aggressive behavior, or both. He needs environmental modification."

Ron quietly thought about how much he hated this vocabulary and was confused by how easily it came to him.

“I understand what you are saying, but it isn’t my first priority,” said Dr. Peters. “I believe that David can learn to thrive in this community and it is the community that needs to adapt their methods for these children.”

“Shondra,” Ron used her first name deliberately, “How do you think it goes over with teachers who David tells to “go fuck themselves?” And I tell them that David will say he is sorry, but before he gets to that he has told them to “Shut up Bitch,” as he interrupted them to deliver his apology.”

There was a sigh of exasperation from Shondra.

“I am responsible to see to the safety of a lot of people, Dr. Peters, which has to be my priority. And I agree, a more inclusive environment is better. And being a little intimidated into be socially more appropriate is a price that David is going to have to pay right now.”

“I cannot concur.” Then she was silent.

“Well, there is just this one thing. David has more than exceeded the number of days qualified for suspension. So I can ask for a manifestation determination conference. You say that right now

he cannot control his verbal responses to teachers. So his suspensions are a manifestation of his classified status.”

“He hasn’t exceeded the number of days that he’s actually been out of school yet.”

“Yes,” said Dr. Tuck. “Because the Child Study team has converted his out of school suspensions to in-school suspensions and not counted them as days of lost instruction.”

“He was at school,” said Dr. Peters.

Ron’s voice sounded like a snap. “And that is your idea of a more inclusive educational environment?”

Shondra stood up in back of her desk on the other end of the phone.

“You’re the one who put him there!”

“Because he can’t control the way that he acts here.” Ron loved to go under the raised volume of someone else in order to make his point. It had the dual effect of being in control and often causing a humorous response.

“Fine, I’ll take this back to my supervisor,” said Peters.

Ron thought, finally! But he wasn’t quite done. “The schedule changes?”

“I’ll have to discuss that with guidance.” Shondra figured that could buy a few days. Maybe David would start to get it.

“You know,” said Ron, “I have those schedule possibilities right here. I’ll drop them off with Bert and the two of you can pick from among them.”

Shondra thought, he really was a bastard! This wasn’t a real conversation. He had the schedules made already. He could have just started with that and saved her time.

Joyce was at Ron’s door. She came in when she saw the light go off on his line at her desk. Ron was smiling at her. “You did great research on David Mathers.”

Joyce preened.

“What have I got next?”

## Chapter 13

Heights Village was a sprawling complex that included four levels of care. It was an exclusive facility. At entrance, a member would have to demonstrate financial liquidity and the current income, or assets, to assure that financial incapacity was not among those incapacities that would come with aging.

Residents could have private homes or condominiums. They drove their own automobiles, went on extended vacations, sometimes kept another residence, and generally enjoyed life as they would like it.

The added attraction of the gated community living, in Village dining privileges to supplement their own complete kitchens, the calendar of Village sponsored trips and activities made it an attractive place. It also offered the promise that when additional care was required it would be available in a variety of ways.

There was the hotel style living. This included accommodations not unlike one would get in a hotel. And added attraction of the hotel was the splendid entrance, the glass covered passageways, with handrails that almost gave it the illusion of a cruise ship, with the occasional office that seemed like cruise line offices.

These residents could eat in the dining room or have room service. At this level, note was taken about how much activity engaged the resident. This was done unobtrusively and with a casual air. These residents were also allowed to come and go freely, although note was taken of it twice daily. This was when Celeste became involved with most of the people that she saw regularly.

The next stages of care more resembled a convalescent center and finally a small hospital. Upon entrance, residents of Heights Village were assured of care for life assuming there was no financial catastrophe.

Celeste was out in the corridor, she was making her morning rounds. She held hands with people when she talked to them. She remembered what they said to her the day before. She knew the names of their children and spoke with some of those on the phone regularly. When she got a call from one of her regular children, she could always say, "This was how mom looked today..." They did not check on their fathers as regularly, and there were far fewer men on the unit.

Celeste was always happy to see Patricia Tallman. She was sitting up in her bed and reading. She smiled as she saw Celeste come in. "Dear girl, how nice of you to come to see me."

Celeste smiled and took both of her hands. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, I am trying to conserve energy for tonight. I am meeting with our priest and also the bishop."

Patricia was also an ordained priest. She earned that distinction at the age of 79. Celeste found her a true inspiration.

“And you know how meeting with men can be at any age, Celeste.”

“I am sure you have handled tougher cases than these,” said Celeste.

“Perhaps we can have tea tomorrow and you will tell me all about it.”

“I’d love that and I want you to meet both of them, Celeste. It is high time that you, and what you are able to do, was more integrated into our spiritual lives.”

“I’d love to meet them,” said Celeste.

Patricia smiled. “Shall we say two pm tomorrow?”

Now it was more than a polite wish. Patricia Tallman had something up her sleeve. Celeste was game.

And then she was back out into the hall and making her way to her next resident.



## Chapter 14

On most days Celeste made it home before Ron did. Angel was out in the barn now. She had moved her things out there, including managing to drag her twin bed and box mattress through the house and out into the barn with no help that Celeste knew of. Her car was in her driveway when Celeste pulled the Eclipse into what had become her spot. Celeste wanted to go and see the barn but she was unsure that she would be welcome. Ron had said that they had to make it feel like it was her own. Celeste thought that was a dangerous attitude to have with Angel.

When she entered, the now almost always unlocked back door, she heard the shower running in the sauna. Celeste stuck her head into the doorway without opening the door to the sauna and said, "I'm home."

Celeste knew that she was always startled when she found someone had come home while she was taking a shower. Ron called it The Psycho Syndrome. She wondered if there was anything that he hadn't given a nickname.

She moved in back of the door and knocked on it, “Angel, I’m home.”

The response was an exasperated. “All right mom, I heard you the first three times.”

Celeste did not answer, dropped her head and started up the stairs. The living room greeted her far more warmly than her daughter did. She smiled as she took off the heavier jacket that Ron had nicknamed frumpwear. She didn’t care, it was comfortable and allowed her to move while she was driving. He could make all the fun of it he wanted.

The smell of the electric crock pot greeted her as she walked into the kitchen. She picked up a potholder and took the lid off the pea soup to inhale the aroma. She loved the timer now that she trusted it.

She heard the downstairs door open and close and did not know whether Ron was home or Angel had left. She went to the bank of windows and glanced out. His car wasn’t there, it must be her.

Celeste fished the large chunk of ham out of the pot, added some heavy cream and plugged in her hand blender. The soup thickened rapidly. Then she shredded the ham and dumped it back into the pot and smiled. Dinner was ready. They could eat absolutely anytime. Angel could even take a dish out to her island if she wanted to.

She moved to her calendar. Today was Tuesday, the 21<sup>st</sup> of October. Celeste kept two running calendars, one at home and one at work. She wrote in Thursday the 23<sup>rd</sup> at 7pm for dinner with the doctors. She smiled as she looked at the cryptic entry “party” for that Saturday night. She felt a naughty grin spread over her face and thought again about what she could wear this time.

She looked across the living room, saw the side door open. It was Angel. She wanted to see her after all. She moved the calendar to the side and put her purse on top of it.

Angel was wearing tight, hip hugging jeans and a white cotton blouse. Celeste thought she looked like a knockout. “Don’t think that I’ll be home until late tonight. Tell Dad the heat in the barn isn’t working properly.”

“Where are you going?” Celeste tried to sound cheerful.

“I’ll be out, mom.” Her response did not invite questions.

“Do you want some pea soup?”

Angel crinkled her face. “It looks like what they used in the Exorcist. It’s disgusting.”

“Do you want something else for dinner? I can make you some eggs?”

"It's not breakfast, Mom and I don't feel like eating vomit."

They both heard the grumble of Ron's car on the gravel.

Celeste smiled. Angel headed for the side door. "Don't forget to tell Dad about the heat," and then she was gone.

Celeste felt a combination of relief and sadness as she watched her pull the door closed behind her. Celeste moved to meet him at the top of the stairs. They kissed and she felt his hand on her ass and smiled. He just never seemed to get enough of her behind and she had grown to have an affection for that. She shared with the women of her family, the power of the Belmont ass.

He brushed his lips along the side of her neck and let her go. "Is everything ok?"

"Yes, we are alone for dinner, and Angel says she doesn't have heat."

"I saw her car, is she out there?"

"No, she is going out."

Ron started back out the side door, he hadn't even taken his jacket off.

"Ron?"

He stopped and turned.

“Do it later, she is in a mood.”

Ron reversed direction and started upstairs toward the bedroom.

“What else is new?”

Celeste felt rebuffed again. Someone could have at least been excited that she had managed an all-day dinner while working all day. Did he really have no sense of smell or was he just not paying attention. She felt herself sulk a little.

## Chapter 15

Ron presented himself to Celeste wearing his overalls and announced, “The tile perimeter is finished.”

Celeste looked up from a catalog of fabrics and smiled, "I want to see it after dinner." She looked at Ron. His face had that reddish glow and his hair was matted down on his head in a way that showed its thinning. Celeste was certain that baldness was a condition that Ron would despise and she wanted to put off mentioning it as long as possible.

"Come here, I want you to see this," said Celeste.

It was a grouping of pictures that showed windows in various states of draping. Ron looked down with some interest. Celeste wrapped her hand around his thigh. Ron smiled. "I know we want to have as much light in from the windows as possible, and I know that you don't care that the windows are bare, but look at this." She squeezed his thigh and moved the finger of her other hand to point.

Ron looked and saw that they were just little transparent pieces of fabric that dressed the outside of the window frames. They were pretty. She squeezed again and he felt himself twitch. "I really like them, what color?"

"I think a burgundy." Celeste looked down and saw the erection pressing out on the buttons of the overalls. She felt herself moisten.

It was Wednesday. Angel was in class until after 10 pm. Celeste just did not think about dinner. When the alarm woke them this morning, in those few

seconds before he got up, they sometimes held and kissed. Then she would drift back off to the sounds of him in the bathroom, or the images from her dreams. He said, "Don't cook tonight." The idea had put her in a delightful mood.

"Show me where," said Ron.

They went into the living room. They stood in front of a slatted wood bannister that spanned the length of five side by side windows that were above the entrance stairs up from the door that everyone used.

Their hips were touching side by side. She felt that thrill of standing next to him. He extended the arm closest to her. "You mean just treat it like one window?"

She grinned and said, "Yes." She led him to the two single windows on the other side of the room, "And we can do the same with these, there's no one to see in and everything to see out."

And then he was kissing her, and because Heidi Kleiss did not allow the slacks that Celeste would have preferred to wear to work, she dressed daily in a skirt and his hands were up under it.

The embrace brought them down onto the couch. He was sticking out almost painfully now, and she was aching to have him inside of her.

Then he grinned up at her, “The bed. It’s so comfortable up there.”

He put his hand between her legs from the rear and squeezed her with every step, as she got excited and moved faster. They didn’t wait for much more to come off in the bedroom. He stepped out of the overalls revealing that he had nothing on underneath them while he was working. She pulled her panties off and lay on a pillow of her belly, the way that she knew he loved it.

She raised her hips when she felt his weight on the bed. And he rubbed himself on her. And then his hand was between her legs and his fingers were dancing their tips into her with the hand that he used to make finger strums on the guitar.

Celeste moaned and said, “Yes, yes, oh yes.” as he entered her. And then he was deeper inside and she was thrusting back at him. And then he was up on his toes and up on his hands and just dipping himself in and out of her. And she felt herself squirming beneath him, feeling just that part of him moving in and out of her and his breathing on her neck. Ron sunk down to his knees and let his hips begin to gallop. She felt the plunging weight of him now in and out of her.

The waves had begun riding in her when he went into that frenzy and swelled harder, her release



flooded out of her and seconds later he squirted hot jolts of himself into her.

Ron and Celeste grinned and moved slowly together with slow drifting, like gliding on their lake, then they pulled apart and lay touching.

Celeste said, "What do you want to do about dinner?"

Ron said, "I want to have it later."

Celeste said, "Well what do you want to do?"

Ron grinned. "Get the rest of the way naked and then take a sauna and shower together down there, and then have dinner."

"We won't make it, you know that. One of us will get distracted by something else that just seems to need to be done instead."

Ron was grinning. "OK, I'll turn on the sauna and go get pizza and you get naked"

Celeste grinned too and as he was on his way out the door she said, "Ron, I think I want a puppy."

## Chapter 16

Ron and Celeste's days settled into their rhythms. Ron had the manifestation determination conference scheduled. Celeste met with and liked the clergy. Patricia moved her into a spot representing patients' rights on a joint Board where clergy, and medical professionals meet with leaders from the Friendship Fund.

Patricia informed Heidi of her desire to have Celeste on this board and Patricia was a powerful woman. Her late, and never discussed philandering, husband was one of The Heights Village Founders. She had many friends and was now one of the clergy. This, of course, inserted a bug up Heidi's backside, but she would take that out on Celeste in different ways.

Angel thrived in the barn. She brought Ron out to see it one afternoon while he was mowing grass. She had done a good job and Ron had shown her that the circuit breaker for her heat had been turned off, and now the baseboard was, while not hot, warming.

It was Sunday morning. But not like a normal Sunday. They were taking a long ride. Ron and Celeste did not enjoy driving into Pennsylvania. There were too many ghosts on these roads. Ron had a distaste for Pennsylvania since before Celeste met him.

For Celeste, it had always held good memories, except that in the summer time she found it very buggy. Then the nightmarish cloud of Angel's deterioration descended on them, and this state with its horrible rehabilitation facility came into her life.

Celeste asked Ron what books he had in the car. He was listening to *The Source*. That would be perfect. "Just start it where you left off," said Celeste, "I'll fall right into it."

Michener did his magic and Ron tried to follow the directions. They were going to get their first dog together. They had both done research. This breed was known as Irish Water Spaniel. They had found it because of Celeste's allergies to dogs that shed. Water Spaniels were mostly all the same color. They were chocolate brown but were described officially as liver brown.

The ride was about two hours old when Ron said, "We need to turn off at the next exit and from there I need you read the directions."

Celeste grimaced. This never went well. Why did he keep forcing her to do it? She couldn't read a map and couldn't read his handwriting. It never ended well. She braced herself and hoped the explosion would pass quickly like a thunderstorm but maybe she would get lucky this time.

After he had expressed his exasperation with her ability to decipher things, she could keep him in line by reminding him that he was acting like a Vice Principal. That got him every time and then he would become mostly cooperative, but some thunderstorms came in twos. They were the real pains in the ass because she would have relaxed thinking it was over, but then some new twist of fate might send him over the edge again.

She did have more of a chance on Sunday, because he would have burnt some of that energy off all day on Saturday and would also not be as pent up.

Ron tried to read the directions as Celeste held them up, but had to glance away from the road which made him tense. If only she would just read what was there. But, magically, there was the street for whose number they were looking. They had gotten there without difficulty.

As they walked up the driveway that saw the paws and curious head of a beautiful dog, who wanted to see who was arriving, jump to the window ledge.

Ron rang the bell. Celeste was excited as the breeder answered the door flanked by two more of these wonderfully brown, curly coated, friendly, alert dogs.

"Come in," he said. John Frances Reilly was happy to see them. His wife was so done with this litter

that she was giving him an argument about ever doing it again. This pup had been returned after two weeks. He was the runt of the litter anyway, and the elderly couple who purchased him had used a tooth brush on his puppy teeth to make sure that he never had that bad breath smell that they hated in dogs. Then, they just brought him back. His name was Boo Boo but Ron and Celeste could name him anything that they wanted. They were both immediately smitten. Boo Boo curled right into their arms and was at ease.

“Yes,” they wanted him. “No,” they didn’t have a crate. “Yes,” they would take him now.

Ron was ready with the agreed amount. Celeste had already written the check before they’d left the house. The breeder’s wife even came down stairs and offered them coffee while her husband created the paperwork. Ron was busy signing the permission slips. Celeste was just holding their new puppy and feeling him breathe and looking into his eyes.

“What do you want to name him?” said Reilly.

“Keats,” said Ron.

He felt Reilly flinch at the name of the English poet as he said, “Keats it is.”

Chapter 17

The afternoon before the manifestation determination, Ron met with the principal, the supervisor of special services, and the guidance department chairperson. The principal had called the meeting.

Muriel Bowser sat with Karl Polemnic and Kristie Triano when Ron entered the room. He took a seat and Muriel was glad that he was there. Of course, she did not favor the returning of kids from outside placement but Ron was getting his hands dirty with it.

Superintendent of Schools, Rufus Finley, had made the decision and it was their job to implement it. Rufus would not really want to be bothered with the details, unless it was a political necessity.

Ron knew that tomorrow's conference was really to inform the team what had been decided here.

Muriel smiled. "Does anyone need anything?"

None of them did.

"Ron, why don't you bring us all up to speed?"

Karl resented the assumption that he needed to be brought up to speed by anyone, especially Ron. "I think we all know what's going on. The kid's acting out and Dr. Tuck wants to get him kicked out." Karl

looked around the room for agreement. He did not wait for reaction. “Doesn’t that about sum it up, Ron?”

Polemnice was the kind that you just had to stand up to and Ron knew it. Karl felt that most decisions were really simple, and the school made too much out of them. Ron knew that he had to throw Karl off balance or else he would just dominate the meeting, make his point of view the plan, and walk out.

“I really wish it was that simple, Karl.”

Polemnice was immediately defensive. “What’s complicated about it? I know you want to use all of your fancy language and keep us here forever and I’m just trying to cut through the crap.”

“The crap, as you so elegantly put it Karl, is that the kid belongs in a situation where he can get real help, which is not happening here.”

“I differ with that assessment,” said Kristie Triano.

“Dr. Peter’s report indicates that David Carpenter has shown real progress.”

“We’ve got a band aid on the situation, but it won’t hold. Yes, we have him in classes with all male teachers and that has quieted things down some, but Lois Pasternak found David wandering the halls yesterday and when she approached him to ask to

see his pass, she was greeted with David's favorite response, "Go fuck yourself, bitch."

Muriel and Kristie were offended by the words and had body language to indicate that. Karl said, "But after he made his wisecrack, he went back to class. I think that's the progress that Dr. Peters is referring to."

"That's just great," said Ron. "Let me go and find David and congratulate him on his newly found self-control."

"Gentlemen, there's no need for profanity or egging each other on. We are here to problem solve." Muriel tried to sound in control of this meeting in her office.

"The problem is that Dr. Tuck does not like the Superintendent's decision about the district and, instead of finding ways to implement it, he is intent on challenging it," said Karl.

Muriel's political antennae were up. She knew what Karl was doing. "No one opposes the decision, Karl, but we do have to find ways to make it work."

"We've just about got a faculty revolt on our hands," exaggerated Ron. "How many of our staff is trained to deal with kids who talk to them like that? They see nothing done to modify David's inappropriate behavior. We need a better plan."



Kristie Triano was ready for this and Karl had given her the perfect lead in. “Last year, David’s out of district placement cost the district \$46,500. That is money that we just don’t have anymore.”

Ron knew it was true. The school budget had not passed. Cuts had been mandated. Rufus had gotten out in front of it all by placing a moratorium on the emotionally necessitated out of district placements.

“How do you suggest that we handle it, Kristie?”

“I think that we need to mandate some sensitivity training for the faculty,” said the Director of Special Services.

“With all due respect Kristie, that may create some eventual long term improvement in the way the faculty responds some situations, but it is going to take more than sensitivity training for our female staff to not react negatively to being told to go fuck themselves and being referred to as skanky bitches.”

Muriel stepped in. “I don’t think that we have to use David’s exact wording again and again, Ron. It’s offensive.”

Ron knew its impact and was repeating the language on purpose. “That’s exactly what the staff is saying to me, Muriel!”

It had worked. He had been able to deliver that line in a way that was inescapable. “Here’s the even greater problem. Because faculty doesn’t want to be treated that way, they have begun just staying away from David in the halls. The boy has sensed his impunity and will become emboldened.

“That’s not the worst thing that can happen,” laughed Karl.

Kristie Triano looked directly at Ron. “What is it that you suggest?”

Ron smiled. “Home instruction.”

“That is out of the question as a real education plan!” said Triano raising her voice with incredulity. “What does it accomplish other than getting Dr. Tuck’s headache out of the building?”

Ron spoke quickly. “The manifestation determination has made it a headache for all of us, Kristie. As you point out, we do not have the available funds for out of district placement, or we are being told that we don’t have them. I think that in this case we have to do what is best for the educational community.”

“Bedside instruction is for students who have suffered a serious injury and cannot attend,” said Kristie.

Ron had been a Home Instructor, not in this district but he knew how it worked. "Districts have used home instruction to get kids dealing drugs out of the building in the past. It has been used for kids who were school phobic. It is the best option that we have available."

"And what about the burden that it places on the Carpenter family?" said Karl.

Ron's face hardened as he spoke, "That's not my problem."

Muriel liked the idea. It was the simplest, no fuss, and no mess solution. Of course the situation was untenable, but she had used Home Instruction for similar purposes in her previous school.

"I cannot support this as a long term plan," said Kristie Triano.

"It does meet all of the immediate criteria," said Muriel. "Perhaps we should give it a try."

Kristie Triano glared at Ron. Shondra Peters was right. He was just a cold hearted bastard.

## Chapter 18

The manifestation hearing itself was an entirely different kind of meeting. The entire Child Study team, including the case manager, the learning disabilities testing coordinator, and the psychologist were there. Susan Carpenter was in attendance as well as Bert Pouri, Ron, and Muriel Bowser. David would be brought in at some point and there could be others who were invited to attend if their presence was considered necessary. Usually, at least one teacher on David's schedule was asked to be there. Ron had been a fierce advocate of having the student be allowed to pick the faculty member that he wished to represent him academically. That had become established practice.

Kristie Triano chaired the meeting. Ron took notes, he wished for Joyce who could write as fast as anyone spoke and give it back, with at least the gist and many of the details. But he knew what he was looking for.

They listened as David's recent standardized test scores, mandated by the manifestation hearing,

administered by the child study team, were announced.

His IQ was 132. His hand eye coordination was above average. His hearing was well above average. His hygiene was passable, but revealed evidence of his oppositional defiance issues.

“They are mostly manifested by a resistance to authority, or perceived authority, by negative verbal signaling.” Ron listened as Shondra spoke and he wrote. He jotted down three quick questions.

“Upon confrontation David does not, at present, have complete control of his social acceptability, but we feel this is improving,” Shondra paused and added as she stared across the table at Ron, “because of David’s opportunities to adjust to socialization which will be significantly hampered by any aspect of isolation.”

Ron smiled over at Kristie Triano. Of course she had told Shondra. Ron expected she would, but Muriel didn’t like it. That was a private meeting in her office.

Kristie Triano thanked the child study team and welcomed Susan Carpenter. She asked if Susan had agreed with the picture that it presented of David.

Susan Carpenter was an immaculately dressed woman in a business suit. Her hair was sculpted to

hang just to her shoulders. Her nails were manicured red and they rested on the table in front of her. She held her wrists together and gestured with her fingers. "David has never been an easy boy. I know what he's like. I had no better luck with his older brother." That surprised Ron he jotted it down and drew circles.

"Yes, I agree that he is a smart boy who does not like to be told what to do." She paused like she was about to say something else but then didn't. "He does seem happier here," concluded Susan. Ron thought that her ability to understate was about as good as he had ever heard

"Are there any questions before we proceed to the next stage of this hearing?" said Kristie.

Ron indicated that had had a question by repositioning his pad and then pointing to it with his pen.

"Could you describe the negative verbal signaling, Dr. Peters?"

"Inappropriate responses," said Peters, stiffening.

"Responses that include vulgarity and sexual innuendo?" said Ron.

"Yes, Dr. Tuck we all know how he responds." Shondra wished that she could plant her sharpest

heel so far into his balls that he hopped like bugs bunny.

“My point, Shondra is that the tension that is added to this room by even discussing the details of his behaviors makes it extraordinarily clear that they have a negative impact on a community as interactive as ours.”

Muriel Bowser said, “I think that it is about time that we hear from David.”

David Carpenter was a blonde-headed kid with a surfer look haircut that drooped into his right eye. Muriel Bowser tried to make eye contact with the one uncovered eye, but was unable. David sat in the chair staring at the table.

“David, do you know why we are having this meeting?” Muriel asked hoping it would raise David’s eyes. It did they were a sparkling blue, he brushed his hair back with his hand.

“People get pissed off at me,” said David. His tone was moderate.

“Do you know why?” said Muriel softly.

David’s eyes drew a little closer and his voice seemed more rehearsed. “There doesn’t have to be a why, bitch.”

Shondra Peters made eye contact with David. Imperceptibly she moved her eyes back and forth like she was shaking her head.

David nodded and put his hands in his pockets as he had been taught.

Susan Carpenter looked embarrassed and hardly for the first time.

Ron said, "Dave, why didn't you want a teacher here to speak about your academics?"

The voice deepened again. "I've got nothing to say about any of them, don't care what any of them has to say about me."

Ron nodded, "So, you don't feel bonded with any of them, you know, friendly?"

David smirked. "Just you Dr. Tuck, I just love our little chats." He paused. Everyone listened. "You're funny as shit."

"Thanks David," said Ron. It hadn't been the first time that he's said it to him.

Shondra spoke up. "David, will you excuse us a minute please."

David was happy to get out of there. He hadn't said anything that bad.

He hadn't told the skanks about the stink of them.



After the door closed in back of David, Shondra said. "He obviously feels very threatened in this situation.

"That felt pretty much the way David is during his day to day interactions. That is why I am recommending that he be placed on immediate home instruction while psychological counseling is provided on a regular basis."

There it was. The reports had been delivered.

Kristie Triano had one more detail to resolve. "The district cannot assume the complete cost of the counseling, Mrs. Carpenter."

This was not a decision that Susan was allowed to make. She nodded her head and said, "I understand." Ron thought he saw her close her eyes and swallow.

Triano added, "This is a temporary decision that will be reviewed in two months.

## Chapter 19

Along the glass causeway that snaked its way from the beautifully appointed lobby, back through the

ground floor of the facility, and eventually through the Residential Health Care Unit were some well-spaced rooms. The library, stacked with large print books, some audio books, and many Romance and crime mysteries sat across from the Chapel.

It was designed for meditation and faith. It was not normally set up for a service, but more a place to come and feel closer to God. Celeste met with the clergy in an antechamber of the chapel.

Duane Murphy smiled his natural and welcoming grin. He and Celeste were friends. He had inspired her to join their church. His attitude towards doing good in the community and creating Christianity through social fellowship inspired Celeste.

It was a song that she recognized. She felt its backbeat in her soul and could dance to it. He and Celeste held hands after a brief hug. Duane was sporting a very closely cropped, daily-manicured beard. He had confided with Celeste when he started to grow it. She always gave it a once over, like she was in on its conception and was pleased with its maturation.

Dennis Kincaid was an openly gay minister, who lived with his deacon and head of the choir, at a Parish about twenty miles to the West. He and his partner liked Celeste and her boyishly cute husband. And so they saw them socially as well.

Ron liked them but it was his affinity was for Duane's wife, with whom he shared mutual and open affection. Duane leaned in and whispered into Celeste's ear. "Do you and Ron want to have dinner with Mandy and me tomorrow?"

Celeste grinned and wrote it on her pad. "I don't know what he has going on, but I'll ask him and call Mandy later."

"Or, you can call me later. I have some things to tell you." said Duane.

Zin Walsh rounded out the meeting. His parish was just to the east of Height Village. He was a little thick through the waist while both Duane and Dennis were slender.

Patricia Tallman sometimes joined the group when she did not have something else planned. She had arranged for this grouping and the rotating cycle of Masses that the Episcopal priests now offered in the Chapel.

They met after lunch on Thursdays. Celeste had a list of new residents to the community. She often gave observations about residents that she thought might benefit from a visit. They, in turn, would offer an occasional observation about one of the private, residential villagers about whom they might have noticed something during their regular parish services.

It might have been surveillance and a subtle erosion of privacy, but it was mostly met with acquiescence, or a proud- if polite- assertion for a need of space. This team was not evangelically driven and so quite responsive to that. They were there to offer a type of community to those in need of it.

It was a relaxing, rewarding part of Celeste's week. She liked these men. She wanted to stand with them with what they stood for. Because of their personal and public intermingling, there was always some gossip to be shared.

"Jack got his ass handed to him over in England. It's going to be interesting to see how he responds," said Dennis.

"I think he may have had enough," said Duane.

Each of these men knew John Shelby Spong as their bishop. They had introduced him to Celeste.

Celeste was mesmerized by him. She found herself for the first time, in such a very long time, seeing in him, the embodiment of a life-walk to which she could aspire. "Do you think he's in trouble?" Celeste was worried. "What happened in England?"

Zin gave an accurate account. "He was told that he has simply gone too far and was not acting in the best interests of the Church or Christianity. And that his positions were under review by the council of

bishops who would provide a written review.” Zin shook his head but knew changes were going to be afoot, and it was up to him to stay nimble and be ready to respond to them.

Celeste communicated with Ron through Joyce. He needed nothing but short and to the point. “Just say...dinner with Duane and Mandy tomorrow?”

Joyce lowered her tone. “Should I say it enthusiastically?”

Celeste grinned. “Unless something has come up, he’ll be enthusiastic.”

She knew how much he enjoyed seeing Mandy and she wanted to hear more about what was going on about Jack.

## Chapter 20

Ron ran the electric lawn mower rough-shod over what was left of the overgrown, thorn bush invaded space, inside of his slate lined perimeter. It was colder. He was wearing a sweater over the coveralls. His plan for the weekend was to rip it out,

lay growth cloth, and then have two yards of top soil delivered on Saturday afternoon

Keats was sitting by his Chery tree watching from a fenced-in wire playpen area that Ron had stuck into the ground for him. His floppy ears went up when the mower connected with roots, but mostly he was watching Ron, or rolling on his back in the grass. Ron had given a sock to chew on.

Celeste was inside making dinner and talking to Duane.

Angel come up the outside stairs from the in back of the barn. Ron had shut off the mower and was lifting it over the slate so that it didn't crumble. He had learned that his perimeter was fragile on top. Ron saw her and took off his gloves.

Angel came onto the front lawn and saw Keats wagging his tail. "Hello, Shitsalot! How are you?" She moved over to pet Keats. She knew that she had annoyed Ron. But the dog annoyed her, and was now in the house during the only time when they weren't.

"What's going on?" Ron hadn't taken the 'shitsalot' bait.

"Something that could be special," said Angel. "I could be getting a chance to work behind the

scenes while somebody makes a film at the college.”

“That’s great,” said Ron. “What’s it about?”

“I don’t know,” lied Angel, “I don’t care. I get to work on it.”

There was a vulnerable challenge as she stood in front of him.

She really didn’t care what it was about, although she knew. She wanted it to not matter to him. She was waiting.

Before the mowing, his reaction might have been different. But he had a chance to be with Keats and let out some of the frustration, he needed to let it out as much as a drunk needs a drink. But she had come at a good time.

“What are you going to be doing?”

Angel grinned. “I’m just a go-for but I get to see what everyone else does and it goes on my resume.”

“That sounds really good. You’ve done it for plays. You can do this.”

“I know I can do it, Dad. Did you figure I felt that I couldn’t and needed a pep talk?”

“No Angel, I figured that if I get this done today I can turn it tomorrow, and I have top soil Saturday in the afternoon. Could you bring the growth cloth that’s on the bench in the barn up before then?”

“Sure Dad, That’s great! Where’s Mom?”

“In the house.”

Ron began walking the lawn mower down the slope that curled back down to the small road back to barn. Angel went in through the side door and slammed it.

Keats saw all his people disappearing and he was fenced in. He started scratching at the gate and then shouldered it to the side. He was out. The freedom sent an exhilarating shiver through him and then he began to puppy prance towards the garden, and the little wall that he wanted to climb over and see what was inside.

Angel struck a pose for Celeste who was putting down the phone and moving between her stove and her island. “Why is Dad always such a bastard?”

Celeste was grating cheese. “What’s got you riled up?”

“No, I want to know! Why he is always such a bastard!”



Celeste stared at her evenly. "I don't think he's a bastard and I'm not sure why you think he is."

Angel looked at Celeste mockingly. "Why should I bother to tell you? It's not like you are able to do anything about it anyway."

Celeste looked back at Angel. "You have little idea of what I can or cannot do Angel. How could you? You would have to give me some credit and you would not dare do that."

"Well, I'd like some credit too" screamed Angel, grabbing the cheese grater and throwing it towards the sink.

Ron found Keats playing in the garden and couldn't help but laugh. The puppy ran to him and Ron lifted up into his arms and walked him back to the wire cage.

He kissed Keats on the side of his face and whispered, "Did you break out? Did you think I forgot you? Or did you just want to show how strong you are?"

He kissed and the puppy and Keats tried to lick. Angel flew down the stairs to the barn hollering, "Glad you love somebody, Dad."

## Chapter 21

Friday night was that kind of evening in late October that seems like a gift. The insects were mostly gone and the evening was warm with just a hint of cool. Celeste walked with Duane holding hands and talking. Ron walked with Mandy his arm comfortably circling her waist.

They were walking slowly, meandering their way back from dinner. The Church was on one of the prettier streets in Hackleberg, and Duane and Mandy's house was two doors down from it.

Celeste said, "What will happen if Jack does retire? What will he do? What will you do?"

"It's' very up in the air," said Duane. "I almost want to say that it is in God's hands but you know that I don't believe that."

"You believe that it's up to us," said Celeste. "I agree with you."

"Jack would say that we should not be as concerned for him as we should be about what his rebuke means for the future of the church," said Duane.

Mandy was speaking softly because he leaned his head in when she did and she liked that. "It was a good summer for the roses. You have to let me

show you one more time when we get back to the house. They are so strong even for now.”

Ron smiled and squeezed her waist. “I’d like to see.” What she had already shown him was a knockout and she was dedicated to her garden as something that could live on, be passed from priest’s wife to priest’s wife. This had been Duane’s fourth posting. There would be others.

“How is your garden?” said Nancy. “Have you had time to make progress?”

“Yes,” said Ron. “I will be able to plant in the spring. The top soil is coming tomorrow and you have to help me to design the garden.”

She smiled for him and almost wanted to kiss him but squeezed his hand around her waist instead.

The four of them sat on the front porch and drank coffee. They talked about the church and Celeste asked if Duane had his sermon ready.

Mandy giggled. “By Friday night? No chance. We haven’t gone through the tearing up of this week’s work yet, and having his Saturday surprise.

Celeste laughed. “Is he really like that?”

“No, he’s decidedly worse,” said Mandy.

They all laughed. Ron and Duane knew that they shared impulsivity, it was a bond and created a reason for respect.

"I don't feel it sometimes and I would feel awful standing there on Sunday morning trying to say something that I don't feel. Sometimes I get anxious about it."

Mandy smiled, "But somehow when I walk in on Sunday morning, it's all ready." Duane and Mandy exchanged their look. Then Mandy said, "Doesn't Ron ever get nervous about something that he has to deliver?"

Ron interjected, "I'm not trying to give the advice of God."

Celeste laughed, "You don't think that you are ever writing something that could come out of the mind of God, Ron?"

Her voice was teasing. The girls were laughing, Duane was grinning. Ron was stammering.

"Didn't you want to show Celeste those brochures?" said Mandy. "I'm going to take Ron over to the garden."

Celeste and Duane huddled under a wicker shaded outdoor light as he showed her his designs for the new food drives for the holidays. Mandy took Ron to see the garden. She caressed the bushes

carefully. She lightly squeezed the stems. "Here, feel how full these are." Ron squeezed them for her. "They will be so ready to pop in the spring."

They talked while she inspected. Yes, she was happy. Yes, she thought at least two more years here. They wandered back to the porch.

"Mandy is going to have some scar tissue adhesions taken out on Monday," said Duane.

Celeste and Ron looked concerned. Duane and Mandy smiled. Mandy explained, "It's a simple thing. Scar tissue from a difficulty I had as a little girl. But after this I will really be able to work the garden better."

After a little more time, they kissed and shook hands and said goodnight. As they drove home, Celeste missed the bench seats where she could put her head on his shoulder but instead held the hand that was squeezing her thigh.

## Chapter 22

Three days into his home instruction, David Carpenter showed up in the student parking lot carrying a starter's pistol. It was relatively harmless but looked very real. When he started pointing it at people, and laughing at their reaction, Frankie Martin subdued him. He used the walkie-talkie to call Joyce and tell her to notify the township police.

Joyce did and called to Ron that Frankie needed help in the front student parking lot. Ron dropped what he was doing in a flash and was out the front door in time to see Frankie walking David towards the school.

There was a crowd of gawking students around them. Ron strode into the group. He made eye contact with Frankie who was sweating as he held David. The boy had his head lowered and was repeating, "It was a fucking joke, you stupid pig."

Ron hollered, "You don't want to miss your buses or be part of this. Show's over! Is anyone hurt?"

He looked around. There were snickers and some of the guys were talking about how Mr. Martin was a badass.

They started back into his office as two patrol cars with lights flashing headed into the school parking lot. "Take him onto my office, Frankie. I'll talk to these guys."

Ron approached the patrol car. "Would you guys mind coming into my office, we have a bit of a situation here."

The policemen were getting out of their cars. Officer Bond said, "We had a report about a gun. Is that real?"

"Frankie Martin is in my office with the kid. There were no shots fired and no injuries. We need to just clear this area now," said Ron.

The cops knew Ron. They had given him PBA cards. He had been with them when they did drug sweeps through the school. There was a sense of alliance between them.

In Ron's office, Frankie said, "I'm going to take these off of you now David, don't do anything else stupid or these guys might really hurt you."

The cops stood over David to reinforce the idea that they would really hurt him. Ron opened the door to his office and came in.

"Do you have the gun, Frankie?"

Frankie looked up at Ron and smiled at the other two cops. “No, I think it’s somewhere out in the parking lot,” he said sarcastically and then saw the look of fear that passed over Ron’s face. He laid the starter’s pistol on Ron’s desk. The three cops chuckled. Of course, Frankie had secured the gun.

Herman Bond picked up the gun from Ron’s desk and looked at it. “What are you doing with something like this, David?”

“It was a joke,” said David. “It can’t hurt anybody.”

“But the other people didn’t know that, did they David?” said Bond.

“I don’t know what they knew,” said David.

Ron’s intercom buzzed. Joyce was on the line. “We are starting to get calls from parents about a shooting in the parking lot!” she said excitedly.

“Tell them there was no shooting,” said Ron. “Take their numbers and I will call them all back.” He looked up at the police officers. “Sorry about that, people get crazy when they hear guns and school.”

Bond took the starter’s pistol and handed it to his partner who produced a plastic bag and dropped the gun into it, then continued with his notes. “They sure do,” said Bond. “Where did you get this gun, David?”



"It belongs to my father," said David putting his head down.

"We're going to take you in, David."

"Shit," said David.

"Yeah," said Bond "and you are in a world of it."

"Can we wait just a couple of minutes before you leave?" said Ron. "I want to contact his family and see if they want me to accompany him."

"Your call, Ron"

Ron came out of his office and motioned for Joyce. The buzz of the incident was still alive in the general office. The phones were ringing. Joyce came over. "I need you to do three things," said Ron. "Get me David's emergency contact number, find the principal and tell her we need to call the Superintendent, and see if the nurse is still in the building and send her to my office."

"In that order?" said Joyce. Ron nodded and moved back into the office.

He was just in back of his desk when his phone buzzed. "Susan Carpenter," said Joyce.

"Mrs. Carpenter, I am here with David and the police. He is being taken down to the police station now. Do you want to meet them there or do you

need the school to accompany him until you can get there?”

“What’s happened?” said Susan Carpenter. Her voice showed tension and strain.

“He brought your husband’s gun to school.” said Ron flatly.

David looked up and blurted, “It was a fucking joke, Tuck.”

Ron ignored him.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” said Susan.

Ron didn’t care how much of a priority this was for Susan, it was no longer a priority for him. “Alright,” said Ron. “I’ll tell them they that you are on the way.”

Ron clicked the phone down. “She’ll meet you at the station.”

There was a soft knock on Ron’s door. “Yes?” he said.

Gladys Peterfritter was in the doorway. “Did you need something, Dr. Tuck?”

Ron looked over at David. “Are you injured?”

David didn’t answer.

Ron raised his voice, "I'm asking you in the presence of the school nurse and these police officers if you are injured, David?"

David bit off the word, "No."

"Frankie, would you please let Gladys have a look at your hand, it's bleeding."

The township cops and Frankie shared a grin. "It's fine Ron."

The two cops left with David between them. Ron watched them load him into the patrol car. He was going to enjoy this conversation with the Superintendent.

## Chapter 23

Ron and Celeste got home at the same time. It was a rarity. Each of them had their late nights, but never seemed to arrive home together. Celeste

knew that the first thing that he would want to do was change his clothes. That was a constant, but this couldn't wait for that. She was upstairs just a moment just before him. She put down her purse and sat at the kitchen table waiting.

Ron always moved heavily on the stairs when he came home from work. Sometimes by a weekend, he could almost skip down them softly, but when he came home his steps were always heavy.

He was trying to get out of his jacket and tie at the same time, when she called to him at the top of the stairs, "Ron, I have to tell you something."

He finished struggling out of both and entered the kitchen with his eye on the flight of stairs, then he saw her and her words registered. He stopped and put his hand on the back of the chair.

Celeste said, "Can you sit with me?"

Ron sat. He saw that she had been crying. "What is it?"

"Ron, Mandy isn't coming home from the hospital."

He didn't understand. "Why?"

"She's going to die there."

"What?" It wasn't registering. The confusion on his face sunk into a dark look.

“She developed ARDS, Ron.”

“Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome. Fluid is leaking into her lungs from more places than they can contain,” said Celeste. “There should have been signs. This isn’t just supposed to happen.”

Ron was stunned. “She’s dying?”

“Yes,” said Celeste.

“How is Duane?”

“In shock,” said Celeste. “He’s saying that he knows she is dying, but I don’t believe that he know what he’s saying. I just left him.”

Ron exhaled. He was speechless. He sat back. He could not think of anything to do. He felt totally helpless, and then Celeste embraced him.

She felt cold and he tried to give her his warmth. They stood for a long moment before they heard Keats, pawing at the gate in the small enclosed room where he felt safe when they weren’t home. He was desperate for attention. They shared a grin and Ron went over to let him out.

The three of them sat on the rectangular rug that was stretched across old wall to wall that they would have to replace. They were both crying quietly as they gently took turns, cuddling and

greeting Keats who was becoming affectionately known as Puppy Dog.

Celeste went to answer the phone when it rang. Ron cuddled Keats to his chest quietly. Celeste said, "Yes, I can come back." Then she listened. "Ok, eat something to appease all the church ladies, and then we can go back to the hospital." She put down the phone and looked over at Ron. "Are you ok for dinner on your own? There's plenty to eat where I'm going and I know that you won't want to be part of it."

"I'll be fine," said Ron. Keats was chewing on Ron's fingers now. "You sure you don't need me?"

"You'd hate it and I want to do it," said Celeste. Maybe some of that training that she had gone through again and again might help now. Then she thought to herself that Duane had been going through that with many other people. He'd know what people were going to say before they said it. He just needed a friend to help him through.

Celeste felt a pang and for a second stopped at the thought that maybe she should give Ron suggestions about what he could have, then she thought that she did not know where Angel was. Then she was out the door and starting her Eclipse.

## Chapter 24

The snow had been coming down for a few hours. It fell straight down without even a hint of wind to blow it one way or the other. Celeste sat with her coffee staring out of the windows that watched over her lake. The house was quiet. Keats was lying on her feet and being very still. The bustle would begin when Ron got out of bed. It was a Sunday in December. Next Sunday would be her birthday. The house was fully decorated for the holidays.

Celeste inhaled the warming aroma of the coffee as she heard Ron stirring upstairs. Keats was the first to hear his sounds and made his way up the stairs one step at a time. He would place both paws tentatively on the step above and then jump with his stronger back legs. As he got more used to the repetition he moved faster and made it up to the top. He did not stop to admire his accomplishment, but hurried towards the sounds coming from the bathroom.

Celeste was grinning and huddled into the comforter that she had wrapped around her. She thought about whether her mom would be proud of her now. She had a home, she had a good job. She had a man who had been right for her and for

Angel. Her poor mother, only ten years older than she was now, and gone almost twenty years.

