

PART ONE

MURDER IN THE MAIN OFFICE

A COVE HARBOR COMEUPPANCE MYSTERY

ANNA DUNWORTH

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Blood in the Carpet

March 31

6:25 AM

Kate's shoes clicked loudly against the checkerboard tile, each step echoing off the walls of lockers around her. It was the quiet before the morning storm of teenagers traipsed in from their cars and buses. They'd enter loudly and messily, mucking the neatly mopped floors and breaking the silence, all else forgotten as they greeted one another in this most careless of life's chapters.

“Anderson!”

Kate turned in surprise, catching her bag on the corner of a bulletin board overflowing with the midterm projects from a foreign language course. She made a face and unsuccessfully attempted to nudge the flap of a student-made brochure back into place. Shrugging, she turned to see her favorite Assistant Principal emerging from a stairwell behind her.

“Hey, Jenkins.” Kate smiled at the other woman, hoping she

hadn't noticed the disruption of the bulletin board.

"You're here early."

"Just prepping an exam for tomorrow. Can you believe this downpour?"

"You're telling me! Though I suppose it's just that time of year." AP Jenkins wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead. She was quite red in the face, Kate noticed, as Jenkins coughed slightly into her sleeve.

"Are you okay?" Kate rummaged in her pocket to offer a crumpled tissue. Jenkins accepted it with a grateful smile, dabbing first her mouth and then her brow.

"Oh, yes, thank you... It's just the heat in this building. Full blast, no moderation. You'd think we could invest in a better system, eh?" Jenkins chuckled, though Kate hardly heard humor in it.

Kate smiled hesitantly. She liked AP Jenkins but was never sure where the line fell between colleague, friend, and supervisor. After a moment, she decided not to join her in complaining about the heating system, especially as she felt perfectly comfortable on this particular morning. Jenkins dropped the tissue into the wide trash bin of an abandoned custodial cart as they passed.

"Looks like Gordon is here early, too," Kate said, nodding towards the cart.

"Gordon?"

"The custodian..."

"Oh, yes, of course. Gordon..."

Jenkins held open the door to the Main Office as Kate stepped inside, passed the reception counter, and entered the alcove of

staff mailboxes. She reached hers in a few steps, withdrawing a small pile of papers. Atop the stack was a bright blue sheet with familiar bubbly handwriting dancing along the top margin.

Professional Development Training Session, it read, with Friday's date and Kelly's written beneath. She laughed, recognizing Cove Harbor's local dive bar. Just as she peered around to see how many other mailboxes received the same note, a scream pierced the stillness.

“ARGHH!”

“Hello!?” Kate shouted. Nobody answered, and she ran back to the Main Office, stopping short at the scene ahead. AP Jenkins stood with her hand clasped over her mouth, pointing in shock at something on the ground behind the reception counter. Kate rushed forward, heart pounding, then gasped, papers scattering to the floor.

There lay Principal Kirk, choppy haircut lost in the pool of blood around him. Though most of the dark red liquid had hardened into the Main Office's thick carpeting, it seemed to Kate as if it oozed endlessly from him, clashing horribly with the bright blue of the now-forgotten happy hour invitation.

Eric Haywood

March 30

9:30 AM

Eric's watch rumbled against his wrist as he opened his mouth to address the class. He clenched his fist, fighting the urge to peek at the flashing notification.

“Five more minutes, everyone!”

“Mr. Haywood!” A voice called from the back table. “I need help!”

“Coming, Jenny!” He kept his eyes away from his smartwatch. Don’t do it, he told himself sternly. Don’t check it. Just ignore it. Now is not the time. But in the end, he couldn’t resist. Eric tapped the little screen, staring for just long enough to read the email subject line.

Tenure Decision.

He went hot and then cold. His stomach dropped.

“Mr. Haaaaaaaywood!”

“On my way, Jenny!” He hurried to the back of the room.

The next fifteen minutes of class dragged like the slowest

sludge of mud oozing towards the gymnasium door on this rainy spring day. He willed the seconds to tick faster, reminding himself to keep smiling, talking, and helping the kids with their research projects.

Finally, after an eternity of a class period, the bell rang. Cove Harbor High did not use a shrill, loud bell like you'd hear in the movies. It was more like a beep, quietly reminding everyone it was time to move along. A tenth grader once told him it was a b note, but he'd never double-checked the pitch.

The students rose and filed out as they did every day this year, his sixth year teaching. Six years of long hours for little pay. Of coaching, volunteering, and spending every spare penny on whatever he needed to teach history to the kids of this little town. And it all culminated in the email he'd just received from the principal.

Tenure Decision.

He closed the door behind the last lingering student, a quirky senior named Bo who didn't always try his best but wasn't his biggest slacker, either.

“See you later, Mr. H!” Bo called behind him, hurrying to catch up with his friends down the hall. Eric couldn't help but crack a smile at the sight of them bouncing away, galivanting through the spring of their final year of high school. What would become of them? Only time could tell.