The wall of windows was beautiful and she would not trade it for anything, but the house did get chilly as the cold seeped in from the little unseen places that an old house has. She felt very peaceful as she watched the snow.

She could barely see the lake now. The snow and the trees seemed to hide it. She knew it was very cold outside and did not want to move. Ron came down the stairs holding Keats in his arms. Puppy Dog was licking the underside of his chin and Ron was smiling.

The Puppy squirmed free when he bent over to kiss Celeste, and Ron lowered Keats gently to the floor. He slid his hands inside of her nightgown and squeezed her breasts after they kissed. Celeste jumped. "Your hands are cold," she said accusingly.

Ron grinned, "Good morning, dear one." He put his hands on his hips and looked out at the view. "This is just beautiful. Every day is a new picture."

"Do you think you could light a fire later?" said Celeste.

"As soon as I come back from the store," said Ron.

"You're not going out there, are you?"



“We need the newspaper,” said Ron.

“You’re crazy! It looks frigid out there!”

“I’ll be fine. Are you gonna warm me up when I get back?” He was grinning that naughty little grin that promised fun in bed.

“Not on your life,” said Celeste. She involuntarily pulled the comforter closer around her but felt a shiver of delight at his words. “Let the puppy warm you up. He’s old enough to have a job.”

Ron’s response shocked her. “He’s coming with me.” He got his ‘moon boots’ out of the shallow living room closet. Keats saw him and started wagging is tail frantically. The enthusiasm of the wags and the size of his tail caused his entire backside to shift from side to side as he wagged. Ron stomped his feet down to make sure he was securely in his boots and the motion and sound caused the joyous Keats to turn in a wagging circle.

Celeste felt secure but a little worried as she watched him. “Dress in layers,” she said.

He grinned with expectation but did not answer. He looked down at Keats. “I’ll be back for you as soon as I get the car cleaned off.” The puppy stared at his face and seemed to understand, but when Ron started down the stairs, he was right on his heels.

He was out the door with Ron before Ron could stop him.

The two stood under the overhang of the deck outside the door. Keats was tentative about the sight of the snow everywhere, and at first sniffed it and then licked it. Ron looked over at him and said, "This isn't so bad." He walked to the car, opened the door and lifted Keats inside. The puppy put his two fore paws up below the window and watched as Ron cleaned off the car. The snow was not over the front of his boots yet, and the car eased out of the driveway normally.

Ron looked over at Keats. "Be a good boy or you can't come with me to do this anymore." The puppy seemed to understand and whimpered to have his window opened. "It's snowing out," said Ron. Keats whimpered again and Ron said. "Don't tell Celeste" and pushed the button to lower the window all the way down on the passenger side.

Keats looked out with his forepaws on the top of the sill and his tail wagging in a slower, more controlled fashion, as they drove down the road with snow whipping in the passenger side window.

## Chapter 25

Angel came in the side door some moments after Ron and Keats left. Her voice was edged and she did not say good morning. "Where did Dad go with Shitsalot?"

Celeste felt determined to not let Angel break her reverie. "Good morning," she tried to say sweetly. "Dad went to get the paper."

"He does realize that there is a blizzard this morning, right?" spat Angel.

"Yes. Angel, I am pretty sure that he realized that it was snowing." She could tell that Angel was looking for conflict.

Angel said, "Was he always this much of an asshole?"

The reverie was gone. Celeste said, "You didn't think he was being an asshole when he was building you a snowman!"

"I was six years old!" shouted Angel.

"There's fresh coffee," Celeste tried to be conciliatory.

"Yeah Mom, I can see the coffee. I can smell the coffee. I don't need to be told that there is coffee!" Angel poured herself a cup and said, "I'm going back out to the barn." Celeste felt a knot in her stomach but was happy to see Angel go.

When Ron got back from the store, Celeste's reverie had become a brooding about why she could not talk to her daughter. He came up the stairs with Keats who was happily flinging the snow from his curly fur with a series of shakes that were spraying ice crystals all across her clean living room. He put the newspaper down and Celeste hollered, "Do you see what a mess the dog is making on the floor?"

"It's only water," said Ron. "We're going back out." He dropped the paper down in front of her and started tracking ice and snow through her rooms and back down the stairs.

Celeste was exasperated. How could she ever be expected to keep a decently clean house with him!

Then she heard the scrape of the shovel and realized that he was clearing the driveway. It was still snowing! Didn't he know enough to wait until it stopped?

Because the driveway was gravel and Ron could not use a snow blower, his idea was, that if he kept ahead of the snow, things would be manageable.

Keats tried to help Ron by grabbing the edge of the plastic shovel in his mouth and pulling. It didn't help at all but Ron found it amusing. After he's walked the width of the driveway, pushing the shovel as Keats energetically tugged on it, he would lift the shovel and toss the snow to the side. Keats would jump in the air and try to catch the snow with his mouth and his body. Ron was laughing as he was shoveling. "You like that, huh Puppy?" He started back the other way and Keats charged to grab hold of the shovel and tug.

Celeste could not help but laugh as she watched this comedy from her windows. The she felt like a slug for not being out there. She could at least clean off the Eclipse.

Ron was just about done with this pass at the driveway when Celeste appeared dressed like a snowperson. Her winter jacket fitted her like an inflated tube that came down to her waist. She was

wearing a brown woolen knitted cap with a fleecy red ball on top of her head.

“How can I help?” said Celeste, trying to sound eager.

Keats barked a “hello” to Celeste and came over to her and sat proudly. He was totally covered in snow and it clung to his curly brown fur. Celeste thought he looked absolutely adorable and then thought about the horrible mess that he was going to make in the house. “Ron, look at what you have done to this poor puppy! How is he ever going to get cleaned up?”

“He was helping,” laughed Ron.

Celeste started for the Eclipse. It did not look happy covered in snow. She wanted to uncover it. She opened the driver’s side, to the low sitting Eclipse and Keats surprised her by leaping into the front seat and tracking snow all over it. He turned to her and gave her one of his rare barks. She was horrified and laughing as she tried to shoo him, “get out of there,” she hollered.

Ron laughed at her and said, “I’m going to do Angel’s driveway.” He started off towards the front of the barn with Keats now happily trailing him and wagging his tail.

The Eclipse started right up for Celeste, but she was afraid to move it. She sat in back of the wheel and like a flashback she saw herself laying in the sloping snow-covered ditch with a broken collarbone, hoping to be rescued. She felt shaken and all of a sudden very cold. She wanted to go back inside the house.

Celeste sat on the living room couch while Ron laid on the floor in front of the newly ensconced Keats who was back in his little foyer room having been told by Celeste that he would not be allowed out until he was dry. Of course, this was after Celeste and held him in one of her fluffy towels and rubbed as many of the ice balls off of his small body as she could.

Ron looked up and said, "Listen to this." He read an ad for an English Department Supervisor, for a regional high school district, who had managerial experience. "That seems like it was meant for me, doesn't it?"

"Maybe you should look into it, but it would have to be some job to pry you out of Oak Mountain."

Ron looked over at Keats. The dog's eyes were on him. He whimpered to be let out and then moved away from the gate as he saw Angel come in the door.

Angel was dressed to go out. She was wearing the scarf that Celeste had knitted for her. First, she looked at her mom and said in an informative tone, "I'm not sure when I will be back, so don't worry about me for dinner."

Then she turned to Ron. "I don't want to be forced to go to Marjorie's house on Christmas Eve." Then she was back down the stairs and out the door.

## Chapter 26

Ron had spent the day watching football and having his mind restless, thinking about not having a stack of papers on a Sunday during football season for just the second time in the last twenty-five years. He liked to turn off the sound on the TV and listen music at a ridiculously high volume. He did not smoke pot anymore. He could not do that in any form of conscience, and be a vice principal. So now, as he listened to the music and watched football, he had a few drinks. Keats was on the couch with him. The fireplace gave the room a warm glow.



Celeste enjoyed Sunday afternoons in the kitchen. She always enjoyed making Sunday dinner, and she could experiment and mix and plan meals for the week. He was not totally oblivious as to how these meals appeared, but he really did not know what went into them. Sometimes she missed his stack of papers.

Ron watched the Giants win a close game with the Denver Broncos, and then came into to visit Celeste.

“I’m going back out to shovel again, but I’m going to put Keats in his little room. Please let him out after I’m gone.”

Celeste nodded and then said, “Taste this,” she held the spoon in front of his mouth.

Obediently, he tasted. Ron grinned. “What’s that?”

“Brown sauce,” said Celeste. “The Giants must have won, you’re in a good mood.”

Ron sighed, “It’s about time they won a few games.” He took the spoon from her and licked it again. “Have you had fun?”

She wouldn’t exactly call it fun, but it was interesting, and yeah, maybe this is one of the things that he would consider fun. Celeste grinned. “I’ll know after dinner.”

Ron was outside when Celeste heard Keats. She went to the gate and let him out. She would have sworn he was about to knock the gate down when she got there, but was happy to see her. He scampered out and down the stairs where he heard Ron go. She heard him down by the door and said, "Keats, I have for you."

She grinned when she heard him hopping and running back up the stairs, which was still much more of an effort than going down. Lamb and rice was something that she cooked for his week on Sundays. It was the food the vet had recommended for his stomach. Celeste didn't mind cooking for him.

Ron was just finishing Angel's driveway, when she showed up. She smiled when she saw that he was clearing it for her. "Thanks Dad," she said when she got out of the car.

Ron said, "Your mother has dinner just about ready."

Angel was too hungry to be disagreeable. "Great."

Ron stopped, to stow his shovel and get some snow off of his boots, while Angel went right up the stairs. "Hi Mom, can I set the table?"

Celeste was slightly shocked and then smiled. "Sure," she said.

Keats was devouring his bowl of lamb and rice. Angel actually did not refer to him as shitsalot. The house felt warm.

Celeste carried the platter of pot roast and carrots to the table. She returned with a bowl of mashed potatoes. Angel and Ron took turns washing their hands in the small bath just off of the kitchen.

They each took a generous portion. Celeste said, "The Christmas store is this Tuesday. I hope the weather is ok."

"It was stopping when we came in," said Angel. "Everything will be fine by Tuesday."

Ron said, "Are you having it in the dining room again?"

"It's really the only room that is large enough to accommodate it," explained Celeste.

Ron looked up serious and said, "I think that should use that grand concourse of a winding walkway. This time of the year, with snow on the ground on every side. It would be perfect! The vendors could set up little temporary shops."

Celeste looked at Ron with an incredulity that was almost unimaginable. She started slowly. "Ron, at least twenty five of those people are in wheel chairs and there are at least that many that need walkers. Do you remember the slope of that walkway?"

Angel burst out laughing with a mouth filled with cider. Celeste continued, "It would be like geriatric roller derby." Angel was now laughing totally out of control. Celeste finished by looking at him and asking, "Are you sure I should propose that idea?"

Angel could not stop laughing as the images of the wheel chairs colliding with each other and upending doddering residents needing walkers had totally overtaken her. Each time she thought it was over a new wave of images came to her and knocked her back into a fresh paroxysms of laughter.

Ron said, "Well you did say that there was a waiting list."

This thought caused Celeste to burst into her own eruptions of laughter. Keats barked and wagged his tail, as the phone rang. There would be no school tomorrow.

"I can drive you to work in the morning," said Ron. Celeste smiled. It really had been a great day.

## Chapter 27

Ron and Celeste lay in bed watching Ali McBeal. Under the covers, they were naked and entwined

with afterglow. He loved to be in control and she loved to be receptive. Ron was hot for Calista Flockhart and Celeste was attracted by “the biscuit” the character Peter MacNicol was portraying. Ron had such a thing for waifs, but she didn’t feel threatened by it anymore.

“Are you really going to drive me to work tomorrow?” she said softly as he muted the TV for a commercial.

He slid his knee between her thighs and raised it up against her. “Yes, we can stop for breakfast somewhere on the way.”

They lay that way for a moment after the show started again, but then adjusted. Poor little Ally was wandering down a rainy night street and he was transfixed by the image. Somewhere, Celeste felt she competed with this image inside of him.

She felt determined to look as little like a waif as possible. “You really don’t really have to drive me,” she said. “I’m just worried about getting out onto the road and then I would be fine.” She really hoped she would be fine, but she couldn’t say that she was sure.

She had made a lot of progress. She reassured herself. Absently staring at the biscuits firm buns that were once made a subject of the show and which now always drew her inspection.

And then Vonda Shepherd was playing her piano and singing a song and Celeste felt herself wanting the feel his hips bucking into again. Ron turned up the volume and they listened. It was old Mo Town and Vonda was giving it a lonely, yearning feel.

Celeste felt her hips move almost imperceptibly as she felt the music. Lonely yearning was another thing that attracted him was another of the things that attracted him.

The episode ended. Ron muted the TV. He grinned at her and said, "I could go downstairs and get us ice-cream."

Celeste said, "It's cold down there."

Ron said, "I would go."

"I want chocolate," said Celeste.

Celeste snuggled under her lined Duvet and thought briefly if Angel was warm out in the barn. Maybe a blizzard wouldn't be the worst thing.

Ron came back with two bowls of ice cream. She held the Duvet open as he got in, and then took her bowl. They ate ice cream and grinned. Then Ron planted his ice cold foot onto her inner thigh. The shock caused Celeste too literally, involuntarily, unexpectedly squeal.

Ron's voice was soft. "Come on, you know the agreement."

Celeste closed her eyes. She was half grinning and wondering if he had planned this since the ice cream suggestion. She said, "I hate you," and brought her still not shocked, warm thigh down on the other side of his foot.

The agreement had been her idea when her feet were legitimately frozen, and his damn body was always so warm. She claimed that he should have to warm her whenever she needed him to. He had agreed, if it was mutual. But he was creating reasons and he was the one who always picked the spot where she had to warm him.

Ron finished his ice-cream. Celeste was still holding her half eaten dish and trying to adjust. Celeste said, "You are not going to do that with your other foot."

Ron grinned. He withdrew his warmed foot. "You can finish your ice cream first."

Celeste mock glared at him. "Get it over with." She spread her thighs.

Ron placed the other slightly less frigid foot against her decidedly less warmed inner thighs. She closed them and he closed his eyes in pleasure as she warmed him. Then he withdrew his foot and held

her thighs open. “Lay back for me,” he whispered. Celeste finished her ice-cream as he warmed her thighs with kisses.

## Chapter 28

The small Chapel was at the back of the main church. On Wednesdays, Duane offered Mass for a small but reliable group. Celeste had been an occasional participant with the group before Mandy died, now she was a regular. There were only eight of them, but Duane was good at offering a streamlined service and then they could all talk.

They met at what would normally be dinnertime. Debbie Insolate and her husband Jonas came regularly. They were met by Herman Pierce and Martha Hagerty. Josephine Montgomery and Sylvia Bonami, were the most recent additions to the group.

Since Mandy’s death, Duane had been inundated with more food than he could eat if he were five men. The ladies of the church were very solicitous about his well-being to the point of a daily



smothering him in offers to help clean his house, do his laundry, bring more food, tend to Mandy's duties by hosting the events that she hosted.

Duane was withdrawing from it all. In second grade, Mandy had passed Duane a note in school. It read, "I like you." They had been boyfriend and girlfriend since. There was never a time for Duane that there was no Mandy. He did not even want to get out of bed in the morning and he surely did not want to dream up some message of hope on Sundays.

The Congregation stepped up. Patricia Tallman contacted fellow clergy people and they covered Duane's Sunday Masses. Other priests offered to make his visits to the sick. Celeste listened in confidence to his doubts and fears that he had lost his faith.

Wednesday service was the one function that she urged him to continue to perform, and Duane said that he would try. Instead of a homily, Celeste and the others there had short discussions about how they felt. Today's liturgy was about the promise of Jesus.

Herman read, "...do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

Celeste could not help but look to Duane who was shaking his head back and forth. "It is hard for me to know what to say right now," he continued. "I know that Mandy would want me to be grateful to each and every one who is trying to help me and I am trying to do that." He put his head down and tears were brimming his eyes and Celeste knew what he was thinking. If you all could just let me alone to let me grieve, but he could not say that.

After the service, Josephine and Sylvia crowded too close to Duane to see if he was alright. Celeste could have sworn that she saw Josephine literally stick her chest into his arm. Celeste felt more than a little disdain for both women.

Duane just wanted it to be over. When Celeste signaled that's she was leaving, Duane used her exit to make a break. "Can you give me those pamphlets that you have in your car Celeste?"

Celeste said that she could and they walked to her car. Duane had begun smoking again. He lit a cigarette when they reached her car. "Can you give me something that I can just carry away?" he asked.

All Celeste had was a stack of the library's audio books but she gave him half of them. "I know that you don't believe me right now, and you may feel like you are doing a half-assed job, but you have to stay busy."

Duane looked her full in the face. “I have absolutely no idea of where to go or what to do.”

## Chapter 29

It was later than usual and Celeste was driving on the country road, her book was playing but she was only half listening. The road was cleared of ice and the cornfields wore a thick, cold blanket of snow. Celeste knew that it kept the fields warm under there, but it was cold snow that stretched out everywhere and covered everything and what did stick out had ice that made it glimmer like glass.

She had not talked to Ron, except in passing, in three days. The only time she really felt him pressing against her was when he was sleeping. She felt that though he loved her, she was the last thing on his mind. His attention would be a distraction that she would have enjoyed about now.

Patricia Tallman was taking another step in her slow and graceful decline. True to her nature she was trying to set things right. For Patricia, setting things right was as much about social interaction as it was about a personal reckoning.

Her children were who they were, and they loved her. That was enough for her there. She had presented her beliefs in a way that was encouraging

but accepting of a difference in pathways. She had become a priest because she felt a true calling and refused to accept that it had come too late.

Socially, Patricia wanted propriety balanced with a hint of change. She had chosen Celeste to be someone who would make a difference. She felt her bishop was a radical but brilliant thinker from whom she felt the love of god and she trusted that feeling.

She wanted Celeste to find out what was happening. She had introduced Celeste to every bishop and priest and important parishioner that crossed her path. Because of her legacy as being a Founder's widow, a woman from an established family of social means, and a wise and friendly person, she had more currency than one could imagine.

Patricia could no longer see out of one eye. She felt her other eye's vision in jeopardy and used it sparingly. She smiled when she told Celeste that her ears and mind were just fine. Celeste was remembering that smile when a female deer raced out into the road and in front of the Eclipse.

Celeste stomped hard on her brake pedal. Tires screeched, she saw the hind quarters of the deer racing in front of the nose of her car and was slowing when she felt the thud. She screamed out like it was she that had been hit.

The car stopped. She could not see the deer. She was shaking. Because she was not wearing a seat belt, she had whacked the top of her head against the windshield when she stopped. She was a little dazed. She managed to put the car in park.

She could not find the deer, but there was a pathetically small patch of fur embedded into the front of her Eclipse. She gasped when she saw it and tears sprang to her eyes. She felt dizzy for a second. She looked around for some sign of the deer, but she could see nothing but snow and a few outcroppings of branches.

She was crying when she got into the car. She had her cell phone. Her mind went reeling back to a time when they lived in Hackleberg, and this deer had just taken a swan dive into the side of her car, jumping from out of nowhere. She remembered her revulsion as she watched the state trooper put the broken backed deer out of its misery. No, she would not call the police.

She started to put her car in gear and felt his voice in her head, "Put the fucking seat belt on." She felt her head throb and whimpered a little as she slid it over her shoulder with begrudged obedience. She could do this. She switched off the book that had become a humming drone in her ears. She made her way home a bit tentatively and found Angel in

the kitchen. Keats had been fed. Celeste felt safe and hugged her daughter.

Angel felt her shiver and said, "What's wrong?"

"I hit a deer," said Celeste.

"That sucks! Did you kill it?" said Angel with normalcy.

"I don't know. I looked." Celeste was a little stunned by the way that Angel took this in stride. It was the difference in where they had been raised. Out here there were dead deer on the sides of the road all the time. Angel was from out here and it showed.

Celeste was thinking it was a good way to have been raised, out here.

Angel said, "If it was just wounded, it will probably just starve or freeze to death. Wonder if she was pregnant?"

Now Celeste felt bitch slapped and wanted to slap back but did not want confrontation. "Thank you for feeding Keats." Keats was now at her feet and wanted to be acknowledged and held and then taken out.

"Shitsalot hasn't gone out yet. I'm sorry you hit the deer. Is the car damaged?"

Celeste picked the puppy up and held him close. "I don't know. I'll tell Dad and he can look at it."

“Is he ever around here?” said Angel challenging.

“You know what it’s like. It’s Christmas for a month.”

As Angel went back to the barn she said, “I hate this time of year,” trailing her voice off as she walked away.

Celeste couldn’t quite catch the words but knew what she had said. She held Keats and really missed Ron.

## Chapter 30

Ron was in the halls at the change of classes. They were buzzing louder than usual. It was Christmas. The kids were always crazy this time of year. It was hard enough being a teacher, but to try to keep tabs on the building was exhausting. Ron and Frankie and Lois and Joyce were sure trying though. Each was counting the days until the holiday but each at different times had lost track. It was that busy.

Ron was walking the halls when he saw Demetrius enter the boys room looking like he had a purpose. Demetrius was a tall lanky kid whose family had just moved up from Dover and gotten one of the

cheaper apartments in the Oak Green complex. Demetrius was not going to fit in easily with his bandana and slacker pants.

Then Ron saw Harold Peters go into the boys room and it clicked. Peters had a loud mouth and Frankie had heard him talking about the darker element that was moving into his neighborhood, and about how his father was going to deal with the renting habits of these apartment complexes in their clean town.

He had been talking too much and too loudly. Ron walked into the boys room in time to see Harold at the urinal and Demetrius heading out of one of the stalls in Harold's direction.

Ron's voice was loud and he moved quickly.  
"Demetrius!"

He came up in back of Peters who involuntarily flinched and was pulling up his zipper. Ron was between the two boys. "What's going on?"

Peters had turned around now and was whiter than usual. He was speechless.

"Ain't done nothin, Mr. Tuck," said Demetrius.

"Show me your hands," said Ron.

Demetrius slipped his hands into his pockets. "I ain't done nothin," he repeated.



"Come with me," said Ron.

"I have to use the toilet," said Demetrius.

"You just used the toilet," said Ron.

"I need to wash my hands," said Demetrius.

Ron moved closer. "I said come with me." His tone left no question as to his direction. The bell rang.

"I got to get to class," said Demetrius and tried to step around Ron.

Ron blocked him and said softly but deadly serious.

"Do not make me put my hands on you."

Demetrius noticeably stiffened and took a half step back. It was like he was considering, sizing Ron up.

"Come with me," said Ron again, and led Demetrius out of the boys room careful not to touch him. Ron kept his eyes locked on him as they walked down the now empty stairs.

He ushered Demetrius into his office and asked Joyce to get Frankie. Neither of the males sat while they waited. Frankie was there almost instantly. Ron said, "Frankie close the door."

The two men flanked Demetrius. "Empty your pockets for me, please," said Ron.

"I ain't done nothin' Mr. Tuck, why you giving me a hard time?"

Ron moved in back of his desk and sat down. Frankie moved in front of the door. "I hope I am wrong Demetrius. If I am, I will give you a pass back to class, apologize to you and call your mom and apologize to her. Now, empty your pockets."

Things came out slowly. There was a couple of crumpled papers, some cigarettes and some matches. "There," said Demetrius, "you got me. I was carrying cigarettes. I'm busted," said Demetrius with an embarrassed looking smirk.

"Keep going," said Ron.

It was then that the box cutter appeared. Ron looked down at it. "What you doing with that, Demetrius?"

"I'm supposed to be going for a job down at the warehouse by my new apartment, after school."

"And you just carrying the box cutter in case you get the job?" said Ron.

Demetrius put his head down. "I feel safer around here with it."

Ron could almost believe that, but he didn't. His bet that it was in Demetrius' hand when he stopped him from teaching Harold Peters a little lesson.

Frankie was looking inside of the cigarette pack and was fishing something out. "Look what we have here," said Frankie.

Wedge into the corner of the pack was a skinny joint. Demetrius face went into an anguished scowl. "You guys, just trying to fuck me up"

"No Demetrius," said Frankie, "you did that all by yourself."

## Chapter 31

Ron drove home annoyed with himself. He couldn't stop thinking about Demetrius. How many thousand joints had he smoked? Maybe he meant no harm with the box cutter. Did Ron have the right to just pick him out that way? If Demetrius was someone Ron actually knew, would he had acted differently?

Ron was saddled with the deal that he and Frankie had made with Demetrius. It was a god-damned plea bargain on the high school scale. The weapon plus the drugs and the kid was out. Frankie told him that they could look the other way on the box cutter, but they could not ditch the pot.

What a fucking joke! The potentially lethal weapon could be forgotten but not the joint! How much of a hypocrite had he allowed himself to become? He felt his self-loathing grow. He had no business doing this job. Was there really nothing that he believed in anymore?

He tried to tell himself that he still believed in the education of kids, but there was the sight of Demetrius being loaded into the back of the police car. The school's zero tolerance policy on drugs was clear. All violations of substance had to be turned over to local authorities for adjudication. Some fucking adjudicator he was!

Ron stomped on the gas and swerved cleanly into the left lane. The rushing of blood in his ears was like the rushing of his Nissan as he picked up speed. Then he glanced down at the speedometer, he was going ninety five miles an hour!

He took his foot off the gas and felt the car slow its rush. He glanced in the mirror. There was no one in back of him. His eyes moved to the sides and then up in front. No, he was safe. Besides, he was Dr. Tuck and he had 4 PBA cards in his wallet. Great fucking example he was!

Ron had a scowl as deep as a canyon when he pulled into his exit lane.

Maybe there was something that he could do? He pulled the car over to the side of the road. He didn't want to bring this home with him. He dialed in the number for the police station on his cell.

"Hello, this is Dr. Tuck from down at the high school." Ron hated the sound of his own voice saying those words. "I was calling to check on Demetrius Brown, he was brought in this afternoon from the high school."

Ron was put on hold. Then a familiar voice came on the line. "Dr. Tuck, this is Steven Hahn."

"Hey Steve, how's it going? I was just following up on Demetrius, has he been released?"

"He's on his way to Juve, Ron. He had a prior from down in Dover. This kid is bad news."

Ron felt crestfallen. "Thanks Steve, I'll call back in the morning." Ron sat there on the side of the road wondering what he had become. For that moment, he was disgusted with the answers.

When he pulled into his drive way, he saw Celeste's Eclipse and realized that he had forgotten to look at it this morning as he promised that he would do. He saw where the nose of the car had hit the deer and reached into the grill and pulled out the fur and traces of dried flesh. The car was fine. He couldn't

say the same thing for the deer or Demetrius Brown.

Then he heard a puppy bark and was surprised to see Keats scrambling his way down the outside stairs. The sight of him was a cleansing, momentary wave. "What are you doing out?" said Ron smiling.

He crouched down to pick Keats up. He was getting heavy. The puppy kissed his face and then struggled to get down. "Oh, you're a big boy now who doesn't need to be carried around huh?"

He walked to the back door and opened it. Keats scampered in and then waited at the bottom of the stairs for Ron. Ron laughed. "Oh, sometimes it is OK to be carried?"

Keats wagged his tail happily.

## Chapter 32

Patricia Tallman asked Celeste to arrange time for her to attend a holiday breakfast. Celeste responded that of course she would make time.

Patricia was having a good day. She was up and dressed in her daily priestly garb and collar. She liked keeping the arrangement of things social and casual with underlying formality.

Patricia's demeanor no longer showed a twinkle in her eye, but sometimes there were these signals that Celeste had seen from her mouth. Celeste had learned to assess her people as she spoke with them. She found the most successful approach was just getting to know them. Patricia had become more than just one of Celeste's people.

"At this breakfast Celeste, it would surely be nice if you and I were able to determine what on earth is going to happen with Jack Spong."

Celeste said, "I have heard a few things from Duane, but his thoughts about everything are just so dark right now. It colors how he feels."

Celeste and Patricia were sitting in the Chapel. When she was able, it was where Patricia spent a good deal of her time. Celeste was a frequent visitor. "Duane thinks that Jack is being forced out and that the conservative bishops have had enough of his ideas and actions. They will threaten to publically enforce their beliefs as being more central and in keeping with Christianity."

Patricia grinned, "I have no doubt that Bishop Spong has anticipated that."

“Here’s where the dark part comes, Duane thinks that Jack is eligible for retirement and has had enough. I’m not sure if he’s talking about Jack or himself there.”

“A calling is a strange things Celeste.” Patricia spoke from the wisdom of her experience. “You are the only person who knows when you hear it and if it stops. We should say a prayer that Duane can hear his again.”

They held hands and prayed quietly in the Chapel.

“Now,” said Patricia. “Bob McElroy is just a great big huggable bear of a man isn’t he?” Patricia leaned in and almost giggled with Celeste, who felt herself wanting to giggle a little too. “But he holds all of his cards very close to his chest.”

“Zin Walsh will want to gossip,” said Celeste. One of the roles that Zin played was that he was the power of attorney for an ever steady number of the older female residents. He was compensated for this service of balancing their checkbooks and distributing their assets for a fee. His wife, Zoe, was an accountant. They supplemented their income with these proceeds.

“Yes,” said Patricia with some sarcasm. “Do see what you can get out of Zim Walsh, bless his heart.” Then she gave her private smile. She was from Virginia and wondered if people from New Jersey



would ever grow to understand the real nuance of that expression. “We should also talk with Bishop McElroy.”

After break, Heidi Kliess asked to see Celeste in her office. “I think that you should start writing another monthly report to me Celeste.” Celeste had her pad and pencil. “I’d like a regular report on your meetings with the Clergy.”

Celeste was startled. “Which ones?”

Heidi looked at her with an incredulous expression. “Well, how many are there?”

“Clergy is represented on a lot of the committees that I am on Mrs. Kleiss.”

“I don’t mean those necessarily,” said Heidi. “But your name keeps coming up at Board Meetings, and it is usually mentioned by the representatives from the Clergy.”

“Well,” said Celeste, “I am on the Chamber of Commerce. I am a member of the Ethics Committee. I meet regularly with them when planning activities and events. So I’m not sure what you are asking me to write.”

“I see,” said Heidi. “Well, just forget about it then. That’s all.”

Celeste went back to her office a bit puzzled but definitely not forgetting about it.

### Chapter 33

Ron and Celeste crowded into the meeting room at St John's Episcopal Church. It was a Friday night and the room was packed. The Lanbeth Conference had only recently occurred and many thought that Bishop Spong would be silenced by the rebuke that he had received.

Spong thanked everyone who came. Ron was tired but he was listening intently. He had made it through the week. Two more days of school and they would be on vacation.

Spong began, "When we define God as being all knowing and omniscient, we are not talking about Jesus Christ whose birth we are about to commemorate. Jesus never actually says in the bible that he is God. I believe that this is actually somewhat of a miracle, considering how little of the New Testament words were actually spoken by the historical Jesus," Spong paused, "In fact no words

spoken by Jesus actually appear until he has been dead for more than twenty years. Then his words are somewhat shaped by the political beliefs of ensuing centuries. The version of the birth of Jesus that is told in Mathew and Luke was an attempt to refute the assertion that Jesus was illegitimate.

“I would urge you not to blindly subscribe to the misrepresented version of the birth of Jesus. On one hand, it shows disdain for the human act of reproduction, treating it as a sullied business, too common and base to be ascribed to God. On the other hand, it gives the impression that Jesus was God himself.

“Jesus never saw himself as an Almighty creator. I believe that we should be offended by this notion. What I do believe is that, in Jesus, we see the essence of what we come I have come to know as ‘Godness’”

When he was finished some 40 minutes later, Ron was convinced that he had just heard the most acceptable theory of Christianity that he had ever heard. He was very quiet and accompanied Celeste over to see Jack Spong.

Jack recognized Celeste and thanked her warmly for driving down to listen to him. Celeste introduced him to Ron who just shook his hand and said, “I found myself amazed by your lecture”

Spong smiled and thanked him and then Ron was lost in thought as Jack and Celeste chatted for a moment about when he would again be at St. Peters.

On the drive home Ron said, "I understand why he has your attention."

"He was just wonderful," said Celeste.

Ron felt his imagination and his spirit touched by the words of Spong and he would have walked, if not on water, over glass to have a chance to really have a conversation with him. He told Celeste and she smiled and said, "Right now he's a very busy man."

"I am certain that's true," said a slight dreamy-eyed Ron.

When they got home, they found Angel playing with Keats. Ron had suspected that Angel only put up her dismissive attitude and complaining nature about the puppy for their benefit.

"Surprised to find you home," said Ron.

"No one goes out before 10 o'clock, Dad."

Ron stopped her outside, on her way to the barn. "Can you leave Sunday night free? I'd like to take you and your mother to the Manor to celebrate her birthday."

“Sure Dad,” said Angel.

“Do you have money to buy her a gift?” asked Ron.

“I’ve had her gift for weeks Dad, I don’t need you to give me money for my mother’s gifts anymore.”

“Hey, you’re in school. Your money is tight.”

“I know Dad you are always willing to give me money, except when I really need something, you are nowhere to be found,” snapped Angel.

“But I can count on you for Sunday?”

“I already said yes, Dad. I’m going out and it’s cold standing out here looking like two fools.”

## Chapter 34

Dinner at the Manor was a good one. They all preferred the occasional Friday night Seafood buffet, but Angel had been going to fancy restaurants since she was a very, very young girl. She knew what a good meal was and liked it. She had ordered pressed duck and it was succulent and

not a bit greasy. Celeste had introduced her to duck and even though Angel did not think about it when she ordered, but Celeste did.

The three of them sat in the bar dining area next to a large, raging fireplace. Angel was meeting with success at the community college. She spent hours and days and the weekend in the studios. She had learned so much and Ron respected what she was doing. It was hard for Angel to acknowledge success unless it came with victory. Celeste felt that she got that from Ron and wasn't sure it was a good thing.

"Where do you think that you'd like to study next?" said Ron.

"I don't know," said Angel. Then she offered. "I'm not sure that school is the best place for me to get the experience that I need."

"What do you mean?" said Celeste.

"I'd learn a shitload more working on an indie," asserted Angel.

Ron felt a warning signal. He hated that he felt it. Celeste had worked on independent films with her first husband. She knew that Angel wasn't wrong.

"I know some people who want to do a documentary about Grateful Dead Concerts." Angel stopped to gather her thoughts. She was drinking her after dinner coffee. "Obviously, Jerry Garcia is

dead, but the band is still together and the parking lots are amazing.”

The warning signal grew louder as Ron listened to her voice. He had learned to be wary with Angel this time of year. Her history was incredibly regular and always over took her at some point during the holiday season. There was no telling when it would erupt but there would be a meltdown. It was almost easier when you could see it coming and so he was wary.

Celeste said, “How many people would be on the film crew?”

Angel laughed with a slight edge. “There isn’t even a film yet Mom, it’s an idea.”

“Ok,” said Ron. “So in the abstract, maybe you could pick up more skills working on a film, but you may still need more creds to get yourself involved with a legitimate effort.” For some reason he did know how preachy he sounded. “Lots of idea start and then stop. It’s not writing or something like that. Your thing depends on lots of people and therefore lots of factors.”

“So, you’re saying my idea is worthless?” challenged Angel.

Light flashed in Ron’s head. Now he remembered. At fifteen, she had wanted to leave home and go on

the road with the Grateful Dead and sell hemp bracelets in the parking lots. "No, I think it's a good idea. Maybe it's a story you should write, but ..."

Ron paused. He needed to be careful here. He was almost back over the border from no man's land. He knew she would erupt if he suggested that she should write one more time and scream that she did not want to be a writer, "I'm suggesting you write it up as a film idea, maybe submit it."

Angel smiled. That was a good idea. She liked it. Celeste felt herself able to breathe. They were right on the edge. She could feel it, but it got reeled back. She looked at Ron and Angel and said, "Thank you for a wonderful birthday dinner."

Ron grinned. "You haven't gotten your birthday present yet."

They drove him with an anticipation. Angel wanted to see. He did give good presents and Christmas was just about here. They settled upstairs in the living room. Ron had a fire going all day, and it was still glowing. He added some wood and Angel poked at it with the prongs. They smiled when the first new flame popped up from the embers and soon it was totally rekindled.

Ron said, "Stay here." He returned with a large, professionally wrapped box.



Celeste had no idea. This looked like something very special. It was a promise that he never failed to keep. Celeste told him how her birthday presents always got combined with her Christmas presents. He promised her without her ever asking that he would never do that.

When she opened the box and saw the silver tail mink jacket with a warm, warm hood, she felt her mouth literally drop open. He bought her a mink jacket? How much did he spend on this! She knew it would be weeks before he would ever let her ask that. The feel on her skin was luxury that she had only tried on in a store or felt on someone's coat. It was unbelievably soft. It was made of beautifully stitched tails. It was the warmest coat that she had ever worn. Her arms swung free, the sleeves were a perfect length. Celeste got up and twirled in front of the fireplace.

## Chapter 35

Angel had tears in her eyes as she sat in the barn. He had no idea how much she hated going to his mother's house. How it had hurt her to know that she was not loved, not even liked. Anger seethed in her. She felt it like a storm inside of her, a turbulence that grew until it had to burst out. She needed to get out of the barn. She heard Ron's voice in her head saying, 'Don't drive when you're this upset,' and she screamed "Fuck you," across the snow covered lake.

She got into the car and started it. Then she saw Ron walking towards the mail box that was inexplicably set on the road by her driveway. He was waving towards her. "Shit!" she exclaimed. She rolled down her window.

"We're going down to my mother's about four o'clock, are you sure you don't want to go?" said Ron.

"Yeah Dad, I'm really fucking sure!" She put the car in gear and pulled out of her driveway scattering gravel.

Ron thought, she drives like her mother, but he had heard the scream. He saw her face. Should he have gone after her? Should he try to call her? She wouldn't answer. Would she get into an accident? The words of her therapist Jackie, tried to reassure him, 'she isn't suicidal, but she pushes those

boundaries like she has to push at any boundaries.’ That was easy to say from an office but out here on Christmas Eve afternoon with his daughter off on winter roads maybe crying, maybe not, maybe thinking of wrapping her car around a tree, and maybe not.

Ron put his head down and closed his eyes. What was he going to say to Celeste? Ah the holidays! How times had changed so much about them. Ron stood looking at the lake, letting his eyes search the trees across the water. Staring down at the frozen wooden dock that was encased in a thin film of ice. Ron extended his hand and caressed a small frozen twig on the end of a branch. He looked up at the tree. “Are you sleeping or still awake?” He had begun to feel their presence when he was out playing with Keats or mowing the lawns or just wandering this property that claiming his love. He stared down the road where Angel’s car had gone. Having his love, was that a blessing or a curse? Which had it been for Angel?

And then he saw her car coming back around towards the barn. She parked, got out, looked at him and said, “I forgot that there was nothing open.”

They embraced. It was a hard embrace and he felt her body shaking against him. She was quivering like

a frightened wild animal. They walked back to the barn together.

Ron pulled the wide swinging, wooden door closed in back of them and latched it shut from the inside. "I have to get you a proper lock."

They went through another door into her room. Angel took off her coat and sat on her bed. "No one likes me at your mother's house."

Ron nodded, "Except maybe for your mother and I who love you."

"You don't love me enough to keep them from hurting me." Angel felt the anger rising again. She did not want to feel that storm again. She did not want it to be Christmas. She never wanted it to be Christmas again!

Ron did not know what to say. He could no longer dispute with Angel about how she felt. His mother and George and Bumpy had not been kind. His mother had been downright cruel to both Celeste and Angel for years. With Celeste it had changed. With Angel, it had not.

There had been countless fights, countless hours of discussion and soul searching that had been an utter failure.

Marjorie Bombasco had become a formidable woman. Ron looked for Angel's eyes and there they

were. Large and brown, bright as searchlights, and glowing in the quiet room.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to go, I wouldn't want to go if I were you. But she's my mother. The holiday means a lot to her."

"So Dad," Angel gave off a smirk that if Ron did not know any better would have sworn that she got from him, "your advice is 'sucks to be me,' cause I don't see much else."

"My advice is the same," said Ron. "Respect your family but do what you have to do for yourself."

"That would be great if it wasn't bullshit, dad. Because every time I do what I need to do for me, they all hate me more!" The words stung like ice whipping into his face. "I'll go if you really want me to go, but I won't like it."

## Chapter36

Marjorie Bombasco's home, a center hall, Southern colonial was her dream house. It twinkled with white lights in the low front hedges and white light

reindeer that adorned the front lawn. Marjorie had looked for this home for years and, once she had it, she was intent on making it a living showcase.

The front porch was polished slick wood that was made more slick by the weather. George had put down a rubber mat that led from the three stairs to the front door. All three of them were loaded down with packages for the event.

There were few Italian American traditions that Marjorie had allowed herself to adopt but Christmas Eve dinner was one. It was an all-day fish cooking extravaganza that featured piles of shrimp prepared in every known way. There were butterfly fried shrimp. Shrimp that were sautéed in butter and garlic. Shrimp that were prepared in tomato sauce and shrimp that were prepared for cocktails. It looked like a Bubba Gump wet dream.

There were at least two kinds of pasta, mixed with oil and garlic and served in a red sauce. There was a tray of manicotti. There was a tray of stuffed shells.

Calamari, both fried and stuffed, varieties were prepared with baked mushrooms and arranged around a hot spicy dipping sauce.

There was a huge antipasto, split into fish and meat. Thinly sliced meats that were special forms of salami and cured hams. Cheeses both hard and soft

adorned the trays. Olives in varieties both green and black, pitted and stuffed, lay waiting.

There was flounder both fried and broiled.

Sausage and peppers for those who did not like fish, but they seemed liked orphaned additions to the crammed center island. It would be filled for the appetizer course, refilled for the main course, and filled one last time for desserts. It was in the opulent tradition of a feast.

Bumpy and Paula and Honey had been working all day. Bumpy lived with Marjorie and George. Paula was George's niece and Honey her friend.

The small TV room where George and Bumpy and Marjorie spent a good deal of time together was overflowing with gifts. The wood paneled walls that Marjorie had adorned with autographed pictures of movie stars, looked out from over a mountain of presents.

The pocket doors of the living room were opened to reveal a table that was shaped in the form of a T and extended down into the living room. In the right hand corner of the living room, next to floor to ceiling embedded bookshelves, was Marjorie's Christmas tree.

The tree and table were her main contributions to the event. Marjorie's tree was always fresh-cut,

always large and always full. It only had varieties of white lights, some that sparkled and some that glowed. Lavender ribbons, tied in elegant bows were spaced on the tree along with glass and gold ornaments. A manger sat on the mantle over the fireplace. The tree commanded the attention of one's eye again and again throughout the night.

The table was a holiday picture of Lennox with individual salt and pepper shakers, platters and taurines. Burgundy and white linen napkins and gold plated flatware were topped off by golden goblets.

One might say that Marjorie took the holiday seriously. She was seated in her Aunt Dotty's fan back chair that she had reclaimed from her son. Marjorie stood when they entered. She was dressed in winter white pocketed slacks with a red and white Christmas sweater that looked as if it must be too warm for this room with the burning fireplace.

"Merry Christmas" bounced through the downstairs of the house like a crazy ball. Celeste and Angel put their packages down to get out of their coats and were met and hugged. Ron stacked the packages with a look of yearly shock. How could this many gifts possibly be exchanged in one evening?



Ron tried to calculate how long it would take and thought of Keats, back home in his little safe room. He was sleeping Ron was sure. He had been running around all day and gotten way too many treats from everyone, except Angel who claimed that Keats was too fat.

Celeste went to Marjorie and held her hands and gave her the yearly ornament for her tree. This time it was small glass bells with golden knockers and Marjorie loved it and kissed Celeste. Celeste felt the powdered sandpaper feel of Marjorie's cheek and smiled.

Angel talked and laughed with Paula and Honey while Bumpy continued to cook with an ear towards what was being said, so that she could report back to Marjorie later.

George was red faced, dressed in his 3X athletic suit, and rubbing his hands as he asked people what they wanted to drink. Ron told him that he would have a rum and coke and George was delighted.

"I got that new brand that you like," said George.

"Meyers?" said Ron, genuinely surprised.

George look confused. "I thought you said you liked Bacardi 150?"

"I never tasted that," said Ron.

He moved into the living room and crouched down by his mother. Marjorie was waiting for him. "Remember that iPod you gave me last Christmas?"