His anxiety returned with the click of the closing door, and he hurried to his computer, a screensaver undulating at his desk. He jabbed his finger at the enter key and the login screen came alive. Eric frantically typed in his password.

Incorrect password. Please try again.

He grumbled and entered it again, this time successfully. He clicked the blue icon on his toolbar, and his email popped up. The little circle spun and spun, Eric's unrest growing with each passing second. Then, the window dulled out.

“Son of a bitch!” he cried, cursing his ancient computer. He force-closed the app and restarted it. “Come on, come on, come on...”

And there it was, sitting at the top of his inbox.

Tenure Decision.

He took a deep breath, then opened the email.

From: dmyers@coveharborschools.org
Subject: Tenure Decision

Dear Mr. Haywood,

We regret to inform you that the district has declined to offer you tenure this school year. We value the expertise and positive results you bring to our community and would like to offer you another probationary year with Cove Harbor High School.

If you should accept, you will be eligible for tenure again next spring.

Attached, you will find a link to a shared folder with your observation results from the past six school years.

Please pay careful consideration to your two most recent observations, both of which played a significant role in our tenure decision. Each

contains actionable steps for you to improve your ratings next school year.

Wishing you all the best,
Mrs. D. Myers
Superintendent
Cove Harbor Schools

Eric groaned, then cursed into the silent classroom. How could they extend his probation?! He worked night and day for this job, getting the juniors through their state exams and even talking the senioritis out of the school's most apathetic students.

How dare they?

He growled behind his teeth and clicked on the attached folder in the email. His last two observations... He hardly remembered them. Principal Kirk had postponed both debriefs for so long that they'd never actually met to discuss the results. Eric drummed his fingers on the table while he waited for the folder to load, then clicked the first observation in question.

Kirk rated him in a multiple areas, but one stood out in bright red font among the others.

2e. Organizing Physical Space: Ineffective.

“Ineffective?” Eric scratched his head. When had he ever been rated ineffective, the lowest of the four classifications, in anything? In all his years teaching, he’d never received any score below ‘effective.’ Hell, he was even accustomed to a respectable number of ‘highly-effectives’ in his observation reports.

He scrolled down to read Principal Kirk’s notes in the full

description.

2e. Organizing Physical Space- Ineffective Teacher remained seated in front of students for the duration of the period. Teacher refused to leave his seat, despite student requests for help, addressing them only from his chair.

Teacher instruction would have been more effective if accompanied by constant circulation around the room to assist students.

Additionally, teacher arranged student desks in a horseshoe instead of the recommended groups this district believes fosters student growth and cooperative learning.

Eric was really confused now. When had he ever spent an entire class period sitting in the front of the room? He checked the date on the observation report. It was from November. He thought back to the fall.

Wait a minute...

Eric broke his ankle at the end of October. No shit, he was sitting down, he was wearing a cast! And he'd dragged himself in every day, balancing on his crutches through the fallen leaves and slick autumn sidewalks. He kicked himself for not checking his evaluation results earlier. Unbelievable! And now it would be too late to challenge the rating or file a grievance with the union.

He thought hard, remembering the day the principal observed him. The desks had been in a horseshoe, but only to allow him

to roll his desk chair from student to student, instead of hobbling on those uncomfortable crutches. His armpits had been intensely sore even just a few days after his injury.

He remembered Kirk's presence in the room, but he didn't recall any commentary decrying the seating arrangement. The principal even joked about Eric's dedication and how impressed he was that he continued teaching with his broken ankle. Eric now burned with anger and frustration at the memory.

What the fuck was Kirk's problem?

Eric closed out the observation report and opened the next one. Dread swept over him as his eyes fell on the date. Just five weeks after the first observation. He still would've been in the cast.

"No way," he said to the empty room. "No way would he do this again, not twice..."

The report loaded, and there it was again: 2e. Organizing Physical Space- Ineffective.

Eric scrolled down.

2e. Organizing Physical Space- Ineffective
Despite past warnings, teacher remained seated in front of students for the duration of the period.

Teacher instruction would have been more effective if accompanied by circulation around the room to assist students.

Additionally, students were seated in a horseshoe instead of the recommended groups we as a district believe foster student growth and cooperative learning.

It was essentially copied and pasted from the first rating.

Eric shoved his chair back and stood, pacing the room, raging in his head. How could Kirk do this? It was so unfair! Was it too late to challenge the observations? The tenure decision? Surely, any reasonable person would understand his foot was in a cast!

Why hadn't he read this back then? Insisted on a debrief?! Anything.

He needed to do something. His whole career, everything he'd worked for, hinged on this tenure decision. It was job security. It was a chance to breathe next year, to spend less time in this building and more living his own life.

It was nothing, apparently, because it wasn't going to happen.

Eric strode to the little white phone affixed to his classroom wall and punched in Kirk's extension. It rang and rang while he deliberated his next words. He probably shouldn't shout the guy down, but he wanted to let Kirk know exactly what he thought of him and his fucking observations.