It was quite possible that Marjorie remembered every gift she had ever given, or taken away. Marjorie smiled. Ron helped her put earphones on and said I want you to listen to this. He had typed out the words for her so she could follow along and he played Jackson Brown's song, "The Rebel Jesus."

Marjorie was listening intently when George walked into the room and gave Ron his drink. "I could have sworn you said Bacardi."

Marjorie instantly looked up angry and said, "Can't you see I am trying to listen to something!"

## Chapter 37

Marjorie sat at her holiday table renewed by the idea that Ronald still believed in Jesus. Why else would he have played that song and taken the time to show her these words? She and Angel had acknowledged each other, but nothing more. Marjorie was resolutely disapproving and taciturn

towards Angel who seemed content to return the favor.

More people had gathered for the meal. Bumpy's brother Lumpy had already staked out a corner of the table and was eager, almost salivating to begin to shovel the food into his mouth. His girth dwarfed George's 3X and he was there for food. Being seated next to Lumpy was a burden that no one wanted. There was little conversation and sometimes sounds that were low an unfamiliar and guttural as he ate. Normally he would just start shoveling but Marjorie had trained him to wait until after everyone was seated and they said grace.

George's sister and her husband, who were also educators in Newark, were convivial as they waited for their son to arrive. Their daughter and her friend had contributed a good amount of labor to the meal.

Later there would be more people, a steady stream of them, but this was the dinner portion of the evening. Marjorie called out to Bumpy in an annoyed voice, "Do you think that we should all sit here and stare at each other or are you coming to the table?"

"I'll be right there," said Bumpy who waited for the kitchen to be cleared to ladle extra portions of olive

oil on the food. They just did not understand that there could never be too much olive oil, even though they had used about 2 gallons that day. This was the extra virgin oil that she liked to have things swimming in.

Bumpy came in and sat down. Marjorie asked Ron to say grace. Ron passed it off to Paula, which annoyed Marjorie.

“Bless us dear Lord and these gifts that we are about to receive from your bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen,” said Paula quickly as she blessed herself. Marjorie half scowled as she looked to see if Ron followed suit, he did not. Neither did Angel who was sitting next to him. But Celeste dutifully blessed herself along with George’s family and Marjorie peered at Bumpy to see what she did and scowled as she quickly made the sign of the cross.

Lumpy got up headed for the island of food immediately. One had the impression that he would have knocked down anyone in his way. The front door opened and Paula’s brother finally arrived. George breathed a little easier but scowled none the less. He had not seen his nephew since the summer. He was sitting at dinner. His nephew could get his own drink.

“So how is being a Vice Principal?” said Anthony Racioppi. Anthony was a reading specialist who had

not seen more than one student at a time for 15 years. Now he saw no students and was happier for it. He enjoyed analyzing test results.

"It's different," said Ron. "It's nothing like the classroom."

"Yup," said Angel sarcastically, "My dad, the pothead, gets to be the school narc."

Marjorie glared at Angel as there was a soft chuckle around the table. "Did you ever decide to graduate high school?" shot Marjorie.

Angel smirked. "Nope I didn't have to put up with any of that bullshit and went straight to college."

Marjorie said, half rhetorically, half mocking, "Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"A GED is a great option for some kids who will thrive in college but had trouble with high school, true Anthony?" said Ron.

"Statistically speaking kids in college with a GED do just about as well as those who went the more traditional route," said Anthony.

Of course, Ron knew this but Marjorie would find it less of a defense, hearing it coming from Anthony. Marjorie felt rebuked. Lumpy continued to shovel long after people had eaten their meal. He was going back for his 4<sup>th</sup> helping of everything. Marjorie

watched him with an amazed disgust. She had spoken to Bumpy about him not grabbing his fork with his fist but that training never registered.

It occurred to Ron that there was really no one there for this meal with whom he had the slightest interest in talking. There might be a joke or a laugh that amused for a moment, but it was soon something he forgot.

More people began arriving for dessert. Ron was sure that they would never get out of there. Angel was bored and getting antsy. Celeste was doing her 'making the best of it' routine that no one recognized except for him and her.

Marjorie went into the kitchen after dinner and before dessert and said "ouch" as she pricked her finger for blood and then winced deeply when Bumpy gave her the insulin shot in her belly.

The meal was followed by gifts and gifts and more gifts. Paula and Honey were in charge of collecting wrapping paper and by the end of the night they had three 40 gallon trash bags of the stuff gathered.

There was one gift that he would remember. Paula and Honey had taken a picture of the fan back chair that he loved so much. The only piece he had taken of his Aunt Dotty's furniture. The one he gave back to his mother after it was miraculously spared from his apartment fire. He had begged his mother for

the chair back and she had refused. This was their humor.

About 10 o'clock, Ron reminded Marjorie that he had a puppy at home and they needed to be going. "I feel like I never see you anymore," complained Marjorie.

"I'm just really busy," said Ron.

"Too busy to pick up the phone and call your mother," said Marjorie.

The ride home was a quiet one as the three people tried to shake the noise and food haze from their heads. They would do it again at Celeste's sister's house in about 12 hours.

## Chapter 38

Celeste's office was where family conferences usually took place. This part of the holiday season encouraged more family visits than other times of the year. Celeste was meeting with Diana Glass's daughter Elinor. Elinor had a brother but he was

rarely interested in his mother's care, however Elinor was. Bill and Diana Glass had entered Height about 12 years earlier.

Bill drove back then, and they had such a good life. It was just like being on vacation every day. Money was not a problem, and they loved to dine out and go on cruises that Height sponsored, and just have a grand old time.

It was true that Diana was more than a little forgetful. There were times when words, or the notion of language to express them, seemed foreign to her. Bill kept her on track with things and their trust was the thing that she most counted on at this point in her life.

But then Bill died and she often could not find the track. Celeste arranged for Height's nurse's aide and housekeeping services to become more comprehensive. She augmented this with frequent reservations at Height House for lunches or dinners, but this was not working. Diana's hygiene was beginning to suffer and she was losing weight.

Elinor Glass had a length lengthy lunch with her mom. She was touched by how sad her mom was and how she sometimes spoke of her dad as if he wasn't dead. She knew her mom was very lonely.



"I want to inquire about the possibilities of bringing my mom home to live with me and my family," said Elinor.

Celeste was a bit surprised. She would going to suggest that it was perhaps time for Diane to move into a more supportive environment. But she listened sympathetically. "We have a guest room on the first floor where there is half-bathroom and kitchen. Mom seems capable of making the stairs, if it's only two or three times a week, to bathe."

"I understand," said Celeste. "Your mom is a lovely person and she is lonely and grieving and I know you want to provide her with a home." Elinor was nodding but Celeste felt a tension in her agreement. "There may be a lot more involved than you think."

"Such as what?" Elinor was looking at Celeste with resolve. Diana had always reminded her after whom she had been named.

"Housekeeping is telling me that there is fairly extensive," Celeste did not want to say bed wetting, that made Diana seem infantile and she did not deserve that designation, "... loss of bladder control," she said gently.

Elinor nodded. "I will have to have a hard conversation with her about wearing some protection at night." Elinor did not want to say diaper.

“Yes, but that would just be the start, Elinor. She might not be able to be alone in a house with a kitchen on the same floor.”

“Then I might have to install a door that locks on my kitchen.”

Celeste was trying to do this gently. She did not want to tell her about the way that her life and her family’s life would be substantially changed. The easiest and most direct way to put it would be to ask if she remembered having a new born and then saying that this was much more exhausting than that.

They chatted. Celeste used her skills to address the guilt that Elinor was feeling about not having her mother there with her already. Christmas had just been too much and seeing her alone and despondent, juxtaposed with seeing her and dad smiling and alive. It was causing a pain in her heart that she did not know how to help. Celeste was trying to guide her passively to her inevitable conclusions. It always went this way. Celeste knew about fifteen minutes before Elinor that it would dawn on her.

Finally, Elinor said, “You are telling me that I really don’t have a choice.”

Celeste was careful. “We always have some choices. What do you think would be best for mom?” This

was another part of her training. To refer her as the familiar “mom” instead of “Diana.”

This part was difficult. Elinor had agreed that, for now, this might be the best solution. “I’m afraid mom will have to distribute some of her things.”

“Things can be put in storage, they can be taken to Diana’s family,” she knew when to back off “mom” so as not to sound ingratiating.

Elinor closed her eyes. This was moving too fast. She just wanted to have a conversation about the possibility of her mother coming home.

“I have to think about this and speak with my husband,” said Elinor.

Celeste hoped she didn’t wait too long and have it result in a tragedy.

After Elinor left, Celeste informed the Director of Admissions that there could be a potential opening in the independent lining apartments and that there was probably going to be a need for someone to join the first floor Residential Health Care unit.

She informed the head of nursing to make special note of what the nurse’s aides were reporting about Diana Glass’s condition. The head of Housekeep was notified to report on the daily state of Diana’s bed linens. And finally Heidi Kleiss was given an overview report on the entire situation.

Because this was the day after Christmas and very few of the department heads were at work, they would find these requests in written form, memorialized to Heidi Kleiss, when they came back into the office. This efficiency was something that did not make Celeste popular among her coworkers.

## Chapter 39

It was the second Monday that they were back in school, settling in to the long dark months of leaving for and returning from work in the dark. Ron was in his office, dictating a letter to Joyce, when

Margaret Philco appeared in his doorway. Ron was never happy to see Margaret and always wary of her.

Margaret has been at Mountain Oak for her whole career. Her uncle was a friend of the Superintendent and Rufus was always a good politician, who knew how to take care of his local friends. Margaret had become the Chairperson of the History Department and Ron had been a veteran of more distasteful meetings with her than he could count.

She was a short squat woman whose features resembled those of the porcine family. Adele Becker had truly despised Margaret and told Ron something that he never forgot. "You cannot fix dumb, Ron, but never underestimate her ability to be conniving,"

Margaret had a file of commendations that was three times as thick as anyone else's. She would gain these letters by bringing a box of donuts to the presenter of any workshop that she attended, and then asking if the presenter would give her a letter of commendation. It was low grade ass kissing, but the Board of Education did not know that and Margaret Philco's stock was high.

She smiled at Joyce and said that she hoped that's he was not interrupting, but then proceeded to

interrupt. "Theodore Mulvanney is on drugs," she announced to Ron.

Ron unsuccessfully tried to hide his exasperation. "Did you actually see him taking drugs, Margaret? I mean he didn't shoot up in your classroom or anything did he?"

"No," said Margaret who despised Ron and would enjoy watching him get into as much trouble as she could possibly arrange. "His eyes are red, and one of my teachers caught a whiff of it on him, and he is acting like he is on drugs!"

She handed Ron the referral which stated in capital letters with three bold underlining that Theodore was "acting like he was on drugs."

By stating it this way, Ron's use of discretion was removed. The New Jersey State Zero Tolerance Drug Policy took over, and Ron was required to take several steps. He turned to Joyce. "Please pull up Ted Mulvanney's schedule and have Frankie bring him to the nurse's office. I will meet them there.

The school nurse was not around as it was a Monday morning and she always took Monday mornings off. Ron sat in the examination room with Frankie and Theodore.

"You been taking an illegal substances, Ted?" said Ron.

"I don't do drugs," snapped Theodore.

Ron studied his face and demeanor. His eyes were red rimmed and he was acting in an agitated way. There was no whiff of anything that Ron could detect on him, and he was acting nothing like someone who had been smoking pot.

"I have a referral here from a teacher who is claiming that you are acting like you have been taking drugs."

"That's bullshit," said Theodore. "Who is saying that?"

By law, Ron was not allowed to say who the teacher was. "I'm not allowed to say, Ted. But I have to have you tested. Is someone at home?"

"My mom and dad work like good Americans," said Theodore.

"I need you to contact one of them for me. They have the right to take you for the test or, if they cannot, we will arrange to transport you from the school."

"I didn't take any drugs, and I'm not going anywhere with you!" shouted a clearly agitated Mulvanney.

“That’s fine,” said Ron, standing up. “Mr. Martin, please stay here with Ted.” Ron started out the door.

Theodore jumped up. “You got no right to hold me here. I’m going back to my class.”

Frankie Martin moved between Theodore and Ron. “You don’t want to do that, Ted.”

Theodore immediately sat down and said, “Yes Sir.”

Joyce gave Ron the contact information for Mulvanney. His father’s place of employment was listed as the Essex County Department of Corections. He was a guard in the Newark lock-up.

Joyce sent the call to him when she had made connection.

Ron explained the situation to Mr. Mulvanney who said, “You’re full of shit. I’m on my way there now.”

## Chapter 40

The Essex County Corrections vehicle, with headlights on flasher and the band of blue and white lights that spanned the top of the roof blinking with official warning, drove up over the



curb and towards the paved walkway in front of the main office of the school.

In itself, this caused commotion in the main office. Then two large, armed men got out of the vehicle and headed towards the main office door. Joyce immediately called for Ron and Frankie.

“We’re here looking for the guy who is running this place and illegally holding my son,” hollered Albert Mulvanney. There was a stunned silence from the secretaries. Counselors ducked back into their offices and shut the door. Albert exchanged a pleased grin with his partner Luke.

Ron and Frankie entered the area from separate directions. Frankie circled around to have his back while Ron, walked up to Ted Mulvanney’s father. Luke and Frankie exchanged a look of recognition.

Ron said, “Let’s go into my office,” and gestured through his open door.

Albert was standing his ground. “I want to see my son!”

“Sure,” said Ron. “We can all go over to the nurse’s office and have this meeting there with Ted present. Or, we can talk first and then go over there.”

“We can talk but this better be good,” said Albert and started towards the office.

Ron stepped in front of the door. "Do you think you could turn the flashing lights off first," Ron gestured out of the open windows. "We are having classes."

"I'll get the lights," said Luke.

"And do you think," Ron pressed a little, he was annoyed by this man's antics and wanted to assert control of the situation, "that maybe you could leave the guns in the car and lock it."

"My gun and my partner go everywhere with me," growled Albert.

"That's nice," said Ron nodding, "please come in."

Luke killed the engine on the car and the four men went into Ron's office.

Trudy Bennet looked over at Joyce and said coyly, "Don't you want to go and take notes?"

"Not on your life," said Joyce smirking.

There were four chairs but Albert chose to stand in front of the one behind Ron's desk. "My son doesn't do drugs and anyone who says that he does it a god-damned liar."

"Let's try to calm down," said Ron. "I'm not saying that Ted took drugs. I got a referral from a teacher that said he was acting like he was on drugs."

"I want to see the referral! I want to see this teacher!" Albert's fists were clenched.

Ron glanced over at Frankie, who was not tense. He had already sized up the situation. Nothing to really worry about.

"The New Jersey State policy regarding Zero Tolerance for Drug Use prohibits me from showing you that referral or giving you that name," said Ron.

He thought the policy unfair but understood that it was written with an eye towards much larger drug issues and much more profound reasons for keeping the referring teacher's name secret. The fairness reasoning was that there was no penalty, and the school would pay for the test.

All Ted would have to do was urinate into a cup. Social stigma was not a consideration for the policy. This was because it was supposed to be administered confidentially. Margaret Philco had started this off poorly, but Albert Mulvanney had blown confidentiality out of the water like he had artillery.

"Well my policy is that I get to see my accusers. I want to see my son now!"

"Let's go," said Ron.

They made their way to the nurse's office in a complete male formation. Ron led the way, the two

swaggering men were at his heels and Frankie followed a couple of steps back. Alberts Mulvanney's heavy ring of keys jingled.

Joyce and Trudy giggled after they left.

Theodore Mulvanney stood when he saw Ron and his father. He held his back very straight with his shoulders back and looked straight ahead.

"Did you take any drugs, son?" said Albert.

"No Sir!" said Theodore.

Albert turned to Ron. "That's enough for me. Go wait in the car, son."

"Yes, Sir!" snapped Ted.

And then he left the nurses office and walked to the dormant Essex County van that sat on the side walk outside of Ron's office.

Ron sighed. "Frankie, can you see Ted from here?"

"Yeah, I can see him," said Frankie

Albert looked confused. What was the punk gonna do now? His kid, his car. He was leaving.

"Mr. Mulvanney, the policy says that if a test is not performed, within 12 hours, because of parental interference, that it must be a presumed positive. Maybe you shouldn't do this."

“I’ll get him tested and then I want a public apology from you and this school!”

“I’ll be happy if he is negative, Mr. Mulvanney. I got enough work.”

Mulvanney and Luke rattled their way to their car and left, as they had arrived, with flashing lights.

## Chapter 41

On Christmas Day, Patricia Tallman had a stroke and was taken to the hospital. It was considered a moderate stroke meaning, she had survived and was not paralyzed and had lost no mental function. When she returned from the hospital, she simply announced that she wished no more treatment.

She was 87 and practically blind and could see that she would not become physically strong enough to do what she had done. She was finished. When Celeste tried to reason with her, she patted her hand and said quietly, “All things must pass dear, and we are among them.”

Celeste’s sadness kept her from understanding. Height Village made a concerted effort to change her mind. She was asked daily if she ready to

resume her medications, if she wanted to eat. If she would allow a feeding tube.

To all of this, Patricia patiently and steadfastly refused assistance. Word got out and the procession started. Bishops came from all over New Jersey. Priests came by the dozen.

Heidi Kleiss viewed Patricia Tallman's passing as inevitable but also an opportunity to showcase the facility at Height. It more than angered her that each of the visiting clergy had asked specifically for Celeste Tuck.

Heidi remarked to Vivian Florencola, "You think the king of the gypsies was dying."

"Celeste seems to be one of the tribe," said Vivian.

"She certainly does," said Heidi.

Heidi never liked any challenge to her authority. She did like Celeste's efficiency and she used her to slip in barbs to other women on her management team.

They had been complaining about Celeste's habits for years, but Heidi had mostly ignored them, and slapped Celeste around during break once in a while to keep them all happy and to make sure that no one was too complacent. But this was more than backbiting, this was a threat to her control of power. The clergy was independent of any control

that she might have, and they had enormous sway within the village hierarchy.

The procession of visitors continued for a week and Heidi stewed in the juices of her resentment. When Bishop McCelvey asked to see Celeste, Heidi made up her mind about what had to be done.

The visits were more reminiscences about Patricia more than anything else. There was laughter and tears and hugging. Celeste was oblivious to any negative fallout until one day at break.

Annabel Pritchard asked if Celeste would have time to get her charts done for team this Thursday, then corrected herself saying, "That's right you do your charts while the rest of us are discussing the patients wellbeing."

Celeste was shocked. It was unlike Annabel to be confrontational. She cried too easily. But then Heidi said, "It's a wonder that Celeste has time to do anything at all recently with all of her visitors."

There was no laughter around the table. There was silence.

Patricia Tallman passed eight days after she returned to the Residential Heath Care Center. Celeste was very sad when she did the paper work connected to her passing. She shut the door to her

office, something that she rarely did when she was alone.

She called Ron. "Do you have anything that absolutely needs you there tonight?"

Ron said, "I can be home."

"I need you tonight. Patricia Tallman died today and I just want you to be there tonight."

Ron heard it in her voice. Death had taken more than its toll on her.

## Chapter 42

Technically, Theodore Mulvanney had failed his drug test. His parents had not gotten around to having him tested until two-days after they left the high school. Brenda Mulvanney was a vice principal in a Newark grammar school. She explained to Albert that Ron had shown no tact whatsoever, but he was operating within the limits of what he could do.

Albert objected again the next day when Brenda took her son to their physician to be tested. She made Theodore swear up and down, even as she and the doctor watched him urinate into the cup, that he never did drugs.



The results were sent to the office of the Superintendent of Schools. Rufus Finley did not like having to officially acknowledge anything, and this was an annoyance, but he dealt with it. He called Muriel Brower and said, "Theodore Mulvanney drug test is clear." That was the end of the story.

Margaret Philco was smirking as she handed Ron the referral. "Disruptive behavior- Fighting!" If she had just left it at disruptive behavior, there was a range. Fighting mandated at least a Saturday detention and perhaps an in-school suspension. But preferably an out of school suspension for at least three days. The student was Ted Mulvanney.

"When did this fight happen?" said Ron. He noticed that the referral was not dated.

"Yesterday, let me fix that." She snatched the referral back and put yesterday's date on it.

"Who was the fight with?" said Ron.

Margaret put her hand on her ample hip. "I don't think I should say."

Ron tried to fathom how this person's brain could possibly operate? How their electronic gears meshed and synapses fired. It would all look so normal from the outside and yet be so profoundly ridiculous.

“Margaret,” Ron began slowly, “let’s review. First you brought me a referral that was worded so that I was forced to require Ted to be drugged tested, and all hell broke loose here over that. Now, you want me to discipline him for fighting with someone whose identity you don’t think I should know. Is that about right?”

“I suppose that it could be viewed that way. But I don’t really see what difference it should make?”

Ron felt his jaw almost drop again. She appeared to be so earth-gaggingly stupid. What was the miracle of science that allowed her comprehension of language? Unless of course it was an act. Just a little twist of what happened here and there. But that would require an accomplice.

“You don’t think that it would appear that you were harassing this student?” said Ron.

Margaret shook her head. “You’re going to make it worse. Ok, he hit a teacher.”

Ron was stunned. “He hit you?”

“No, it was a male teacher.”

“Who was it?”

“That’s what I’d rather not say,” asserted Margaret.

“Which just coincidentally makes everything more serious,” said Ron.

"I'm officially reporting it to you, Dr. Tuck."

Margaret nodded down at the referral.

"Well, Margaret, if afraid that isn't going to do. Let's go and see the principal."

Muriel Browser was confused after she heard the story. She, of course, knew the Mulvanney story and this did not have a good look. "So what do you expect him to do with the referral?" said Muriel.

"He's the Vice Principal, that's his decision.

Margaret was a bit defiant.

"OK," said Ron. "If it's my call then here it is. Ron took the referral and wrote, "No Action due to no detail." And handed Margaret the attached third copy. "Can't do anything, Margaret?"

"It was Mr. Breckenwald." Margaret said this like a sad admission had been forced out of her.

"Why did Mr. Breckenwald report this?" Muriel did not have a face to go with the name but she had seen the name before.

"Why didn't Don report it?" Ron did have a face and more.

"He said to just let it go and forget about it and that the kid was in enough trouble already." Margaret shook her head. "I was not going to standby and have one of my teachers treated that way."

Muriel Browser looked at Ron and he nodded. "I'll talk to Don Breckenwald."

## Chapter 43

Ron found Don Breckenwald in his classroom on his prep period. He was a third year history teacher, who also coached soccer. Being in the social studies department and coaching were synonymous. Oak Mountain's program was not a big or particularly successful program and changes were coming. Don was an assistant coach and this was his tenure year.

Their relationship had been cordial but had changed. When Don was in his first year, Ron Tuck was in charge of the English Department. He and the principal had implemented a change of curriculum that was radical. It was followed by a change in schedule that was also considered radical.

Since it was Don's first year, anything would have been new to him. The advantage that he had was that it was different for everyone. Don's contract was an easy renewal decision.

The second year everything changed. Adele Becker retired. Tuck became the Vice principal and was no longer involved. Sure, Ron Tuck had been on the team of developers and had been there its first three years, but then he just left and became the vice principal. He had done that the same year that Adele Becker retired. The teaching and the program were confused at best. They relied on interdepartmental communication which was now led by Margaret Philco.

"Can I have a few minutes Don?" said Ron opening the closed classroom door.

Don nodded. He was a bit embarrassed by his having coffee and a roll in the class when food and beverages were not allowed. Ron closed the door in back of him.

"What went on with Ted Mulvanney?"

"Did she really write something up?" Don shut his eyes and was genuinely contrite. "The kid is a hothead, but he's really not a bad kid. He's under a lot of pressure."

“Tell me what you mean, Don” Ron really needed to hear this. He needed to trust Don to be straight with him, and he wasn’t sure he could do that yet.

“I have him in class, he’s an average student who desperately wants to excel but hasn’t gotten the hang of how to do it. He learns facts. He rejects the thinking skills curriculum. He is not a student who is flourishing in your Project Oak.”

“Did you have physical encounter with him?” said Ron.

“Not a real encounter,” said Don. “It really wasn’t.”

“I need you to explain. It was written up as a fight.”

Don was clearly uncomfortable. “He pushed off of me. We were standing close and the discussion was about his grades. He put his hands on my chest and shoved me back. That was it. He apologized. It should not have been written up.”

“Yeah, I agree Don. It should not have, unless you wanted it written up.”

“Look Ron, she’s my immediate supervisor. I’m up for tenure at the end of this year. There is nothing I’m going to do except agree with her description.”

“I do understand. Anything else got you concerned over this kid? Do you think he might go off on another student? Just shove him or her?”

“I don’t know, Dr. Tuck. I’m really not in a position to say.”

Ron nodded and thanked Don for his time.

Ron sat in his office wishing that he could talk to Adele Becker. She would understand the situation intuitively from the broad strokes. She had seen it before. Ron knew that when he went into see Muriel Browser, she was going to expect a strategy.

He could not see what was best and it occurred to him that without the assembly of a team that seeks to solve problems with a greater degree of experience and knowledge, it was just his call. But maybe there was someone who could really give him a different perspective.

Ron put in a call to Karl Polemnic. They butted heads all the time but this was a place where Ron felt they could find agreement. Karl was familiar with the drug test.

The entire school was familiar with the drug test. Ron actually thought it might become an article in the local newspaper, as Mr. Mulvaney had railed about it in the last Board of Education Meeting. He had been told that this was a student privacy issue and that it could not and would not be discussed in this forum.

“Karl, I’m not sure what the best interests of the kid are here,” said Ron.

“Well the parents are surely a pain in the ass and yeah it does look like he was not a favorite of Margaret’s, but the kid laid his hands on a teacher. You have no choice.”

“Even if the teacher himself doesn’t support it?”  
Ron could not get past that part.

“Bringing that up only places that teacher in a very uncomfortable situation. But hey, you have to do it the way that you think is best.”

It was good advice.

## Chapter 44

Ron knew all hell was going to break loose when he delivered the suspension to Ted Mulvanney. That was inevitable. But he could make a phone call first. Adele Becker had never told him to give her a call if he was in need of advice, but he knew that he could.

She and Becker had moved into their post house apartment. She was still working on her doctoral dissertation. She and Ron had been students



together, when she had made it possible for him to join the doctoral program at Drew University. He had blitzed through it, while she, now in retirement, was savoring the experience.

She had mentored him for ten years. She had taught with him. She invented curriculum with him as part of the team. She knew Angel, who she always truly liked. She knew Celeste and they shared stories.

After the catch-ups, for which Adele had not that much patience, they got around to the point. Ron's call was an opportunity to excite her brain. She would rather talk to him about literature and teaching, but that would be a raw subject right now. Truth was she missed talking to him a little.

"So Ron, you are not calling me at 1 o'clock in the afternoon on a school day to ask about how I am. What can I do for you?" Adele lit a cigarette and listened. Becker was after her to quit and she was slowing down, but this called for a cigarette.

Ron sketched out the scenario, she would understand the shorthand. No need to explain what this one or that one said, she would anticipate that already. She just needed to know what happened.

She was thoughtful. She ran her hand through the front of her hair. She got the picture, but was not

sure Ron did. There was some obvious alternatives to consider.

“The way to approach the suspension is have Muriel Browner make the call to Ted’s mother. You said she was an educator, correct?” There was an edge in her tone.

Ron nodded and it seemed obvious to him in a flash. “She’s a Vice principal in a grammar school.”

She scolded Ron. “That was a rather obvious alternative wasn’t it, Ron?”

Did your male pride get in the way?”

Ron laughed and took his punishment. “Maybe a little.”

“Well first of all Muriel should have taken this referral out of your hands and did it herself when this first came up. That’s what should have happened here. Now, she needs to clean it up. She’ll understand that. She not dumb.”

Ron was nodding on the other end of the phone.

“But you have other problems,” continued Adele. “How do you intend to deal with a department chairperson who is out to subvert you, and who you cannot move?” Adele sighed and shook her head. “Some form of training, behavioral in nature, a

punishment,” Adele paused. “But you’ll need Muriel to do that as well.”

Adele paused to let this sink in to Ron. She was teaching and she was good at it. She knew that every once in a while, she had to allow for a breath.

“Now, you did right by involving Karl. Unless Rufus gets involved, he’ll want to back you on this and will consider it a favor, which also means that he will expect one back from you. But I hope you already knew that.”

Adele did not like it that she was on the telephone. She could judge by the expression on his face if he did, indeed, already know it. That would inform her as to how much he had learned about not trying to do it all himself. He had to realize that administration had to be a collaborative effort. She was not sure he had learned that yet.

“The other potential issue is that somehow Rufus Finley needs to be involved again. That changes everything.” She had laid it out for him.

“I understand and I did know I would owe Karl. But I always know where he is coming from,” said Ron.

Adele said, “You may not if Rufus gets into this.” She saw that she needed to amplify. “Rufus was made to put something in writing. He does not like that. Then there was a commotion at his Board of

Education Meeting, and I am sure he did not like that. So what you need is for Muriel to put this to rest.” Adele reinforced her lesson.

Then there was small talk and the promise of a shared dinner. Adele and Becker were on a two month tour of theaters that included forty-one plays in sixty days. Maybe over the summer, before she and Becker left on the Canadian swing of theaters.

## Chapter 45

Celeste’s yearly review had always been a perfunctory task. There was some stroking from Heidi about the way that she showed great empathy toward the clients. There was some praise for her efforts to enhance Height’s standing in the community. There was some mention of her ability to understand and comply with state regulations. There was always a goal that Heidi had charted for Celeste to complete by her next review. This year’s review had an entirely different tone.

Heidi Kleiss opened Celeste's file and laid the stack of family letters of thanks to the side. She presented Celeste with her typed copy of the review. Celeste was jarred by the first box that she saw checked. It had always read either meets or exceeds the skills necessary to be successful in her position. This time it read that "Improvement was needed" in order to meet those standards.

It did not register until she got to the narrative. "Numerous complaints" had been made by Celeste's colleagues about her inability to contribute to discussions of patients in the Residential Health Care Center. She was often distracted and after suggestions to change were made, she ignored them and continued to engage in her idiosyncratic behaviors."

The second point in her narrative was that she was "not adequately fulfilling her duties to the clients in the Residential Health Care Center because she was spending too much time with independent residents and community activities."

Celeste was stunned. She knew that color had drained from her face but this was only the first half of her review. Her goals were not attached.

Heidi Kleiss handed her the second part of the review. "Her department was being reorganized to be part of the nursing department. She would no

longer be considered a Department Chairperson and would now report directly to Annabel Pritchard.

"I don't understand," said Celeste.

"It will no longer be necessary for you to attend the Department Head meetings and you will no longer be considered to be part of the management team. You will be regarded as a specialist."

Celeste was speechless. But Heidi was not finished. "That will of course place you on a different salary structure, Celeste."

Celeste felt numb. Heidi was still not finished. "And I must tell you that the new JUCO regulations may require a person with an MSW doing what you are currently attempting to do with a CSW. So to be honest I cannot say how much longer you will be qualified to do this."

Celeste was maintaining control. She was not going to cry in front of Heidi Kleiss. Maybe that's what she wanted her to do, but too fucking bad. She was not going to do if it was at all possible to help it.

"Are you firing me, Heidi?"

"Oh Celeste, of course not! You are a valued member of this community. Everyone appreciates your skill set. It may just not be a good fit for the direction in which we are going."

"It's going to take me some time to digest this, Mrs. Kleiss."

Heidi nodded with a mock version of understanding. "I want you to consider something else as well."

"What's that?" said Celeste.

"I know that you do not wish to work for Annabel, but my hands are tied here. State regulations are what they are. You know that better than anyone."

Celeste heard the props and thought, "bullshit."

"But if you moved across the street to Sunrise House, you could be in charge of the entire program. You would no longer interact with your current team members and have time for a more select group of residents with whom you have demonstrated an ability to be successful."

Celeste was back in her office with the door shut and she was crying now. She had been doing this job for ten years. She had practically created the department. She looked around at the evidence of the work that she had done and felt it had all been for nothing. Sure Ron would tell her that she had helped. Right now it seemed like it was all for nothing.

Her phone rang. It was Vivian Florencola. Of course she knew. She had typed the evaluation. "How are you doing?" said Vivian.

“Like I have been screwed with my pants on,” said Celeste.

## Chapter 46

It was spring when Ron heard back on that District Supervisors job. He had sent in his resume and then forgot about it. Three months later he was called for an interview. When he got the letter, he was at first dismissive but, it was not a form letter.

“Dr. Tuck,

The outstanding nature of your work with curriculum and scheduling, added to your background in English, and including your recent



building management makes you an ideal candidate for the opening that we have. Please call to arrange an interview at our mutual convenience in my offices.

Sandy Humz,

Assistant Superintendent of Schools,

Middle Hills Regional School District”

Celeste was silent and it was so hard for her to be quiet. She did not want to influence him. She desperately wanted him to stop being a Vice Principal. It was making him crazy in a way that she had not seen. She was living with a cop, who did not know what it was like to be off duty sometimes.

It was better when he could start getting outside, but the winter had been hard on them both.

Celeste had been unceremoniously dropkicked across the street, and as much as it stung at first, she was starting to like it.

She was away from the entire painful position where to both her delight and sadness she had done fine work, but most often with those about to die. She knew it had changed her. Celeste smiled to herself. There sure had been some changes nursing school till now. She was beginning to see this one as a good step. She no longer had to watch people die. She no longer had to be intimate with their deaths.

That had changed her and she saw that she needed to be ready for something else.

Like Ron though, Celeste was also a city person. She understood what had happened and knew what was behind it. She had no intention of forgetting.

Duane was struggling in a way which was becoming uncomfortable for her. She felt her distancing herself slowly, giving some space now that the immediate grief had settled in. Yes, Celeste could accept and even welcome these changes but Ron needed a change too.

"I think you should take a new job. I really hate you being a narc." Angel was not even attempting to hide her sentiments.

Ron looked down at Keats. He had grown so much over the winter and he was showing real signs of growing more. His paws were big and the pads under them soft. Ron loved to lay on the floor with Keats and rub hands and paws, hands and faces, paws and faces.

Celeste loved watching them, and loved the effect that those moments had on both of them. It seemed that Keats began to anticipate them and would be gloomy if they did not come. They just seemed to calm Ron down in the connection.

"It's only an interview," said Ron.

Celeste met his gaze evenly. "Look at me."

Ron did. He looked full into her face. "If you want this job, the only way that it doesn't happen is if you decide that, for one reason or another..." She paused. "I don't know. You have security where you are. But I think we'll be ok either way."

"I want to go to Salem Massachusetts," announced Angel.

"Why?" said Ron. He had zero idea where this was coming from.

"It's a cool place. I might like to live there." Angel followed her announcement with her departure, out to the barn.

## Chapter 47

The interview was scheduled for 6 pm. Ron was led into a conference room and found that he was to

be interviewed by six people. Ok, that was a little unusual. Sandy Humz was a tall angular woman with a severe cut to her straight blonde hair. She was dressed in a rust colored business suit with a skirt that flattered her long legs. Her style was business impeccable. She sat down after she ushered Ron to his chair. She opened the interview but thanking him for coming and asking if he wanted anything in addition to the bottle of water that had been placed in front of his chair.

Ron smiled and said that he was fine.

“Each of his has some questions that we would like to ask about different areas,” said Sandy. “We are all familiar with your resume and so there is no need to review that.” The truth was that Sandy had thoroughly vetted his resume. “Dr. Mathews will begin.”

Bill Mathews smiled across the U shaped conference table. He moved a little forward in his chair. “What is your familiarity with current standardized testing regulations?”

“I have been involved with New Jersey standardized testing since the inception of it being extended to secondary education. I am still an active holistic scoring trainer. I have contributed to the development of the Core Curriculum Content Standards. I am an experienced reader for the AP

exam, now that I no longer teach that course.” It occurred to Ron during this recitation that he no longer did any of these things.

“I would be your counterpart in math,” said Bill Mathews. “What would you say your philosophy towards preparation is?”

“In a K-12 district there is much more time for early identification of fragile students.” Ron had done his homework too. “But in a regional high school, you have to work hand in hand with the sending districts, and have faith that your curriculum will address the standards being tested.”

Bill Mathews smiled. That matched his philosophy identically. He knew that it was also what Sandy Humz believed. She had been his partner in the position for which Ron was now an applicant. She had gotten the promotion instead of him. Bill was OK with this. Sandy was hungrier for power than he was.

Hector Gonzalez was the School Business Administrator. “Tell me your experience with budgeting and ordering?”

That was easy. Ron had ordered all of the departmental books and supplies when he had been a chairperson and currently managed the school disciplinary budget. Gonzalez was easily satisfied.

John Winter asked, "What would Larry Viola remember about you, Ron?"

"Larry Viola?" Ron laughed. "He was a history teacher and someone I coached with back quite a few years." Ron was careful not to say that this was in parochial school. "I suppose he would remember me insisting that we gave kids water breaks no matter how they performed."

Winter laughed. He knew Larry was an asshole. Ron had stated it without saying it.

Sandy Humz then began an extensive set of questions about literature. It occurred to her during this set of questions that Ron knew far more about literature than she did. When she was finished, she turned to Dr. Sean MacTavish, the Superintendent.

"How happy will Mountain Oak be to see you leave?" said Sean.

"I'm not sure how to answer that, Dr. MacTavish. I'm sure some people will be happy, I would hope not all."

"How happy will you be to leave, Dr. Tuck?"

It was a softball. They were winding down, thought Ron.

"It has been my professional home for more than a decade and I am proud of what we accomplished. I

would be honored to have an opportunity to work with you and the rest of the people here.”

“Did you have any political problems at Mountain Oak?” said MacTavish.

“I am the Vice Principal in charge of discipline. There are always political problems,” said Ron.

The interview ended cordially. As Ron drove home he wondered, how happy would I be to leave Mountain Oak?”

## Chapter 48

Sunrise House was a converted farm house that was once been home to the 150 acre spread that occupied the tract of land across from Height Village. The Village had been trying to buy this land for some time, but the deed to the majority of it was held by a family already made rich from subdivisions and not eager to sell. They had parted with the house and two acres surrounding it, but

that was so they were no longer responsible to maintain the residence.

The house was a sturdy construction and Celeste set about having it brought up to what she knew to be code for an adult day care center. Labor was cheap. She just ordered things done by the maintenance department at Height.

The first goal that Heidi gave Celeste was to increase her enrollment numbers. There were only six daily clients at the House and it was losing money. The secret that Heidi would never share was that it was supposed to lose money. It was one way to balance profits made from Height and maintain a “not for profit” standing. Through the religious affiliation, Height’s taxes were less than minimal. It was a shell game of moving funds around so that regulators would not spot anything that was untoward.

Through her connections with Duane Murphy and Zin Walsh, Celeste quickly doubled the population to twelve. Heidi encouraged Celeste’s renovations because they still allowed her to show Sunrise as losing money.

Keats happily accompanied Celeste to work two days a week. Even though still a puppy, his manner was gentle and he rarely barked. The clients love to stroke his curly brown hair and he was sweet and



patient with them. Keats elected to just curl up and go to sleep at their feet when he had enough petting.

However, Heidi now had a new annoyance in her life which she chose to blame on Annabel Pritchard. As Celeste's replacement in Social Services, Annabel hired Penelope Boudreaux. She held the Master's Degree in Social Work that Heidi had used as the reason for Celeste's transfer. About one month into her employment, it became obvious that Penelope suffered from narcolepsy.

It seemed that the more stressed Penelope became, the more apt she was to suddenly fall asleep. Heidi caused Penelope stress and the woman could literally not stay awake in her presence. The amount of annoyance that this caused Heidi was tantamount to having a fly make its home in her nostrils. She placed the responsibility for this squarely on the shoulders of Annabel Pritchard.

Heidi had convinced Annabel that she had been responsible for Celeste's transfer. Penelope was in her department. It was her job to do something to fix this.

"I can't keep her awake," Annabel cried, in Heidi's office. "I've tried everything. I told her to wear a rubber band around her wrist and to snap it when

she felt herself falling asleep, but that only worked when she knew she was falling asleep.”

“You have to fix this. I can’t have this!” railed Heidi. This brought a new wave of tears sniffles and tissues from Annabel. She sometimes amused herself by making Annabel cry, but this was becoming an actual problem. Penelope was protected by the Employees with Disabilities Act and was aware of her rights.

As long as she stayed in her office, she was awake about 75% of the day and could get the majority of her work finished, but the stress of seeing residents had caused her to drop off during her talks with them. Heidi charged Annabel to always have a nurse’s aide in the room with her when she met with clients.

This came about as the result of a rather notorious meeting where both Penelope and the resident were found asleep in Penelope’s office during one visit. Heidi simply kept demanding that Annabel make sure the work was completed, and then she scolded her about the additional hours that were needed by Annabel’s nursing staff to cover the situation.

“I don’t know what to do next,” cried Annabel. She was extremely proficient at organizing her nursing staff but this was beyond her abilities to cope.

"I suppose you'd better call Celeste and see if she can help you out," said Heidi.

"Do I have to call her?" cried Annabel. The tissues were now gathered in two piles on Kleiss's desk.

"Unless you have any more bright suggestions, yes you do," said Heidi.

This brought a new wave of tears from Annabel that amused Heidi.

## Chapter 49

Celeste recognized that Annabel had been crying when she said hello.

"How are things going in your new position?" said Annabel.

"You know," said Celeste, "there are always twists and turns but I'm managing." Celeste was polite but distant.

Annabel tried to maintain her professional demeanor. "Heidi asked me to call and tell you that we need a little help over here in Social Services."

"Oh?" said Celeste. She waited. There was no way that she was making this easy for Pritchard.

"If you could just review and sign off on some charts and meet with some residents," said Annabel.

"How am I supposed to manage that Annabel? Are you having the residents and charts sent over here?"

"We can't possibly do that!" said Annabel. "You'll have to come over here, but it will just be for one day a week."

Celeste was matter of fact. "There would be no one to cover things over here, Annabel. I'm afraid that you'll have to find someone else."

"There is no one else!" cried Annabel. Her eyes were red and puffy and she was almost finished with her first box of tissues for the day. "I can't keep her awake," sniffled Annabel.

"I'll give you an aide for the day that you are here," said Annabel.

"I don't think that will work, Annabel. An aide can't be the only person in the house with a dozen clients."

"You have a dozen full time clients already?" said Annabel who was both impressed and annoyed. If Celeste had only been a team player none of this would have been necessary. This, of course, was not true but it served Heidi to have Annabel think that it was.

“Yes, so I don’t see how I can help you.” Celeste was pleased and happy to be this far away from the daily tension that was Height.

An hour later the call came from Heidi. Celeste expected it but wanted to make Annabel have to report to Heidi that she was not able to get Celeste’s help. Celeste smiled to herself. Ron always loved stories about Annabel crying.

“Celeste, you’ll report over here tomorrow morning and one day a week for the foreseeable future,” said Heidi. “I’m sending Judy Campbell over to work for you. She will help with the new clients that you now have and free you up to be over here one day a week.”

This was not a discussion. Celeste was being informed as to what was necessary. “Judy will be over this afternoon to start so that you can orient her for tomorrow. You can, of course wait until the clients have arrived so that they are not confused by the new face.”

Celeste calmly said, “Yes, Mrs. Kleiss,” and Heidi hung up without saying goodbye.

Penelope Boudreaux was a middle aged woman who was well dressed, when she did not look disheveled from sleep. She smiled at Celeste. “The job will really be easy if you just follow this policy and procedures book,” she said holding the book in

both hands clasped towards her chest like she was unwilling to part with it. "I'll have a copy made for you."

"That won't be necessary," said Celeste.

Penelope looked confused until Celeste continued, "I wrote that book."

Penelope felt herself getting drowsy and snapped her rubber band.

## Chapter 50

Celeste was telling Ron the story of the policies and procedures book as they cleaned up after dinner, when the phone rang.

"Ron, this is Sandy Humz. Congratulations! We like to offer you the position as the Director of Instructional Services for the Middle Hills Regional School District."

Ron can hear the pride in Sandy's voice as she announced the title. It had been her title. She

wanted to make very sure that her replacement was someone that she could trust and respect. They would be working together and MacTavish had told her that this appointment would be her most difficult and important. She had taken her time and cleared the Director's calendar for the remainder of the school year with the exception of the budget. She had completed all of the observations and evaluations. He would have two months to get his footing.