The asshole hadn't been in a classroom in over a decade, anyway... The nerve he had even evaluating teachers. He wasn't even the official principal yet, just the interim, still as probationary as Eric himself. The more Eric thought about it, the angrier he became. That silent rage, the most dangerous kind, bubbled within him, getting closer to the surface with each unanswered ring.

Finally, he gave up. He placed the phone down too softly, an excess of control stemming from a growing awareness of his anger. Eric took a deep breath and imagined boxing up his rage, storing it in a little container deep in his chest, and buttoning it

up. The students would be back soon, and it wasn't for them.

The day was still young. Eric would finish coaching at 4 pm and could find Kirk in his office afterward. The principal was well-known for his tendency to arrive late and leave after most of the building cleared out. Must be nice, Eric thought bitterly, bound as he was to the abnormally early mornings of a public school teacher.

He would finish teaching, coaching, lesson planning, and grading, as he always did, early in the evening. Then Eric would find Kirk in his office, and when he did, he would open up that little box of outrage inside of him and unleash it on the one who deserved it most.

Principal-fucking-Kirk.

Ramona Giovanni

March 30

10:25 AM

Tap, tap, tap.

Ramona curled her toes at the sound. After listening to Will's pen all year, she'd just about had enough. The page before her remained blank, though she knew exactly how to solve the first problem. She lowered her pencil to the paper, doodling a sharp angle above the complicated-looking equation.

A few desks ahead, a soda bottle lay on its side, the dark liquid puddling under Bo's seat, inches from his heavy boots. He remained hunched over his paper in an uncharacteristic display of concentration. Didn't he notice the spill? She couldn't help but judge her classmates in these moments, oblivious as they were. Although, if she were honest, she sometimes felt their parents were the ones she was really judging.

Ramona heard her mother's voice in her head: Ramona Giovanni, you pick that bottle up right now! Who do you expect to clean up after you? I must've forgotten we have hired help!

Or, worse, Uncle Donny's face if he saw her do such a thing.

She wondered if anyone ever chastised Bo like that in his house. Maybe he took more care there than he did here. Again, she pictured her uncle's expression, this time with a stab of annoyance at her classmate. It really wasn't that difficult to clean up after yourself.

Tap, tap, tap.

She forced herself to ignore Will, concentrating instead on the folded paper that had just traveled through her classmates from a seat in the front of the room. It landed lightly on her desk and she picked it up, opening it as quietly as possible. Like Bo, most of the class was absorbed in their practice exams, their last opportunity before the actual semester midterm next week.

A little smiley face was drawn hastily beside three words:

Check your phone.

She crumpled the note and pushed it beneath her papers. Ahead of her, Grace flashed a small smile, tucking a blue-streaked blonde curl behind her ear. Ramona sighed and pulled her phone from her pocket just far enough to see her messages.

She didn't want to get into trouble for using her phone in class. Not after being suspended over morning lateness last month - Her first and only disciplinary action in 13 years of school. She still felt sick over it.

A message from Grace topped her notification panel.

Grace: Cafe Caprese after school?

Ramona: Can't. Have to pick up the brothers.

Grace's reply was instant.

Grace: After?

Ramona: Internship.

Grace: Still doing that? We are basically graduated.

Ramona: It's only March. Still doing it. Maybe tomorrow?

Grace: Yep. Let me know if you skip the internship.

Ramona loved Grace. She was one of her oldest friends. But she just didn't get it sometimes. Grace was going to college because she was always going to go to college. Her parents had been preparing her for freshman year before Ramona's mom even enrolled her in kindergarten.

They may have come through the same school in the same town, but Ramona's world was a stark contrast to the one in which Grace lived. She fought and scrounged for every opportunity, every extracurricular, every A that brought her closer to her place as salutatorian. Ramona missed the top spot by inches to someone who didn't have two third-grade brothers to care for while their mother was out making a decent living.

As Ramona closed her messages, another notification caught her eye. She tapped it, and a new email blossomed on the screen. Her heart jumped into her throat as she read the subject line: Admissions Reconsideration.

From: smasen@yale.edu

Subject: Admissions Reconsideration

Anna Dunworth

Dear Ms. Giovanni,

Upon receiving notice of your recent suspension from Principal Kirk, we've been forced to reconsider our offerings to you for the upcoming school year. As you know, the Excellence Scholarship is awarded only to incoming freshmen with clean disciplinary records and impeccable transcripts. In light of your suspension, you are no longer eligible for this award.

We also regret to inform you that our Admissions team will review your credentials over the coming week. As stated in the admissions notice you received upon your initial acceptance, we are within our rights to reconsider any applicants with new disciplinary action against them. We will inform you of our decision by the end of next week.

Sincerely,
Sarah Masen
Director of Admissions
Yale University

Ramona shoved her phone back into her pocket as if it had stung her. Sweat broke on her brow, and her stomach lurched. She thought she might be sick. She'd worked so hard for her admission to Yale. And without the scholarship, she didn't see how she'd even afford to go.