Ron was startled. He thought he had done well, but expected there to be at least one more round of interviews. "Thank you, Sandy. Wow that's wonderful." He didn't know what else to say. He felt the cold rush of adrenalin wash through him. This was all of a sudden very real.

"When would you like to come in to sign contracts?" said Sandy.

"I'm at work until 10:30 tomorrow night," said Ron. "Can we do it on Friday? I'll take a personal day and I can come by to see you in the morning."

Sandy smiled. He was showing loyalty to his current position. He wanted the day to let them know. She would be very much the same. Sandy gave Ron his first piece of advice from her. "Don't give notice until after you've signed your contract here."

Ron smiled as well. "I understand. That was nice of you. What time would be good on Friday?"

"Why don't you sleep in and get here around 9 o'clock." She was not going to tell him that she began her day at that time.

"That's perfect," said Ron. "I'll see you then."

Celeste had finished in the kitchen. Their dinner cleanup was a ritual that Ron insisted upon and she had come to love it. She could honestly say that he had never once finished his dinner and walked away from the table. Marjorie had trained him well.

Celeste was smiling. "You got the job didn't you?"

Ron nodded. He was just standing there still holding the phone. "Boy, do we have to talk," he said.

"Let me fix you a drink," said Celeste.

Ron nodded again and put down the phone. He walked into the living room. She mixed him a rum and coke. Celeste heard Jackson Brown singing the first lines of My Opening Farwell as she walked into the living room.

She knew this about him now. He needed to curl up into himself, into music, and think before he would be ready to speak. She used to think of it as him shutting her out. Now she just thought of it as his process. This part of it had no room for anyone else.



That was not an easy lesson for Celeste to learn but it was an important one. For some reason, she remembered telling Marjorie that she had trained him well about dinner. Marjorie had scoffed at her. "He didn't need to be trained to do that."

When the song ended he pressed the mute button so no more songs could be heard. Celeste did not like that. There had been times when he got annoyed and just unmuted the stereo and it blared into the middle of a song when he didn't want to talk anymore. That always caused an argument. "Can we just turn that off?" said Celeste.

Ron got up and clicked off his iPod. "What do you think I should do?"

Celeste shook her head. "I'm not going to tell you what I think you should do. How long do you have to make a decision?"

Ron was serious now, in Vice Principal mode again. "I want to know what I am doing by tomorrow," he said.

"Ok," said Celeste, "but that wasn't my question."

"I'm supposed to sign the contracts on Friday," said Ron.

"For September?" said Celeste.

“No, they want me to start as soon as I can get out of my contract,” said Ron. There was a perplexed tone in his voice.

“They’re not going to let you finish the year?”

“They want me now.”

Danger signs blinked on and off for Celeste. That could keep him from doing it. He would see it almost as bad as leaving his team in the middle of the season. She had watched in disbelief as he hobbled through a football season in an immobilizer because he would not consider surgery during a season. This was the insane part of him. He might not do it.

“Do you want to do that? Are you going to be able to do that?” asked Celeste.

Ron curled the index knuckle of his fist to his lips and then brought it to his chin. “Contractually, yes I can do that. I’m bound for thirty days. They’ll be pissed as hell and some people will be hurt and Margaret Bring the Donuts will get to do a happy dance, but I could do it.”

Celeste smiled. “But are you able to do it?”

Ron smiled back. “Now that’s the question isn’t it?”

Ron sucked long on the straw in the drink. Then he got up to take Keats out. "It's thirty thousand more a year," he said.

Celeste felt shock. Thirty thousand was what she would make this year.

## Chapter 51

Later that night, Ron was unable to quiet his mind. He had the urge to call several people, but he already knew what they would say. When Ron had decided a few years ago not continue teaching in college, his onetime professor and mentor had been more than a little disappointed in him. Warren Lashly had turned down several promotion offers,

both at his college and in other places. He was exploring teaching and literature and writing. He saw these other opportunities as distractions that would get in the way of what he wanted to do. He told Ron back then, "I no longer have a clue about what you are trying to accomplish." Ron knew what he meant, but his life was different now. He had found ways to express his creativity that Warren had found natural, and he had passed that approach on to Ron. He had asked Ron to come down and teach nights at the college and Ron had done it. Lashly even gave him his office to share. The reports that he had gotten back on Ron's teaching made him proud that Ron was his student. Why he had not chosen college teaching more fully was a mistake of Ron's that Lashly could not understand. There was no sense in asking his advice.

Quimpy had gone round the bend. He was forced into early retirement for a number of reasons. When last Ron saw him, his skin was perpetually covered in nervous rashes that he picked at endlessly. He was eternally distracted now. He told Ron that he had stolen Celeste from him and that he wanted them to be friends who just didn't talk to each other anymore. Ron knew what Quimpy would have said in an earlier time. "Take the fuckin' money, that's a no brainer. Haven't you paid attention at all?" There was something to be said for that point of view and that was exactly what he would have said.

His Aunt Dotty would have taken Quimpy's point of view. Adele Becker would ask if he had investigated the stability of the administrative team at Middle Hills. He had. People did not leave there, they retired from there. She would have asked him if he wanted to be a principal. That was the real question wasn't it?

Muriel Browser was out of there in two more years. He would be the natural successor. Ron thought about that. He did love Mountain Oak, but it was not the first school that he loved. He did think it would be the last. He could lead them. He knew every aspect of the building and had a relationship with Board of Education members because he had taught their kids. He was thought of as an excellent teacher. Adele had promised him that he could make his office his classroom, and Ron felt surely that he had failed to do that.

Angel was more than a little right, he had become a Narc. Calling Chris would be good for a laugh, but he did not think there would be insight there. He wondered for a second when it was that he stopped looking for insight from Chris. Then he stopped himself. There was no time to think about Chris now. He and Celeste had talked for about two hours. She assured him that whatever he wanted to do that she would be there with him. She told him that she knew that his dream was to be the Principal of Mountain Oak.

Ron called Marjorie. "Hi Mom, how are you doing?"

“Ronald!” exclaimed Marjorie. “Is it a holiday? Did someone die?”

Ron laughed softly into the phone, “No Mom, how are you?”

“You’re calling to actually do say that you care how I am or is this call for some other reason?” Marjorie was not backing down. She was pissed. He called her maybe once a month. Maybe not for three months at a time. “I’m just calling, Mother.

“Do you remember when the last time was that you called?”

“Mom, I think you know well me pretty well, don’t you?”

“Better than you know yourself Ronald.” Marjorie said the words with anger and love. “You’re doing what you are doing and there’s not time for anything else. It does not matter what I need or what anyone else needs. You’re doing what you want.” That hurt. Ron felt himself wince.

“I guess you’re right, mom.”

“Celeste says that you are losing weight,” said Marjorie.

“Yes, I’ll eat more when I can get outside and do more,” said Ron hopefully.

“You know what happens to you when you don’t eat, you run yourself down and get sick,” scolded Marjorie.

“How are you feeling?” said Ron.

“I’ve told Celeste everything, and I don’t want to repeat it.” said Marjorie making two points. She knew that Celeste kept him aware of her health, so

that he did not have to do it. He had already scolded her once for talking about nothing but her health since she retired. She'd was going to be damned if she would answer that question from her never-around son.

"I have the offer of a new job," said Ron.

Marjorie was interested. Celeste had mentioned an interview but not that he had the job. "Is it more money?"

"Lot's more," said Ron. "But I would no longer have job security for another few years."

"You can't worry about that! You're a worker like your father and me. You'll be a success anywhere you go," said Marjorie with conviction.

"I do love the place where I am now," said Ron.

"Does it love you? You know Ronald you have a bad habit of loving places and people that don't want you around," said Marjorie.

Ron laughed to himself this time. She was really good. "They made it be possible for me to be Dr. Tuck," said Ron.

"Adele Becker made it possible for you to be Dr. Tuck but it was you that did it," Marjorie voice grew quiet. "I think that you get confused about what you should do because the person who had always loved you and helped you is no longer in your life. If you would only open your heart up to Jesus like you did when you were a boy."

"I can't do that, Mom."

"I don't believe that. You can do anything! You just don't want to do it. For whatever your reasons are."

“I’m going to take the job, mom.”

## Chapter 52

Ron went through Thursday feeling less than honest. He was seeing things with new eyes. Why was he doing this again? Then he would hear Adele’s voice in his head. “Foolishness is thinking that you are not replaceable.” She was right. As much as you told yourself to give a school your all, the school’s needs were ongoing and insatiable. It did not make him love Oak Mountain less.

After the lunch periods, Ron told Frankie Martin that they should go for a ride. “I’ll drive,” said Ron.

Frankie looked confused. Things would calm down after the lunches but not that much. They slid into Ron’s Nissan. Ron lit a cigarette once they were off school grounds. “What’s up?” said Frankie.

“I’m going to be leaving,” said Ron.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m taking another job, Frankie. I wanted you to know but don’t say anything to anyone yet. You’re the first person I told.”



“Shit,” said Frankie. “When are you going?”

“I’m going to sign the contracts tomorrow,” said Ron. “I’ll be gone by next month.”

“People are going to go ape-shit! You know that right?” said Frankie.

“It’s more of what I should be doing,” said Ron. “I don’t think that I was cut out to do this.”

“You’re a god-damned natural,” said Frankie.  
“You’ve got instincts.”

Ron wanted to bring it to an end. He did not like where this was going.

“It’s a lot more money and better for my family,” said Ron.

Divorced Frankie nodded his head. “I can understand that. I’ve met Celeste. I’d want to keep her happy too.”

Ron smiled and thought that was an odd way to put it.

It was a rainy, spring morning and Ron was wearing his tan, London Fog raincoat over a green brushed suede sports jacket and brown slacks, tan leather shoes. He wore a plain white shirt and a burgundy silk tie.

The driveway was a long winding, climbing rise to the summit of a large hilltop. It housed a huge high school and field structure along with the District's Central Offices.

Luckily, the rain had stopped when he parked his car in a visitor's space in front of the central offices. Sandy Humz, smartly dressed in one of the five colors that she bought of two different business suits, led him into a wood paneled Board Office with plush seating for twelve. He signed the contracts without hesitation.

"When do you think that you can start?" said Sandy.

"I'll give notice on Monday," said Ron. "In thirty days if they hold me to it."

Sandy first brought him to the Human Resources Director's office. Daphne Swanson was friendly as she explained some of his immediate benefits. "You may transfer up to thirty of your accumulated sick days," said Daphne.

Sandy interrupted. "How many sick day do you have now, Ron?"

"I don't remember. I think 145," said Ron.

Sandy smiled. He just kept saying the right things.

"The same is true of your vacation days," said Daphne. "We'll start you with ten and then you

don't begin to earn them again until the end of next year. So, in effect, you don't get a vacation until you are here for two years."

That seemed like a long time to Ron but that was the job.

She led Ron down the hall and introduced him to people whose names were on the office doors. Then she said, "Would you like to see your offices?"

"My offices?" said Ron, grinning at her. "How many do I have?"

"You have three and control of three secretaries, including your own." said Sandy.

Ron felt a little dizzy.

## Chapter 53

Maybe Celeste's most important discovery was a grant from the New Jersey Department of Health called the Community Care Program. This enabled her to reduce the cost to her clients by 50%. It also enabled her to double the size of her population.

Celeste organized her program based on the overarching belief that engagement was one key to combating dementia. She also added the catalyst of a schedule of changing flexible engagement.

The morning began with coffee and chat. Celeste explained the goals to her new assistants. "We want to know how people are doing but we don't want them to feel examined or interrogated."

Judy Campbell looked confused and raised her hand almost timidly.

Celeste instinctively understood. "Interrogated... I mean like questioned, by a doctor or a lawyer." She wished that she can have a clone of Ron's brain that would just deal with these questions and then be absolutely quiet. She could use simple synonyms right now. "I want it to feel like a natural morning among friends," said Celeste. She had firm footing now. "We want to get everyone involved."

Judy smiled, "I'll bet they love to gossip!"

Celeste was a little uneasy at this. She had found a reserve in her clients at Height. They were from a generation that spoke of things in whispers or not at all. Some had been through real war. She was not sure about gossip but they were mostly women. Celeste laughed to herself. Ron had infected her brain.

Hadn't her mother loved to gossip? Didn't Marjorie? Maybe not her father, but these were mostly women who would set their own boundaries for discussion.

"After coffee, which I will say should not go longer than 45 minutes, we'll transition to chair exercises. There may be some need for bathroom breaks during transitions and surely one long one after exercises. Martha, if you can basically work to assist that?" Martha smiled. That was easy.

Celeste had gotten the exercises from some contacts she had among her Social Workers Network. In her effort to make sure of the success of her grant, she cross referenced each with the health of her patients and the areas that the exercise stimulated. All Martha and Judy needed to know were the exercises. They had no desire to know anything deeper than that.

Lunch involved arrangements that she made with Height Catering. She worked an affordable and

healthy meal from their menu. Because Celeste had enough clients now, she was a daily customer and they had become punctual. Celeste had also learned that punctual was a key.

Judy was in charge of distributing Keats on the days that he came with Celeste. The clients loved and sometimes did not want to share him with the others.

Keats spent these days of puppyhood doing antics that delighted and surprised his circle of people. Then he was passed from one adoring lap to another. He was almost six months old now and if he did not want to be in a lap, he could surely make that known, but his appetite for affection mostly calmed everyone.

During group activities Keats wandered into Celeste's office where she was almost always on the phone or on her computer.

Duane said, "Jack Spong is retiring. He's going to teach at Harvard. I don't think I can do this much longer either Celeste. I feel like I am acting when I comfort people with expressions about faith in God."

Celeste said, "Do you still believe in God?"

"I don't know for certain, but I do know that I see him in a different way. I can't express those changes to people and be their priest. The two are in conflict."

"How are things going with the ladies?" said Celeste. "Are they still stuffing you with enough food for five?"

"The food has calmed down but it's other things now," said Duane. There was a nervousness in his voice that Celeste hadn't detected until recently. "Things have gotten much more personal," said Duane.

Ron wasn't sure how to say goodbye and so he figured that it would take care of itself. Muriel Browner had been easy. She thought it would be an opportunity for him and thought things would work out or not at Mountain Oak. Either way, she was just about ready for this phase of her life to be over. Rufus did not object. He would privately get word to the Mulvanneys that he had taken care of their dissatisfaction with Dr. Tuck.

Some of the Board Members grumbled about having paid out all this money for Ron's tuition reimbursement, only to have him leave a year after getting his doctorate. Department chairs considered applying for his job, but it was asking for too much work. Karl Polemnic suggested that they really should have an administrative farewell dinner for him. "I did not always agree with him," shouted Karl, "but can any of you tell me that you ever doubted his sincerity?"

Even Margaret Philco conceded this point and so a dinner was arranged.

Ron asked Joyce Garrett out for a drink. The prospect of meeting Ron in a bar made her squirm a little bit. She always felt this closeness to him and he made her feel like he could not manage without



her. She knew that he found her attractive and this pleased Joyce greatly.

It was a local bar and Joyce almost hoped that one of her husband's friends would be there so that she would have to explain herself. But what if he was going to make a pass at her? What if he had been waiting until he was not going to be her boss anymore? What then?

She dismissed it as a silly idea, but wouldn't it be nice if someone was going to want something slightly indecent with her? Particularly if that person was a boss she could say had made her do things? Joyce flushed. Her husband was a good man and he loved her and she loved him, but she also knew that he did not feel that same spark when he saw her naked body anymore. He was a little too comfortable with her, maybe even complacent. She actually felt herself blush when he walked into the bar and smiled at her sitting there waiting for him. She had wine and he had a mixed drink. She would have figured him for Scotch, but he ordered a rum and coke.

"Thanks for meeting me," said Ron.

Joyce decided to play. "Dr. Tuck, I cannot imagine why you wanted to meet me in private this way." Then she saw the confused look on his face and

laughed and reached for his hand. She squeezed it and said, "I'm only teasing Ron."

He smiled, relaxed and said. "You know that I'm leaving."

Joyce looked at him like he was Captain Obvious. "Yes, Ron. Everyone in the building knows that you are leaving by now."

"It's incredible to me still, the way that happens," said Ron.

"Some of the girls told me that I would miss you and others said that I was finally being let out of my cage," said Joyce.

"How do you feel Joyce?" Ron made eye contact. She had been great for him. He wanted her to truly know how she felt.

"To be honest, said Joyce, "I feel a little abandoned. So does Frankie. So does Lois. I only know how to do things your way and now I will have to learn to adjust to a new boss." Joyce felt a pang of sadness. A new boss who would not treat her as an equal.

"Suppose you came with me?" asked Ron. "I'm going to need someone that I know and trust, Joyce. I was hoping it would be you."

Joyce was startled. He wanted to take her with him? Did he even have the power to offer her a job yet? "I don't know what to say."

"It seems I'm going to have several secretaries," said Ron, still amazed and totally confused about what that meant. "But my main secretary is going with my new boss. There's going to be an opening."

Joyce Garret felt a shiver of fear. Of course, this was what he wanted. Why had she thought anything else? More money? A new work place away from all her friends, away from the school that she graduated from. No she could not even consider it. "I don't know, Ron."

"I just want you to sleep on it," said Ron with that playful grin she had seen a few times before. The one that made everything seem a bit naughty. "And talk it over at home."

Oh Joyce intended to have fun talking it over at home, but there was no way that she was going to do it.

## Chapter 55

Celeste thought her baker Peter had been looking more tired than usual. "I haven't seen Ruth lately," she said.

Ruth was Peter's wife. Sometimes, if she came a little later, or when Ron came with Keats on Sundays, Ruth would be in back of the counter. Peter would be doing his last round of baking in the back. "Her hip has been bothering her more lately," said Peter.

Celeste took in this information. There was a degree to which she performed the analysis on people continually now. She did it with Duane. She did it all day long. It used to be more physical. Celeste would take more note of how erect one's posture was. If there was the hint of a limp, or a listing in one direction or another. That had been in her nursing days. Now the social worker and nurse had merged in her.

Back in the Eclipse, Celeste steered towards Sunrise. She was the first to arrive. Celeste enjoyed the quiet early time in this area that had taught her to feel safe. She could see buds forming on the trees. Crocuses were up. If it weren't for her allergies, she would have stopped to smell the air. But the little tickle of pollen let her know that it was there.

Celeste winced as she got out of the Eclipse which sat quite low. She had been playing stick with Keats, and he had tugged with a strength that she hadn't seen before. It had jolted her. Celeste thought that ten years ago she would have not even noticed it.

She was doing a radio interview at lunch time. It was a local station that had a revolving set of hosts, one of whom was the local minister at the Methodist Church in Hackleberg. He was asking Celeste in to explain what an Adult Day Care Center was. It was part of her new outreach campaign.

Four months into the job and Celeste was now asking Heidi what the cut off limit was on the number of clients she could service. She had determined that with the help of the State Grant, she could not see why they could not be at capacity.

Franklin Fevel had one of those unfortunate names that made one want to giggle when they put it

together with the appearance of the man. He was, to say the least, persnickety. He was also kind.

Celeste had learned that she would never really be accepted as a townie by the old timers. Angel was now, because she had gone to grade school here. Celeste felt melancholy for a moment. Angel who was now living in Salem Massachusetts and learning to become a witch or something. Just when Celeste thought she was getting it together, she fell in love. Salem was where the boy went to college, an art school from which he would graduate next year. What was she thinking? What about her career?

Reverend Fevel placed the large black microphone in front of her face. It was a rather ominous looking kind of phallic thing for him to thrust at her face. She looked over at Franklin as he fiddled with the extension arm that held it in place. She stifled her chuckle.

Franklin side in back of his much smaller round silver and black, desk mounted microphone. "Just act like we are talking naturally," said Franklin.

Celeste looked at the full microphone and said, "That's fine Frank."

Fevel began, "We are with Celeste Tuck today. She is the Director of an Adult Day Care Center that is worth hearing about. What is an Adult Day Care Center, Celeste?"

Celeste looked over the top of her mic, “Along with being a way for people who are in the twilight of their lives to feel a sense of community and engagement, it is a way to bring some much needed relief to their caregivers.”

The conversation proceeded and Celeste found that after being initially startled by the microphone, she was at ease. Except for one time she bent over and chunked it with the tip of her nose and that made a sound in the earphone of Fevel and cause him to give her a little brush back wagging of his fingers like a whisk broom. She was not telling Ron about that.

At the conclusion of her segment. Fevel said, “Celeste that was wonderful. Would you like to do three more?”

“Minutes?” said Celeste. She had some experience from youth in working on a film crew. She thought that this would be much the same only much simpler.

“Three more shows, Celeste,” said Franklin, who then adjusted his collar and felt warm.

## Chapter 56

There was a Dutch elm tree that had died towards the rear of Ron and Celeste's property. It stood near the small road that ran along on the lake and was their property boundary. Vines had grown up clinging to it and it sometimes appeared to be alive, but it wasn't. Their first winter a lightning bolt had cracked down on the dead tree and sheared off one of the massive lower branches. Ron had waited and on one of the first days of spring he took his hand truck down to the site. He strained maneuvered and told himself that he was out of his mind but he was determined to haul this large dead branch back to his house. It probably weighed about 400 pounds.

Ron felt a sense of accomplishment when he stored it in his barn, still strapped to the hand truck with bungee cords and a chain. Now he wheeled it out onto the concrete lip that was laid in slabs between



the back of the barn and the fieldstone wall that ran the length of Ron's house, sometimes inside, but mostly outside.

The wall was about twelve feet high and was broken by an outdoor stair case but also created a natural retaining wall that allowed him to keep most of good dirt up above.

Keats sniffed the wood and started to lift his leg. Ron barked at him and he put his leg down and turned the other way and lifted it again. Ron had been sanding the branch smooth for a week. This morning he was slathering a coat of spar wax onto it. When it dried he intended to add several more coats. Today he wanted to file and sand the place where the jagged edge had snapped. His chain saw helped him to create a base that would stand on its own. He saw something in the wood.

Ron was taking a break and tossing a stick with Keats. Ron could not get him to master the notion of giving the stick back once he retrieved it. So now he was using two sticks. As soon as he picked up another, Keats would drop the one in his mouth and wait for Ron to fling the new stick. Keats was not fast but he was tireless. Ron was happily sanding and filing and running his hands along the smoothing grain for about thirty minutes while Keats sat and watched. Then Ron threw sticks for

about twenty minutes to give his hands a rest from the filing motion.

Celeste glanced out of the windows and watched him work from time to time. Celeste was cleaning. She liked to curse as she cleaned. A morning of cleaning might illicit seven or eight “son of a bitches” and a countless number of “shits.” She tried to tone it down when she cleaned with Ron because he always thought something bad had happened or thought she was angry about something. This morning she was free to curse to her heart’s content. She did not hear the phone until it was near the end of its second ring. “Fuck,” she exclaimed when she heard it ringing.

“Celeste, this is your sister,” said Tina. It was an odd quirk that they had of announcing the relationship each time one called the other.

“How are you Tina?” said Celeste wiping the sweat she had worked up from scrubbing her baseboard.

“I am sober for the first time in fifteen years,” announced Tina.

“You’re what?” said Celeste.

“I am sober, don’t you believe me?” said Tina with more than a hint of accusation.

Celeste was confused. "Of course I believe you Tina, but I didn't know you were drunk."

"It is something I hid from everyone. No one knew but I was always drunk."

"No you weren't," said Celeste. "I was married to a drunk and I know how that goes."

"He never hid the fact that he was drunk, neither did Joey. But I did."

Celeste was shaking her head back and forth as she listened. Ron was walking in the side door with Keats, Celeste shouted, "What kind of bullshit is this?"

Ron wanted to just turn around and walk back out the door, but he had promised Keats a treat.

Celeste was nodding now and saying. "You did? You were? When did you do that?"

Ron got the treats and Keats gobbled. Ron tried to brush his curly fur and half listened.

"I don't know what to say, Tina. You've caught me with my pants down."

Ron grinned and thought about pulling Celeste's pants down. He stared at the way that her bottom jutted out in pretty pear shape and felt himself getting aroused as he watched her pace. Then

without goodbyes and abruptly, the conversation ended.

Ron looked up and their eyes met as she came towards him. "My sister has decided that she's an alcoholic," said Celeste.

## Chapter 57

When Ron took Keats down to the lake, he felt a nervous excitement rush through his dog. Keats pranced playfully into the cold, spring water and began to splash. His ears flopped up and down as his hind legs balanced his happy forepaws and wet face. Ron was beaming a smile as he watched him. There were winter branches that were still strewn along the swimming beach.

Ron was almost frightened by his idea but Angel had told him the lake was not deep. He called, "Here Puppy Dog."

Keats did his excited puppy imitation of bounding towards Ron at the sound of one of his names. Ron picked up a stick and threw it into the water. Keats

watched it drop into the water and then heard Ron's voice, "Go get it."

He was off like a rumbling little shot and Ron followed him to the water edge, wary now. Keats ran until he couldn't and then he just swam. His stroke was powerful and amazing. He snapped the stick in his jaws and turned back towards the shore. When he came out of the water, he was dripping like a fountain. He seemed smaller because his outer coat was now saturated.

He shook off a spray of water that covered Ron, who was laughing and holding another stick. "Do you want to do it again?"

Keats barked. It wasn't his little puppy bleat. It was a bark and Ron tossed in the other stick.

Celeste looked up at the two of them at the top of the stairs leading into her living room. They were both dripping. "What's the matter with you?" hollered Celeste. She closed her book and ran to get towels. Keats happily followed her, proud of what he had accomplished and hoping for a snack. He dripped after her into the kitchen.

Celeste turned in horror to see him. "Don't move!" she screamed at him. She walked across the kitchen, and into the bathroom to get some towels. Keats followed her. When she saw him in the

doorway she was totally exasperated and just knelt down and began to towel him in her arms.

Ron knew he was in trouble and slipped off his shoes and socks and overalls at the top of the stairs. He laid the overalls across the bannister in Celeste's newly polished living room. He padded into the kitchen to help clean the floor.

He stared down at Keats being toweled off and saw that he had developed a small erection. He grinned to himself.

It was just then that two field mice who had found their way in through a crack in the foundation under the front porch, undetected and basically harmless, but with a point of entry, scampered across the floor madly searching for a way to hide in this sudden open space.

Celeste screamed. Keats barked. Ron went for a broom. Then they were gone in back of the peninsula counter in the kitchen. Keats and Ron searched for them. They were gone. Keats kept sniffing. Celeste was horrified.

"I am not going to live with mice, Ron! I put up with you leading a soaking dog into the house, and you dripping yourself in happily in back of him because it is only water and you think it's funny, but I am not going to live with rodents!"

“It’s the country,” said Ron. “What are we going to do? I’ll set some traps!”

“It’s the country, what are we going to do?”  
hollered Celeste. “I am not living with mice, and I do not want to find them dead in traps or have Keats think that one is a gift that he should bring to me.”

There were a number of things that Ron could have said in response to this. Unfortunately, he chose to point out that Keats was not a cat.

Celeste literally screamed. “I want an exterminator!”

Ron could see that that was not a time to bargain with her. “That’s a good idea,” he said and went upstairs to find some pants. Still wet Keats followed him. Celeste wanted to cry.

## Chapter 58

For her second grant, Celeste created a plan for an outdoor raised garden. The research was easy

about how the effects of gardening, when it was physically possible, were highly beneficial to aging people. Her grandparents loved their gardens when Celeste was a little girl. Celeste seized upon the phrase “when physically possible” and set about making it not only a possibility but a reality.

Her idea was for a free standing garden that was raised and open underneath to allow for wheel chair access. She sketched out the dimensions of the garden which would be twenty feet long and three feet wide. She contacted the local lumber yard and got an estimate on materials as well as a “senior discount” for the project. Next she contacted the oldest, farming family in Hackleberg and discussed soil and drainage. They too offered Celeste a discount and felt like they were giving back to the community.

When she had her ducks in order, she met with Heidi Kleiss. Celeste knew how Height worked by now. She knew that they would be all for it on two conditions: it could not cost them any money and had to have no controversy associated with it. Heidi was not a patient listener but she was very smart. She grasped the broad strokes of Celeste’s project quickly but was shaking her head in a negative way. “Where are we expected to get the matching funds for the other 50% of the cost Celeste? I can’t present something to the Board that has such a large price tag with no discernable advantage to us.”



Heidi was pretty certain this would be the end of Celeste's most recent pipedream when Celeste answered her quickly, "I've thought about that and as I see it Height stands to both make money and do a good thing."

"Oh," Heidi was amused. "Exactly how is that supposed to happen?"

Celeste smiled, "Labor." She pulled out her second sheet of calculations. "The Grant includes both the cost of material and labor, but it does not specify how much is allotted to each. We pay for the materials out of the money we get from the state. Use our own salaried employees in maintenance to do the work. We charge what we need to charge for their service in the grant."

Heidi was thoughtful. "You are suggesting that the State pay for the project and pay us for the use of our people to build it?"

"Yes," said Celeste. "There is nothing in the grant that prevents us from using our own labor and charging what we deem is appropriate."

"I'll have to talk with maintenance but you seem to have covered your bases, Celeste. How long will this take?"

"I think I can have a verbal approval on this additional segment of the existing grant we now have by tomorrow."

Heidi was a little taken aback. "Have you gone ahead with this without my approval Celeste?" Heidi was sure she did not like Celeste's head strong ways and would not think twice about squashing this whole idea of a grant if she had gone behind her back in any way.

"Oh no," Mrs. Kleiss. Celeste gave her that look of sincerity that any good Catholic school girl had learned by 6th grade. "I've just gotten everything ready for your go ahead."

Celeste was feeling pretty good about herself as she left Heidi's office. She was walking down the hall when the familiar sound of Annabel Pritchard's crying filtered out of Nursing Director's office. She stopped in the doorway. "How are you Annabel?"

Annabel sniffled and reached for another tissue. She gathered herself or gave the appearance of one who was gathering herself and not totally succeeding. "Celeste, nice to see you. I hear everything is going great across the street."

Celeste stiffened a little and wanted to say pretty damn well considering you helped get me demoted and cost me twenty thousand dollars a year. She smiled and said, "Things are fine. How is it going for

you?" She subtlety, but not that subtlety, glanced into Annabel's tell-tale trash and saw the mounting pile of used tissues.

"She fell asleep on a family. It was a family conference about the need for a level change and she just fell asleep."

"Oh no," said Celeste.

"The family had to go find someone to help," wailed Annabel. "And now Mrs. Kleiss says that I have to sit in on each of her family conferences to make sure that she stays awake."

"That's terrible," said Celeste. "Isn't there something else that you can do?"

"Mrs. Kleiss is afraid to move her out and says that Social Services is now my responsibility. Celeste saw Annabel's chin begin to quiver again and now she had to leave or else laugh.

"I have to get back," said Celeste quickly.

## Chapter 59

Ron started his first day at Middle Hills in the middle of April. He met with Sandy Humz. She smiled at him. "You ready?"

Ron grinned back. "Absolutely."

"Better for you to ask questions," said Sandy. "That way we won't waste time by me telling you things that you already know. We have an hour and then we have a much longer meeting that will last most of the day."

"Ok," said Ron. He thought that was a really intelligent way to begin. He understood that it was also his first test. "I know that among other things I am in charge of the English Departments and libraries for both High Schools. How hands on with the libraries have you been?"

Sandy paused. She would have to think about that for a moment. He had gone immediately to a vulnerable aspect of his responsibilities. She had no training in library science and she knew that he did not either.

"I leave selection ordering and maintenance of the collections to the librarians. You may wish to get more involved with that. It becomes a struggle for dollars with the building principals. That where you really come in," Sandy paused and then said. "There are some personnel things. The chief librarian at one of the schools is married to a member of the

English Department. You'll be supervising them both and you have not met Althea Babel. That will happen on Wednesday."

"Tell me about the building principals," said Ron.

"Dirk Willamore is famous and has a good scientific mind. He was part of the group that won the lottery a few years back. He's set for life so he is doing this because he wants to."

"I've met him at a conference with Adele Becker. Middle Hills also gave its scheduling presentation when we were researching a new schedule at Mountain Oaks," said Ron.

"Dirk is a math and science guy. Respect that about him and you'll get along fine. He knows you and had nothing but good things to say about Adele Becker."

"Do you know Adele Backer?" said Ron.

"We may have served on a committee or two together in Trenton," said Sandy. "We weren't friends."

"What about Audie Riffle?" said Ron.

Sandy formed a smirk that Ron had not seen before.

"Little man is a character. He probably won't like you because he will identify you as central office and connected to me."

Sandy stopped and leaned forward and said, “Just remember you do not report to either of them and they will test you about that.”

“What do you mean?” said Ron.

“We are responsible for the education of students. In our system they are basically building managers.”

That fact felt like a splash of cold water and Ron took a moment to digest it. Sandy continued. “You and Bill and I evaluate the teachers and develop curriculum. You are also partially responsible for Social Studies and Special Ed, although Special Ed will be changing.”

Ron felt a surge of adrenalin pulse through him. This was going to be an entirely different kind of challenge.

“I read through most of the course of studies,” said Ron.

Sandy interrupted with a laugh. “Real page turners, weren’t they?”

“I had trouble understanding them,” confessed Ron.

“You and everyone else in the world including the people who wrote them,” said Sandy. “We’re going to entirely restructure them.”

Ron was beginning to see why she hired him. He had already participated in a complete curriculum restructuring.

“That’s where some of your work with critical thinking is going to come in handy,” said Sandy.

Ron thought, does she know what I had for breakfast as well? “I guess my last question is what about the Staff Development Steering Committee?”

Sandy smiled broadly. “That’s my baby. We pay teachers to keep learning.”

When they walked into the second meeting, they were joined by Bill Mathews. “This is our yearly exercise in creative writing,” said Sandy. “This morning we earn about \$175,000 dollars for the district.”

Bill Mathews chortled. Sandy grinned. Ron said, “How do you we do that?”

“Basically we set goals and invent statistics to reach them,” said Bill. He continued, “We don’t have to meet the goals, we just have to set them and make progress towards them over a three year period.”

“How to we find out if we made progress?” Ron was feeling foolish now.

“I told you,” said Sandy. “This is creative writing.”

## Chapter 60

On Ron's second day, he finally got to see his offices. Ron sat in his empty office and tried to picture it as his own. Maybe he would bring in his Lincoln portrait, but Celeste had grown to like it at home and she might not understand. Ron was activating things on his computer when he first meeting with his secretary.

Rose Schweitzer had been Sandy's secretary for eighteen years. Her assignment was to get him oriented as soon as possible, help him to find his own secretary, and then get herself back over to Sandy Humz offices where she belonged.

Rose found Ron fiddling with the computer. She would have been perfectly willing to help him through the set up if he had waited. She frowned. Sandy came in after she did but stayed much later. She saw Ron's car in his parking space when she arrived. She thought of one of the maxims by which she lived. "Eager beavers make a mess."

When she found him doing things on the computer before she had showed him what he was to do, she was annoyed but told herself that God would never give her more than she could handle.



“Good morning Dr. Tuck. I can give you an orientation to that if you would like to wait.”

“Good morning Rose,” said Ron. “Sure, that would be fine. Please have a seat.”

Rose sat with her pile of notebooks on her lap including the new calendar that she had painstakingly prepared for him. It detailed his meeting responsibilities for the rest of the school year.

Ron grinned over at her. “Please call me Ron. I really don’t like the Dr. Tuck stuff.”

Rose gave him a tight lipped smile and passed him his box of newly printed business cards. They proudly announced Dr. Ronald Tuck, District Director of Instructional Services, Middle Hills Regional School District.

Ron looked down at the card and shook his head. “I guess the doctor thing is unavoidable,” he said.

Rose responded by showing him his new office stationary, complete with his title. She had painstakingly laid out the format for the business cards and the stationary in anticipation of his arrival. Ron glanced down at the letter head and back up to Rose who was waiting for him to approve of her work. He shook his head slowly, “I

get it," said Ron. "The district wants to make sure my title is listed. Ok."

Rose was not happy with his response. She had expected the delight that Sandy had expressed when she showed the business cards and stationary to her, to be echoed by Ron. All he did was shake his head and say OK. She hoped this part of her assignment would not last long.

Next she handed Ron his calendar. "You really don't want to go anyplace without this," she said professionally.

"Why?" said Ron. Joyce kept his calendar at Mountain Oak and just told him where he had to be next.

"It's a little empty right now, but that is because Ms. Humz has finished all of your work for this year, but this is your lifeline. You should not go anywhere without it."

Ron laughed. "Well I'm sure that will take some time. I tend to lose things like this."

Rose was horrified. "You can't lose your calendar!" she exclaimed. "We both rely on it to know where you have to be."

Ron turned some of the pages. "Seems like I don't have any place to be until tomorrow afternoon," said Ron.

"That may change," warned Rose.

Ron's phone rang and Rose started for it before Ron could move. Rose's face lit up at the sound of Sandy's voice. "Yes, I'll send him down right away."

Ron was sitting back in his chair watching her. Her movements were almost insect like. She did not give him the phone but cradled it gently when she was finished speaking. "That was Ms. Humz. She needs to see you."

Ron stood and started to leave. "I'd like to meet with both principals later today. If you could call their offices and tell them I am going to be stopping by."

He started for the door and was into the hall before an excited Rose Schweitzer ran after him waving his calendar. "Don't forget this," she called out.

Ron thought she looked funny running after him and waving the thing.

Ron took it laughing. "Of course not. I'll treat it like my bible."

Rose felt mocked. She started back to her office determined to find him a new secretary as soon as possible.

## Chapter 61

Celeste had lunch with Duane. They shared the warmth of the food at the new Mexican place in Hackleberg and the warmth of each other's company. Sometimes Duane could still be a priest but that part of him was broken, and they were both more comfortable as friends. After Mandy died, some talk of her seemed always like their ritual.

Celeste said that she stopped her car by Mandy's garden and was so pleased to see the new buds. Duane said that he felt her there, he felt her everywhere and he wasn't sure how to live with this mixture of her presence and absence. "I've started going out more," said Duane.

"Where have you been going?" Celeste broke off a piece of her edible salad bowl and chewed with a crunch she felt was a bit too loud.

Duane felt almost like it was a mixture of confession and declaration.

"I've been spending time with two of the women from the parish," said Duane. He met her eyes. He wasn't looking for forgiveness as much as he was asking for acceptance.

Celeste tried hard to chew her crunchy salad well enough so that she would not choke and that she would soon be able to respond. She did not want her response to be gagging.

Celeste thought about Mandy. She would want Duane to move on with his life, but this fast? She drank some water. "Has it brought you comfort?" she asked.

Duane tried to make a joke. "Well it has brought me sexual release," he laughed.

Celeste plucked a piece of chicken out of her salad bowl and held it down with the fork and began slicing off small pieces without eating them. She did not respond.

Duane continued. "No, it doesn't bring me comfort. It distracts me."

Celeste met his eyes and said, "You know this is dangerous for you. What do you think will happen in the parish?"

"I don't see why anyone should care," said Duane.

"Are they married?" said Celeste.

"One is separated. The other I'm not going to keep seeing. It was just one time and it isn't going to happen again," said Duane.

“What are you going to do about the gardens?” said Celeste.

“Both of the women want to work in them,” said Duane.

Celeste eyes flashed dark and for a moment. Duane could see a fierceness, which was older than she was, coming from her. She made sure the look registered in Duane’s brain. “That’s not a good idea.”

When Celeste got back to Sunrise she was greeted by the news that Keats had been humping Gladys Shindmier’s leg. Keats was in her office playing with one of Ron’s chewed slippers. Judy Campbell delivered the message. She was giggling.

“One minute Gladys was petting him and he was sitting there nicely and then he just turned and put his front paws up on her leg and began to hump her. It was really funny to watch his little hips going at it on Gladys.”

Celeste stared over at Keats. He did not look guilty. He did not look afraid. He was working his way inside the torn heel of the slipper. She was going to have to talk to Ron about having Keats castrated.

It was not an easy topic and not one to which he reacted logically. She was going to have to point out the necessity of it. He hadn’t taken it well the first

time. And this wasn't going to be any easier. What was it about their attachment to testosterone?

She sat at her desk and Keats came over. He was a little too big for her lap but he didn't know that. She rubbed gently in back of his ears and he began to pant lightly. Then she stopped and settled into her callback list.

## Chapter 62

The reception for Ron was held in the library of the Hills school. Because the district operated its own transportation service the school days at the two high schools were staggered. Hills started and finished about its day 80 minutes after Summit. Any afternoon meetings that combined the two schools therefore were held at Hills.

About sixty people gathered in the library. They represented a portion of the people who Ron would directly evaluate. He was their boss now.

This was a veteran staff. Feelers began to go out about Ron as soon as his hiring became a rumor. Word came back.

Ron Tuck was said to have been a popular teacher who was hard to get along with. He had unreasonable expectations for teachers and students. He was known as a hard worker and a bit of a scholar. He was also seen as pro-administration and anti-union.

The veteran teachers were anxious to size him up. The librarians led by Althea Babel had already decided that they should educate him about how libraries worked.

Ron smiled and met person after person. He knew that he would need lots of time to learn who these people were.

Sandy addressed the gathering. "I'm personally thrilled to introduce Dr. Ron Tuck to all of you. Dr. Tuck is uniquely qualified to join our team and, at least our Debate coach is relieved that she won't have to face a squad of debaters that he has trained anymore."

Sandy continually surprised Ron by coming up with tidbits about what he had done. Things he did not know she was aware of. But it was true. Ron had won three consecutive debate championships at Mountain Oak. Sandy had been trying to add an interesting tidbit to his resume but the staff, while cordial, seemed unimpressed. "I'd like to ask Ron to say a few words."



Ron smiled his best grin. "Thanks for coming by to meet me. I know that it's late in the day and you have been grading papers and teaching and starting that final lap into the end of the year, so I will try not to keep you long. I'd like to come around to many of your classrooms and stop in, informally, and get a feel for what you are doing. I'm sure that we will all get to know each other better. Thanks again for coming." Ron thought it was an innocuous opening but one to which they could not take offense.

Althea Babel whispered to her husband, the union representative for his department, "Should we object to these informal observations?"

Greg Babel nodded decisively. "I'm sure that he can't do that."

Sandy walked two teachers over to Ron. "I'd like you to meet your two right hands, Dr. Tuck. This is Nicole Johansson and Marilyn Seeger."

Ron smiled again and stuck out his hand. The both took his hand and clasped without shaking. Marilyn was in her mid 50's. She was very well dressed in a coordinated suit with coordinated ear-rings, a thin bracelet and a pendant of matching gold sunrises. Her hair was teased and styled and totally in place on top of her head. "It's nice to meet you," said Ron.

“I’m sure we will get along just fine,” said Marilyn. Ron sensed warmth and professional distance. He liked the feel of both.

Nicole Johansson was very tall and very blonde and Ron thought she and Sandy somehow looked like they were part of a blonde tribe. They exchanged a genuine smile. “You might want to tell people that you aren’t going to be writing anything down on your visits. You just made many of them nervous.”

Ron was momentarily stunned but then nodded. “I see. Can you both pass the word that it’s just me trying to learn how the schools feel and that I am not evaluating them at all?”

The consulting teachers smiled and said that they would.

It was of course a bit of a lie on Ron’s part. He knew that he would be evaluating everything that he saw in the classroom, including them.

## Chapter 63

Franklin Fevel sat down for his next interview with Celeste. She watched, less astonished and more amused as he adjusted the long, bulbous microphone by her face. She anticipated his introduction. Franklin almost seemed giddy before a show. People in his congregation would ask about his guests. More than one had wanted to know when Celeste would be returning.

“Today we are again joined by Celeste Tuck, the program director for the Adult Center Sunrise. How are things going for you over there, Celeste?”

Because she was more comfortable, Celeste’s Jersey twang was more noticeable. “Pretty good, we just installed some raised garden beds, and so this spring we will be growing some of our own vegetables. Nothing tastes as good as when you bite into it straight off the vine.”

Franklin felt a twinge at the idea of Celeste biting into a small ball of a tomato, after she had plucked it from the vine. He smiled. “The summer can be

quite delicious,” said Franklin. He wished that he could see Celeste’s legs, but she was in back of the desk and she never wore anything low cut. “Today we are here to dismiss, I mean discuss” stammered Franklin, “dementia.” “What is dementia, Celeste?”

Celeste ignored the slip. “It’s a fairly new phrase to be used in a non-clinical setting,” started Celeste. “It used to be called senility. It means simply that our minds, like our bodies, get older. Our minds age just the way that our bodies do, but instead of stiff joints we may become a little more forgetful.”

“So, when I forget my car keys it’s a sign of senility?” joked Franklin. There were limits to which psychology could just go too far. Everyone was forgetful.

Celeste smiled. He had given the perfect example. “Not at all Frank, if I did not have a purse I’m sure I would forget where my car keys were all the time. It’s when I am holding my car keys and I can’t remember what they are for. That’s when I may have a problem.

Fevel was struck by the simplicity of the difference. His voice took on a tone of sincerity. “That’s very interesting Celeste. What else should we know in our everyday lives about the nature of dementia?”

“It depends upon your role. If you are talking to a loved one who you feel may be slipping, just pay

attention. I remember my Aunt Minn who was a wonderful, grandmotherly figure from my youth. She invited me to her house for lunch one day. My Aunt Minn's kitchen was always a magical place for me as a girl. The smells and the tastes and above all her approval were things I wanted. This one time she just made a cake but did not add sugar to the ingredients. She was uncharacteristically furious at herself for forgetting. That would be a signal to me today."

"I can almost close my eyes and smell your Aunt Minn's kitchen Celeste. Was she in New Jersey?"

"We're Italians from Paterson," said Celeste.

Franklin Fevel adjusted his glasses. Perhaps that was a little too much personal information. Maybe that was why he felt a sort of feminine warmth radiate from her. "What should a person do to safeguard against dementia?"

"It isn't like the flu or pneumonia. It can be mild and harmless, moderate and worrisome, or severe and necessitating some form of action. You just have to be honest with yourself or your loved ones."

"Can things look like dementia and really be something else?" said Fevel.

"Absolutely," said Celeste. "All kinds of things. Dehydration, exhaustion, and things like a fever,"

Celeste looked through the bulbous microphone and met Fevel's eyes. "Things that make you feel out of it, Frank." Celeste felt herself performing a little and blushed. It made her feel almost like when she posed.

Franklin was perspiring again. "Are there things that you can do to check?" said Franklin who sounded a little less confident.

"I would start in your kitchen, Franklin," said Celeste. "Are things there that belong there? Are they fresh? Have they been adequately covered? Are there things in the cupboard you would normally see in the refrigerator?"

"Finally, I guess we would all want to know is if there are things to be done to prevent or slow it?" said Franklin, wrapping up now.

"Engagement," said Celeste. That's one of the things we are doing at Sunrise."

When the show ended both Celeste and Franklin felt they had done a good job. Two days later, Sunrise was at capacity.

## Chapter 64

It did not give a good look when Harriet Dunmore, the first candidate to be Ron's secretary, fled from his office in tears. When she returned to her place in the main office pool at Hills, she said that she did not want to discuss her interview.

The rumor mill at Middle Hills switched into high gear. One story had it that she looked like he had said something inappropriate to her. This story was started by Audie Riffle's secretary who regularly got her breasts squeezed by Audie.

Another report contended that at Mountain Oaks people called Dr. Tuck and his secretary Beauty and the Beast. The entire rumor was complicated by Rose Schweitzer's refusal to make any comment other than, "He's no Sandy Humz."

Connie Lake heard these stories with interest and amusement. Before her interview with Ron, she called Harriet at home. "I don't want to pry Harriet,

but is there anything that I should be worrying about by having this interview?"

Harriet liked Connie. Everyone liked Connie who was one of the girls and sold Avon products. She was a good friend who would do you a favor. "What he wanted was just too much. I don't think I could have done it." Connie knew that Harriet was not the sharpest knife in the drawer and decided to just file what she said away.

Ron conducted the interview at his office in Summit. Connie Lake was a small, nicely dressed, dark haired woman who was just about Ron's age. She had large dark eyes that were accented by her very straight, short black hair.

Ron glanced over her resume and saw that she had worked in a corporate office in Bloomfield before a long break in her employment history that restarted with a part time job at a high school in the town where she lived. They had exchanged pleasantries and Ron asked her if she wanted some water.

"I'm fine, thank you," said Connie.

"I see that you worked in Bloomfield" said Ron.

Connie smiled a big winning smile that Ron liked instantly. "That was a while ago. Before I had my kids."

"That's the reason for the long break?" said Ron.



"That and we moved out of Bloomfield," said Connie.

"Is that where you are from originally?" said Ron. He was thinking her oddly familiar but was sure he didn't know her.

"Originally?" Connie paused and smiled. "Originally I am from Newark in Essex County.

It was the way she said Newark that hit that all too familiar pronunciation. "Me too," said Ron.

Connie let her eyes take him in and her head was nodding. "Yeah, I can see that."

They talked for a few minutes about places that they both knew. Connie used to hang at Ting-a-Ling's hot dog stand. Ron was smiling broadly and feeling very comfortable. He came to the part that caused Harriet Dunmore to flee in terror.

"I have to do a lot of writing," said Ron. "Do you know how to take dictation?"

Connie looked at him like she was accepting a challenge. She decided to surprise him because she had already figured out that she wanted the job and that he wasn't harmless but he was manageable. "I took a few secretarial courses," she said.

"Is it ok if we try it out?" said Ron. He handed Connie a pad and pen.

Ron started dictating off the top of his head. It was addressed to Sandy and was a memo about the need to transition courses of study into manageable, readable documents and how to go about doing that. He tended to look either down or away as he spoke, like he was seeing it as he said it. When he finished speaking, Connie stopped writing. Then she read it back to him verbatim.

Ron looked her full in the face. "You can run this office, can't you?"

"I'm pretty sure I can," said Connie.

Instinctively, Ron was pretty sure that she could too. He had his secretary.

## Chapter 65

Ron and Celeste were running their fingers through the happy to be adored Keats, one evening in June when the light seems like a young child that refuses to go to sleep. Although they used tick control, they had been cautioned to avoid having the harmful insects to get into the thick curly coat and eventually burrow down to the dog's flesh where they would eat and lodge and grow.

Celeste felt that her fingers were gaining the knowledge to sort them out and find them to protect her puppy from the issues that ticks brought. His fur was still puppy soft, but Celeste could feel it thickening and becoming slightly more rich and coarse. He was big enough for both of them to have their hands on him now.

They talked to Keats and each other as they massaged and searched. If one of them found something, they would call attention to the other and spread the fur back to expose the skin. They would carefully detach and crush the hard shelled ticks. Celeste found this part of the job disgusting and made Ron do it.

The three of them were on their queen sized sleigh bed when Celeste glanced down and was astounded by the size of Keats erection. It was two

or three inches long. She stopped rubbing him and was momentarily repulsed by the sight of it. Keats was panting easily like he was warm. She pointed it out to Ron.

“He’s a happy boy,” said Ron and kneaded the backs of his haunches.

They were both astounded when the very pink, thin, slick erection reached a length of six inches. Ron stopped rubbing and looked down at Keats with a combination of pride tinged with fear. This wasn’t going to go well.

Celeste jumped off the bed and hollered at Keats. “Stop that!”

Ron was defensive. Keats erection slowly began to shrink. “He can’t help it!” protested Ron.

Celeste was angry. “This is your fault. You refused to take this poor dog to the vet to get fixed and now long what’s happened.”

Ron’s first thought was that he didn’t look like a poor dog at all but decided he should not say that. “Let’s go for a walk Keats,” said Ron.

“You’d both better run and don’t bring him back around me sticking out like that.”

Again, Ron bit his lip. It probably wasn’t a good time to out that she loved it when he stuck out that way.

The rhythms of a school change in the summer time. The frenetic pace that comes with the students and teachers, leaves with them. The buildings rest and are prepped for the onslaught of September.

Ron, Celeste and Connie had taken to having early morning conference calls over coffee. His offices were in the planning stages of slipping into gear. The pace was leisurely. It was still more than a forty hour work week with a single, occasional night and there were conferences and presentations that Ron was prepping, but everyone was in summer mode.

Celeste carved out time for these morning calls by simply shutting her office door. She was the boss at Sunrise and with her numbers and program in place, Heidi Kleiss paid little attention to her.

Connie and Celeste became instant friends. Both came from large Italian families. Both had sisters. Celeste loved to hear stories about Connie's eighty year old mother, who was still working a full time job for the city of Newark. They exchanged recipes and used Ron to send each other samples of food from their kitchens.

"You didn't want to see the size of him," said Celeste to Connie on the speaker phone in Ron's office.

Connie gave off a low throaty laugh. "So what are you going to do?"

"Ron, you've got to call the vet. It is passed time. You waited too long and now the dog is going to suffer!" Celeste was relentless. She had seen Marjorie use this approach. She felt like she had an ally in Connie. He had to agree.

Ron seemed quiet and withdrawn. The thought that his delay was going to cause Keats pain caused him to dig his fingernails into his knuckle. "It just doesn't feel right," said Ron.

"How are you going to feel when you turn over in bed and instead of me it is your son and that thing's sticking out at you?" said Celeste.

Connie got caught in a half swallow of coffee and had to struggle to not start coughing. She maintained control, cleared her thought and laughed through it. "Steve is the same way as you. Last night he said that he understood why you were having a hard time."

"They're all the same aren't they? Ron visibly cringes when he talks about it," said Celeste.

Ron felt defeated. "I'll make the call."

Celeste wasn't quite finished. "Connie will you please make sure he does it?"

Connie and Ron exchanged a look across his desk. He was in back of it and she was in front of it. Connie grinned at him and said, "I'll let you know when he does."

## Chapter 66

One day in August, Ron was told that he was to meet for work that day at Sandy Humz home. The directions were complicated. It was a sprawling twenty-five acre property with a barn, good fencing and two horses. Sandy had seen the light flood Ron's face when she mentioned horses. None of what she knew about him led her to believe that he would have any more than the natural feeling that they were nice to look at, and too big to want to really get close to.

"You have horses?" Ron's eyes were wide with a wonder she had not seen before. "What kind?"

Sandy's body visibly relaxed when she began to talk about them. "Frank is a little older and an American

Saddlebred, and Tahar is my big beautiful Persian Arabian mix.”

She was surprised when Ron said, “I used to work with an Arabian horse. God, I loved that horse, Rani Shea.” Ron smiled and felt nostalgic for a moment. His eyes went a little dreamy. “I remember bathing her and walking her after she’d been for a run. I never rode her but I stroked her and talked with her and stayed with her on nights when we were at shows. I slept in the tack stall.”

Sandy was nodding. “There is nothing like giving my babies a bath. I’ll save some carrots so that you can feed them,” said Sandy. They shared a grin and were back on task.

Celeste had ordered some special donuts from Peter’s bakery for Ron to bring. “It’s a meeting,” Ron had protested.

“You’re going to someone’s home,” Celeste scolded him.

So Ron picked up a dozen mixed Danish that were made in the German tradition of butter and eggs and headed out to Sandy’s house. The mixture of being dressed in his work shoes and wearing jeans and carrying his attaché case felt odd to him. Ron smiled as he glanced down at the pair of sneakers that he also brought. He was excited to see the horses but you didn’t walk around horses in



sneakers and they should definitely not be your only pair of shoes.

Her place was deep into the western hills of New Jersey and miles and twisting turns from something greater than a county road. Ron imagined Sandy driving these unlit roads in the night hours that she kept. Her home had the name Dreaming Fields.

Ron looked for cars as he drove up a long driveway that was bordered on both sides by a mass of lawn. Small saplings were planted at intervals. He saw a clump of cars around the side and found a spot for his Nissan. He stood at Sandy's door carrying his donuts and his attaché case, in jeans and work boots. His black t-shirt had the red scrawling signature of Salvador Dali across its front.

Sandy was wearing worn work jeans and shirt that fit her like every day wear. Ron put down his attaché case and said like a little boy, "Can I go to see the horses?"

Sandy put down the Danish and said, "Sure, I'll get some carrots and come with you." She reached into the freshener drawer of her refrigerator and pulled out two bunches. Straightening she smiled and presented them to Ron. "I saved these for you."

Sandy introduced Ron to her mother and their resemblance was startling. She was a thirty year older version of Sandy, although not quite as tall.

Hilda Humz shook his hand. "Sandy tells me you like horses," she said smiling.

Sandy Humz moved her body differently as she got close to the barn. Her stride lengthened. Her shoulders moved more easily. Two cats darted to the left of their path in opposite directions. "How many cats do you have?" said Ron.

"Eleven or twelve depending on the old Tom that lives in back of the barn and is a little feral. And there are two dogs that you haven't met yet."

Ron was a bit surprised that he hadn't heard a dog barking. He wondered where the other people who had parked their cars were. Frank and Tahar wandered over as Sandy noticed that Ron knew enough to close gates in back of him.

Sandy opened her arms, and the two horses wearing protective fly gear over their eyes and light filtered covers to help protect their hides from the ever present nuisance of flies in August in New Jersey, nuzzled against her with the front of their heads. Sandy pressed back against each of them lightly.

Then Tahar regarded Ron. Ron stood with arms down at his sides and then slowly raised the hand holding the carrots and slid forward to the horses left, stroked his neck with his free hand, spoke softly and introduced himself. He held his face close

enough for Tahar to see and then reached up to his mouth with one of the carrots. Holding it flat on his palm, Tahar plucked it with his soft lips.

“He likes you,” said Sandy, who then made her way back into her house and left Ron with her horses.

Ron stood between them feeding them carrots and patting their flanks and talking to them. Their feel, their smell caused him to feel transported. He eventually came back into the house with a look that Celeste would have identified as the way that he looked when he surfaced from a dive.

## Chapter 67

Ron went back to his car and changed shoes. He entered again through the back door and found people sprawled out on the living room floor, eating the Danish that he had brought and shuffling papers.

Sandy looked up and smiled at Ron’s grinning face. “Do you have new best friends?”

“They are fantastic,” said Ron.

“That’s one way to get on the boss’s good side,” said Jake Norman.

Bill Mathews added, “Ron knows the right things to say. That’s for sure.”

Ron laughed slid down to the floor and opened his attaché case. “I like horses. I liked them since I was eighteen, and first got to work with them. It doesn’t leave your blood once it is in there.”

Sandy nodded and smiled.

Katie Moustakos said, “Well it never got inside of me and I don’t intend to let it get in there now.”

Ron looked at her. The short, enormously chested woman, seemed to be shuffling her papers with nervous energy. She wanted to get started. She handed Ron a list of the upcoming workshops for the first half of the year. “When we post the sign ups next month your office has always tallied up the ones that will run and the ones that don’t get enough attention and will have to be scrapped.”

This was the staff development model that Sandy and Bill had created. Teachers were paid twenty dollars an hour and got on-guide credit to continue honing their skills. It meant more money in their pockets and a better level of teaching for the school. Because it was the staff development

committee, Sandy thought it best if it were chaired by a faculty person instead of an administrator.

Ron was struck by the brilliant simplicity of the set up. Presenters, largely from the faculty, were sent out to conferences. They learned new skills and techniques. They came back and served as instructors, who were paid to present by the steering committee. Other faculty members took their workshops and were compensated for their time. It was continued staff development with a monetary and professional incentive.

But this part of it was the nuts and bolts. Scheduling the workshops, coordinating availability of instructors, making additions and subtractions to the lists. The gears and shifts that allowed the program run smoothly.

Jake Norman, a vice principal at Summit, was a former teacher at Mountain Oak. He and Ron had not been there at the same time but they knew about each other. Jake was a former history teacher and wrestling coach. He had been an active union organizer who had played rough when it came to the teacher's contract negotiations at Mountain Oak.

For the last ten years he had been an administrator who was just as gritty on the administrative side. He had become well versed with alternative scheduling

and was largely responsible for the scheduling changes which had taken place at Middle Hills. The word he had gotten on Ron was “smart, disarming, and vicious.” He could respect that but could not help sizing him up as an opponent.

Jake viewed Bill Mathews as a passive egghead who preferred not to take the lead. Katie was attracted to him, and he could pretty much get her to go along with whatever he wanted. Holly Trimmer was an art teacher with long blonde hair and a sports car. Katie was a business teacher who loved tight organizations. Holly enjoyed making Katie happy because she sent her endless Greek desserts and was always friendly to her.

It was Sandy’s committee and Jake knew that. But she had been promoted and would not have the time to pay attention to all of it any more. She was going to try to entrust that to Ron. Jake wanted to be sure that Ron was up to it.

When they broke for the lunch that was catered for the committee, Ron changed his shoes and slipped back out to Frank and Tahar. He was hungrier to see the horses again, and Sandy had told him that he could take them more carrots.

Tahar was more affectionate than Frank. He came over and snorted and bobbed his head happily when he saw more carrots. Frank held back and ate

straw from a mounted bail that Sandy set out during the day.

Ron ventured under Tahar's head to rub his sleek neck and feel the power at the tops of his front legs, all the while speaking and reaching out for that sense of connection that drew him. Then when Tahar wanted another carrot, he gave Ron's chest a soft thunk with his large head. Ron was knocked back by the immense power of the horse, but came back laughing and handing Tahar his carrot. He slipped his free hand around the horse's neck to hug him while Tahar, ears alert, chewed and bobbed his head.

"You really do like them," said Jake as he walking over after watching Ron from the porch.

Frank trotted over to even things up and Ron gave him a pat and a carrot. He turned to look at Jake from the other side of the fence. "Yeah, I really do like them."

"Mountain Oak is a great place to be from," said Jake.

Ron smiled, "I know you still have some friends there."

"And some enemies," said Jake. "How's Rufus?"

Ron laughed, "We never talked much. He didn't say goodbye. You worked for Margaret Philco, didn't you?"

"I hated that dumb bitch," said Jake.

Ron nodded seeing a weakness in Jake. "We didn't get along well either."

## Chapter 68

It was not a surprise to Celeste when she heard about the scandal surrounding Duane. It seems those were not the only two women. Duane, as the rumors contended, had been seeing. There were



other women from the parish. There were indications that these relationships were not appropriate.

None of the affected women seemed to be complaining, but others seem to think it unsavory and went to the bishop. Since the retirement of Jack Spong, changes were afoot in the Episcopal Church. The liberal thinking of Spong was now challenged regularly by more conservative elements of the church. This was happening from top to bottom. Spong's successor was already feeling the heat.

It was no different in the parish. The liberal element wanted to forgive these supposed indiscretions, particularly since none of the women were among the people voicing objections. The conservative folks wanted him gone. Enough was more than enough.

Duane was at first uncaring about the rumors. Celeste had warned him twice now. "Who exactly am I hurting?" had been Duane's defense.

The last time he voiced that sentiment to her, she said simply, "Only yourself."

Duane no longer was himself. He avoided any question of faith like it was toxic for him. His standard answer now was, "We have to take care of each other because no one else is going to take care of us."

This response left many feeling unsatisfied. It did not comfort the sick. It did not ease the grieving. Duane knew these things to be true and was at a loss about what he could do to change things.

Celeste found herself engaging less and less in her church. She resented comments about “Duane’s harem” and knew that there were even whispers about her because of their friendship. Celeste withdrew.

Duane was called in for a hearing in front of the bishop’s chancellery. It was decided that it would be in the best interests of all if Duane was transferred. He was taking a position in upstate New York. He would be gone by the end of summer.

The news hit Celeste harder than she expected. She knew that Duane was in trouble but she expected that her church, for whom Duane and Mandy had done so much, would have been more understanding. She too began questioning her faith in “the good community” as Jack had called it. She quietly resolved that she had enough.

Ron and she talked about it as they lay in bed. He listened and then asked, “Do you think you really had more faith in Jack and Patricia and Duane than you did in the religion?”

"I don't know," said Celeste. "Maybe I did but I know that I believed what they were saying, and isn't that the religion?"

"You know I'm the wrong person to ask about this," said Ron, who had been baptized three times and was done with all of it.

"I don't know who else to ask. My family is Catholic so they don't have to think about it. Your mother would just try to get me to come down to her church. You're all I've got to talk to about something like this."

"Do you want me to go to church with you?"

Celeste laughed. "That would be a disaster. You're sincere now but your tolerance for any of it would last less than a day."

"I would try for you," said Ron.

Celeste smiled. She knew that he would and she knew that right now he was just trying to find some way, anyway, that would help her feel better, but that would not last. When someone got under his skin, he would totally forget why he was doing what he said he wanted to do and find the need to go for someone's jugular vein. That was who he was, but it didn't help her to find what it was that she needed.

Celeste lay awake long after Ron dropped off. She knew that she believed in God. She felt that, but

maybe the only true way for her to believe in God was totally on her own, with no family, no friends, and no husband beside her.

A chill shivered through Celeste. He was right there and he loved her and they had made a life but at this moment she felt totally alone. She waited for sleep. She desperately wanted to sleep. She needed to sleep. She took Ron's hand as he was sleeping and he instinctively turned into her. She could feel his heart beating. She let the quiet regular sound cause her to start to drift.

## Chapter 69

Angel was accepted for the fall semester. She was excited about hearing the Communications Department had a good reputation, but not at all happy about her living arrangements and the

location of the school. A strong part of her thought that it was all a waste of time. If she could have thought of something else to do she would have done it.

She was still smarting about Salem. The anger fueled her sense of loneliness. The pounding of her conflicting desires felt like a wall that was colliding with her head. She could not really live in the barn. There was no running water. She did not want to live with them

The barn was the best that she could achieve. She could forget about them, but then they were always there. She always had to feel that need to eat food with them. She did not want that.

They did respect her privacy. She had to admit that, but then another voice in her head screamed that was because they didn't care enough to want to know what was going on. She could not live with them.

They were having dinner. Ron was grilling vegetables from a local farm stand, along with burgers and hotdogs. Celeste was chopping greens for the salad. Angel sat at the table patted Keats and asked if she could help with anything.

"I'm happy you got accepted. It's not a bad school," said Ron.

“They had a great nursing program,” said Celeste.

Angel’s voice was sharp and raised. “I have absolutely no interest in the nursing school!”

“I didn’t say you did,” defended Celeste. “I was just adding to the conversation.”

“The conversation is about how I am possibly going to be able to go to this school that Dad thinks is so great,” Angel was animated.

“The school is as good as you make it,” said Ron, pacing between the grill and the conversation.

“I’m not like you. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life around schools.”

“Then use the schools to make contacts to where you do want to spend your life,” said Ron.

“How am I supposed to do that?” Angel looked at him with that same objection that he’d heard her use about 100 times before when she did not want to do something or was frightened into not wanting to do something.

The view that parents had into the mannerisms of their children was at once insightful and limiting. Associations of the mannerisms with past actions was inevitable. A parent could try to disassociate how something was being said from the content of what was being expressed, but it was so hard.

Ron wanted to pause and use the tools of the grill to buy time so that he could try to wash that mannerism out of his mind. He managed to say, "You'll figure it out. Find professors who you like. They will show you how it works."

Seeing his daughter as a college student, filled Ron with pride and fear. He felt she could conquer the fear and wanted more of the pride.

"Here's how I see it." Ron looked over at Celeste, they joined eyes. Angel's slap had hurt. Ron and Celeste had talked about it and come to a decision. Ron thought he would introduce it and Celeste could follow up. "We can either afford to get you a good car that will make it possible to stay in the barn, or we can afford to get you an apartment in a safe neighborhood that is close to the school."

Buying another car for Angel had been a very sore spot. They had already bought or given her more than ten cars. Some she destroyed, but all were gone except for the twelve year old, three door with over a hundred thousand miles on it that she was now driving. Celeste had wanted her to have the option of staying in the barn. Ron agreed that at least she would have a safe place to be, but wondered how safe she would be driving up and down the interstate.

They ate quietly. Celeste had saved some Hot Grill chili sauce for her hotdog. The grilled vegetables were soft and sweet on the burgers. Keats was getting passed food by Ron and Celeste, under the table. He loved their meal time as much as his own.

## Chapter 70

The first day of faculty was something for which district administrators prepared for weeks. Ron and Connie had worked hard to make sure that every teacher's supply order was in that teachers home classroom. He let Connie do the figuring and counting while he did the physical labor of carrying them to the classroom and stacking them on the teacher's desk. Sometimes heavy cartons of books were involved and Ron smiled when he thought about building his terraced gardens.

All of those stones and now this was easy. He felt strong and like he could just keep going. Connie was impressed. She thought that he might be the type



to just jump in and get his hands dirty but this was even a little better than that.

Ron sent Connie back over to his other, air conditioned offices in the other school. He sat down in this windowless office, which was Audie Riffle's way of punishing Sandy for not being more receptive to his advances. Audie's problem was that now she outranked him. They were no longer equals in either of their minds.

Ron turned on the fan that blew the hot air around, slipped off his shoes and drank some of the bottled water that Connie had brought to him. She was pretty sure that if he sweat any more he might dehydrate and collapse. He sat in front of the fan hoping it would dry his shirt.

Darlene Learner appeared at his doorway. Ron had partially cleaned out this office and turned the desk so that it faced the wall and he could talk to visitors without a desk being in between them. Darlene was a petite blonde with perfectly straight hair and a Maybelline complexion. She was a third year English teacher who had been confident and successful. Sandy had spoken glowingly about Darlene and her sense of organization. She looked at Ron with an expression of disapproval as he sat there shoeless and sweating and gulping water. He sure was no Sandy Humz. "I like the way that you redid the office," she said.

“Thank you,” said Ron. “Not exactly the portrait of administrative cool at the moment am I?”

Darlene smiled and said, “It’s very warm today. I just stopped in to get a look at my classroom and put some things in place but my door is locked. Do you have a key?”

“Sure,” said Ron. He got up and grabbed the ring of keys from his desk and started down the hall towards her room in his socks. Ron liked the way the cool of the halls felt on his stockinged feet. Darlene thought he looked ridiculous.

When he opened her door the wave of deeper heat seemed to be like a cooking oven greeted them. Ron grinned at her. “Few minutes in there, you’ll be as hot and sweaty as I am.”

Darlene wasn’t sure what he meant by that. Was he saying that he wanted her to be hot and sweaty? He did know that she was married didn’t he? “Thank you,” said Darlene.

“If you need any help just let me know,” said Ron.

Darlene wondered what he meant by that. What kind of help was he offering? She set about arranging her desk.

When Ron got back to his office, he felt like he had a second wind. He began delivering more teachers their supply and book orders. These trips caused

him to pass by Darlene's open door a few times. Each time she heard his cart squeaking as it approached and she wondered if he was intentionally passing by her classroom this many times.

When Ron finally completed all of the Hills supply orders, he stuck his head back into her classroom and said, "I'm going to be taking off. Is there anything I can do for you before I go back over to the other building?"

"No, Dr. Tuck, I'm fine. Thank you." She started back to her desk.

Ron stepped into her room. "I know that we don't know each other very well, but please try to call me Ron, if you can."

"I will," said Darlene, uncomfortably.

## Chapter 71

As the census grew at Sunrise, Celeste was required to enlarge the size of her staff. The State regulations mandated a ratio of five to one. Celeste was not to be counted as primary care staff. This meant she needed to double staff. Heidi Kleiss

listened with distracted interest. “You’ll need five staff because they will all be part time, Celeste.” It was not a discussion. It was the way things would be.

As she filled out her staff, Celeste adopted her own managerial style. Her directions were clear. “Work out a timetable that suits your lives. There are some events where everyone will need to be present, but they will be scheduled well in advance.”

That was it. She presented them with the grid and the hours that needed coverage, and then let them sort it out and present it to her. Celeste did keep track of any conflicts or holes that might occur.

It ran like a charm. Celeste trusted her staff to cooperate and even though that were hardly professionals, they worked it out. Of course, this was not without some bullying and a bit of complaining among them, but Celeste simply decided to not be bothered with it until it affected the running of the program, which it never did.

Celeste one other rule was they had to be kind to the clients. There was absolutely no doubt about her stance on this issue. Celeste was clear at their job interviews. “If it is an effort for you to be kind, this is the wrong place for you,” Celeste routinely said.

Morning coffee was a place where Celeste liked to touch base with her clients. "What do you like best about this time of year, Jim?" It would soon be September.

Jim was a retired fireman. He was 78 and very arthritic. He would soon have to shift from his cane to a walker. Celeste was introducing him to the walker as a method of getting out of a chair more easily. "I liked going down to the ocean after all the kids and families cleared out. I watched the seabirds and people who lived by the water."

"Oh yes," said Cecile. She smiled a soft dreamy look of remembrance. "I was proposed to on the boardwalk at Asbury Park." Cecile was an 81 year old grandmother. Like many of her generation, she had lived the life she imagined. There were the lean years that were best forgotten and the sadnesses that one kept private. Her Clark had been a good man and they had a good life and great children. Nothing to the contrary was worth mentioning. "I do remember how much I liked salt water taffy though," she said laughing.

Celeste arranged a trip to the shore. She found a spot that had adequate wheelchair access, she made contacts with family who might be able to accompany them for the day. She determined that she would basically need two to one or even one to one ratio of caregivers to clients.

Judy Campbell thought this was a poor idea that was going to require her to do a lot of work. Why were they even doing it? How stupid was a convoy of wheel chairs and walkers going to look along the boardwalk? People would be laughing at them. "I don't think we should do this, Celeste."

Celeste slid down in back of her desk and Judy closed her door sat right down in front of it. "Why do you think it's a bad idea?"

"It's dangerous," said Judy. She knew that this was her best argument. "What if one of them slips and falls?"

"They could slip and fall anywhere," said Celeste.

"But getting in and out of the vans and walking on the boardwalk. Suppose one of those walkers gets caught and they fall? How are we going to get medical attention?"

"Those are good points," said Celeste, "and they are challenges that we will have to work out."

Judy stood up, "Well, you just can't do it, that's all."

Celeste was calm and spoke slowly. "Judy, this is the way it's going to be. We are going to the seashore."

Judy stormed out of Celeste's office without answering. Heidi Kleiss had told her to keep her ears open if Celeste was doing anything really crazy.

She phoned Heidi. "She wants to bring a busload of people down to the beach!" complained Judy.

Heidi was not impressed. "She's your boss, you'll do as she says. Is that all?"

Judy shuffled back into Celeste's office a few minutes later and apologized for losing her temper.

## Chapter 72

The combined English and library departments met at the Summit library. Ron sat through being introduced by the Superintendent and politely applauded. He listened the HR Director talk about changes to the benefits package. Then he and the other administrators were allowed to leave while the Union held its welcoming meeting at a teachers only group.

Ron surveyed the library. Connie had laid out the fifty-eight binders that Ron's staff would be getting. He wondered if he had time to go for a cigarette but then decided that he did not. He was allotted ninety minutes with his group, then there would be a break for lunch. The principals would then have their building meetings after which

the teachers would be released to spend the rest of the day preparing their classrooms.

Marilyn Seeger and Nicole Johansson were standing in front of Ron and chatting. They looked up when he walked over. Marilyn smiled in a matronly way. "Are you nervous?"

Ron smiled. "Not so much," he said. In reality he had been looking forward to this for weeks.

The teachers shuffled in. Some with coffee, all in small chatty groups that teachers make after having seen each other most every day and then having the enforced break of summer giving them that welcome interruption. Ron gave them a few minutes and checked the number of binders that were not retrieved. There were eight left on the desks. He felt he could start.



“Let me be the seventh or eighth person to welcome you back for what I hope to be a good and exciting year at Middle Hills,” Ron began. Then he paused to allow them to quiet down. He was surprised that it was almost immediate. What he was blissfully unaware of was the level of anticipation about what he was going to say. “This is the day when all the administrators get to tell you things that you won’t remember,” continued Ron. There was a polite smattering of chuckles from the veterans and a wide-eyed looking around from the younger staff to see who was chuckling. Ron started down his own list of things to remember. Sick calls should be accompanied by lesson plans and be made as early as possible. Lesson plans would be inspected each Friday and returned by Monday morning. Reservations to bring classes to the library should be made at least a week in advance. These were all standard things that they had heard before. Ron now slipped in his changes. “Each of your teacher observations would now be accompanied by a pre observation conference and scheduled at our mutual convenience.”

This was a change. Sandy never let them know when she was coming. She and Ron had debated the change. Sandy said that he lost the element of surprise. Ron countered that he wanted to trust them and by scheduling the observation he had the right to hold them to a higher standard. He wanted

to see if they knew what they were going to do and were able to do it. Sandy relented. His method was the preferred observation model. "It's your department," said Sandy. Thinking to herself that there were some who would play him like a fiddle, but he would find that out for himself.

Althea who was sure Ron had never observed a librarian before asked, "Won't you be able to tell from our plans what is going on? I mean why do we have to spend a prep period telling you what we have already written to you?"

Ron smiled and said with just a tinge of drama in his voice. "I surely hope there is more going on in the class than you have written into your plans."

Althea's husband raised his hand and began asking his question at the same time. "Does that mean you aren't really that interested in what our plans say?"

It was clever. Ron found it slightly amusing. He decided to play in kind. "Oh no, I'll be enraptured by your plans. I would not think of leaving on Friday afternoon until I had thoroughly read and signed off on each one. Of course, if I have any questions about your plans I'll expect you to answer them as soon as possible."

Althea smiled to herself. He was a bit of a sarcastic smartass.

## Chapter 73

Ron and Keats were out mowing grass for what Ron hoped would be the last time this year. They had a system now. Unbelievably the system had been Keats' idea. Keats did not like the sound of the lawn mower but always felt the need to walk alongside Ron wherever he went out on the property. He was a young male dog now. He was incredibly strong through his back legs and through his shoulders. He loved to swim and did with a growing agility that caused Ron to be amazed.

So Keats would go to the midpoint of the area Ron was mowing and sit. After Ron passed with the mower, Keats would move back just the width that Ron and the mower made. His eyes never left Ron's progress. Ron was trying to create a gym style workout on the property. It was fine as far as strength was concerned, but difficult when it came to aerobics.

Keats setting the marker caused Ron to be able to go faster and not worry about whether he was moving in a straight line. He smiled and gave Keats a “good boy” as he passed him. The happy Keats would scurry back and take up his new position. He was a rich, liver brown, curly coated being. When he naturally sat, he was straight and proud and almost regal in his stillness. Because the sun was still strong, he was panting slightly with what seemed like a smile, red tongue lightly quivering between his growing incisor teeth.

Ron would mow for about an hour and a half and then stop. The cycle of mowing would take three afternoons this way. At this time of year it could be done every two weeks, but in June the cycle was endless. They had developed this system in June.

When Ron clicked off the motor, Keats would bound over. Ron would hold him and Keats would lick his face or the sweat from his neck. Ron would find a stick and toss it a few times but would give up when Keats would not give it back and Ron ran out of new sticks. He started the lawnmower towards the barn. Keats ran alongside and gave a rare bark. “We’ll go down to the lake after dinner,” said Ron.

Angel’s car pulled into the barn driveway as Ron was putting the lawnmower away. Not for the first time Ron thought that it would not take much to convert this barn into an apartment and a barn. All

that was needed was water. Keats was not comfortable in the barn and liked to stand outside the door and wait. It was the darkness and the smells. If he saw Ron was not coming back out, he would venture in, but it was not his first inclination.

Angel, Ron and Keats met up alongside the barn. "How was your day?" said Ron.

"It was good," said Angel. "I found a place to live."

Ron thought that was fast but said, "Come on inside and tell your mother and I about it."

Celeste was thrilled when she saw all of them come into the house at the same time. Motown was playing loudly as she cooked. The Drifters sang Under the Boardwalk and Celeste was thinking about how she was going to actually accomplish this trip to the beach.

"I can have dinner on the table in ten minutes," said Celeste.

"What can we do?" said Ron

"You could feed Keats," said Celeste delegating. "Angel you could set the table."

When they worked like a team this way it was fluid and easy. Ron would make a little bit more of a mess feeding Keats than Celeste did and Angel

would put more things on the table than they needed, but it felt good when they worked this way.

Dinner was boiled and cleaned shrimp with fresh tomato salad, corn on the cob, and crusty Italian bread. It was what they called their summer meal.

"It's a two room apartment in Hackensack with a tiny kitchenette and a decent bath room. The building is clean and safe. The front door is locked." Ron had been pretty strident with her about safety since she floated the idea of sharing a house with three guys in Montclair. Angel was looking from one of their faces to the other as she spoke.

Ron said, "How far away from the school is that?"

"I don't know," shrugged Angel. "Fifteen minutes maybe. But it's got great transportation to New York City."

Celeste saw that register on Ron's face and spoke quickly. "That sounds very nice. I can't wait to see it. I lived in Hackensack. Where is it?"

Ron was trying to convince Keats that shrimp were really good but Keats wasn't having it. He listened as Angel and Celeste talked about location. Then Celeste looked half over to Ron but said to Angel, "I know that area. It is busy but very safe."

She knew Ron would accede to her on all things Bergen County. That was her territory. Essex County

was his. It was how these two lifer Jersey people divided up things.

Celeste told the story about taking her clients to the shore over corn.

They always watched with some peculiar interest as Ron stood his ear up and carved the kernels with a knife. They heard his stories about why, but found them less interesting than the peculiarity of not wanting that feel of sinking your teeth into a juicy ear of corn.

Angel said, “So what are you going to do have them race up and down the boardwalk in the wheel chairs or maybe have some kind of demolition derby?”

Franklin Fevel leaned into his microphone, "Today we are thrilled to again be joined by Celeste Tuck, the Director at Sunrise Day Center. Celeste, it is wonderful to have you back. Did you have a good summer?"

Celeste was now comfortable and was no longer transfixed by the bulbous phallic microphone that Franklin so enjoyed placing in front of her face. "I surely did, Frank and now I am ready for the beautiful colors of fall." This wasn't true. Celeste hated the fall because she dreaded the winter, but she felt like it was the right thing to say.

"Now, don't automatically switch us off but today we are going to be talking about Death and Dying. I promise we will not get too depressing."

"That's very true, Franklin." Celeste saw the opening that he had given her and jumped right in. "We have taken dying and death away from families in our modern times." Celeste had wanted to say contemporary thinking but modern times kept it folksy. "People used to die at home. Now they die in hospitals. Many people are unable to see a dead person because they have no experience of having ever seen one and it is frightening. Unfortunately, this extends to dying."

Fevel said, "Are there things that we can do to make it less frightening?"



“That’s a tough question, but the simple answer is yes. We can allow people to talk about dying. Our tendency is to always say that everything is going to be ok even when we know it is not. But most people know when they are dying. Elisabeth Kubler Ross has done excellent work on the stages that people go through when the end of life is drawing near. Not everyone goes through all of the stages but there is some universality in them.”

“Can you talk more about that,” said Franklin. Celeste had her legs crossed and was bobbing her top leg up and down and Franklin was transfixed by how that action showed an expanse of Celeste’s thigh and then took it away on the down stroke of the bobbing.

“Denial is usually first. Doctors routinely hear that there must be some mistake in the tests and that they want them run again. This is partially because we know much sooner than we used to when someone is terminally ill. It is that feeling of ‘this can’t be happening to me’,” said Celeste She took a breath and noticed Frank’s eyes and the thin line of perspiration on his forehead and thought that it did not seem that warm in the studio today.

“The next stage is anger. The idea that it is wrong that our own lives are coming to an end. Even though you know it intellectually, there is an emotional rise of anger about it that many people

have not experienced before and may not be equipped to handle.”

“That seems very natural,” said Franklin.

“That is where faith, as you know better than I do Reverend Fevel, plays such a big role,” said Celeste.

“Indeed it does,” said Franklin with conviction. “But I have also found it is harder on the families than it is on the people who are passing.”

“It is much harder on them. Not only do they need to allow their loved ones to talk openly about their passing, but they need to care for them as well.”

Much to Fevel’s disappointment Celeste’s leg stopped bobbing and she shifted in her chair bringing her skirt back down to a very modest level.

“People need to not feel guilty about taking a break. Treating themselves to something special once in a while and to allow other family members to assist.”

“What do you mean by allowing them to assist?” said Fevel who found that he had stopped sweating and realized that he had almost been panting while he listened to Celeste.

“Caregivers get very protective. They know how much they are doing and tell themselves that no one else would do it. They see it as a trust that they can only be sure it is not violated if they do

everything themselves.” Then she paused and met Frank’s eyes and starting her leg swinging again. “I cannot tell you how sad it is when a caregiver runs themselves into the ground and sometimes winds up dying before the person they are caring for. That is tragic and unbelievably hard on all concerned.”

Franklin knew what she was talking about he had seen it himself Then he served up his softball question. “What can we do?”

Celeste swung her leg a little faster and smiled at Frank who felt his pants begin to feel tighter. “We have a support group that meets on Wednesday evening at Sunrise. All are welcome to attend and there is no charge.”

The program ended and the radio station began to get calls wanting to know how they could reach “the death lady.”

## Chapter 75

Nicole Johannsson sat in Ron's office sipping the hot Dunkin Donuts coffees that Ron got for their meeting. She was transitioning from summer with some hitches. At thirty six, Nicole was a widow with an adopted child. She met her late husband at Summit where they taught together. Then the accident, and the surgery, and his dying all happened while they both taught at Summit. Sandy Humz admired Nicole's class and strength. She made her the consulting teacher at Hills in order to give her a fresh start.

Nicole accepted her transfer and elevation with gratitude. Sandy had hired Nicole, who knew that she was a tough but fair boss. She gave her small gifts of celebration and hugged her with the empathy of loss. They were tight, but Sandy had an authoritarian style. She would just tell you how things were going to be, and if you did not agree you would learn to agree.

Nicole really did not have a clear picture of Ron yet. She heard the story about him delivering supplies himself and the story about him walking around in his socks. She thought they were amusing. She kept in mind that this had been Sandy's choice for a position that she had held in the district. He was her first hire.

Marilyn Seeger was a powerful force at Summit. Her husband had been a Vice Principal at Hills. Their children went through the school system. She was just fifty-five years old and feeling on top of her game. She knew Sandy Humz quite well and been in the district longer than she.

She was chatting with Nicole about book orders and whether they needed to trade books between the schools to fill a short term need for a particular text, when Ron came into the room.

They did some small talk about how things were opening up. Ron listened and encouraged the two women to just use the meeting as they saw fit. He drank his coffee and listened attentively. They obviously knew exactly what they were doing.

“As I see things,” said Ron. “I am totally at your mercy. You know the systems better than I do. You know the strengths and weaknesses. My job is to learn what you need. That way we can all get what we want.”

Nicole smiled and thought well this is a different approach. Marilyn felt that Ron had started with a respectful tone.

“I also need you to be able to be my sounding board when it comes to the faculty, until I can get to know them.” Ron grinned. “We are English Departments. I am sure we come complete with our drama.”

“Some people are unhappy about the amount of room changes they have in the schedules,” said Marilyn.

“Ok,” Ron nodded. “Everyone had a schedule for the entire department in their binders. If they come up with ideas that work we can make the switch.”

“It’s not always only within the department. A lot of the newer teachers don’t really have rooms of their own and Vice Principals sometimes have to schedule other departments into their classrooms for periods when they don’t have class,” said Nicole.

“Both schools are full,” said Ron. “Send me those conflicts and I’ll work them out with the building principals.”

Nicole smiled. She would give them to him but it wasn’t going to be fun for him to try to get any changes made.

“What do the teachers think about the pre-conferences?” said Ron.

“Most of them really like it,” said Marilyn. “You have to expect that some will not like change and you, dear Ron, are definitely change.”

Ron laughed. “We’re on our honeymoon. Let’s hope it’s welcome change.”

Marilyn blushed a little.

As the meeting was breaking up, Nicole said to him privately, "You might want to keep your shoes on."

## Chapter 76

Celeste was changed into her pajamas and was upstairs in the bedroom with Keats. She had convinced him to come up on the bed and allow her to rub his belly. His fur was so soft on his underside. Celeste marveled at the closeness that she felt with Keats. She had never had dogs of her own as a little girl, and had always been a little wary of them. But Keats had been a baby in her arms, there was nothing to be hesitant about with him.

Keats had gotten a full dose of petting and worship. He jumped off the bed and Celeste gave him one of the snacks that she had carried upstairs for his evening treats. The phone rang.

"Hi Frosty," said Marjorie. "How are you?"

Frosty was one the endless nicknames that Marjorie had made up for her. This was connected to her desire to in Marjorie's words "freeze everything." Now that she had a home freezer there was absolutely no stopping her. Celeste still had her

turkey from last year, boxes of ravioli, container after container of tomato sauce, a variety of breads, rolls, a birthday cake that needed a recipient. She froze various other meals that were too large to eat and too good to throw away. So the nickname was in obvious contrast to her disposition. Marjorie had never used or said it that way either.