Tap, tap, tap.

Ramona whipped around, eyes flashing.
"Cut it out with your stupid pen, Will!"

Heads turned.

“Geez. Sorry, Ramona,” Will said, affronted. “I didn’t realize it was bothering you so much.”

“Well, it is,” she snapped. “Cut it out!”

“Fine!”

Ramona spun back in her seat and withdrew her phone again, still hiding it beneath her desk. A message from Grace appeared as she unlocked it.

Grace: All okay?

Ramona: No. Bathroom?

A few minutes later, Ramona sat on the scuffed floor, knees drawn to her chest. She looked up as Grace emerged through the ugly speckled tile, the door closing loudly behind her. Wordlessly, she handed Grace her phone, still open to the email from Yale.

Grace’s eyes widened as she read it.

“Holy shit, Ramona.” Grace handed back the phone and sank to the ground beside her. “I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t know what to do...”

Grace put an arm around her. The tears burning behind Ramona’s eyes inched to fall at Grace’s touch. She sometimes resented her old friends for the vulnerability they invoked in her with their kindness. She needed to be strong now, not crying on the bathroom floor.

“What do I do?”

“I don’t know. Can you speak with Kirk? It sounds like he emailed them or something. The nerve of that fucking guy, after all the work you’ve done for him...”

Ramona didn't want to think about that now. Didn't want to remember the hours she'd spent in the admin office, building the tutoring program, turning a pipe dream into reality for Cove Harbor High. A tear slipped out, meandering its way down her cheek.

"Oh, Ramona –" Grace wiped it away with her thumb. "We're going to figure this out. Can't you explain yourself? And explain why you were late? It's not like you did anything that bad! Kids are late constantly, and you're the first I've ever heard suspended over it."

"You think I can just explain?"

"It couldn't hurt! Let's just write them an email about your brothers and how you need to take them to school. It's not like you're sleeping in or cutting out in the mornings or something!"

"Yeah... Okay." Grace was right, Ramona realized. Maybe she could explain the situation to the Yale Admissions team. Maybe she could even explain it to Principal Kirk and have him reach out on her behalf. A glimmer of hope sparked in her chest.

"Let's get back to class to grab our stuff before the bell. What are you doing next period?"

"Going to physics..."

"I'm skipping out. I want a coffee, and I just have art, anyway. You'll come?"

"No way! I'm not risking any more trouble."

"I was kidding. Have you ever skipped a class in your life?"

A small giggle escaped Ramona as Grace pulled her to her feet.

"I'll work on the email. And I'll talk to Kirk tonight after my internship. He's always the last one in the building. Even if I finish late, he'll be there." Ramona could picture him at his desk,

the only one left in a darkening office.

“Good.”

Ramona watched her friend leave the bathroom, twisted curls cascading down her back. She leaned over the sink and shivered slightly as cool water splashed over her face. She met her own eyes in the mirror, red-rimmed and a little swollen.

“You can fix this,” she told her reflection. “You can make Principal Kirk listen. It’s not over until it’s over.”

Gloria Jenkins

March 30

11:36 AM

“Thanks,” Gloria replied, accepting her hazelnut coffee from the barista. Café Caprese was a one-stop shop for all types of market goods and Italian takeout, but nothing ever quite overpowered the smell of their delicious coffee. She especially enjoyed it on a day like this one, with rain pounding heavily outside and an early spring wind nipping as she passed.

Gloria selected a wide wooden table crammed between a drink cooler and a stainless steel baker’s rack of goods. She dropped her briefcase on one of the oversized chairs and collapsed into the other, cracking open her round container of pasta salad. One hand fished in her bag while she eyed three familiar faces in line for coffee.

The taller of the two girls was rolling her eyes at something the other had said, her blue-streaked blonde curls halfway down her back. Grace was her name, and Gloria was willing to bet she was supposed to be in class right now. Gloria pulled her

computer from her bag and placed it on the table, opening the screen as she watched the students.

Beside Grace, another senior leaned on the glass display case, his arm around the shorter brunette. Gloria knew their names too, as she did all the seniors and probably every student in Cove Harbor High. Small towns, small schools. And Will and Heather were both extroverted enough to be known around the halls.

Gloria considered reporting them, as a quick search of the school's database confirmed that only Heather had a free period. But then again, she thought, it was spring of their senior year, and what would be the point? She decided against it as she sipped her coffee.

Still, she couldn't stop the nagging voice in her head as she closed the school database. This is why you're still an AP, never a principal. Won't even report three class cutters standing right in front of you.

Gloria silenced the thought, one of the many persistent doubts that had become all too frequent since losing the top job to Kirk last year. She still thought she was the better choice, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was more qualified than Alex Kirk. The snub still stung when she dwelled on it too long.

The students took seats at the next table, too involved in their conversation to notice their AP sitting just feet away, debating whether to report them for skipping school. Heather buttered a bagel, one knee tucked beneath her, while Will dove into a pile of cheese fries.