“Hi Marjorie, how are you?”

“I was just wondering if I am ever going to hear from my son again.”

“He’s working. You know your son. It’s a weeknight. The chances of him being home aren’t very good.”

“Yes, I know my son. If he wanted to make time to call me, he would.”

“That’s not it Margie. I hardly see him. If he didn’t sleep in this bed, I’m sure that I wouldn’t see him very much either.”

“Well we both know how important it is for him to sleep with you,” said Marjorie sarcastically. She used her son’s sexuality as a soft club with which to whack Celeste occasionally. “Thank God for that or you would probably never see him.”

Celeste changed the subject. “Did you go to the doctor yesterday?”



"Yes," said Marjorie. Then she paused. Marjorie felt her chin begin to quiver. "I have to start taking insulin daily. I tried really hard Frosty, but I knew it was going to get me and, now I have to stick needles, not only into my finger but into my stomach every day."

Celeste was quiet. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"I can't do it. I'm afraid. Suppose I fill up the needle the wrong way or suppose I don't do it right?"

"I can show you how to fill the needle. I can show you how to put it in," offered Celeste.

"What good would that do with you way up there? It's not like you can just come over and show me how to do it, and be there if I make a mistake!"

"I know," said Celeste. "But I'll tell Ron and maybe we can come down over the weekend and I'll show you exactly what has to be done."

"Why did you have to move way up there? I never heard of the towns by where you live. Don't you get frightened in that house all the time by yourself?"

"I did at first, Marjorie, but it's my home now."

"Some home! No streetlights, no sidewalks. You live in the middle of nowhere! Now, when I need something, are either of you anywhere around to

help me? Of course not. I'm not one of Ronald's students or your patients so I don't really matter."

Celeste let her rant on. Then she said, "Do you think that George can help you?"

"George!" Marjorie was incredulous. "Do you really think I am letting George anywhere around me with a needle? He wouldn't do it anyway. Lois is the only one that gives me any help." She chose a rare time to use Bumpy's proper name. "She'll give me the needle. She used to do it for her mother. Not that I have anyone to do it for me. Thank God for Bumpy."

"I'm sorry that you have to take the needles Marjorie. You fought against it for a long time, but it's not the end of the world."

"No, it's just one more horrible thing. Was it this much of a sin to like a good piece of cake once in a while? Isn't a person supposed to have anything to enjoy in life? Is that what it means to get older? You find out that everything that you love is bad for you?"

"I'm sure you can still have a piece of cake once in a while," said Celeste.

"Three ounces," complained Marjorie. Dandy gobbles more than that with two mouthfuls. What kind of a way is that to have to live? I have to count

each one of my cigarettes and not eat cake. Is there anything else that they are going to take away from me?"

Celeste didn't want to answer. There were no answers that were going to make Marjorie happy, but Celeste knew how to distract her. "I got your son a Christmas present that he's really going to like."

"What did you get him?" Marjorie's tone changed. She was interested.

"SCUBA lessons," announced Celeste.

"What is that? Like Sea Hunt?" asked Marjorie. That was an old Lloyd Bridges TV series that had not been on in twenty years. "You got him that so he will keep on taking you to those islands, didn't you?"

Celeste grinned. She hadn't been thinking that when she got him the gift but she had to admit that she knew it would be a by-product.

"You should come with us on one of these cruises. You would love it!"

"Frosty, you think that I am able to get on a boat with you and Ronald? You know that's impossible. Why even suggest such a thing?"

The conversation ended a few minutes later with Marjorie announcing that she had to prick her finger and that Bumpy would help her.

Celeste put down the phone just as she heard Ron finally coming in the door. Keats hurried his way down stairs to meet him. Celeste resolved that Ron was going to have to go and see his mother this weekend.

## Chapter 77

While the rest of the world prepared for the Y2K disaster, Ron was battling leaves. They started

falling at the end of September and fell with increasing magnitude as the calendar turned into October. The sheer volume of them was extraordinary. Ron laughed when he heard about people storing their raked leaves in bags. His property included over 100 trees. He calculated that he would need that many bags and discarded the idea.

At first he and Keats did their summer mowing technique to clean the grass of leaves, but soon there were too many to make that happen and Ron was outside with the blower. Keats did not like the sound of the blower either but loved to romp in the blowing leaves.

Ron found it easier than mowing but frustrating because he never seemed to get them all and when he created a long pile the amount of leaves was staggering.

Soon the blower was not able to move the weight of them and Ron shifted to the rake. Keats liked the rake. It made no noise and it reminded him of the snow shovel. The time seemed to stand still with Ron raking and Keats romping.

Celeste made her way out the back door and over to where Ron was working. Keats saw her coming and took the opportunity to dive into the leaves,

turn over on his back and wiggle all four of his paws in a delighted display.

Celeste put her hand on her hip. "Will you look at him?" she said to Ron. "Do you have any idea how we are going to get him clean?"

"He's having fun," said Ron. "I'll take him down to the lake to wash off before we come in."

"That's perfect, Ron. Then I'll have a wet dog with wet leaves matted into his fur. That's a great solution!"

"Do you want to brush him?" said Ron.

Celeste ignored that. "I don't understand why you just can't wait until they all come down and do it all at once. That's what my father did."

"Yeah," said Ron sarcastically. "I'll just leave them all in the gutter and wait for the street sweeper to come by and collect them."

She did not want to argue with him. He could be such a bastard when he was intent on doing something. Celeste carried her newly frozen containers to the barn door, opened it and slammed it shut hard a few times.

Over the summer, cave crickets had made their way into the barn. They were horribly ugly insects and they kind of hopped down from the walls at you.

The first time she had gotten one in her hair, she had screamed and stomped her feet and run back upstairs to take a shower. Now she just avoided the barn whenever she could. She wanted to mention an exterminator again, but she had to admit that \$700 to get rid of the mice had been costly and the man had said that they would no doubt be back unless they left the poison pellets out. Ron refused to do this because of Keats.

Celeste thought to herself that she was never cut out to be a frontier woman. She did love the lake and her home, but did it really mean that she had to put up with rodents and bugs in her hair. Was that his plan for her?

Ron had gotten the leaves into five humongous piles and was trying to decide what to do with them when Celeste came out of the barn, brushed herself off and shivered. She took some pleasure in hollering over to Ron. "You'd better get cleaned up, we're going to your mother's house soon.

## Chapter 78

Ron could not say that he enjoyed observing other teachers, but he did learn from it. It wasn't that there were not times that he did not genuinely smile and feel part of the educational process. It was that he wanted to forget the evaluation and jump into the class and become part of it. This was a misguided feeling. It was more the residue of nostalgia over no longer having a classroom that he called his own.

By the third year of being fully out of the classroom, those feelings subsided. Observation and evaluation was the way that he had chosen to teach. He told himself that he'd better concentrate and not think about the classroom any more.

Middle Hills had a radically new schedule. Classes were eighty-eight minutes long and met on alternating days. Teachers saw their students half as much for twice as long. It made each class more



important. It made attendance more important. Being absent for one day could create a six day span between classes.

Ron found that he could not really schedule more than two observations in a day. One a day was ideal. He and Connie talked about it.

“When you mentioned or two a day, I did some checking with schedules and calendars. We can finish the first round of tenured teachers and two rounds of the non-tenured teachers, hopefully by the end of the year.”

“Can we do all of that and the pre conferences?” asked Ron.

“No one knows exactly how long those conferences should be,” said Connie.

“I’m not sure either,” said Ron. “Let’s schedule these first ones for forty-five minutes.”

Connie laughed. “That will kick you back until February.”

“I want to do Nicole and Marilyn first,” said Ron.

Connie giggled her mischievous grin. “OK, I’ll tell Nicole and Marilyn that you want to do them.”

Ron burst out laughing. “I wouldn’t put it exactly like that to them.”

Ron was sitting in Marilyn Seeger's class. Their preconference had been more Ron saying, "and then I will ask this," so that Marilyn could tell others what it was like.

Marilyn was teaching *The Stranger*, but her class was on the point of view of the narrator. The essence of an observation was the narrative.

Ron began in the almost totally illegible scratching and partial words and partial sentences that he would dictate to Connie afterwards. He decided that he would time activities.

The class discussion on point of view lasted about twenty minutes. Marilyn was very good at helping them to divorce their dislike of the protagonist from describing his point of view.

Then she set them work at finding examples of point of view excerpts that were particularly poignant to the theme of existentialism. That exercise, complete with some discussion, lasted about fifteen minutes. She then led them to an understanding of the political situation in Algeria at the time of the novel. She used straight lecture for this and Ron thought she could possibly increase student retention through a different means of delivering instruction. He made note.

The last part of the class was spent analyzing the effects of prejudice on point of view. Here Marilyn attempted to set it all on context. Students were encouraged to muse on other times where prejudice altered point of view.

Ron left thoroughly impressed by Marilyn's knowledge organization and use of supporting materials. Having taught the AP class, he knew that she was leading them more to an understanding of point of view than she was taking them through the story. That was the way it should be.

He came back into his office to find Connie laughing while she was on the phone. He glanced down at her line and saw it go to hold and then heard her say, "Ron, it's your mother."

Ron would have been kind of shocked by his mother calling him at work, but Connie had been laughing and so nothing really bad could be wrong.

"Hi, Mom" said Ron.

"Hello Ronald, do you see what things have come to?"

"What do you mean?"

"Now in order to talk to you. I have to call your office for an appointment."

"That's isn't true. You just saw us on Saturday night," objected Ron.

"So is that my quota of your time, Ronald?"

"Mom, I'm at work. I will call you tonight," said Ron with finality.

"I wouldn't want to interrupt your important life Ronald. Only call me if you really want to."

Ron heard the click on the other end of the line.

## Chapter 79

Marilyn Seeger presented the appearance of a woman whose life had gone as she expected it to proceed. Her family was grown. Her husband retired and she felt a freedom without him being an

administrator in the district. She still felt a little girlish when she was about to have her evaluation conference. She knew much more about Ron than he knew about her.

About to evaluate the acknowledged leader of the English faculty at Middle Hills, Dr. Tuck was under far more scrutiny than Marilyn Seeger.

Marilyn wore a pink and grey suit, and a butterfly broach. Ron put his jacket on when she came into the office. Connie made note to remind him when someone was coming in.

Ron looked down at his narrative, back up at Marilyn, "It was a great class and I think you're a fine teacher," started Ron. "I want to ask you about the way that you structure your class and the way that you plan for your class."

Marilyn accepted her compliment and touched her finger to the tips of the wings of her butterfly broach. She smiled, "You mean because of the longer classes, the block?"

"Yes," said Ron. "I've never done it and you've mastered it. I know how to evaluate good teaching, but what changes came when you're class time doubled and you saw them half as much."

Marilyn nodded and met his eyes. He was asking her to explain something like a colleague. For a

moment she was a bit surprised. "Time management and how you think about it was the most profound shift. They were attuned to an attention span that would last just so long. As a teacher, you have a clock in your head and in your pace. All of that has to change."

"How did you manage?" asked Ron.

Marilyn was now smiling as she remembered. "Staff development offered lots of professional development, and personally I thought back to the way I remembered the pacing of seminars. I knew I wanted to start with my AP course."

"I understand," said Ron. He grinned and thought, then grinned again and said, "Wow that is a different clock."

Then they talked about the different techniques she used with the class. The reasons for choices. What the teacher was finding in this year's group.

When it came time for Ron's one suggestion, he phrased it in the form of a question, he clasped his hands, gave his head a slight nod, sat back, "What was your feeling about lecture to deliver to a description of the political climate?"

Marilyn shrugged, pursed her lips, "I guess it was the best I could come up with."

Ron grinned. "I was thinking about it too. Maybe a newsreel type clip from the period?"

Marilyn smiled. "Using films when we moved over to the block was discouraged as a way of wasting time. So you won't find as much as you might expect in our curriculum."

Ron smiled too. "We'll have to start changing that."

Marilyn tilted her head to the side, "You know that was one of Sandy Humz rules?"

"Yes, I do. We've spoken about it. Here is the thinking. Multiple Intelligences are better served by varying learning modalities. See it, hear it, write it, and say it. It can be used or abused like any other strategy."

Marilyn nodded in agreement. "OK, Dr. Tuck, those are good ideas."

At lunch, Marilyn held a moderately sized group's attention. "He knows teaching," she said.

"Well that's a relief," exclaimed Tim O'Rourke. Tim had never thought Sandy a good teacher or a good administrator. He was being humorous.

"He pays attention and wants to know why you did what you did?" explained Marilyn.

"Because I decided that was the way that I wanted to do it!" exclaimed O'Rourke. This drew laughter

from around the table. Tim was probably the second most influential of the faculty. He was both funny and irreverent in a way that inspired loyalty. Tim leaned forward and said in a lower voice, "How much of the administrative Kool aid do you think this guy has had to drink to get this job?"

It was a fair question. The other teachers paid attention as Marilyn answered. She had drawn an honesty pact with them. She had told them that her husband drank the administrative Kool aid was could only be trusted so far. She was respected for that. "From my experience, that is a question of seeing how things work out over time. He isn't a natural for it, that's for sure."

## Chapter 80

Warren County had been having an annual fair for as long as anyone could remember. It was a combination fair and expo actually with vendors from all over the tri state area coming in to show off the latest in farm equipment and home



improvement. The 4H clubs in the area were huge and there was variety of animals, produce and handicraft also on display.

Celeste had a booth across from the goats and next to the exotic chickens. She was housed along with the county food stamps provider and the outreach people for a couple of other family services like Meals on Wheels and a free screening for blood pressure, eyesight and hearing. She was only there for senior citizens day of the week long gathering.

Relatively speaking, this was better than some of the other dreadful events to which Celeste was sent. There had been the minor league baseball game, the town farmers' markets and a sad collection of other events that Celeste attended.

Celeste was happy that she had a small group of people who she knew. She was not popular at these events. No one wanted to talk about death and dying while out at a county fair and carnival.

When the home team mascot at the baseball game began contending that the opposition team needed to see Celeste by trying to usher those players over to her booth, she had been humiliated and asked the young man to stop. He had laughed at her and said that it was all in good fun.

The smell of the goats and chickens was at first overpowering, but it eventually wore off. Celeste

liked to pet the goats. There were huge ones and miniature ones and ones with curling horns and ones that were so cute that she wanted to adopt one, but was sure that Keats would not approve. Celeste knew that he would sniff her accusingly for hours after she got home that day.

Celeste was invited to take part in the Women's Mud Race but politely declined saying that's he did not have a change of clothing. She had her eyes on her watch and was waiting for the tractor pull to begin. This was such a popular event that it was generally considered pack up time for those people in the family services tent.

People were still wandering by her booth and happily taking Peter's cookies but not even bothering to say hello to the woman who was obviously out of place at a good time gathering. Some literally sneered at her.

A woman in her sixties, in a neatly pressed house dress, approached her booth. "Do you have any cards or things that you pass out?" she asked.

Celeste said that's he did and gave the woman her array of pamphlets and brochures. One outlined the advantages of senior living at Height Village, another spoke about the necessity of a living will and yet a third one implored readers to know their End of Life rights. The woman looked through them

happily and then said in a conspiratorial voice, “I want a gag birthday present for my husband Bob. I think these would be perfect, don’t you?”

Celeste looked at her in astonishment. “Do you or Bob have a living will?”

“Oh Gosh no. We just have faith in the Lord and know that he will provide. But he is always playing tricks on me and I thought this would be perfect.”

Celeste considered. She could try to talk some sense into the woman but that was really a waste of time. She smiled politely and said, “Let me get a little bag for you so that you can hide the gift until it’s the right time.”

When she had placed them discreetly in the plastic bag, the woman said, “I listened to you on the radio and I do think it is all nonsense but you seem like a very nice woman. Did something terrible happen to you that made you want to be around death all the time?”

## Chapter 81

By early November, Ron was deep into his observation and evaluation cycle. Darlene Learner's class had been one of the better ones. Her conference would be easy. As he waited for her arrival, he reassessed how they had gone so far. A few were excellent. Some were really good. Most were adequate and there were a couple of disasters. Ron had grown pointedly aware that while some teachers were embracing the block schedule others were working in defiance of it. They would be harder to help, but Ron could easily recommend some of the staff development workshops on new techniques. That would at least postpone him needing to do anything more.

He called Connie over at his Summit offices. "What do we have this afternoon?"

"Sandy called and wants to see you at 2pm in her office," said Connie. "Other than that you are clear."

"Good," said Ron. "I will have two evaluations ready to dictate after lunch. Let's sit down and do those before I meet with Sandy. Did she say what it was about?"

"No," said Connie. "She just said that she needed you to stop by."

Darlene Learner appeared in his doorway. Ron said, "OK, Darlene is here. I'll see you in a little while."

Ron hung up the phone and smiled. "Come on in Darlene, close the door and have a seat." Ron turned to his attaché case to take out her narrative.

Darlene seemed a bit nervous and hesitant. "I'd prefer to leave the door open, if that's alright with you Dr. Tuck."

"Sure," said Ron. "It does get hot and stuffy in here."

Darlene did not smile back. She came in and set down her bags. Female teachers almost always carried several bags when they moved from place to place. She placed her purse at her feet and her insulated lunch bag next to it. She opened her over the shoulder bag and took out her lesson plans and notebook.

"I thought it was a good class," began Ron. "I think that putting the kids in a circle both aids discussion and helps everyone to see each other. I loved using that technique in my classes, but let me ask you this. How do you handle using the chalkboard?"

"That can be a problem," said Darlene. "I know some of them can't see what I write and I thought about using handouts but there is no spontaneity there."

"I agree that it's a problem. I'm going to suggest that you move to a horseshoe arrangement. You like to write on the chalkboard. So do I." Ron grinned, "It's almost natural isn't it?"

Darlene nodded with a tense smile. "Yes, it is natural." She shifted in her chair. Ron was totally oblivious to any lack of comfort that she might have felt. He questioned her about her strategies for creative writing and engaged her as he had on a few afternoons at the end of the day when he would wander through the halls and check with the teachers about how things were going.

"I think that you're doing great," said Ron in closing. "I do think you can be a little more assertive when it comes to class control. Room awareness is a tough thing, but you're getting it."

Darlene seemed relieved as the evaluation conference drew to its conclusion. Darlene closed her books and held them in front of her chest. "I'm sorry to say that I've made a complaint against you for sexual harassment. I feel like you deserve to hear it from me."

Ron stared at her but did not understand the import of what she was saying. He paused for a long minute to let that sink in. "I don't understand. How is it that you think that I have harassed you?"

“I really don’t think that it is appropriate for me to discuss that with you. I’ve gone to see Sandy and she asked if I would feel more comfortable having someone else evaluate me. I wasn’t sure, but you’ve given me a fair evaluation.”

Ron was more than a little confused. How should he respond to this?

“Well, thank you for that Darlene. I gotta tell you, I’m at a total loss to understand what I could have possibly said or done to make you feel harassed and if you are feeling uncomfortable, please don’t be afraid to let me know.”

Darlene looked at him sharply. “I did not feel comfortable letting you know, but I have always felt comfortable with Sandy. It’s nothing that you actually said or did, Dr. Tuck. It’s how you are and how you make me feel.”

## Chapter 82

Sandy saw the blink on her personal extension. “I thought I might be hearing from you,” she answered.

“I just don’t understand,” said Ron. He was bewildered and concerned.

“Maybe you’d better come over now,” answered Sandy.

He drove between the schools on autopilot. His mind was on a full loop replay of every action that he could remember with Darlene. She had been sick, which was practically a natural occurrence for teachers in the fall. He had stopped by to inquire twice, at the end of the day, about how she was feeling. When he saw that she was teaching creative writing, he offered her some lesson strategies to encourage creative thinking. He had gone into the basement with her one day because she was searching for a bookcase, and he sorted through old pieces with her and found a low standing, flat topped bookcase that suited her needs perfectly.

There had been more interactions with her than with some others, but she was a third year teacher. This was her tenure year. Ron knew that he would have to make an evaluation on her by springtime. He wanted to get to know them all, particularly the younger ones.



He had already confided to Sandy, that the Summit staff was senior and that he could only imagine how difficult it was to recognize when it was time to call it a career. She leveled with Ron that some of them were going to have to do that and that it was a delicate balance. So, maybe he had tended to pay more attention to the younger staff, but they were also the neediest.

“Come on in and shut the door,” said Sandy. She got up and closed the adjoining door to her secretaries’ office. She turned to Ron. “You ok?”

“I’m bewildered. I have no idea of what she’s talking about.”

“I’ll tell you what she told me,” said Sandy. “I don’t see where there is any problem with anything that you have done, but of course it had to be passed along and now others are involved. There is the now slightly famous incident,” Sandy rolled her eyes, “of you showing her around the school without your shoes on.” Ron shook his head. He hadn’t even thought anything of it at the time. “She describes that as you being inappropriately dressed. I even asked her if that he meant that he wasn’t wearing his shoes, and she said that yes it was that and also that some buttons at the top of your shirt were not buttoned.” Ron gave her a look of disbelief. “Your collar and the one below it was not closed.” Ron closed his eyes and felt his jaw set in

an expression of anger. “She went on to say that you were overly solicitous about her health in a way that she found invasive.” Ron felt his shoulders and neck begin to tense. She said that the day that you took her into the basement she felt that she was almost forced to follow you down there because when she presented her request, instead of you saying that you would tell maintenance to look around and see what they could find, you immediately led her down into the basement.”

Ron had been trying to contain himself. His brain was starting to work again. The shock of the tailspin had passed. This came from a good, young teacher that he respected. She had sat right there in his office and looked into his face and told him that this was how she felt. That was problem one. The second problem was that he might not have a job anymore. He was now technically a second year contract employee who was still in his first year. He had no tenure. He could be unrenewed without comment. He had no clue about how that was going to work but he was about to find out.

“So she is not contending that I said or did anything that was inappropriate?” asked Ron.

“As I told you,” said Sandy, “now others are involved. Audie Riffle insisted that it was at least partially a building matter and he wanted an examination of her contentions. He has decided

that part of the problem is that your door has no window and so he has taken the door off of your office.”

As insulting as it was, Ron could not let the humor of it escape him. “So he thinks that if I have an office without a door that everything will be fine?”

“No,” said Sandy shaking her head and deadly serious. “He wants to embarrass me by humiliating you.” She saw him absorb that reality. “I’ll make sure you have a door with a window within a couple of days.

Ron wanted to say that perhaps that could put yellow crime scene tape up across the door, but he just nodded.

“We only looked at it for one morning,” said Sandy. “But it looks like you hit a homerun with you evaluation. Artie had Darlene come to his office right after she met with you. He already called me and said that we should drop it. So that’s good.”

Then Sandy learned forward like she wanted to make absolutely sure that he was paying attention. “But it will be viewed as unprofessional. You are my poster boy, and Artie and some others are going to test you. I’ve spoken to the Superintendent and he understands what happened, but you need to understand what has to happen. We’ve always got to be totally professional with faculty. You are no

longer a colleague and you cannot expect to be viewed as one.”

## Chapter 83

By the time that Ron got home that night, he was exhausted. The adrenalin caused by the events had been coursing through his system all day. He had gone back to his office after seeing Sandy Humz and not wanted to do anything or see anyone. Connie listened as he gave his recitation of events, only interrupting with an occasional, “What?” as an expression of confusion and disbelief.

The end of his day came following a call from Nicole Johannsen. “The door to your office was taken off,” she said.

“I was told about it,” said Ron. “They’re changing it for a door with a window.”

“I collected what I thought were most of your personal things and put them in a locked case in the book storage unit,” said Nicole.

"That was nice. Thank you," said Ron a little flat in his tone.

"We're supposed to meet in the morning," continued Nicole. "Would it be better if I came over there?"

"Not on your life," said Ron automatically. "We'll meet in my office without a door at the usual time."

Nicole smiled. That showed an amount of spirit. "Ok, then," she said.

"Did you know that this was happening?" asked Ron.

She thought he might wait until the morning to ask, but she knew the question was coming. "Yes, I did."

"I'll see you in the morning," said Ron and hung up.

Ron drove home feeling that he could trust no one. He dared not ask if Connie knew. He was afraid of the answer. He smiled at the thought that he should talk to somebody who could give him advice. Who was he going to ask that knew the situation better than he did?

Keats heard his car in the driveway and was waiting for him by the door with a wagging tail that had no questions or complications about it. Ron pet his puppy and went back outside so that Keats could

pee. He bounded happily back into the house to announce Ron's arrival.

Celeste was starting dinner. She had fallen in love with the best artichokes that she had seen all year, and wanted to stuff the leaves with breadcrumbs and garlic and drizzle some olive oil on them before they were roasted. Ron took off his jacket.

"Has Keats eaten?" he asked.

"He couldn't wait," answered Celeste. "He was so hungry when I got home. He's eaten and gone out, but not for long, it's chilly outside today."

"I got accused of sexual harassment today," said Ron like he was making normal conversation.

Celeste decided that she would play along and wondered if this fantasy of his was going to be one of the ones that managed to leave them upstairs, happy and hungry. "And who is that you have harassed this time?" she said, walking towards him with a smile.

Ron met her eyes and stopped her in her tracks. "I'm serious," he said.

"What happened?"

"One of my good, young teachers has been taking everything that I have said with sexual innuendo.

Like I've been coming on to her. I think that she actually believes it."

Celeste's face was a mixture of curiosity and anger. "She believes what?"

"I'm not sure," said Ron. "I'm really not sure what she believes. But she filed this compliant and there's been an investigation, which everyone except me knew about, and I've been cleared of doing anything wrong."

"Then I believe that she's a little bitch," said Celeste. Celeste's one hand was on her hip. Ron thought that she looked poised to do something for a moment.

"She's a small problem. There's a bigger problem. I was told that there is the perception that I could have been more professional."

Celeste considered this. She asked thoughtfully, "What does that mean?"

"It means don't ever forget you're a boss," said Ron.

They held each other. They molded into each other's body in that familiar and exciting way that people who have lived in love a long time can experience.

"Did you forget that you were a boss?" said Celeste.

“No,” said Ron. “Adele taught me that so many years ago. They have a different idea of what I should be like.”

“So how much of a problem is it?” said Celeste, the meaning of the distress she felt in his body was becoming clearer.

“I won’t really know until I come up for tenure,” said Ron. He squeezed her to him and she felt warm and soft like their love.

“That’s a long time isn’t it?” said Celeste.

“As Angel would put it,” said Ron. “I’ve gone from being a Narc to a sexual predator, but the pay is better.”

They held each other and were both worried.

## Chapter 84

The blue of the ocean was deep and rich like liquid fabric that rocked them along gently on the bed of the sea. The picture perfect sky was just starting its



daily show. There was a soft breeze. Celeste was happy in back of her large sunglasses. She was reading about the exploits of Alex Cross. There was a glass of pineapple juice on the small table next to her. She looked down at her toes and smiled. When she was a young girl dancing, everyone told her that she would have to have ugly feet. She didn't care. She did not know one dancer that ever did. But she had stopped dancing and now her toes were painted shades of blue and red to match her fingernails.

She closed her book and scanned up to the Sports Deck Track where she saw him walking his way through a cooldown. She knew he would want the steam room, and a shower before he was ready to have breakfast. She had about forty-five minutes.

The ship would be making port in a little while. She could see the outline of the island in the distance. He wouldn't want much for breakfast because he was going diving this afternoon. She really had three or four hours to wander in the port town.

With her hair pulled back on her head, wearing sunglasses, a white midriff top and green shorts, Celeste wandered up and down the aisles of corrugated tin and wood shacks. She fingered the carved, polished wood figures. She held the dyed fabrics up to the light against her skin. She inhaled the pungent scents from the incense stall. She

purchased some packets of spices. She bought a half dozen t-shirts to give away as gifts.

It was a luxurious treat for her. Shopping with Ron was as much fun as a forced march at double-time. She talked to the people, even though she knew she was getting the stock tourist answers, because she liked the sounds of their voices.

“We will be entering the water using a giant stride, make sure you are righted before you begin your descent. We’ll drop down about 60 feet and establish neutral buoyancy. Get with your partners and let’s have a great dive. When you have ten minutes of air let in your tank, you are to surface and make one safety stop at twenty feet that lasts no less than two minutes. Does anyone have questions?” There were none. The dive-master was a thin, blonde Aussie who had spent enough time in the water so that he always needed to wear a dive skin. He looked over at his assistant and signaled that it was time for her to start loading them into the water.

Ron had his hand up over his face mask and his mouth piece between his lips then he stepped. The exhilaration of hitting the water made him breathe faster but he steadied himself in the water, inflated his vest and traded OK signs with his partner, and started his descent.

From here on he needed to trust his instruments. The amount of light that filtered through gave a person some idea of depth, but not a real accurate one. The sound of his breathing was loud in her ears and he calmed himself with by watching his depth gauge as he descended. The bottom was in sight. A small cloud of sand was being raised as the divers, mostly not all very experienced, touched their flippers and tried to stand.

Ron slowly kicking straight legged to slow his descent, began to inflate his vest again to find neutral buoyancy. It was one of the first rules of a dive and allowed for that feeling of weightlessness which Ron found addictive. He and his partner traded OK signs and started off following the dive master, whose partner hung to the very back of the group.

There was a field of brain coral, one of two of them as large as twenty or more human brains. There were bubbles and fish everywhere. The fish lived in small neighborhoods in and around the reef and would disappear instantly at the sight of a predator. Everything was fluid, geometrically shaped colonies of small fish changed shapes and reconstituted to accommodate passing disturbances.

There was a green Moray eel that stuck its large head out from his lair inside some rocks. Its skin was almost neon in color.

It was a different world, a different life that was the cradle of all life but hostile to him now. Denizens glanced at the inhabitants like they were ill prepared tourists in their world. Ron floated and swam in a delighted delirium. A dive never seemed long enough.

Ron's dive buddy signaled that it was time for him to surface. Ron looked at his own gauge. He was almost there too they traded OK signs and began to kick up.

Back at the ship, Ron looked deliriously happy. It was a special look that seemed to be reserved for an after dive glow and Celeste drank it in like a cold drink with an umbrella.

## Chapter 85

They were eating lunch in the main dining room, dressed in shorts and t-shirts, eating from fine plates and silver. It still seemed so strange to them both. They were not unaware or disinterested in the people who were serving them, but they told themselves that these jobs were not bad work for

people from their countries. There was that uncomfortable class shift.

They decided to choose a cruise line that did not allow tipping and paid a wage that did not encourage the staff to grovel. They didn't really talk about it all that much, but at times like this, it was inevitable. Ron was eating sushi for lunch and Celeste was having a great sounding salad.

"Do you think we are becoming rich liberals?" said Celeste. They both laughed at the ironic feel of that question in this setting.

Ron adopted a politician type character to his response. "There's a case to be made for it." That made them laugh again.

"So, what is the agenda for this vacation's conversations, Dr. Tuck?" Celeste was changing the mood again. It was one of her contentions between them. It was her primary assessment of this man that she loved. "We both know that you already have an agenda."

Ron grinned. She had taught him that was true about himself. The fact that he seemed to be sometimes oblivious did not mean that he had not been planning on some level. He had to agree that it must be true. He knew about his conscious manipulations. Both teaching and his mother had

helped him to hone those skills. She was talking about something else.

“Why don’t we decide on one together?” said Ron.

Celeste smiled. That was the answer she expected.

“You go first.”

“I think that we should discuss getting another puppy,” said Ron.

Celeste felt her mouth drop open. “You are totally insane. You are one of the most insane people on the planet. People have no idea about the depths of your insanity. Why on earth would you possibly want to get another dog?”

“I thought we were making an agenda?” grinned Ron. “Your turn.”

Celeste poured more ice tea. She forked a delicious combination of lettuce, berry, radish, and citrus. Then she grinned and waited for him to have a mouthful of sushi and said, “I know that you just did that on purpose because I accused you of having an agenda and you decided to show me just how much of an agenda you could have,” said Celeste calmly as she watched him try to interject but not be able to do so because he had a mouth stuffed with raw fish. She thought it seemed appropriate for a cruise.

Ron was finally able to speak and said as sincerely as he could, “If it was, I didn’t know it.”

“Right,” said Celeste.

“So, your turn,” said Ron.

“Let’s talk about putting in trees,” said Celeste.

“I like that,” said Ron.

Celeste could not contain herself. “Why do you want another dog?”

“To keep Keats company,” said Ron. “Neither one of us is around as much as he is.”

Celeste felt a pang. That was true. Yes he was at home and yes Angel had agreed to spend the time up at the house while they were gone. But he was alone a lot.

“Do you have any idea how much work another dog is going to be?”

“Maybe it will be even less work because they will amuse each other. You know they are pack animals.”

Celeste was thoughtful. He did know more about dogs than she did. Her family had never had a dog. Her father contended that they could not afford it and her mother said that they were all allergic and that having a pet would kill them and so there wasn’t really much discussion about it in her youth.

She loved Keats. He was a source of joy in her life. She had no complaints except that Ron continually promised that Keats was learning to only pee outside but Celeste knew that it wasn't true. "It seems like backwards thinking to me," said Celeste. "You're saying that we're not home enough for Keats now and your solution is to get another dog that we won't be home for?"

She reached under the tablecloth and wrapped her fingers around his strong bare thigh and said softly, "See, I know how to play too."

"Try some sushi for me," smiled Ron.

The thought made Celeste shiver. "I can't."

"This one is just asparagus and rice," said Ron. "I put a little wasabi on top and a quick dip of soy sauce on the bottom.

Ron held it out on chopsticks and Celeste opened her mouth and closed her eyes and loved vacation.



Celeste had managed some coupon deal and they were awarded a car for the afternoon. They set off to explore and came upon a butterfly farm. Neither of them had any idea of what a butterfly farm could be and so they stopped. For, fifteen dollars were given a rum punch drink, a tour, and the freedom to stay there as long as they liked.

The proprietor was from the UK and was clearly enjoying life in this tropical paradise. He had not worn anything but shorts and sandals and a t-shirt for eighteen months now and he was intent on perpetuating his streak. His girlfriend shared his goal and they knew that being friendly and developing a good reputation was the pathway to success. When they heard the name of the cruise line that Ron and Celeste were using, they paid special attention to them. Being placed on a cruise line's list of preferred stops, not only required payment but a solid reputation. It was, however, a ticket to assured success.

"Some butterfly fossils are more than fifty million years old. So it is possible that the same beauties that you see flitting around in here, tickled the ears of a T-Rex. You probably all know the cycle of caterpillar, chrysalis, and then finally butterfly stage, but did you know that most butterflies do not eat? They get drunk on fermenting fruit juices and have sex all of their lives."

This was of course not entirely true but the tourists who really wanted to live like butterflies on their vacations drank it right up.

“If you just squeeze a little of the juice on your finger you might get one to land on you. Please do not swat at the butterflies. They do not bite and carry no diseases with them.”

Ron stood next to Celeste listening to the recitation and then reached down casually and squeezed the round cheeks of her bottom. Celeste was startled and almost squealed but caught herself and gave Ron a mock dirty look. “Would you stop that?” she whispered.

“My new heroes are butterflies,” said Ron and squeezed her there again.

“We are in public,” objected Celeste. She had to admit that having a husband that could be this hungry for her after this many years was flattering, but she would really prefer if he did not get a kick out of doing these things in public.

Ron squirted a few drops of fermenting orange juice of Celeste’s hand and soon a black and white butterfly landed on her fingers. Celeste was a little startled. She did not want to do anything that would hurt him. It was almost like the butterfly was tame. Then the thought that he was encouraging her to have insects crawl over her while he pinched her

ass, caused her to wave her hand and the butterfly flew away.

Ron had just started taking pictures, and he was clicking away from different angles at different butterflies. She took the camera from him and lined him up with the butterfly in the frame and began to click. He had grown a very thin pencil moustache that had turned pure blonde in the summer sun. He held the butterfly up to his lips after she put some of the fermented juices on them. Celeste clicked away and wondered if there were any creatures in the world that he would not have sexual thoughts about.

This went on for well over an hour, trading the camera between them. Using the other as a model. Then Ron concentrated on getting super close up shots of some of the butterflies who were green and blue, yellow and black. Celeste dreamed of a world where beautiful creatures flew through the sky with joy and abandon. She felt like she was in this little mosquito netted world and could just wander and feel and then go back to the ship for her next meal.

Ron wandered over to the proprietor who was between tours at the moment. "How long have you guys been here?"

“Six years,” the Englishman answered. “We’ve had to rebuild twice because of hurricanes but it sure as hell beats life on my cold rainy island up north.”

“I agree with you,” said Ron. “Think you’ll ever go back?”

“We’ll think about it after the next hurricane but as long as the money holds out, why should we?”

Ron smiled. He could admire that kind of life and freedom but it had to be from a distance now. He and Celeste had chosen such a different path.

They felt a little wistful when they got back into the car. “What do you want to do now?” Celeste asked.

“Let’s go back to the ship and pretend to be butterflies,” said Ron.

## Chapter 87

The ship was on the Caribbean Sea and the night was soft. They had called it a day after walking out on a mildly entertaining but mostly lame after-dinner show. They excused themselves from Judge Andrews and his wife Edith, with whom they had dinner and decided they were going to the same show. Went to their favorite bar, got drinks and carried them back to their room.

They were engulfed in the pace and atmosphere that the experience provided for now. They were happy, returning consumers in the eyes of the cruise line and they had taken the opportunity to provide them with a complimentary fruit basket. This was itself a bit gratuitous as fruit was free all over the ship. They laughed about the ridiculous gesture and then ignored it.

They settled out on the balcony. Celeste was amazed that she could do this at all. She had always suffered from motion sickness. The scopolamine patch in back of her ear made all the difference. Celeste put out her painted toes and took a long swallow of a delightfully flavored seltzer. She had watched the bar man spray it from his gun into pieces of fruit that had been split open. The patch did make her thirsty.

“I don’t think I could live like this,” said Celeste.

“You are living like this,” said Ron.

He lit a cigarette and stared out over the dark water and the slightly less dark sky and the occasional little white fluffs of wave that appeared and were then gone as the ship cruised. He felt happily lost in the night at sea. Anything might happen and mostly it was all good. It truly was the appearance of a world with magic.

They booked their first cruise after a miserable week at the Jersey shore. The next year, Angel, Celeste, and Ron had set out from New York City on a week-long cruise to and from Bermuda. It was a forty five year old ship that was coming to the end of its pleasure sailing days. But this was an easy and profitable run.

Celeste had done it before but she knew it would be magical for Angel and Ron and it was. She remembered his face having breakfast at sea that first morning. He was as happy as she had ever seen him. It was the way to ignite his spirit of adventure. It would never be flying, it would always be the sea.

She thought back and closed her eyes and dreamt for a moment about how Angel made a friend of the Captain’s daughter and how they had laughed and decorated a wooden deck horse that they had bought and entered into the sweepstakes.

Celeste said, "We named it Filly Stakes All because it was a female wooden horse and she had learned that the name for a female horse was a filly."

"Yeah," said Ron, "that was the first cruise. I think this is the fourteenth or fifteenth."

"I want more," said Celeste.

Ron grinned, "Me too."

Celeste asked, "Now that this tenure thing is over, will things calm down?"

"It'll be different," said Ron. "The job is secure. They pay me incredibly well."

Celeste waited. He hadn't really put it into words yet but she knew it was there. "I sense a but," she ventured.

"I don't think I'll ever love it, or really trust anyone there. Some of the work is really interesting, but I don't do any of it anymore. This is creating things that other people do. It's strange. I don't feel I'm as good at it as I was when I was doing it," said Ron.

There it was again. It had been gnawing at him for five years. "You still miss teaching," said Celeste.

Ron looked out at the ocean up at the sky that was now twinkling with the small flashes of stars and then brought his eyes to her face. "Teaching was like this, all the time."

## Chapter 88

They were in port the next morning and Ron was off on another dive. Celeste left him instructions about where to meet her. She would be on the beach, not on the ship.

They were about to do a wreck penetration. It was a more serious dive and there were fewer takers. It was a WW2 ship that had sunk, just off the north western curving edge of the island. It was lying flat in 120 feet of water. It was largely intact.

The descent went smoothly. The five divers hung about 10 feet over the bottom. This was a darker world, the bottom was sand and the things that were moved along the sand by the tides. The long uncovered rock was almost white. The air bubbles were fleeing towards the surface.



The wreck was now half buried in the sand at a forty-five degree angle. There was a gaping hole at the bottom. They would penetrate from the bottom and work their way up through the innards of the ship and come out the top. Creatures had burrowed their way into this ship for safety and others had come in to find them. The dive master pointed down to the right at a small, lone shark, gliding through the water and scanning with its head and mouth as it moved back and forth. The breaches in the hull were crusted over, inside seemed a swirl of tiny, slightly larger than microscopic, particles that moved more quickly inside the remains of the ship.

Going through the wreck, Ron told himself that he had to remember to breathe. There was a tendency to hold your breath in such a place. Ron thought it looked like a sad skeleton that had become home for something else.

When he left the ship, the sea seemed brighter as his eyes shifted again and he felt that wash of freedom and the need to look around and find his dive buddies.

On deck, they laughed as they stowed their equipment. A smiling giddiness bounced among them. "Any dive you come up from was a great one," said the partner.

They shook hands in that comradery. It was a popular refrain. "Every dive," Ron answered.

Ron showered and set off looking for Celeste. He was walking with a bounce in his step and a smile on his face.

Celeste thought his timing was perfect. They were docked at a French port and the beaches were all clothing optional. Celeste had arranged to have most all of her body painted in shades of lavender and green.

The portrait her body made began at the sides of her neck, with designs that hinted they were vines but were more abstract as they swept underneath her lavender breasts. Her thighs were pale lavender, her girdle was forest green. A staff of green ran up the center of her back and seemed to grow out of her lavender cheeks

She walked up to him naked, painted, and smiling and carrying two drinks. "Can I get you a drink, Sailor?"

Ron stood there dumbfounded. He was obviously erect at the sight of her. She turned so that he could watch her lavender cheeks roll as she led him to a little hut she had rented on the beach.

She'd brought his camera and posed for him and ordered him drink after drink as he took endless

pictures of her body. Celeste had herself waxed a few days before. She was a creature outside of herself now and she knew he would take her right in that hut, but this port was French. Celeste was pretty sure no one would object.

## Chapter 89

Ron and Celeste sat in front of the “Your next Cruise” consultant’s desk. The cruise line consultant was wearing her uniform complete with epaulets and stripes and stars. She was a Scandinavian woman, as blonde as blonde could be, and tightly poured into her attire. “Dr. and Mrs. Tuck, thank you for taking time out from your vacation to sit with me. How is your cruise so far?”

They both knew that the woman was working from a script, but they also had a form of script. Celeste would have the most say over the broad strokes of where they were going, and Ron would handle the details. Celeste was not detail oriented in this regard. She wanted to know where they were going, for how long they were going and when they could leave. After that, she quickly lost interest.

“The cruise has been wonderful but a little too short. We like to look at slightly longer opportunities.”

Ron was quiet. These rum and cokes seemed the tastiest of all because he had won them at a table tennis tournament. He grinned thinking about how the college kid, who was wearing his gym shorts and carrying his own paddle, had been shocked by this one shot. He had created back spin by dragging his paddle down the face of the ball as he struck it, and having the ball seem to just give the table a feather touch before it flitted away. He had only found the shot again halfway through the tournament, which he really did not think he had any chance to win.

Ron smilingly sipped the drink as he heard Celeste say, “Let’s see something with an air sea package that includes Europe.”

Ron began to cough. He had just been in the middle of a long draw on that sweet little plastic straw when the words registered. The drink bubbled back into the glass and he tried to regain composure.

“Do you both have your passports?” asked the blonde.

Celeste smiled and reached into one of the little pouches that she carried in her bag and produced them happily saying, “Yes, they’re only four years old.”

On Caribbean cruises leaving from and returning to a domestic port in the United States, valid drivers' licenses had been sufficient, but Celeste had thought they needed them for a trip up to Canada a few years earlier. Ron had liked the idea of having a passport. It made him feel more cosmopolitan and on childish level that never came to the surface much anymore. It might now.

"Am I allowed to smoke here?" said Ron.

The Scandinavian woman looked at the healthy, young appearing, middle aged man in front of her, and give him both a quizzical look and an ashtray. In the same fluid motion she opened a brochure in front of Celeste and said, "There is an eleven day cruise leaving from Venice and docking in Rome."

"That's the one," said Celeste. "When do we leave?" She turned to Ron with the sweetest smile on her face and said, "When do you think you can get off and want to travel again?"

He was drawing hard on the cigarette and was studying the itinerary. She hadn't exactly sprung it on him. They had talked about going to Europe. She had been there. He had not. It looked far away and magical as he stared at the map. "Would people speak English?" he asked.

"English is definitely one of the languages spoken on the ship," she said smiling.

That made him feel more at ease. He so admired people who spoke another language fluently but he wondered if a grouping of languages clouded your mind when you thought deeply about something. He did not always think in language but he often did. It was a question he should have asked his first students. He could still ask some of them

Realizing that she was speaking to an American, she added, "and the TV will have English speaking channels."

He looked at Celeste. She was smiling at him now. She knew that there wasn't going to be an argument. Inwardly, she felt a pleasurable wave knowing she would not have to argue. Ron looked up and shrugged and smiled over at the blonde woman. He stubbed out the cigarette, dumped the ashtray into an empty waste can and returned it to her. "What do you have at the end of June?"

They held hands. It was a gift for her. Her joy at dreaming of the next trip before this trip ended. It had taken him so long to get that. One night, talking in bed, he told her that he was too afraid of being disappointed if he allowed himself to act that way. She had told him that even before the disappointments there was the joy of anticipation. It was one of those things he had learned to admire so, as he learned to love her more deeply.

## Chapter 90

They drove up to their home with a different kind of anticipation. This one was mixed with a solid dose of trepidation. Ron reminded as they rode, “Something always goes wrong. Let’s try to take it in stride.”

Things looked normal from the driveway. Angel’s car was by the barn.

Keats started barking as soon as he heard the car. He charged down the stairs, his long, straight, thin tail whipping his hips with the enthusiasm of the wags. They dropped their bags and crouched down. Keats was licking Ron’s face and whimpering. Then he went to Celeste and she tried to say, “No licking,” but he totally ignored her. Then he was back to Ron for round two.

Angel came out alongside the barn and called out a “welcome home.”

She walked up to them looking happy and strong and said, “Shits-a-lot killed a chicken and ate it.”

Ron held him by the sides of his face and looked into the dog’s eyes, “Did you really kill a chicken?”

Celeste was feeling nauseous at the thought that Keats had just been licking her face. "How has the week gone?"

"Quiet, Dad gets a lot of phone calls, and oh, I broke the lawn mower."

"Why were you using the lawnmower at this time of year?" It was fall. Ron had parlayed teacher's convention and some vacation days to carve out a week before the holiday season started.

"I was trying to grind up what was left of the chicken from the mess that it made on the lawn," said Angel matter-of-factly.

Celeste felt like she might vomit now.

"Oh, and I'm pretty sure the washing machine is broken."

Celeste stared down at the packed valises. They had over packed as usual and everything that they brought would have to be washed or cleaned.

"Did Keats get sick?" said Ron.

"I thought he might when Keats bit off its head, but he was fine," said Angel.

"I have to use the bathroom," said Celeste. She went in the door tried not to look into her laundry room walked upstairs and found everything shining



immaculately, walked into her perfectly cleaned bathroom and vomited.

Ron continued to ask questions about Keats health. "Has he been eating regularly?"

Knowing she had gotten to her mother she decided to give Ron a try. "Well he didn't eat much more that day. Drank a lot. You know he's too fat, right Dad?"

"He's still growing," defended Ron.

"Seems to me he's just growing fatter."

Ron smiled and hugged Keats more. She wasn't entirely incorrect but he wasn't sure that he knew what a full grown Irish Water Spaniel should look like and he was sure that Angel did not.

"Everything else go OK?"

Angel showed a feeling that mixed mild exasperation with the knowledge that he cared. But maybe he only cared because she was at his place and didn't want anything more to go wrong with her while she was in his home.

"How did it feel to be staying out here again?"

"It was good. I saw some old friends. You know Dad, it really is beautiful out here. There's just nothing for me to do around here."

They embraced. She hugged him hard. It had started when she was a little girl and he would say, "Hug me harder and show me how strong you are." He'd said it so many times back then that she did it automatically now.

"What's wrong with the washing machine?" said Ron.

"I don't know, it just stopped and wouldn't even drain. I was washing my tent from when I went camping."

## Chapter 91

It was still Friday afternoon. Ron and Celeste had arranged to be the first off the ship and had driven straight home after a room service breakfast that neither of them could resist. One of the perks of their preferred traveler status was easy embarkation and disembarkation.

They had driven straight home. Ron drained the washing machine and managed to get the now 300 pound wet tent out onto the gravel driveway. The washing machine would be OK. Keats was happily helping. Celeste listened to the messages that came in after Angel stopped answering the phone.

There was #1... Celeste it's your sister, give me a call. Celeste clicked delete. Tina had called mid-week and forgotten they were away. That was her sister alright. #2... This Duane. I know that you and Ron are away but I wanted to let you know that my mother has died and I am selling her house and moving away. I will be in touch with a number. Instead of clicking delete, Celeste felt a pang at Duane loneliness and her inability to give bring him any comfort anymore. It was not lost on her that she had become the comforter of her priest, of more than one priest. #3... This is Connie. I'm sorry to have to call, but could Ron get in touch with his office as soon as possible.

Celeste went to the window. "Ron, you better come up here, Connie needs you."

"Dr. Tuck's office," said Connie.

Ron said, "Hi."

Connie was excited to hear his voice. "How was your trip?"

“It was really fine. What’s going on there?” said Ron.

Connie had somewhere between a giggle and a chuckle sound that she made when she was going to have to tell him something that surprised him. “You’re working tomorrow,” she said.

“I am?” said Ron genuinely surprised.

“Sandy said to say that she was sorry. She broke her ankle yesterday. She is scheduled to give a presentation tomorrow in front of The Reimagining the District Committee. She wants you do it.”

Ron felt like he was being catapulted from trampoline to trampoline. He was both exasperated and excited. Ron called for Celeste to pick up the extension.

“Hi Connie.”

“Hi Celeste, how are you?”

It was Jersey girlfriends talking at its best and it demanded a few moments. It would give Ron a moment or two to think. He knew the project. He would need to call Sandy and see what special things she wanted him to accomplish. She had called him instead of Bill. That was odd. Sandy and Bill were often co-presenters. Maybe he couldn’t do it.

“You had what?” said Connie.

“It was this beautiful waiter in a short white jacket and tight black pants and he squirted this seltzer gun into this crushed up fruit. It was delicious.”

“Sounds like you would want to eat that fruit,” said Connie.

Ron said, “So I have an idea. It’s after lunch on Friday right? Looks to me like you might have to go home early and say that you had to drive papers to me at my house. I already have everything I need on the thumb-nail drive.”

“I can’t just go home early!” said Connie.

“Sure you can,” said Ron. “I’m your boss.”

Celeste chimed in. “Why don’t the four of us have dinner tomorrow night?”

Connie said, “That sounds great. I want to cook. Steve wants Ron to taste some trout that he smoked.”

Ron had to interrupt. He knew he would get teased for this. “Connie, I need you to connect me to Sandy now.”

Both women were silent. Celeste said, “He really does enjoy being the boss, doesn’t he?”

Connie said, “You have no idea.”

“Are you kidding me?” laughed Celeste.

“Come on,” Ron pleaded. “I really do need to talk to her.”

They giggled for a few more seconds and then Connie said, “Right away.”

The friendship among the four of them had grown past the initial stages. Steve was from Bloomfield. Connie was his high school sweetheart. Steve's family did not really exist for him anymore. His solution was to just make Connie's family his. It had happened naturally.

Steve was a lifer at the phone company and he had done well. From his perspective, he no longer really had to work. He just had to make sure that things got done. Steve was very good at that. He found Connie's stories about what happened at work amusing. Now that Stephanie was engaged and living in Hoboken, and Steven had graduated and started a solid career, the work stories took a more center stage.

Steve and Ron shared Giants football. The Giants were playing the Minnesota Vikings. "If Collins lets Tiki have the ball and a place to run, they could be OK," said Steve. "They looked good last week and you know that guy from the Jaguars," Steve paused from a moment.

Ron said, "Brunell."

Steve nodded and said, "That guy can be a pain in the ass."

"I know," said Ron. "I always enjoyed watching him play because he's a lefty, but I am pretty sure I wouldn't like it against the Giants."

Ron and Celeste had brought Keats. He was entranced, sniffing in the back yard and going down by the inlet to the lake. Ron suddenly moved down the stairs and said, "Pup."

Keats stopped and turned and sat.

"You can't go in the water." Ron walked to the dock and pointed into the water and said, "No." Then he walked back to Keats and hugged him and came back to the table.

"Do you think he'll listen to you?" grinned Connie.

"I hope so," said Ron.

Celeste shared a grin with Connie. "He will. Keats knows Ron's the boss too." They looked at Ron and started laughing.

Ron looked at Steve for help. "That's your bed," said Steve. "Try some of this trout, you like trout, right?"

"Sure," said Ron. "But you smoked this right?"

Ron took a piece and Connie said, "We're thinking about getting a dog.

"What kind?" said Celeste.

They were still researching that.

Ron said, "We're thinking about getting another dog too."



When it got chillier, they moved inside. They loaded some of the pictures that Ron and Celeste had taken to help convince Connie that she would enjoy a cruise. She was uneasy about motion sickness. But Celeste had an opening that she knew was gonna work.

She showed Connie the itinerary from the cruise they had booked. "We fly to Venice and spend a day and a night at a hotel there. Then we board the ship and basically sail out into exotic islands and beautiful weather. And we get to see Italy. We fly home from Rome."

Celeste had her and she know it. Connie looked at Steve.

He smiled and said, "It's up to you."

"Well. If I'm ever going to do it," said Connie.

The evening was long enough for Keats to wake up from his nap and need to go outside. Ron lit a cigarette as he watched Keats look for the right spot.

Connie said, "You really think I can do this?"

"I'd trust Celeste all the way. She has motion sickness pretty bad."

"But she doesn't get afraid on the ocean?" said Connie.

"You won't be afraid either," said Ron.

"Althea Babel is starting a new rumor about you," said Connie.

"Oh," said Ron. He saw Keats lift his leg.

"You are guilty of ageism," said Connie.

"I guess that's a step up from sexual harassment," said Ron.

## Chapter 93

When Dr. MacTavish decided to retire, there was a scramble of candidates for his job. He would leave in the springtime. It was custom for him to not support a successor. Sandy Humz immediately applied for the job. So did Dirk Wllamore. There was

one other candidate from outside of the district but he was not viewed as a serious candidate.

MacTavish had set Middle Hills up on a corporate model. His administrators were among the highest paid in the state and MacTavish knew that would inspire their loyalty. It did. As far as Sandy and Dirk were concerned, he walked on water. Ron had to admit that he was impressed. MacTavish rarely spoke to him, electing to keep to the chain of command and work through Sandy. But he knew everything.

MacTavish had spoken to each of his in-house candidates and told them that he could not endorse either of them but that the Board of Education could not make a mistake with either of them. There was whispering and the setting of alliances throughout the district.

The English department became a hot bed of rumor, since Sonja Goldman, one of the senior English teachers, who Ron believed was well past her prime if she had one, was the wife of a Board member. Ron stayed away from all of it.

He had no desire for a promotion. He was sure that if Sandy got the job that Bill Mathews would be her Assistant Superintendent. Mathews had confided this to Ron and he was fine with it.

Audie Riffle's sphincter tightened each time he thought about Sandy Humz as his boss. That would signal time for his retirement as well because he knew that Sandy would use him as a whipping boy from now until the day he left. He tried to glean some information from Ron.

"You know that I've always liked you, Ronnie. Even when that nasty business happened with that bitch Darlene Learner, I was really on your side."

Ron nodded not believing a word of it. He remembered the humiliation of the three days he spent without an office door because of Audie. He knew by now that Audie had the reputation as a leech who was banging his secretary and had tried to work his slimy way into the pants of every woman in the district that he found attractive. "I'm sure you were, Audie. I never doubted your support."

"You know that she's got no chance. The Board will never support a woman as the Superintendent. Dirk has already made it clear that he would do the job for three years and then retire. The Board will like that."

MacTavish's retirement was a milestone in the administrative lineup in the Department of Education. Tenure for Superintendents had been eliminated. MacTavish was one of the last tenured

superintendents to go. The Board of Education was gleeful at their new found power. Everyone was now jockeying for position.

Sandy and Dirk were colleagues who more often than not were on the same side of an issue. Neither would have a problem being passed over for the other. They were both part of MacTavish's team. They were both shocked when the Board passed them both over and went with the outside candidate.

Leonidas Stavros was chosen to succeed MacTavish. He had no secondary school experience. He was considered to be a politician who could pass budgets. He was active in State organizations and his wife was a high priced lawyer.

Ron had never seen Sandy so angry. She sat venting in the board office with Ron and Bill. "Of all the short-sighted, wrong-headed decisions that they could have made, they chose this fool and now I am supposed to work for him? He knows nothing about how this district works and when MacTavish reached out and said that he would give him all the help that he needed, he met with him for one hour and was none too interested."

"I agree with you," said Bill. "They think that you'll run the district and he will take care of the politics. I don't think that they meant it as a slight to you."

“Let’s face it Bill, I didn’t get hired because I’m not a man,” declared Sandy. “They could never have been comfortable with a woman leading them. That’s why I was convinced that they were going to choose Dirk.”

Ron was quiet. He was still the newbie in this group. He would do better to listen. He was sure that he would be happier working for Sandy than he would have been working for Bill, who he had found to be a math head who was not all that interested in creativity. Bill would always leave that to Sandy and Ron.

“He’s a fool and I’m going to have to save the district from this fool but I don’t have to like it. The good news is that he won’t do anything to block any of our plans. He won’t want to butt against me this early on. He wouldn’t know how to even if he did. So we soldier on and we run things the way that we know that they are supposed to be run.”

## Chapter 94

Over Celeste's desk was a framed saying that read: You can't reminisce if you don't remember anything. Most people ignored the sign. Ron was the only one who saw the immediate humor. She looked at his picture on her desk, tanned and kneeling with his arm around Keats. Her men.

Her program was full and she had a waiting list. The beauty of this was Celeste could now do whatever she pleased with her work day. She had contacted her farm and they were arranging a small luncheon and trip through the corn maze before they closed it down and started bringing in the Christmas trees.

It was a good time of year for her clients. The cold had not yet taken its yearly toll on them. They were already dressed for winter and talking about Thanksgiving.

Celeste's phone rang. "Sunrise Social Center, this is Celeste Tuck."

"Celeste, I'm so happy to finally talk with you. I called last week but you were on vacation. This is Nancy Atwood, from the Alzheimer's Foundation. I've listened to your radio series with Franklin Fevel. You have a strong radio voice."

"Thank you," said Celeste. She could not imagine this woman sitting around the radio in the middle of

the day listening to Franklin Fovel's show. "How did you hear those shows?"

"I've heard a tape of all three and I am wondering if you would like to do some work with us?" said Nancy. "To begin with, we'd like to meet with you. I don't think that at present it would interfere with what you are doing, but I know that you must be quite busy."

Celeste was grinning broadly on the other end of the phone. "I would like that. I have the greatest respect for the Alzheimer's Foundation."

"Let's have tea," said Nancy Atwood.

Celeste wandered out into the main room in time to see chair yoga. Judy Campbell was bent over a straight backed chair, wearing yoga pants with her ample rump raised into the air. "Today we are gonna tighten our butts," said Judy. "You just squeeze and release." She demonstrated.

The women looked both horrified and amused. The men were smiling. Celeste turned on her heel to go back into her office. Perhaps Sally Winter would be a better choice to lead chair yoga.

Her telephone rang again. It was Marjorie. "Hi Marge, how are you feeling?"

"Oh Celestes," Marjorie said her name making it a familiar form of possessive and plural that sounded



almost liked baby talk. It was Marjorie's term of endearment. "I'm just cold all the time."

"Is George giving you a hard time about the heat?" said Celeste.

"He's a cranky old bastard. He's been a cranky old bastard for his entire life. I can't stand to look at him!"

Marjorie was in venting mode. She was safe until the venting got around to Ron. Maybe she could keep that from happening. "At least you have Bumpy there."

"Thank the Lord for Bumpy," said Marjorie. "She never used the name Jesus Christ in exclamation. That was what Catholics did. "I would be crazy in a padded room without Bumpy. Who would I talk to? I could have just as two sided a conversation with a squirrel, and the squirrel would make more sense."

This went on for a little while. "What are you and Ronald having for dinner?"

"He won't be home tonight. He'll get something on his own," said Celeste thinking about a Chicken potpie that she could share with Keats and enjoy without his obvious disdain for anything chicken. "Why does he hate chicken so much?"

“He has always hated chicken soup. He claimed that the skin was slimy and the meat was dry,” remembered Marjorie.

“He still says the same thing,” said Celeste. One of her favorite meals had always been a roasted chicken. He would always eat it but never ask for it. When they still needed the money it was a cheap two dinner cook, but he turned his nose up at anything that was a left over now.

“He’s a stubborn man Celeste. He’s like his father,” declared Marjorie whenever she was putting out one of Ron’s less desirable traits.

“You can be a little stubborn too,” teased Celeste gently.

“When I’m right, of course I am. Everyone should be. But when I’m wrong, I have to admit that too. I saw that George would be a good provider and I was right about that, but he’s a miserable old greedy bastard and he’ll live forever.”

## Chapter 95

The breeder's home was in upper Passaic County. They left Keats at home and took the Nissan. They were excited. Norma Flynn was a middle aged woman with a little bit of an edge. Her home was large and spacious and she lived there alone, although Ron and Celeste had thought they saw movement inside the house. Norma and Ron had talked on the phone. They had checked each other out through the Irish Water Spaniels of America where they found that this litter would hold cousins from a previous litter to which Keats was born.

At first reluctant, Celeste was now totally committed. They greeted warmly at one of her side doors, where she was waiting for them at the top of her driveway. She wore old jeans, a work shirt, woolen vest and a bandana on her head. "There were five in this litter, I'm keeping one of the females, and the other is sold. There are three boys." She exchanged a grin with Ron and Celeste.

As they walked Ron asked, "Do you hear anything from John Reilly?" He was the man they had gotten Keats from.

Norma chuckled. "His wife made him stop. I guess he had to keep his wife happy," she said and shrugged. She exchanged a quick smile with Celeste that communicated a few volumes about what the relationship between John and her had been.

Norma opened the gate and her entire demeanor changed. She was like a proud mom with her brood. "Over here everyone, she called out.

Ron saw four almost identical liver brown colored, immaculately groomed heads react and bound towards her, followed by four scampering, stumbling balls of brown fur who were trying to run.

Celeste crouched down and Norma corrected her. "Keep yourself higher than them until they get to know you. They are very friendly but very serious dogs." Celeste stood back up and felt surrounded by Keats' family. For a moment, she almost felt bad that he wasn't there to say hello.

"You should have brought Keats with you," said Norma.

"We weren't sure how Keats would react," said Ron.

Norma gestured to her pack. "They would have kept him in line."

The three puppies made it to the group. Two of them went to Norma and one went to Celeste. She lifted him into her arms and never really saw the other two.

As they completed the exchange and the puppy lay in Celeste's arms as she held him hypnotized with her soft stroking on his baby fur, Norma said, "What do you want to name him? We need it for the registry."

Ron and Celeste smiled to each other. They had agreed on a name. "Fitzgerald," said Celeste.

Norma gave Celeste a quick smile. "His official name had to begin with the letter Q. It's how they date registries and lineage by using the alphabet instead of numbers which are banned."

"Call him Quinn Fitzgerald," said Ron.

Celeste felt a thrill. She liked that. "The mighty Quinn Fitzgerald" she cooed at him.

"He's very social, very athletic." Norma turned full-faced to Ron. "You understand that it is against the rules for you to breed him, don't you?"

Celeste spoke up. "That is not going to be a problem I assure you."

Fitzgerald slept in Celeste's arms as Ron drove home. At least he slept as long as she stroked him. The minute she stopped he began to stir.

Celeste felt compelled to begin petting him again.

"Keats is going to be so mad at you," said Ron.

Celeste looked at him in utter disbelief. "You are a complete fucking lunatic. Now you are going to convince Keats that this was my idea and my fault?"

"Of course," said Ron. "You're absolutely in love already. What should I take any of the blame?" Ron paused and grinned at her a bit devilishly. "Keats won't want to blame me, but he's going to blame somebody."

"A bastard of a lunatic. That's what you are. And you're not already totally committed to this puppy?"

"Of course I am but something tells me that Fitzgerald will get more than his fair share of love."

## Chapter 96

It was a Sunday morning and they were having breakfast. Fitzgerald had doubled in size and could walk more easily. When they could see them both, Ron and Celeste would allow them on the floor together. They were still wary of Keats who seemed undecided about whether or not to allow the persistent puppy to live.

Angel pulled into the driveway with a spray of gravel. She was into the house and on her way up the stairs calling out her customary hello when she saw Fitzgerald come prancing in to meet her. "Oh my god, you got another one!" shrieked Angel. She walked passed the puppy, into the kitchen. "Shits-a-lot, you have a brother! I'll bet you are thrilled about that." Angel sat down, petted Keats and watched as Fitzgerald came prancing up to them. Keats gave a short little growl and Fitzgerald immediately redirected towards Celeste.

"Well, I got an internship with NBC Sports," announced Angel. "I've already been out on Long Island covering Arena Football, they are flying me to

Minnesota for the National Gymnastics Tournament, and if everything goes OK I'm going to be covering the Triple Crown in the spring."

"That's amazing! That's fantastic," said Ron.

"What are you going to be doing?" asked Celeste.

"Right now I'm just a go-for but they know that I have experience with sound and lighting so I get to do the crap work of setting up," said Angel.

Keats ventured over to get some water and Fitzgerald took it as an opportunity to approach Angel. She could not resist picking him up. He was that soft and that pretty. When Keats turned, he saw Fitzgerald in Angel's lap, made eye contact with the pup and sat down. Fitzgerald dutifully slipped down to the floor and over to Ron.

"It doesn't matter what you are doing, the important thing is that you are part of the team," said Celeste.

"It does matter what I am doing mother. It would be a lot better if I was running a camera or setting up lighting but those are union jobs and this is one of the only ways to qualify for a card. I don't know if I'm going to do great but I want to. So that's what I need to talk to you about.

" Angel and Ron shared a love of bagels and lox. She knew it would be there on a Sunday morning. She



made herself a bagel with cream cheese lox and tomato. Angel held it up with two hands and sunk her teeth into it with delight. "I want to drop a couple of classes so that I can give this enough time."

"That sounds fair," said Ron automatically.

Celeste bit her lip. She would like to know more about what classes she was dropping. How many classes was she intending to take the next semester. Celeste knew they were committed to a couple of years of rent, but she wanted to make sure that Angel was making good use of the time.

Angel was happy. She did her laundry, raided the pantry, and was on her way while Ron was out on the lawn with Keats and Fitzgerald trying to get across the concept of stick and sharing. He was not doing that well. Keats was grabbing every stick Ron tossed and snatching every one that Fitzgerald picked up.

Celeste answered the phone. Chris Calvin said, "Hi, what's up?"

"Chris, great to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Good, good," said Chris. "Are you guys going to be home this afternoon?"

"Are you kidding Chris? The Giants are playing. Where else would we possibly be?" said Celeste and

they both giggled that contagious giggle that they shared.

"I thought I might take a ride up," said Chris.

"Ron would love to see you and we have a new puppy!" said Celeste.

"Do you need me to bring anything?" asked Chris.  
"I've already got what I think Ron would like."

"No, I'm fine Chris. I'm not sure that Ron is able to get high anymore," explained Celeste.

"Ron is always able to get high," said Chris reassuringly. "He's not the Chief Investigator anymore right?"

Celeste laughed. "We haven't seen you in such a long time. Can't wait for you get here."

## Chapter 97

The sky was a late autumn gray. Fitzgerald had taken refuge with Celeste up in the bedroom. Keats was in the living room with Ron. The sound of the

football game was muted. Jackson Browne was singing, "For Everyman" when Chris arrived.

Celeste had closed the bedroom door and was hoping that Fitzgerald did not beg to go downstairs. She wanted to give them some time alone.

Ron stood up when he heard Chris making his way up the stairs carrying his guitar and a pineapple. "How are you Chris?" said Ron. Chris embraced Ron and handed him a small baggie of pot. Ron saw the plastic bag and rolling papers and seemed to smile from a forgotten place.

Keats gave one bark which seemed like an air-raid siren. Fitzgerald immediately began to try to get down from the bed. When Celeste tried holding him and talking gently, he whimpered but continued to struggle. Celeste had to relent.

Chris was kneeling on the floor in front of his open guitar case. Ron was reclining on the couch with a pillow between his knees.

"How are pigs doing?" asked Celeste. "Hi Chris, nice to see you."

Chris got up from his knees. Fitzgerald padded into the room, smaller than everyone else there. Chris and Celeste embraced warmly. She remembered that he always looked smaller until she hugged him, but was as tall as Ron. "I brought you something,"

said Chris. He took her hand and led her back into the kitchen and showed her the pineapple. "Now we just need a cutting board and a big knife and we're in business," said Chris.

Celeste would have to say that in his awkward way it was touching. He was the only one of Ron's friends who remembered to bring anything when they came to the house. She did not expect it from Angel's friends but she did see it as an act of respect among adults. Celeste was touched and smiled. "You go and watch the game with Ron. I'll take care of this."

Jackson Browne was singing the words, "sing my songs to me" and Ron was sipping a rum and coke, smoking his first joint in years and absently petting Keats who was grinning. Chris eventually was introduced to Fitzgerald and was polite but uninviting with the puppy.

Chris began to tune his guitar, Ron sipped harder and petted Keats a little more intensely. Fitzgerald was trailing Celeste in the kitchen. Chris said, "I've been working on one of your songs."

Chris laughed and sat cross legged on the floor. "Two of them actually. Hey, can we mute Jackson?"

Ron smiled, "We can try." He loved double entendres and Chris was masterful at both creating and understanding them, intentional or otherwise.

“Have you been playing?” said Chris.

“No time, not enough talent,” said Ron.

“Hmmm,” said Chris. “Seems like it must have taken some talent to write this.” Chris launched into Riding in the Driving Rain Blues with a far more complex cord pattern than Ron could even understand or was vaguely capable of. Quietly, Ron remembered that he had written this song for Chris. He smiled as he recalled his frustration at trying to teach him the words and just agreeing to sing the thing as he played. The gift had never really gone farther than that.

He listened to the gravelly, evocative texture in Chris’s voice and was floating on this new old song of his when Chris forgot the words and abruptly stopped. He made a couple of false attempts and was stymied and went on to another part of the song.

Ron said, “Sitting in a traffic jam in New York City.”

Chris snapped back to that spot in the song and began again. Ron laid the now extinguished roach in the ashtray and Keats, silent as a shark, snapped it with his tongue, un-noticed.

“Where have you been?” said Ron. “I don’t think I’ve seen you for six months.”

“Don’t have a car anymore,” said Chris. “Helga let me borrow hers to come up here today.” Helga was the woman with whom Chris was living since things had gone really wrong and then gone worse and then hit the basement for what had been the structure of Chris’s life.

Ron did not know what to say. He could not explain what had happened. Vivid and sometimes bizarre scenes were like segments of video in back of his eyes as he listened to Chris sing a flawless and beautiful version of his song “Imagination.” He almost felt a tear when Chris sang the line, “But in my imagination, you’ll still be around.”

Next to Celeste, this was his best friend in the world. He wanted to help and didn’t know how. Nothing was going to put his marriage back together. Nothing was going to allow him to create the opportunities for his children that he had wanted them to have.

“Are you doing any lawyering?” asked Ron.

“I’m out to beat your record,” said Chris. “How long did you go without a job? Two years, maybe more.”

“We were in college Chris, we had to scam our money.”

Chris laughed and twirled the unkempt end of his moustache. "We decided to scam our money," he corrected.

"So what's your plan now?" said Ron.

"Haven't got one," said Chris.

## Chapter 98

Tea led to a request that Celeste be interviewed by a larger radio station. The subject was the importance of a living will. Celeste had been

strongly in favor of the concept since she worked across the street. She thought that it just made sense for people to think about the end of life care of their own bodies as much as they thought about the after their life care of their assets.

Celeste had put it that way with Franklin Fevel and the way that she expressed it intrigued Nancy Atwood who saw an opportunity to get out a good message. They sat in the Morristown radio station.

It was more spacious, there were more wires and a control board behind a glass panel where two engineers worked the show. Celeste knew Franklin had an engineer but she had never seen him.

Nancy was smooth in her reading of an advertisement and turned to Celeste. "Today we are here with Celeste Tuck, also known as the Death Lady of Warren County. Celeste why don't you tell us how you came to get that name?"

Celeste was a little flabbergasted. "I guess I didn't know I had that name."

That was exactly the reaction that Nancy wanted. "Celeste Tuck has earned that name by being courageous enough to speak out about end of life care. The subject that nobody wants to talk about. How do you cope with that Celeste?"



At this point Celeste was kind of wondering where all this was going, and if she was going to be able to cope with the interview. She felt a little blindsided and then praised.

"It's probably best if you don't make it the centerpiece of holiday dinner conversations," said Celeste. Remembering when Ron had insisted that he tell his mother and George and Bumpy about it at one of their holiday meals. That had been one of his rather poor judgements of timing. "What I mean is that when people are ready to talk about these things, they will ask. I just suggest that they not wait until they are incapable of asking."

"There are many ways to have a diminished capacity to ask, aren't there?" said Atwood.

"Yes, definitely," said Celeste. She launched into the direction in which she knew Nancy was steering her. She knew that dementia was the way that she wanted her to go. "It's not that you won't remember who your doctor is, although that can happen eventually, it is that you may have impaired judgement over what you think is best for you."

"Celeste, are you talking about Euthanasia?" asked Atwood.

Celeste knew she needed to be careful here. There was only so much detail for which the average person could abide consideration, before they

switched her off with a decided prejudice against hearing more. There may come a time when they needed to hear more, but then they would no longer have a choice.

“No it is about retaining control. If you decide you no longer wish to eat, do you want to be forced to endure a feeding tube is an example.”

She saw Atwood wince a little. That was a powerful image. Nancy segwayed into an advertisement about living on the lakes in the Poconos.

After the interview Nancy said, “Celeste I am going to be very honest with you. We think that you’d make a very positive addition to our team. I would like you to come to our offices in Parsippany and listen to an offer.”

Celeste felt her cheeks warm from the flattery. She was pretty sure that she did not wish more upheaval in her life but said that she would be happy to meet in Parsippany.

## Chapter 99

Even Sandy would have to agree that No Child Left Behind being enacted and Leon Stavros arriving at Middle Hills was coincidental, but she couldn't help herself. Bill, Ron and Sandy watched from the Board office room as Leon made his way to his car.

"Did you ever see anyone walk that slowly?" observed Sandy. "He moves like a reptile in cold weather." Her hatred of him was palpable. "The two of you should thank me that you don't have to deal with him more. He knows nothing."

"Better put," said Bill, "he knows exactly as much as you would expect a graduate of the University of Phoenix to know."

The three of them chuckled. When Stavros displayed his degree and started making reference to it, there was difficulty in holding back titters from anyone who knew. It was almost an on-line scam shop. Ron was surprised that you could even call a degree from this place a real one. In itself, it was no real measure of the man, but the fact that he openly referred to it, was.

"So, No Child Left Behind. What is your assessment of how it will impact the district? Sandy looked at Ron. Two of his areas were the most troubling.

“We have a separate problem at each school,” said Ron. “Because Summit’s Special Education program is popular and people have actually moved into the district because of it. Our cohort is too big too not be considered and measured. Because of our sending districts to Hills, our ESL population is also in the same category.”

Sandy looked over at Bill. “What about you?”

“We will have to start coordinating far better with the sending districts. With the level of preparation that we are getting from some of them, there is no way that our students will be able to pass. But I think we have a couple of years before penalties start to apply.

“So you are both telling me that we are screwed and about to look bad,” said Sandy.

The truth was that the testing systems were designed to have schools fail. The first part of that design was that no penalties accrued to a school until high school. Students could be denied graduation as the result of not passing the High School Proficiency Assessment by the time they were scheduled to graduate. Aside from this, students were not impacted at any earlier point. A high school could be penalized for not meeting what was called AYP, or Adequate Yearly Progress towards the President’s stated goal of having 100%

of students proficient before they earned a high school diploma.

Unlike states like Texas, where state testing required a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education in order to pass, New Jersey had opted for a test that was set at 10<sup>th</sup> grad norms and was first administered during the first part of the junior year. New Jersey was told that they would not be allowed to change their test.

Until now, Summit was customarily in the top ten schools in the state and Hills in the top twenty. This was going to change all that.

"I think that all of us need to make our voices heard at State Department of Education meetings and in every way that we can. Bill, I want you to set up meetings with the grammar school principals this month. Ron, I want you to help me with an article that we are going to write for the School Administrators Magazine. We are also appearing on TV Ron, so make sure you have a bunch of answers to a bunch of questions translated into language that regular people will understand."

"When are we going on TV?" said the surprised Ron.

"Right after the holidays. You'll be great," said Sandy.

"What about Stavros?" said Bill.

“He wants to do the same sniveling act that you would expect out of him. ‘If that’s what the state wants’ was all he said. He wouldn’t know a principle if it crawled up his pants leg.”

## Chapter 100

Ron, Celeste and Connie sat having their morning conference call. Sometimes each was at a desk and sometimes Ron and Connie had Celeste on speaker while they all had coffee.

The regular topics were the TV programs they were all watching, but today Connie said, “OK, you have all talked me into it. Steve found the cruise you are going on and booked it.” Connie laughed. “So I guess if I’m going to die it’s going to be among friends.”

Celeste said in a dreamy enthusiasm, “We’re going to Venice together!”

Connie sipped at her coffee. Ron smiled often when he saw that Connie tore the little V in the top of her container. He did the same thing and had showed Celeste how to do it. Even though he hadn't learned the skill in Newark, he asked Connie, "Where did you learn to tear that V into the top of your container?"

Connie with her newly relaxed and immaculately trimmed straight black hair which framed her face like a portrait, stared down at the lid. She looked up at Ron quizzically. "The lids have little perforations on the top, see?" She showed Ron her lipsticked lid.

Celeste laughed on the other end of the line.

Ron defended, "They didn't always have them."

Celeste could picture the two of them as they spoke and the image caught her funny bone. "I let Ron show me how to rip open my lid," she started.

"I'm sure you did," interrupted Connie. This brought giggling laughter from both women and a proud grin from Ron.

Celeste continued her tease, "And now he thinks that he invented it and they stole his idea with the perforations."

Ron had never really expressed that to Celeste, but he had showed her how to tear the pie shaped hole in the top. It was fair game.

“You should have had a patent,” continued Connie.

Ron directed a feigned exasperation at Celeste, “Tell her you made that up or she’ll tease me about the millions that I should have made from the idea forever.”

Both women laughed again. “So, how do I pack for this voyage?” said Connie.

Ron checked out of the conversation to look at his calendar. He had a pre-conference to an evaluation in fifteen minutes. “I’ve got someone coming in for a conference,” he said.

Celeste had one more jibe. “Are you telling your wife and her girlfriend that they have to get off the phone?”

Ron was smooth. “No dear, I am suggesting that my wonderful assistant move your conversation to her desk.”

Connie almost giggled. “I really do have to get some work done.”

Tim O’Rourke was a good teacher who hated the bureaucracy involved. He had tried to make it for years as a professional actor, he wrote poetry, and he was a student of literature. Tim also harbored vile feelings of resentment towards all



administration. Directives got his defiant back up and ready for a fight.

Tim was a challenge for Ron. The classes Ron had seen were at least good and sometimes very good. Tim shared the belief that Ron had held about the only way to teach kids to write was to have them do it over and over. Tim had also been smart enough to realize that students would only write if they were interested.

He sat across from Ron and at first they chatted about what books Tim was teaching.

“So what are you going to do with the class?” said Ron.

“I’m going to teach them about Frankenstein,” said Tim.

Ron feigned a little laugh. “Ok, but how are you going to go about it?”

“Same way that you used to go about it, Ron. Remember?”

“OK, Tim,” relented Ron. “Let’s let it be my surprise. But Tim, you’ve given me lesson plans once so far this year. I can’t keep ignoring it. When we do your evaluation, you know? If I don’t have any plans I have to say that I haven’t gotten any plans.”

Tim was not concerned. “You’ll just do what you have to do, Ron.”

“Tim, you’re really going to make me give a fine teacher a less than stellar evaluation. What is the point of that?”

Tim became deadly serious. “The point Ron is that I know I’m teaching them and I think that you believe that I’m teaching them. Why isn’t that enough?”

“If you’d just give me a summary of what you covered so far, I could accept that and we could move on.”

“You’ll do what you have to do, Ron.”

## Chapter 101

As Christmas presents to the house, Ron and Celeste bought a pellet stove and installed a doggy door. Along with the door had come a wireless fence that created an area of thirty yards in a circle.

Ron fitted Fitzgerald with a radio transmitter after he tested it by shocking his own neck until he found a level that was not painful but a serious reminder. He led Fitz out to the perimeter of the invisible fence that Ron had marked with small, red flags. Fitzgerald heard the warning beeps and froze for a second. Ron walked back and Fitz followed him.

Ron crouched down over the small Fitz and kissed his muzzle. He whispered, "You have to understand that this will be a great thing for you, but you're gonna have to learn a lesson. Ron knew he didn't get it. How could he? Fitzgerald was just not as good at reading other people's feelings as Keats was. He was still a self-involved puppy.

Ron got to his feet and took several steps forward. Fitzgerald followed despite the warning beeps and the shock knocked him off of his feet. Ron scooped him up and carried him back to safety. He whispered, "Once you hear the beep, you have to stop."

He put Fitz down and in that instant, shock now totally forgotten, he went to find a stick for Ron to toss. Keats liked it too but Fitzgerald was obsessed with fetch.

The pellet stove was a major purchase. It was installed at the head corner across the door from the fireplace that was no longer to be used much.

The temperature could be kicked up as high as you wanted it.

It was New Year's Eve and Ron had been blasting the thing all day. Celeste had the oven on. Keats and Fitzgerald were drinking more water.

Celeste had placed candles all over the living room and lit the frame over the live tree that they kept on the deck and that Ron intended to plant that spring.

The candles flickered in the breeze created by the open windows. Celeste remembered her father bellowing when someone left a window open in the wintertime. "Are we heating Fairlawn tonight?"

She expected that Ron's attitude was about as far away from her father's as was possible and she was happy for that. But this was crazy.

"You know how insane it is to have the windows open and the stove blazing in January, don't you?"

"You made me promise to make it always be summer," said Ron. "This is the best I can do."

The music was soft jazz and this was how they were bringing in their new year.

"What are you going to do about the other job?" said Ron.

"I don't want to go anywhere else, Ron. I like it where I am. I'm happy. I don't like the pressure of having people on my back and I can do some good."

"You could become a spokesperson. Now they want you to do TV! It is a shot for something different."

Celeste felt a little shock ripple through her belly. She could not believe that she was about to say this. She always liked different so much more than he did. "I don't think I want anything different, Ron. I think I'm content. I wish my daughter didn't hate me, but that's not changing now. She's healthy and has a future she is pursuing. I'm good with it all." Celeste looked at Ron with a tinge of admiration and sympathy. "I don't think that I have that same drive that you do. I don't think that you can live without it."

"It is what I'm doing right now," said Ron.

Fitzgerald surprised Celeste by showing her that he could jump all the way up onto the couch. They shared a look of astonishment. "Have you ever seen him do that before?" said Celeste.

"I've never seen a puppy that young do that before," answered Ron.

Fitzgerald burrowed in to Celeste's body as close as he possibly could and then shut his eyes to sleep. Ron was petting Keats and Bill Evans was playing

piano to what seemed to be in time with the flickering of the lights in the moving air.

“You’ve seen Chris twice in a month now and each time he has wanted oxycodone.”

“I know,” said Ron. “I’m going to tell him that we have no more. We still have plenty in case either of us gets into trouble right?”

“We’re fine,” said Celeste. The stockpile of pain meds that she kept on hand was prodigious, but neither of them ever abused the pills and both regularly suffered some form of acute orthopedic distress. Something that was in the back of her mind once in a while now. “Are you going to say anything to him?”

Ron dismissed her. “There would be absolutely no point in that.”

## Chapter 102

The spring thaw was in full drip. Everywhere one stepped was spongy. There were still small crusts of ice in places that did not get much sun. He was pretty sure he could drive the second hand Ford truck up to the top of the rise of the property but the weight on the load of top soil was causing the mud flaps to drag on the pavement of the county road as he navigated the relatively short ride home. Ron had closed off the doggy door because he already had a plan about what he was going to do. There were two things on his side. Speed and the good set of tires he had put on the Ford.

Ron was hoping for a clear road and he got it. He crossed the road at about twenty five miles an hours and bucked and bounced and squeaked his way to the top of the rise. Ron smiled when he put it in first gear and turned off the truck. He looked at the deep tracks he had made in the new grass on the way up the rise and smiled. He didn't care. They would go away. At the top of the terraced garden,

in back of the barn and atop the twelve foot field stone wall, Ron had carved out enough space for a large vegetable garden.

He went inside to let his puppies out and they bounded from their confinement like creatures who had been denied the use of the yard for days instead of the hour Ron has closed them in to go get the dirt and jockey it to the top of the rise. They sniffed around the new space and christened it. They were curious about shovel filled with dirt that Ron flung into the garden.

Three hours later Ron had finished shoveling out the truck and was raking the new top soil smooth. He was sweating and thought he was about done when Keats came over and deposited a large poop in the center of his newly created garden. Ron laughed, "Well you didn't waste any time, did you?"

Finished now and using his back paws to try to cover his deposit, Ron watched Keats undo some of his work. "I suppose it is the softest dirt around," said Ron.

That afternoon, Ron put up his fencing which consisted of rolls of chicken wire attached to long metal posts that he banged into the ground until his shoulders hurt and his hands tingled from the banging. He was tired, hurting and proud.



Celeste came out to have a look. "Do you think the fence will be enough to keep the critters out?"

Ron grinned, "The fence and Fitzgerald should do the trick."

Fitz, hearing his name, trotted over. He came to Celeste and was waiting, not patiently to be hugged. He was a strong boy now who had an abundance of energy. He charged through the doggy door fifteen times a day, because he did everything at a charging speed, and because he might have missed something since the last time he was out.

Keats came over to Ron and sat beside where he was standing. Fitzgerald, trained by the occasional nip to his hindquarters and the occasional swat or growl, responded to each of Keats movements or signals. "I'm going to train them to be puppies with a job," said Ron.

In full view of Celeste, Fitzgerald and Keats, Ron opened his overalls and urinated against his newly planted fence. Celeste quickly looked around to see if anyone was watching. "That's disgusting, Ron. You're just as much of an animal as they are," complained Celeste.

To her amazement Keats dutifully lifted his leg and peed against the fence. Fitzgerald trotted over and followed suit. Celeste was aghast. "I live with a crew

of animals!” said Celeste. She stared at Ron accusingly. “Disgusting animals,” she said again. And started back into the house. Fitzgerald dutifully followed her through the doggy door and into the house. Keats gave one bark to signal his approval.

Ron followed Celeste into the house. “You could always come out and cop a squat and join in,” he said teasingly.

Keats followed Ron into the house lifted his leg and gave a little squirt against the side of their couch.

Celeste screamed, “I live with a bunch of filthy animals,”

## Chapter 103

Ron and Celeste were seeing Connie and Steve tonight to help them get through a bad night. Stephanie’s engagement had fallen apart. In fact he had taken the puppy that they bought for their new home, moved to Florida and told Stephanie that he really didn’t want to get married. He notified her of

this change of heart five weeks before their intended wedding.

Connie had to cancel everything. Steve was becoming increasingly angry at the amount of money they were losing from down payments and deposits. The number was creeping up into the thousands.

The four of them decided that the only thing to do was get together and party. "What are we going to do?" said Connie. "We don't want to sit home and feel sorry for ourselves."