"What's with Ramona?" Will asked, rolling his eyes, "Since when does she have a problem with me?"

“She doesn’t,” Grace replied, reaching over and pulling a french fry from his tin container, “She’s fine.”

“Yeah, right. She nearly took my head off for tapping my pen in Calc...” Will swatted Grace’s hand away, upending the ketchup bottle onto the formerly clean tabletop. He righted the bottle, leaving a red smear on the wooden surface.

“She’s just...” Grace hesitated, looking around, “She’s having a rough day. That’s all.”

“Oooh,” Heather leaned in, “I smell tea. Spill, Grace.”

“Well, keep it to yourself, alright. I mean, she’d probably tell you anyway if she were here, so it doesn’t matter, but still...”

Will and Heather hung on her words, and even Gloria couldn’t help but listen a little more closely. She’d always liked Ramona Giovanni.

“You know how Kirk suspended her for being late? Yale pulled her scholarship. And they might even withdraw her acceptance.” Grace’s eyes seemed double their size, magnified by concern.

Heather gasped at her words. “No!”

“That bites,” Will replied. “Can she fight it? That girl deserves to go to Yale...” He laughed a little. “More than the rest of us, probably, anyway.”

“She’s going to try. I mean, if I were her, I’d absolutely kill Principal Kirk! That guy has some nerve to report her suspension to Yale after everything she’s done for him. It totally pisses me off just thinking about it.”

“What do you mean?” Heather looked confused. “Like her internship?”

“Well, yeah, but it’s what she did in her internship. Remember

that tutoring program Kirk was so loud about last year when he was pushing for the principal promotion?"

"The one with the college kids?"

"Yes –" Grace lowered her voice and Gloria strained hard to hear her. "Well, did you know Ramona came up with that? She did basically everything... created the plan, found the college students, and convinced them to join. She even set up the entire website and online platform for the actual tutoring to happen. I'm pretty sure Kirk couldn't run it without her even if he tried."

"No! That sleazy..."

The rest of Heather's sentence was drowned out by Gloria's own thoughts.

She remembered the meeting where Kirk presented the tutoring program that connected local college students with struggling kids at Cove Harbor High. Throughout his lengthy discussion of the Shooting Stars sessions, the participants' ever-improving performance, and the ingenuity of the online platform, Gloria was sure he'd never mentioned Ramona – nor anyone else for that matter.

If Kirk hadn't created that program himself, he had no business taking credit for it. Unless Grace was mistaken. Surely, Kirk couldn't get away with lying so significantly to the board. It would have been an unforgivably underhanded trick.

In fact, hadn't he joked about how difficult it had been to put it all together? Made more than one self-deprecating comment about teaching himself to build an online platform from scratch? Was it possible he was lying the entire time?

Gloria could hardly wrap her mind around it.

Returning to her computer, she opened the shared

administrator drive, home to all the board meeting slides and presentations. Kirk's deck about the Shooting Stars program must be saved amongst the crowded files. She opened last year's folder and clicked the October meetings. Nothing. Next, she tried November. Still nothing. Grace groaned in frustration. It had to be here somewhere.

Bingo! December. The final board meeting of the calendar year.

She opened the notes, and there it was, a presentation titled 'Shooting Stars Tutoring Program.' She clicked through slide after slide: introductory info, statistics showing student improvement, screenshots of the online platform. Nowhere was there any mention of Ramona or other student helpers. It was official. Either Kirk lied in this meeting, or Grace was wrong about it now.

And if Kirk lied, he as good as stole the principal's job from her.

Shooting Stars was by far the most significant factor in why he was selected over her for the top spot. Why he was given this probationary year to prove he could run the school before they officially appointed him as Cove Harbor High's new principal.

It should've been her.

The easiest thing to do would be to confront Kirk, though Gloria knew it would be a highly unpleasant conversation. The man was beyond defensive and quicker to temper than anyone she'd ever worked with before. There'd be fireworks, and she'd need to be ready for them.

The sudden scraping of chairs startled Gloria back to Café Caprese. Grace, Will, and Heather rose from their chairs,

halfheartedly collecting their trash to toss in the can on their way out the door. Gloria opened her mouth, ready to call Grace to her table, question her about Ramona's role in the program.

Then, as she watched Grace flip up her hood, Gloria sat back in her chair. Something didn't feel right about interrogating Grace, especially away from school grounds. She would do a little digging of her own this afternoon and confront Kirk this evening. She didn't need to involve a student.

Gloria knew how to access Kirk's files and didn't think confirming the truth of Grace's claims would be difficult. All she needed to do was wait for his assistant to leave. Vanessa was too loyal to Kirk for her own good, and Gloria didn't want her around for the conversation.

Gloria watched the students leave the Café, a glob of ketchup still smeared on the table where they'd sat. She closed her computer. It was time to head back to her office and find out if Principal Kirk really was as much of an asshole as she'd always suspected.

And if he was... Well, this year was only probationary for him, wasn't it?

A smile slowly stretched across her face. Things were looking up.

Jordan White

March 30

5:20 PM

“Where are you going?”

Crap.

“Just heading home for the evening!” Jordan forced an upbeat tone. “It’s after five!” He waved his umbrella, grinning sheepishly at Principal Kirk’s hard stare.

“Jordan. My email?”

He’d hoped to sneak out before Kirk saw him. Jordan had forgotten to resolve Kirk’s ridiculous email trouble of the day, but it was already after five and long past time to go. But, on the other hand, he really didn’t want to argue with his hot-headed boss.

“Right, yes. I’ll get to it now,” Jordan grumbled, turning on his heel. What would it be this time, another password reset? Maybe a computer restart? Unbelievable that this inept man was the principal.

“I’ll be back in twenty. Just need to collect a few things

downstairs.”

“Sure,” Jordan replied, heading for Kirk’s office. The door was propped open, the custodian’s cart parked outside. Jordan knocked twice before entering, but the room was empty.

He sat behind the mahogany desk, the only one in the building not constructed of the simple laminate-covered particle board so familiar to high schools everywhere. Dropping his umbrella to the floor, he wiped absently at a condensation ring near the keyboard, but a ghost remained, staining the dark wood. A moment later, Jordan clicked into Kirk’s email, ready to wrap this up and head home as soon as possible.

Aha. Kirk was logged in, but the inbox wouldn’t refresh. A little message in the corner told him it hadn’t synced since yesterday. Jordan sighed, running through the usual quick fixes. It didn’t take long to find the problem.

The man’s email application was set to “work offline.” Jordan couldn’t make this stuff up. How had the technologically defunct principal even managed to do that? He cracked a small smile as he toggled off the setting, grateful it hadn’t been anything more complicated.

Jordan readied himself to leave, his mind on the Chinese food he planned to pick up on his way home. Before he stood, however, a flood of emails came pinging into Kirk’s inbox.

Jordan wasn’t a particularly nosy person, and he didn’t make a habit of snooping, but one subject line gave him pause. It was a message from Kirk’s assistant, Vanessa. Before Jordan knew what he was doing, he’d clicked it.

From: vbonilla@coveharborschools.org
Subject: RE: next year xxxrg

Anna Dunworth

Glad to hear you took care of it. Do I want the details?

-Vanessa

Jordan scrolled down to start the thread from the beginning. The first message was sent from Vanessa to Principal Kirk nearly a month ago.

From: vbonilla@coveharborschools.org
Subject: next year xxxrg

Have you figured out what to do about Shooting Stars next year?

We need that program to work if you want to stay principal and I want to stay principal's assistant. I'm enjoying the upgraded office space. :)

-Vanessa

--

From: akirk@coveharborschools.org
Subject: RE: next year xxxrg

Ramona should be back in our office next year. I'll be creating a new admin assistant position for her.

-Kirk

--

From: vbonilla@coveharborschools.org
Subject: RE: next year xxxrg

Why would she take it? I thought she was going to
Yale...
-Vanessa

--

From: akirk@coveharborschools.org
Subject: RE: next year xxxrg

Don't worry. I don't think she's going to Yale
anymore ;)
- Kirk

Jordan wished he hadn't read it. What did that mean, she wasn't going to Yale anymore? Jordan didn't know every student in the building, but he knew Ramona. She was one of the few without a reliable computer at home, and she spent many after-school hours in the computer lab attached to his IT office.

Jordan jumped as footsteps approached. He tapped the keyboard, plunging the screen into darkness.

The custodian's face appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, it's only you. Hey, Gordon."

"How are ya, Mr. White?"

"Can't complain."

"Same, same."

Jordan woke the computer screen and closed the email thread. A few clicks later, the message was again marked unread, waiting for Principal Kirk to find it himself. Jordan picked up his umbrella and gave Gordon a quick wave, hurrying past AP Jenkins' still-lit office and into the hallway.

He pondered the email thread as he traversed the empty

school. Had Principal Kirk been insinuating to Vanessa that he knew how to stop Ramona from attending Yale? Or, perhaps, that he already had? He remembered Vanessa's email. What did this have to do with the Shooting Stars program?

Jordan mulled it over as he trotted down the staircase, unease growing with each step. If Principal Kirk did anything to sabotage one of the school's most hard-working students from attending the school of her dreams, he should be fired. Hell, he should be arrested.

Jordan saw Ramona in his mind's eye, surrounded by textbooks, typing away on the school's dated computers. She hardly ever noticed the students clowning around her, fighting for top scores on games he never seemed to be able to block, playing jokes on one another with the text-to-speech function. Ramona worked through it all, unwaveringly focused on her assignments.

And as he pictured her at the computer, Jordan felt something hot and harsh creeping through him. He'd never felt quite as connected to the students as other adults in the building. After all, he was just the IT guy. But Ramona was something special. A different breed, working diligently to raise herself up in the world. Just like he had so many years ago.