Ron had an idea. "Suppose we go down to the place and take pictures? We can see if they have already booked it again. That can't hurt."

Steve had agreed. Maybe pictures of the hall, already re-booked would be helpful. It couldn't make things worse. Steve had mixed some of the most potent Long Island Ice Teas that he had ever made.

It was a warm spring night and the drinks went down easily. Ron asked at one point if there was much alcohol in these drinks. Steve laughed, "It's all alcohol. It just doesn't taste like it."

Connie and Celeste stopped after the first drink. Steve and Ron had three. Connie tried to warn Ron about drinking with Steve. "He's got a hollow leg,

Ron. I've never seen anyone who can tolerate as much alcohol as Steve."

Steve smiled and Ron took it as a challenge. "What else are friends for if you can't get blasted with each other once in a while?"

Connie drove their Honda down to the Brownstone Inn. It was a place that Celeste knew well. It was close to Paterson and her family had used it forever.

The place was in full swing when they arrived. Ron realized that he was not quite himself, when he felt the unsteady carriage of his legs moving him along while he sort of watched himself walking. They were dressed very casually and this drew suspicious looks from the people who were filing into the reception area and the tuxedo-clad staff who were watching them closely.

Ron walked in snapping pictures. Steve was at his side but quiet. "May I help you?" said the maître d.

"We're here," said Ron in a voice that was a bit too loud for the surroundings, "because you are trying to screw these good people out of getting a deposit back and claiming that you couldn't book the room on short notice. But it looks to me like you've got all your rooms going. I'm just going to take a few pictures."

The maître d started to say that Ron could not do that but Ron brushed passed him and started snapping pictures of the guest registry and standing in the entrance of the various rooms and setting off his flash to the slightly startled guests who were assembling.

Two large men appeared from out of nowhere at the signal of the maître d. They were burly men who had either not shaved that day or had incredibly thick beards. "That's enough, Sir."

"Why? I'm just taking a few pictures. I'm not bothering anyone. You folks have nothing to hide, right?" Ron was buzzed and his words were tumbling out with a slight slur. Steve retreated when the men came closer.

"Come with us, now Sir," said one of the men as he clamped a heavy hand on Ron's shoulder.

Ron was agitated, "Why should I come with you? You going to write out a check to my friends who have had enough go wrong, when some scumbag, who looks a little like the two of you, by the way, runs out on their daughter like the dickless wonder that he is and that maybe you are too?"

The men were on either side of Ron and in no mood to be gentle with him as soon as they got him away from the still arriving guests. This was not going to go well for Ron.

It was then that Celeste appeared from out of nowhere and said, "Is Anthony Ragucci here?" The men seemed to freeze at the sound of the name and let Ron go.

"Do you know Mr. Ragucci, Miss?"

"He's an old friend of my family from Paterson," said Celeste.

Hearing the name, the maître d came back over. "I'll be happy to tell Mr. Ragucci that you're here, but we can't have this. Do you know this man?" "He's my husband," said Celeste.

The men let go of Ron and Steve walked him back to the car. Celeste went to meet with Tony Ragucci. In the car, Ron said, "I think we got all the pictures."

Twenty minutes later Celeste came out of the Brownstone and got into the Honda and handed Steve a check. "I think that's everything," she said.

"How did you do that?" exclaimed an astonished Steve.

"It was just a family thing," said Celeste. "Let's get out of here before they remember Ron"

Ron was now hugging her in the back seat repeating, "I was just trying to help."

Celeste patted his head and Connie laughed. "You really showed them," said Celeste.

## Chapter 104

Celeste truly believed that Ron would be in a severe hangover state this morning. After losing his credit card under the table at which the four of them had gone to dinner, he had drunk more and gotten to the state where him passing out was a distinct possibility. He had avoided that, but finding out the waitress' name was Sara, he launched into an uncontrollable and badly mangled version of the Bob Dylan song by the same name. Celeste remembered Steve smiling like a Cheshire cat and Connie whispering to Celeste, "I tried to warn him about drinking with Steve."

When she woke up this morning and reached for him, he was gone and so were both dogs. Fitzgerald not being there when she woke up, startled her. A few moments later she saw his note, Went to bakery, took the dogs. She wished he had saved this

maiden voyage for a time when he was feeling better.

She was sitting at the table having coffee when she heard the door and the sets of paws coming up the stairs. She smiled and thought that her baby was OK and that Keats had given up the idea that he could just kill him and be done with the nuisance. She had to admit that Keats had actually accepted Fitzgerald and had even showed him occasional tenderness.

"How are you feeling?" asked Celeste.

"I feel fine," said Ron.

"You feel fine? Do you realize how drunk you got last night?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "I was pretty plastered. It was a great night though."

Celeste was incredulous. "And you feel fine today?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "I took the dogs to the bakery and we got bagels and lox and the paper. Two stops and not one squabble. Fitz whimpers when I get out of the car though."

Celeste was annoyed. A person who got that drunk should have to pay. It seemed like a scam that he got off scot free. She could tell, he wasn't faking that he was OK, he was.



Not totally unexpectedly, Angel arrived carrying her basket of laundry. Ron wondered if all adult children picked Sunday mornings to visit their parents. He had done it. Celeste told him that she had done it. Here was Angel.

"I feel like a duck who has been fucked with a firecracker," said Angel.

Everyone was silent except for Fitzgerald who padded over happily. Keats heard her tone and sensed the tension in Ron and Celeste and kept his distance.

"Fritz," said Angel. She bent down to pet him.

"What happened?" said Ron. "Did you go to the Preakness?"

"Oh, I went to the Preakness! I'm just going to run downstairs and threw these clothes in," said Angel.

"I really don't want to talk about it.

"Do you want me to slice you a bagel?" said Ron.

"Yes, please," said Celeste, "and then if you'll do my wrists?"

She walked to the ringing phone and picked it up as he sliced three bagels. They were all sesame so it didn't matter except for the pumpernickel that he'd gotten Celeste to begin to apologize for being a complete ass last night.

“Hi Chris,” said Celeste. “Yes, I think we’re going to be home. Sure we’d love to see you.”

“Chris is coming over,” said Celeste.

“Sundays aren’t quiet anymore are they?” said Ron.

Celeste sat down to fix her bagel and look at the newspaper. “You have no schedule, no meetings, and no crusades to mount. Sure, it’s a quiet day.”

They laughed as Angel came back upstairs. “This apprenticeship is another word for slave labor.”

Ron and Celeste both smiled. It was true. “You’re like the roadies,” said Ron.

“I’m like two steps below a roadie. If I am lucky, I get to kiss a roadie’s ass,” posited Angel.

“Have some breakfast,” said Ron.

It was on this third visit that Chris coaxed Ron into picking up his guitar.

He first asked to see it. Then he tuned it. Then he played it and handed it to Ron. It felt both familiar and strange in his hands. He stretched his fingers and strummed a few cords and then put it down. “I don’t know,” said Ron. “I really haven’t got time to practice. Celeste doesn’t like my guitar playing and she barely tolerates my voice.”

Celeste didn't mean to hear this from the kitchen but she did. She wondered if he meant it or if he was just deflecting Chris.

Chris said, "I want to play this lead that I have been working on for The Woman I Love Said Goodbye," He gestured down at the guitar. "Just play the chorus."

Later Chris met with Celeste in the kitchen. "Do you have some valium still?"

He had changed the drug. Celeste was prepared to tell him that they had no more oxy, but he asked for something that she had plenty of and probably would not ever be needing again. "I have some but they're six years old, back from when Ron got sick. I don't know if they're still any good."

Chris snapped his fingers and smiled, "Shelf life of valium is at least 7 years old."

## Chapter 105

Ron sat with Nicole Johannsen at his Hills office. “I got approval to run the course, now I need you to write the curriculum,” said Ron.

Nicole gave him that beautiful smile that Ron was sure melted most men. “So you are actually going to run it with the choice of subject electives in the fall?” asked Nicole.

“Yes,” said Ron. “So we have to have it ready and I already budgeted the money for the films.”

The Art of Film had been Ron’s brainchild. He dressed it up in all the appropriate language and tried to hit all the sweet spots of what Middle Hills required for an addition to its curriculum. His most strenuous objections had come from Sandy Humz.

“Ron this was a big issue when we were researching the Block. Board of Education members objected that teachers would use the longer classes to just show movies and so I stripped just about all of the films from the English Department Library. You’re going against something that I preached for five years.”

Ron had thrown her off balance with his first assertion. “We aren’t going to show movies in class. My plan is to give each student a personal copy of

the film the way that we give them a book. They will view it on their own time,” explained Ron.

“How can we possibly afford that?” asked Sandy.

“It will only be a financial burden the first year and after that it will be less expensive,” said Ron. “The films will get used again and again. We can swap them between buildings and go in reverse order in the schools.”

“Have you seen some of the prices that they are charging schools for movies?” objected Sandy.

“We aren’t going to use educational suppliers. I can get everything I need either through Amazon or at COSTCO.”

“Here’s the justification,” said Ron. “The state says that we need to school students through reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing the language. We aren’t doing anything with viewing skills and a still frame for this course will make excellent practice for the picture prompt writing that they’ve instituted.”

“We can get pictures anywhere,” said Sandy.

“What we can’t get is the vocabulary that helps kids to express their ideas about what they have seen.” Sandy seemed unconvinced so Ron decided to take a chance. “You’ve seen *The Horse Whisperer*, right?”

“Five times,” said Sandy a little defensively.

“Suppose instead of just saying that it was good, kids could write about the use of music when they transported Pilgrim cross country. The use of an establishing shot to show the differences in terrain. The uses of lighting when we first see Pilgrim after his accident.”

Sandy agreed. It was a valuable approach. He then started tickling Nicole with the idea. She was viewed as one of the best teachers in the district. She had Marilyn Seeger’s stamp of approval. She had the district’s sympathy because of the untimely death of her husband. No one was going to want to reject Nicole if she had something she felt strongly about doing.

When she started mentioning different titles and what she could do with them, Ron knew that he had her interest. Then he started creating graphic organizers that would help with collaborative learning.

He knew that her juices were flowing when she started coming back with graphic organizers of her own. “So,” said Ron “let’s pick out our 15 titles.”

“I saw that film about the Beanfield that you picked out for the magical thinking genre. It’s really good and I never heard of it before. What do you think

about using Moulin Rouge and contrasting it with Busby Berkeley clips?" said Nicole.

"I didn't like the movie, but I see where you are going," said Ron.

"We've got to figure out who is going to teach it at Summit," said Ron.

"Don't worry about that," grinned Nicole. "Drew Weaver will jump at the chance to work closer to me.

"Can you control him?" asked Ron.

"I'll just agree to let him take me to the movies. It's a way for me to get him off my back. We used to date but I stopped that."

Ron was surprised. Drew Weaver was a full ten inches shorter than she was. He could not picture them together. After a couple of hours they had their list. Nicole would get \$750 for creating the curriculum. "I feel like I'm cheating for taking this money," said Nicole. "You've done most of the work."

Ron smiled. "I'm on salary."

## Chapter 106

Venice was a dream and it flickered in back of their eyes as the ship left the port. The sounds of the water lapping against the canals, the shouting communication of the shopkeepers, and the light as it bathed everything in sepia, the unexpected flowers blooming from omnipresent windows, the smells of the sea as they swept in from the south and the Mediterranean.

Ron was learning that he had an eye for taking pictures. It hadn't really occurred to him before, but he knew a good photograph when he saw it. He knew that he might take the smiling picture of Celeste here or there in front of this or that. But if they were alone, Celeste would pose and that was a whole different thing for both of them.

He had learned to find angles and light. He had learned to create composition in his photographs. He had done really well with butterflies, but told himself that everybody did well with butterflies. But he had taken pictures as they walked through Venice and slipped along the canals in gondolas that he felt differently about. He had decided that he



wanted his pictures to be things that were looked at for themselves, not who was in them.

Celeste could still feel the excitement in San Marcos Square at night when everything was lit and vibrant. Four or five bands played in turn, and sometimes in unison, and sometimes in competition from the outdoor restaurants where people danced, laughed, ate and sang.

Connie was a little nervous about what it would be like on the water but so far everything smelled, tasted, sounded, and looked so good that she could not imagine something going wrong. There was hardly any rocking as they lay back in the sun on the deck.

Steve was studying the map and watching the people pass by. Ron and Celeste were friends. They had helped him convince Connie to go on this kind of trip. Celeste had saved him that money. Ron was funny and felt loyal.

Steve said quietly to Ron, "Take a quick look at Abercrombie."

Ron looked back from out over the rail and saw a pretty young girl with red hair down to her shoulders and happily bouncing breasts inside a cut off t-shirt that read Abercrombie. Ron let his eyes travel downward, as they invariably wanted to do,

and saw her bikini clad bottom rolling in a decidedly delicious walk. Ron smiled. "She's a star."

That's as far as that part of communication had ever gone between them, nothing really more personalized than that. It was easy and open and the girls joined in. "I think we should scout out some of our own Abercrombies," said Connie.

Celeste took off her sunglasses grinned and looked around. She was all for that. They ordered drinks. The sun got hotter and Connie and Celeste got rid of the cover-ups.

Ron was happily taking mental photographs of the pretty people he saw walking by. "So, no SCUBA for you this time, Babe" said Celeste.

"Nope," said Ron. "This is a different kind of trip. I've wanted to see Greece forever. Walking on those islands will feel like a pilgrimage and a reunion for me."

"What do you mean?" said Connie.

"I've spent so much of my life reading stories that come from these places and teaching the lessons of the characters that were created by these writers. I want to see what they were seeing. I want to feel the sea air that they wrote about. I want to imagine Odysseus is real."

“Is he your favorite character from those stories?” said Connie.

Ron had to think about that for a moment. A certain level of sophisticated snobbery among his circle of friends would have made such a question seem too common and not clever enough to be considered seriously. It was like what is your favorite flavor or color or song. It would be like asking Connie or Celeste what’s your favorite kind of food? Then it struck Ron that neither Connie nor Celeste would respond in a way that was other than sincere. There was something he could learn to do more of. “Yes, he is,” said Ron. Ron laughed and leaned in to the group. “He has no super powers, only his wits.” Connie nodded her head thoughtfully.

Celeste said to Connie. “You’ve just been introduced to Mr. Tuck, the teacher.”

Ron looked up at Celeste a little astonished. When she said that he’d felt a jolt.

Ron and Celeste selected a walk through the town of Albertobello to see the Trulle houses. Connie and Steve went to see a thirteenth century castle. The two couples were each on a four hour excursion but much of it was spent on buses. The tour guide for Ron and Celeste's bus was a young woman from the town they were travelling towards. She was about twenty five years old and smiling constantly. Celeste said, "My grandfather was born in Albertobello. My grandmother too." She used a combination of speaking slowly and hand gestures.

The girl smiled broadly and said, "That is good. You come back home."

Celeste hadn't thought of it that way but nodded her head and agreed happily.

"There was a sweet food my grandmother made at Christmas. No one ever heard of it before," explained Celeste.

The girl nodded half understanding and half welcoming someone who was once from the town. She had heard that some Americans called themselves Italians, but she didn't understand how that worked and why they would want to be from a place that they left. "Yes," she said nodding.

Celeste said, "She took zeppole dough and fried it and then boiled it in grape jelly."

A large grin spread across the girl's face and she said, "Bambini dolce."

"Yes," said Celeste understanding. Ron traded places with the girl, and she and Celeste sat together and shared the recipe for the dish that Celeste learned had nothing to do with Christmas but was a dessert that was served mainly to children.

When they reached the town, the girl now holding hands with Celeste as they walked along the cobblestone streets that were actually hard to navigate because each of the stones seemed to be so smooth and distinct and a bit slippery if you did not know how to walk these streets.

The street was obviously spruced up for tourists and there were definite streets that the girl was trained to guide you towards but when Celeste said that her family owned one of the houses in the town and she would like to visit it, the girl asked question after question. Did she have the address? Did she know if they still owned it? What was her family's last name?"

Then Celeste said, "Bragovinni."

The girl lit up and said, "You are Bragovinni?"

Ron had never heard the name before. As far as he knew, their name had been Brago.

The Trulle house was conical shaped with walls that were several feet thick. The Bragovinni house had become a sort of informal Inn. They served lemon cello. When the proprietor learned that Celeste was Bragovinni and that her father was Mario Bragovinni, she was taken to a wall where the male names of the Bragovinni family had been carved for hundreds of years. Celeste reached out and touched the carving of her father's name. Then the small group, including Celeste, blessed themselves and said, "Familia," and took turns embracing and kissing Celeste and the astonished Ron.

Celeste and Ron and what was there of the Bragovinni family sat drinking their lemon cello as the slightly feral Bragovinni cat wandered over and bit Celeste's partially sandal covered big toe. Celeste screamed more because she had not seen the cat and no idea what had bitten her. The Bragovinnis were alarmed and jumped up to drive the cat away and get first aid for the bleeding toe. Celeste was warned that she should have a tetanus shot when she got back to the ship. The Bragovinnis knew how Americans were and said, "You no sue. We kill the cat."

Celeste was horrified and assured them that they did not have to kill the cat.

Ron wandered and snapped pictures of the interior and exterior of the Trulle house and then they climbed back into the bus to head back to the ship.

## Chapter 108

The four travelers sat by the pool having drinks in the afternoon sun of Italy that was blazing hot. Ron and Steve sat under an umbrella but both Celeste and Connie were fully greased, with the exception of Celeste's newly bandaged big toe. The conversation was easy. Ron and Steve were doing their ever-present Abercrombie search and Celeste and Connie were talking about the dessert that Connie had never heard of either.

A muscular man with dyed blonde hair remembered Connie and Steve from the castle trip. He was stretched out on a longue chair with his companion. The man said to Steve, "Hell of a long bumpy, ride to see a bunch of old rocks," he said.

Steve nodded in his affable way. He and Connie enjoyed the trip but he wasn't going to contradict. The man was talking and alternately caressing the bottom of the woman lying next to him and pointing to her nicely rounded cheeks for the other two men.

Ron noticed that the man and woman had matching tattoos. He had been thinking of getting a tatt since he started diving. His father's admonition still rung in his ears. "Don't do it unless you are sure. I got this thing at twenty-one and I'm still stuck with it." He had been thinking about a sea horse on his calf. At first he wanted a dolphin but then he found out that dolphins were a favorite tattoo of gay men and used as a signal to other gay men. The dolphin got dumped and Ron was now unsure about the sea horse. But this man and his wife had matching tattoos. Ron wondered about that.

It was a small spray of flowers wrapped in a ribbon and fastened with a small heart. It was on the man's forearm and the woman's thigh. Ron didn't like the tatt itself but the idea intrigued him. "Did you and



your wife get those at the same time?" said Ron, pointing to the man's tatt.

He gave them woman a little pat of her bottom and said, "Oh she isn't my wife, she's my secretary."

Connie looked over at Ron and said quickly, "Don't even think about it."

Celeste and Connie looked at Ron accusingly. The secretary ignored them.

"I wasn't thinking anything," protested Ron. The four of them laughed. The man told his secretary that it was time to go back to their cabin. She stood up and began to gather both of their things.

The group watched the two walk away. "What do you think?" said Ron. "Half an Abercrombie?"

"Maybe," said Steve.

"Do any of the other secretaries tease you about Ron?" said Connie.

Ron interrupted. "You made us promise no work talk."

"This isn't work talk," said Celeste dismissing him. "Work talk is when Steve and I have no idea what the two of you are talking about. I think we all know what this is about."

Connie looked at Steve and smiled. "They did at first. Audie Riffle's secretary warned me to watch out for you," said Connie staring at Ron who really did not want to have this conversation. "She said that you had roving eyes."

"I don't have roving eyes and besides," Ron turned to Steve for help, "there's nothing wrong with looking right?"

"Nothing at all wrong with looking," agreed Steve.

Connie gestured to where the boss and his secretary had been sitting. "Do you think they were just looking?" she said.

"I think looking was well in their rearview mirror," said Celeste accenting the words rear view and staring at Ron and Steve.

"A few of the girls were really surprised that we decided to go away together. They asked why we didn't want to get away from each other for a while."

"We could always go with the matching tattoos," said Ron. "Then we'd always be close."

"Not on your life," said Connie. "I would never let any man handle me like that in public."

Celeste nodded. They were joined in their disapproval of the woman. They were wives. They

believed that there was some poor woman at home thinking that her husband was on a business trip and here he was showing off his secretary's assets. The two women stared in tacit disapproval at the men. They had done nothing but they were both men and men were capable of anything.

## Chapter 109

The four of them walked through the sea port of Mykonos and Ron wanted to take the day trip to Delos to see the birthplace of Apollo but the way the small boats bobbed in the current dissuaded both Celeste and Connie. Ron snapped photographs of windmills and moorings as they walked in the seaport town.

Then they went to Santorini with its clifftop town, all painted white and blue and its magnificent flowerboxes and cafes. They elected the donkey-ride up over the cable car choice to get to the town. Both Steve and Ron rode in back of Celeste and Connie and watched their wives bounce in their saddles.

"You know what their back there doing?" said Connie.

"I know what Ron is looking at," answered Celeste.

"Steve too," said Connie.

“Isn’t it great?” giggled Celeste. She looked around to some of the hills. Nothing about this landscape had changed since that time Ron read about. “I wonder how the women got their water.”

“We might be looking at it,” said Connie.

They both realized that it could not be salt water but Connie’s point had been made.

Ron and Steve laughing uncontrollably as Celeste and Connie frantically bounced and clung to animals bristly necks, as the donkeys, knowing the pattern included rest and food on this end trotted back down the steep trail.

Ron’s knee had started aching after the ride up. Ron and Steve rode the cable. As beautiful as it was, Ron wondered how a person could live here. Would the shoals of tourists begin to resemble the food that the sea gave to them?

Connie and Celeste’s excitement at the open markets of Nice over shadowed Steve and Ron’s easy smiles. “Why are we walking through a food market when we have spent days being stuffed full of fine foods and there is absolutely no sense in buying anything?” asked Ron.

Celeste dropped back and took his hand. She brought his fingers up to her lips and kissed them.

“Just look around at how beautiful everything is and don’t think of it as shopping,” she said softly.

“I could take pictures!” said Ron.

Celeste patted his ass and said, “Yes Ron, you could take pictures.”

Tomorrow was Florence. As the ship cruised on the plate glass sea and the moon and stars twinkled their hellos. Steve said, “I’m looking forward to Florence. It’s probably too crowded but to me it looks like the perfect city.”

Celeste was the only one of the group who had been there before. She had travelled through Germany and Italy and France with her first husband over a two month span, when they were still happy. “Florence attracts people, that’s for sure,” she said to Steve.

Ron had been waiting for this moment. He saved the picture in his safe. He hadn’t even showed it to Celeste. He took out a picture of the David with Bill Helmut’s head superimposed on the David.

Bill Helmut had also taught with Ron at Mountain Oaks. He was a math teacher. They had been linked back there because Bill’s wife was an English teacher that Ron supervised. Through the grapevine of years, it had become known that Helmut’s wife

was quite pleased with the unusually large size of Helmut's penis.

Connie had complained that it was now impossible for her to look at Helmut without thinking about the size of his penis. Celeste found that funny and teased Connie about it. Ron handed the picture to Connie.

Connie opened her mouth, began to laugh, she brought her hands up to cover her mouth. She looked at Ron. "You are the Devil. This poor man, I cannot even look at him without laughing now."

"From what I hear, he's not poor," ventured Ron.

Connie slapped Ron on the shoulder with the picture. "You just did that so that now when I looked at The David I would see Helmut's face and my eyes would travel down." She slapped him with the picture again laughing.

Ron played along. "Sometimes it's fun to be with the Devil."

Connie opened the picture looked at it again and laughed. "As long as Celeste is around to take care of the rest of the devil stuff."

Celeste chimed in. "Oh yes believe me, I get it all."

Ron looked up at Steve. "How come they never pick on you like this?"

Steve smiled. “Looks to me like you set yourself up for that one.”

## Chapter 110

When they got back home, Ron threw himself into his first campaign in a long time. Campaigns had a different feel because there is a goal and a deadline. Campaigns for esoteric value, while they may be noble, seemingly cannot sustain the intensity because there is no end of decision deadline in sight. Politics and education are bedfellows, but they often meet with entirely different goals. They come from the perspectives of popularity as opposed to the perspective of achievement for the sake of competence.

By now, the team of Ron Tuck and Sandy Humz had spoken at County and state events. They were fighting the imposition of what they termed a

“teaching to the test” position that the Department of Education was considering.

It was a strange debate. Both Ron and Sandy were proud of the career work they had done in professional development and curricular design.

They had, at different schools, radically changed scheduling. Sandy was the much more powerful political force. Her incredible workaholic habits were satiated by a cornucopia of committees on which she served. She found it difficult to relax.

Standing five foot ten inches with a lean and hard physique, Sandy also exuded an unmistakable sexual energy. It was an unrelenting force and many of the men with whom she successfully worked were cowed by it. MacTavish looked upon her as his tomboy daughter, and she was always acquiescent in his presence, but he had retired and she had been passed over.

Sandy had worked for Middle Hills for her entire career. She had attended as a student. Her only marriage had ended, childless when her ex just said that she had no room or time in her life for a man. Sandy agreed.

She had one torrid affair with a teacher that she supervised. The rumor was that they used to rendezvous in the same office where Audie had removed Ron’s door. Audie Riffle was suspicious of



the affair that ended when the teacher left the district. The rumor was that he had left the district because he was afraid of Sandy Humz.

Artie saw this departure as an opportunity to make a move on Sandy. That was when she began calling him little man.

Sandy and Ron made a good team. When they grew comfortable with each other, a teasing element developed between them. They had common history at the same State College. She had used her contacts there and found out he spoke really well in public. Then she witnessed it.

All the while assessing him, she saw his ease with public speaking. He did not go faster and read his remarks. He engaged larger groups in a conversation and tried to persuade by presenting their sides of an argument and answering questions that arose from their conflicts. He could persuade. He persuaded her anyway. He also teased her constantly.

At first, Sandy required proof reading of all major memos from his office. This amused Ron and he asked her if she did not think he proof read his memos? She countered that she had found a split infinitive in one of the things that he had written. Sandy was a grammar Nazi of the first order.

Ron had grinned at her and said, "Oh, well sometimes I like split infinitives."

"You make like them but that does not make them accurate!" said Sandy.

Ron proceeded to insert a split infinitive into every memo he sent to her. At first she thought it was a failing, but slowly she realized that he had been doing on purpose.

"Do you think that I have time to play 'Where's Waldo' with your memos?" she had accused him.

Ron laughed, "Well since you saw the need to proof read them all, I figured it should not be a wasted exercise for you."

"I knew it!" Sandy blushed. "You've been teasing me."

Ron smiled his reassuring smile. "Look, your secretary let it out that I send all my memos to you, for what she calls final approval. That's not good for either of us."

"I agree with you," said Sandy. She saw his point, but did he have to tweak her for this long to make it?

"It's not great for me to be seen as your boy," said Ron. "I can be more effective as an ally."

It was Sandy's turn. "Well you do have to work under me. So this is what we are going to do. I'll provide the rationale and the numbers in a global sense. You talk about what it means to the education of the students."

"I can do that with my eyes closed," boasted Ron.

Sandy fixed him with her serious gaze. "Please do not attempt to prove that to me while we are on camera," she said. They both laughed.

## Chapter 111

The studio was large but they were only going to be using a small segment of it. There were two desks and five cameras. Ron had a mic fitted to his lapel. They were being interviewed for Education in New Jersey, a cable show that would be rebroadcast, and played on a monthly loop by a few local stations.

The interviewer worked out of Trenton, where these shows were often taped. Sandy and Ron had created a stir with a co-authored piece on the importance of trust in educators. Connie had become adept with the creation of power points.

Shelia Storm began her questions. “Sandy, tell us why you feel that standardized testing is such a danger?”

Sandy was poised. “The testing itself isn’t the danger. The danger is in how the educational community is responding to it.”

“Why is that dangerous?” asked Sheila.

“There is no reason to revamp curriculum because it is going to be tested. This is a time for us to have faith in the curriculum that we have created and to fine tune it to accommodate changing needs. What is being proposed is radically different from that.”

“What do you think it being proposed?” pressed Sheila.

“A punitive approach that will force districts to comply with immediate results or face monetary consequences and consequences with respect to who has the right to make district level decisions.”

Sheila turned to her other guest. “And how do you see this Dr. Tuck?”

Ron smiled for Sheila and the camera. “We’re being asked to compare apples and oranges. They just don’t taste the same no matter what you do. For example, Texas creates a test where kids have to have a sixth grade level of education in order to

pass. New Jersey creates a test where the same passing score requires an eleventh grade education.

The President lauds the Texas school accomplishment and criticizes New Jersey for having a system where education fails its kids. Is he saying kids from Texas don't need to be as smart as kids from New Jersey?" Ron grinned and shook his head. "That's another question entirely, isn't it?"

Shelia felt she had a point to make here. "But don't New Jersey parents have the right to expect an education that is on grade level?"

"Sure they do," said Ron. He decided to change things up on Shelia a little. "Chief complaint of most kids in school is?" Ron paused like he almost expected her to answer, but he didn't. "The complaint is that they are bored. Our challenge is to make their education meaningful and interesting. One cannot do that and concentrate on the test driven standards and benchmarks we are being asked to drop everything and pursue."

Sandy chimed in. "Dr. Tuck was actually on the state committee that formulated some of our tests."

Ron laughed. "That's true. That was back when we were being told that we would have local control, educator created testing. That lasted one year and the State decided to give it over to a company who designs tests for profit."

“Why is it important that they are for profit?” asked Shelia.

“Because they also design and sell the prep books that districts buy in order to pass their tests. I’m not saying that the tests are designed to have a bias that produces a certain failure rate, but that is a distinct possibility isn’t it? The more books and tests that are sold, the greater the profit.”

Sandy was growing a little uncomfortable. Ron had almost taken a tone that inspired distrust in motivation. It was true that New Jersey had a Republican Administration now. But he might seem to be using this to attack them. That wasn’t a fight that Sandy thought they could win. He would turn some heads by raising the point though. She just needed to rein things in some.

“What we need is to have faith in our existing curriculum. We will be alright if we do not panic and right now I sense an amount of panic,” she said.

It was a good thirty minute segment and both Ron and Sandy were told for weeks that they had been seen on television. They felt good about themselves. That was when Leon Stavros informed Sandy that he would like to replace Ron when they gave these interviews.

“How is the sloth supposed to replace you when he doesn’t know anything!” fumed Sandy. “The

solution is simple. We won't do any more interviews. Let him do his own interviews."

## Chapter 112

Celeste and Ron were having their Sunday morning ritual when not surprisingly they heard Angel come in the downstairs door. Fitzgerald hurried to greet the guest. Keats stayed at the top of the stairs cautiously wagging his tail and waiting.

"Get away from me you smelly, fur-ball maniac," hollered Angel.

Ron and Celeste shared a look. I wasn't going to be a happy visit.

"Come and have some breakfast," said Celeste.

"I don't think I should eat unless you want vomit added to your menu," said Angel.

Ron said, "What's wrong?"

"I'm fucked with NBC is what's wrong," said Angel. "It's kind of funny actually but they didn't think so and I doubt that anyone there will ever want to see me again."

"What happened?" said Celeste. She jumped up. "You can at least have coffee."

"Yeah, I'll drink some coffee. I've been up all night drinking it anyway, so one more cup isn't going to hurt. What happened is that I disliked being an easy piece of ass for the guys that work on those shows," said Angel.

Ron's face furrowed. "What does that mean?"

"It means, Dad, that some guy was using your daughter as a convenient fuck and when I found out that I was nothing more than that I got angry."

Ron shook his head. He could only imagine what things were like between the young people there. He remembered the restraining order. "Did you hit someone?"

"I should have. I should have electrocuted the worthless asshole, but I didn't."

"What did you do?" asked Celeste.



“Well Mom, I told the sonofabitch’s mother that he fell from the top of a ladder and was dead,” said Angel.

Celeste gasped. Ron was shocked. Angel looked at both of their faces and said accusingly, “Your expressions are exactly what the faces of the NBC people looked like when they found out. It seems the old bat went crazy and started calling people to find out what happened to her son. She only thought he was dead for about an hour.”

Ron did not know what to say. Celeste said, “Why would you do that to that poor woman?”

“Right Mom, that’s exactly what I would expect from you. Worry about the woman and not about me. That’s fucking perfect. I don’t know why I even came here and told you. You don’t care how hurt I was by the asshole, only how upset his poor little mother must have been.”

Celeste recoiled. “I didn’t mean that I wasn’t upset for you, but Angel you told a mother her son was dead.”

“I was angry and yes, now I am royally screwed,” said Angel. Her face was hard. Her chin was beginning to quiver. “It might be nice if, at least once, someone was on my side.”

"It's not that I am not on your side," said Celeste.

"That's a pretty brutal reaction."

"At that moment I wanted him dead. She just called at the wrong time," explained Angel.

"Isn't there some way you can apologize?" said Ron.

"Nope, they don't want apologies, they want me gone."

"Maybe you could get transferred to another unit?" asked Ron.

"NBC doesn't want to deal with shit like this. The team leader says I'm gone and I'm gone," said Angel.

"There are other networks," offered Celeste.

"Yeah Mom, I'm sure that they'll give me a great reference."

"You still have school," said Ron.

"Yeah Dad, this worthless fucking school you sent me to has me afraid for my life all the time."

Ron could not hide the incredulity on his face,

"What do you mean afraid for your life?"

"Those kids that come up from Paterson, all carry guns. They can't read and they can't write and they like to pull their guns on people to see the reaction

they get. They aren't paying for anything, so it's all a fucking joke to them."

Celeste should have stayed quiet. She should have just listened. She was nervous and frightened for her daughter and was just saying things from that emotional state. "Marjorie and George are coming up for dinner."

"Well that's god-damned wonderful mom. More people who hate me. This was a mistake! I have to go?"

Celeste said, "Aren't you going to stay and do your laundry?"

"No Mom, I'm not really worried about my shitty laundry right now."

## Chapter 113

Ron and Sandy's point of view was firmly trounced. It was defeated without comment. Leon Stavros felt quietly victorious at her defeat. Since she had refused to work with him, he sabotaged her. He did not publically work against her, but he did circulate

a response of compliance that placed him in a good light after the inevitable defeat happened.

Sandy was angry and directed her feelings of anger towards Stavros by avoiding him when at all possible. She and Ron worked out an agreement that he would spend mornings at his Summit offices and she would use his office at Hills. Leon went to lunch at the same time each day and that is when Sandy would come to her suite of offices that adjoined his.

At this point, Sandy would schedule one of her committee meetings to extend passed the time that Leon left for the day. Sandy would then work into the early evening in her offices. Intersection at Board Meetings and district Council meetings was inevitable.

These interactions were always done in cool professional tones. Alignment lines were drawn among the members of the Council and among members of the Board. Sandy knew and managed the nuts and bolts of district operations. Leon cultivated his relationships with the building principals.

The way the administrative structure had been aligned by MacTavish, Ron and Bill had control of curriculum. They were the experts. Principals managed most other aspects of their buildings, with

complete control of the building itself. When everyone was on board with each other, it ran like a corporate machine. Now the machine was straining in separate directions while it worked.

The key to this balance was the relationship between Dirk Willamore, Summit's principal, and Sandy. Dirk had been passed over as well. He and Sandy had agreed that each had fine qualities and deserved the job. Now, that was behind them.

Every two weeks, Sandy, Ron, Bill, Leon, Audie, and Dirk meet in the conference room where they were joined by Hector Gonzalez, the school business administrator.

The meetings could last for several hours. Other administrators would be invited to join from time to time, but this was the room where it happened.

Hector kept the minutes of these meetings. Hector was a proud Spanish man who bristled at the suggestion that he was Hispanic and made sure to correct any such indignity whenever it arose. He was also a juggler of numbers without equal. He was MacTavish's money man.

Leon would chair the meeting. Ron was at the top of the agenda with an item for review, discussion and implementation. He and Bill had worked out the proposal but Bill asked Ron to make the presentation.

“We have to make curricular changes to implement these new testing benchmark requirements. Some students who are obviously proficient must not have their schedules impacted by the demands of standardized test prep that they do not need. But the State does not specifically say how standardized test prep will be demonstrated. Bill and I have taken a creative approach and developed a district test that we can administer to all of our students one time. That will give us all the test prep indication that we will need.”

Ron passed out copies of the tests that he and Bill had created. Hector did not even open his copy. “What norms and variable spectrum did you use to calculate the accuracy of your little test?”

Bill leaned forward and answered smoothly. “I have all of those graphs and charts right here Hector. I did not want to bore everyone by duplicating that formula but if you look on the first addendum you’ll see what you need.” Bill had a soothing manner and his math skills were respected and sometimes leaned on by Hector. So he nodded and was satisfied. That had his vote.

Audie said, “I don’t think we learn enough by giving them one test one time. We are going to be vulnerable in the community if our scores come back lacking.” He looked directly at Leon. “We will

be seen as a failing school and will have a harder time passing the budget.”

Leon nodded. “That’s a consideration. Lots of things depend upon the budget. We have to look strong.”

Sandy said, “I think we are looking strong and independent. We are acknowledging a directive from the state and standing by our principles at the same time.”

“Your principals,” said Audie, “are why we are in this mess.”

Sandy leaned forward and stared hard into Audie’s face. “Are you saying that you have different principles, Audie?” She looked him up and down and deadly serious. Ron thought that at that moment Audie must have felt like she would slice off his penis and feed it to whatever animals that wanted it. He had begun to sweat.

Audie stammered. “I just mean that some kids may need to be tested more.”

Ron was about to speak and Sandy knew it, caught eye and imperceptibly blinked no. “We will identify those who don’t meet the standards and offer them,” she looked at Audie like she was trying to sympathetic but wasn’t. She said slowly biting off the word, “remediation.”

## Chapter 114

Planning for the holiday season began for Celeste in September. The summer was officially brought to closure by a dinner that the clients of Sunrise hosted for their families and friends. It was one of Celeste's only fund drives and it came in the form of a 50/50. Half of the proceeds went to paying for the dinner and creating a small pool of money from which Celeste and her staff would purchase holiday presents for the residents. This was not a big time fund raiser but it was important to Celeste to have enough to make sure everyone had a present. Her theme was clear. Life did not have to be over for them.

Because of its feel good nature, local newspapers and the radio station, where Celeste had become a regular, gave her free advertising. This brought a trickle of entrepreneurial folks who wanted the publicity to promote their service or product. Charlie Rosen was one such man.

Celeste had met Charlie at the county fair. He was riding the crest of a holiday fad, deep fried turkeys. Charlie was a bear of a young man with burly arms and a beard. He was jovial. He was working next to Ron who had volunteered to man the barbecues. Angel was there, as she promised her mother she



would be, serving plates to the residents. Keats and Fitzgerald came to offer hospitality and to provide the guests with the pleasure of feeding them extra food.

Celeste was the hostess and she was radiant, wearing a genuine smile, a lingering tan and flowers in her hair. “Jesus Mom, you look like you are at Woodstock, but you are pretty,” said Angel.

Ron could not have been happier. He was sweating, working hard to keep up with demands of people wanting burgers and hotdogs and reveling as he saw his family working as a team. He noticed that on the days he ran, his legs were hurting now but he didn’t care. He watched his wife.

Celeste moved between arriving families and seated tables. In front of what was still a thriving garden that they planted, always reaching out her hands, always offering tender kisses and embraces. The pride with which her clients introduced their families swelled Celeste’s heart. Of course she knew the majority of the families to whom she was being introduced, but that wasn’t the point. When, usually a male member of the family would correct his elder and say, “Mom, or Gram, or Dad, we met Celeste before. Don’t you remember?”

Celeste would find a way to hold or touch them both and say, "Of course we remember, but it's so nice to be introduced to you for this."

Ron had watched her do it at least fifty times over the years. It was a perfect blending. It seemed to be and was a natural gesture. At the same time, it hit every professional mark of reinforcement, instruction and acceptance. It was a marvel to see and yet no one really knew that she was doing it.

What Celeste had managed to keep alive was a sense of community love, perhaps the most worthwhile achievement of Woodstock, although Ron was not sure that Angel would ever see it that way.

He was flipping burgers and rolling hotdogs and he turned his attention to Angel, his fierce and exasperating daughter. He thought she had found her way into a professional world. He would never know or really want to know what happened at NBC. Sometimes truths had a way of driving wedges between them.

He added cheese to some of the burgers. He started to fill the platters and place them into buns. "Dad, some of the people are taking the hotdogs and hamburgers out of their buns. Why don't we just put them on the side?"

"That sounds great," said Ron. "Less work for me."

Angel smiled. "And some of the ones without teeth can dunk the buns and just suck on them too," said Angel with that ever present sharpened wit.

Even when she said that about the hamburgers it carried a tone of challenge to it. Ron wished that wasn't a part of her nature. He thought for a time that she just said things that way but really didn't mean it as a challenge. He once asked her about it. "I may do it more with you," she answered. "But you describe it exactly the way that I mean it." He struggled to stop trying to correct that about her. It made things much more difficult for her.

Keats and Fitzgerald were working the yard of picnic tables like a team.

The smells of the cooking food the gathered people, their sense of security with the environment made them happy and alert. The order of their pack was it was the younger dog's job to not get in his way. Keats eyes were never long off Ron. He loved to be petted but this was a sensory feast for him that could only be topped if it had water.

## Chapter 115

Ron and Celeste arranged to have trees delivered. It was a Monday in early October and Ron had the option of taking the day because there were no classes to celebrate Yom Kippur. There were twelve trees being planted. A row of evergreens that they helped would grow into a sound barrier and in the center of the side garden a willow tree, and about fifteen yards away a flowering plum. When Celeste got home from work Ron was busily supervising and inspecting. The frustrated dogs were very happy to see her because Ron wouldn't let them out into the yard where the machines were working.

They kissed and Ron squeezed her into him like it was planting day.

"I don't think the dogs like it," said Celeste. Ron and Celeste turned and watched their two dogs staring at them embrace and sitting, Fitzgerald fidgeting a bit when he saw them look at him, Keats perfectly still, upright and aware.

"Ok, well they have to stay in here."

Ron turned and went back out the door. The dogs looked at her and whimpered. Celeste said back to them, "Ok, I'll feed you. You just think I'm a refrigerator, both of you!" griped Celeste as she went back into the kitchen. She gave them each a biscuit

Celeste stirred her twenty-first and she hoped her last batch of tomatoes for the year. The vines just kept producing. It was late afternoon when the workmen left. Ron and Celeste walked their property with Keats and Fitzgerald romping sniffing and marking everything that they could find. Celeste held him to her. "I love planting trees."

"I want to plant more in the yard by the lake but let's see how these do."

They walked over the tile lined perennial garden that was graceful in its cycle. Celeste saw its full summer splendor, its buds of spring, its decline of fall and hibernation of winter. They were its guardians.

The evergreens were even bigger than Ron and Celeste imagined and would need daily watering into the ground around the root ball, as would the willow and flowering plum. "You're looking forward to watering them aren't you?" said Celeste.

Ron grinned and nodded. "I am, they're alive and part of us here now."

Ron tossed a stick in one direction and Keats, as was his right was entitled to it. Ron held up the Frisbee. Fitz trembled with excitement. His tail wagging frantically and unable to stop. Ron tossed it in a smooth arcing motion that he learned from playing catch with a friend named Hank. Fitzgerald sped

after it, a streak of motion, growing muscles at full speed and then leapt into the air, caught it in his mouth, brought his hind legs underneath him, landed with ease and trotted at sort of parade victory speed as he brought it back.

"I never expected any of this Ron," said Celeste.  
"Look at what you made possible."

Ron shook his head, smiled, tilted, grinned deeper.  
"Wouldn't that be a prime example of 1950's thinking in 2003?"

He had her. This was teasing material for years. And now she looked confused, because she didn't realize he was teasing her yet.

Celeste said with some conviction, "No sweetheart, you made this possible."

Oh, this was beautiful. "You're an idiot," said Ron.

Celeste blinked.

"For anyone to think that either of us could have done this without the other, idiocy or ignorance are the only options."

Celeste was a little annoyed with him. "You still haven't learned how to just take a compliment, have you?"

Ron looked down, sheepish. "I just didn't want you to think..." he started to say.

Celeste interrupted him and molded her body to his. "I know," she said.