Jordan's anger mounted, threatening to boil over as he froze, one hand on the door to the parking lot. Suddenly, he changed course, heading back to the Main Office. He needed to find out what the hell was going on here.

And if Principal Kirk did anything to mess up that girl's future, well, he'd sure as shit have something to say about it.

Principal Kirk Clobbered

March 30

4:45 PM

A knock sounded on Principal Kirk's door as he placed his iced coffee beside his keyboard.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Haywood is here to see you.”

“Send him in, Vanessa.”

A moment later, Eric Haywood entered the well-decorated room, lingering awkwardly just inside the doorway.

“Sit, please, Eric,” Alex Kirk waved a hand toward the seats in front of his desk.

Eric sat, meeting Kirk's eyes with a cold stare. Kirk sighed. He thought he knew why Eric was here.

“What can I do for you?”

“We need to talk about my tenure application.”

“Ah, yes... I heard your probation was extended another year. I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Like hell you are. I saw my observation reports. You dinged

me for not walking around the room, but my foot was in a cast!” Eric hissed the last word.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Haywood, but the teacher evaluation rubric is perfectly clear. I can rate you only on what I see and witness, not what I think or my assumptions about your behavior. You know that by now, don’t you?”

“Only what you see? Did you not see the cast on my foot?” The color was rising in Eric’s face, and he was close to shouting now.

Kirk stood his ground. He couldn’t tell Eric he’d needed to mark a few more teachers poorly for an even distribution across the staff. The board would want to see a nice mixture of high and low ratings. Besides, if he marked everyone highly from the get-go, what proof would he have that he helped them grow under his tenure as interim principal?

“Mr. Haywood. If you had a problem with your observation ratings, why didn’t you ask to discuss them when we first issued the reports?”

“Because... because... Well, I didn’t have a chance. I’ve been so busy with...” The sentence died in Eric’s throat, and Kirk smiled.

“Perhaps next time you should make your personal growth a bit more of a priority.”

Eric jumped to his feet, eyes flashing. “What’s your problem, Kirk?! Do you not want me to teach here anymore?”

“Please watch your tone, Eric. There is no need to be unprofessional. I’ve never wanted you to leave our school. I simply want –”

“You know what? I don’t care what you want. I’m finished with you. If you’re principal again next year, I’m out. Out!”

Eric strode across the office and through the door, leaving

Kirk alone in the ringing silence. Vanessa appeared a moment later.

“What was that about?”

“Oh...” Kirk felt supremely uncomfortable. He hadn’t meant for Eric to quit like that. Hopefully, he’d be back. It wasn’t exactly an easy job market for teaching positions in strong suburban schools like this one. “It was nothing, Vanessa. Don’t worry about it.”

“Ramona Giovanni is here to see you, too. She’s waiting outside.”

“Send her in.”

Vanessa raised her eyebrows at him but complied, backing out of the room with a concerned glance at her boss. Unfazed, Ramona entered, walked quietly to his desk, and took the seat in front of him.

“How can I help, Ramona?”

“Hi, Principal Kirk.” Her hand shook slightly where it rested on the mahogany desktop, but her voice was steady. “I just wondered if you would consider contacting Yale on my behalf.”

“What about?”

“They revoked my scholarship and are reconsidering my acceptance.” Her eyes turned towards the floor. “Because of my suspension.”

“I see...”

“I just thought...” Ramona took a deep breath. “I just thought you might be able to tell them my late marks weren’t due to laziness, or cutting, or something like that. See, I have to drop my brothers off at elementary school before I come in, so sometimes it makes me late. I swear, that’s the only reason.”

“I’m sorry, Ramona, but you must accept the consequences of your lateness, and your suspension was one of those consequences. There really isn’t anything I can do for you.”

“Please – I worked so hard to get into Yale, I –”

“Ramona, this is not a matter of working hard. I know what a hard worker you are. In fact, I was going to offer you a position here with me. Next year, after you graduate.”

“A... position?”

“Yes, an assistant’s position. You would help Vanessa with daily tasks but primarily be responsible for running the Shooting Stars program.”

Ramona remained silent, her eyes searching for meaning in his gaze.

“You want me to work here next year? To run the tutoring program?”

“Yes.” Kirk smiled, “What do you think?”

Something shifted in Ramona’s expression. Was it anger? Sadness? Resignation? Kirk hoped for the last one. He needed her to accept his offer.

“I think...” Ramona’s voice hardened. “I think I need time to consider it.” She rose mechanically from the chair and walked to his door, slowly lifting one foot in front of the other as if moving through grimy sludge.

Kirk leapt from his chair and followed her out, grabbing his iced coffee off the desk as he went.

“Ramona!” He called after her.

“Yes?” Ramona turned to face him, those big brown eyes meeting his. For the smallest second, he felt a stab of guilt. Then it passed.

“Let me know what you decide about the assistant position.”

Ramona left the Main Office, exchanging a wave and a sad smile with the custodian as he entered. Gordon treated Kirk to a mean glare as he pushed his cart past him, preparing to clean the Main Office. What was the janitor’s problem? But before Principal Kirk had time to dwell on the unexpected hostility, he spotted Jordan White.

“Where are you going?”

“Just heading home for the evening!” Jordan’s voice was falsely high. “It’s after five!” Kirk glared at him. He didn’t really care what time it was, as he’d been unable to receive email all day and Jordan still hadn’t fixed it.

“Jordan. My email?”

“Right, yes. I’ll get to it now,” Jordan grumbled, turning on his heel.

“I’ll be back in twenty. Just need to collect a few things downstairs.”

“Sure.”

Kirk left the Main Office and took the long way down to the cafeteria. A quick sugar rush would keep him focused for the next hour. He placed his coffee on one of the cleanly wiped tables and dawdled by the vending machines, examining each selection before making his choice.

Kirk eagerly tore open the first bag of M&Ms on the walk back to his office, his forgotten coffee abandoned for tomorrow’s cafeteria staff to find. He’d hardly entered the Main Office when Gloria Jenkins stepped through her doorway.

“Kirk? We need to talk.” He groaned. Jenkins had been rubbing him the wrong way for the better part of a decade, but never so

bad as this year. She obviously wanted his job. Too bad.

“What’s the matter?”

“I have a few questions for you about the Shooting Stars program.”

“Okay...” Kirk glanced towards Vanessa’s desk, hoping for an excuse to end his conversation with Jenkins, but it sat empty. She must have gone home while he was downstairs.

“How much involvement has Ramona Giovanni had with the program?”

“Why would you ask me that?” Kirk’s nerves rattled. What was she getting at? Could she know? No, it was impossible. Ramona never realized he’d presented the program as his own and she had no reason to mention it to AP Jenkins.

“I heard a rumor today that she basically put the entire thing together herself. And, you know what, Kirk? I’ve been looking into it. And I think it checks out.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Gloria.” Deny, deny, deny. She has no proof. It’d be his word against Ramona’s. And, well, he was the principal. She was just some student.

“I think you do, Kirk, and I think the board will be very interested in this. I seem to recall you telling them all about how difficult the setup was for you last year. How absolutely complicated it was to build the online platform...”

Kirk’s fingernails drew blood as he clenched his fists.

“Are you threatening me, Gloria?” His lips pursed against his teeth. “Are you?!”

“I’m simply asking a few questions.” Gloria looked at her watch theatrically. “And, look at the time! See you tomorrow, Kirk. I’ll be here bright and early to prepare for my lunch with

the board members. I do hope they'll all be able to make it." She flashed him a deep grin before leaving the office.

Despite his best efforts to keep control, Kirk's stomach felt like it had been thrown overboard into a stormy sea. He took a deep breath. Before he released it, however, Jordan came tearing through the Main Office door. Kirk hadn't even realized he was no longer at his computer.

"Great to see you're finished! Did you fix my email?"

"What did you do to Ramona Giovanni?!" Jordan was fired up, and Kirk stifled his reflex to recoil. Instead, he stood taller, throwing back his shoulders and lifting his chin towards the taller man.

"Excuse me?"

"What the hell did you do to stop Ramona from going to Yale?!"

"What? How did you – Wait. Did you read my email?!"

"Answer the question! I don't know what you're playing at, Kirk, but that girl deserved her place at that college, and –"

"DID YOU READ MY EMAIL?!" Kirk was shouting now, sweat rolling down his reddening face. That sneaky bastard read his email! He had no right!

"YES! You know what, I did read it! I'll admit it! It's not half as bad as what you've done if I'm right and you messed up her chances at attending a decent college. How can you live with yourself!?"

"You had no right to read my private email! I'll have your job for this!"

"Or I'll have YOURS," thundered Jordan, standing tall over the principal, umbrella clutched tightly in his hand. "It looks to me

like you somehow sabotaged her so she would take some silly position as your ASSISTANT?"

"Get OUT!" Kirk roared, spit flying from his mouth. "Now!"

"I'll go, Kirk, but this is NOT over!" Jordan was fuming. Kirk heard him storming all the way down the hall, crashing his umbrella into the lockers as he went.

The principal fought to catch his breath. Separately, neither Gloria nor Jordan knew enough, but together...

WHACK!

Something hit Principal Kirk in the back of the head. He crumpled to the floor, blood flowing heavily, staining the worn carpet.

WHACK!

One more for good measure.

The custodian stood over Principal Kirk's body, broom clutched in one hand, chest heaving with the effort. Gordon stood in the empty office for a moment, catching his breath. Then, he slowly withdrew his phone from his pocket and typed out a text to his niece.

Gordon: Thanks for picking up your brothers again today. I'll grab dinner for everyone on the way home.

A few seconds later, his phone pinged in response.

Ramona: Thanks, Uncle Donny. See you soon.

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Thank you again for reading!

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from Cove Harbor Comeuppance Volume One

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Anna Dunworth is a history teacher turned author who writes mysteries, short fiction, and young adult fantasy.

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