

Something Tacky in My Pocket



a novel for the next generation
Susan E. L. Lake

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CHAPTER ONE

“This is one of our few opportunities each year to gather as a student body at Brentwood Preparatory School. We wish to welcome our new students and welcome back those who were here last year. We look forward to a productive year and know each of you will . . .” The voice of the principal droned on. Brandye looked away. Watching her speak seemed unnecessary.

Tuning out the message, Brandye’s foot tapped in time to the principal’s voice measuring her internal frustration. Every principal must receive a copy of the same speech. It explained why announcements at the start of the new school year always sound alike.

Schools never changed. This auditorium looked no different from the one she squirmed in only a month before at an end of school assembly. The chairs lined up so that each angled slightly to the right or left of the one in front. Red cushions instead of gray marched across the room, but the walls soothed the impatient audience with the same pale blue.

The kids looked the same. Everyone dressed in jumps, short for jumpsuits supposedly like those worn by pilots. Made of denim with Velcro and zippered pockets the jump’s brilliant hues filled the room. However, no space pilot would wear the colors in this room.

Brandye smoothed one leg of her jumps. They radiated an emerald sheen making her eyes extra green, the one part of her that she really liked. She didn’t feel that way about her dark curly hair. She’d just had it cut again short enough that she could mostly ignore it.

Brandye’s attention returned to the speaker’s voice coming from the public address system. “Let me remind you of the rule prohibiting all recorders or music devices. They will be confiscated, and your parents notified.”

Every year she heard the same warning. “Schools did not allow music. It encouraged incorrigibility. This rule protects children from the undesirable influences that corrupted them in the past. Music was one of those influences.”

If a school labeled a child an incorrigible, they removed that child from the home and sent him or her to special schools. Parents warned children from the time they started school that incorrigibles were sent away.

Brandye shivered. Even the thought of incorrigibles scared her. What music did incorrigibles listen to? I’ve never even met an incorrigible. I wonder if Aunt Bess listened to music when she was in school? But Aunt Bess wasn’t an incorrigible, Brandye reassured herself.

Relieved to think of something else, Brandye noticed the person sitting in front of her turn around. A pair of dark blue eyes skimmed past Brandye and stopped. For a

moment their eyes locked and then the blue eyes moved on. Brandye didn't know the face. That wasn't surprising. Even if the girl came from her previous school, there hadn't been many chances to meet more than a few people in classes such as competitive sports and at lunch. The girl turned back around.

Trying to fill the minutes of waiting and dread, Brandye looked around the room. Two rows over, a girl talked in whispers to the person sitting beside her. A boy on her right slumped in the auditorium chair nearly asleep.

At the end of Brandye's row, one girl sat rigid in her chair. She didn't move. The girl appeared as nervous as Brandye felt. She also didn't look very happy. Maybe someone had made her wear a dress. She was the only one in the auditorium dressed that way. Brandye felt both sorry for her and slightly horrified that anyone would appear so different.

The speech continued. "We will begin to call names, and as you hear your name, please come pick up your carrel assignment."

Misery drenched Brandye. She hated this part. It never got any easier no matter how often she endured it. If she could just get through these moments, she consoled herself, everything else would be fine.

You'd think that they would skip this part. It's not like we need to do this. They've already given us our carrel assignments. All we have to do is code our desk with our thumb print and the computer will know we are here. Why do they have to call us up one at a time? There should be an easier way to start the school year. I just hope no one laughs.

Her foot quit tapping and she became still. The names began. It became apparent to her that they didn't seem to be calling them in any order. She hated that she couldn't anticipate when hers would be the one blaring from the speaker. As the speaker called each name, Brandye's tenseness increased. She waited and she waited. She began to wonder if they would ever call her name. As the minutes passed, a new concern took over. Maybe they don't have my enrollment. Maybe I'm not even supposed to be here. What will I do if they don't call my name?

"Brandye Whyne Drinker," announced the speaker at the front. The relief at finally hearing the sound of her name made Brandye jump. No one laughed. She avoided looking around to see if her parents' choice of name amused anyone. It was a skill she had practiced many times, each time wishing she could learn to be invisible instead.

She crawled past those sitting in her row, disturbing the sleeping boy, and walked down the aisle. She focused straight ahead as if by not looking at others, others would not look at her.

Inching her way back to her seat, she looked at the computer printout. The paper curled from the sweat from her hand. However, she relaxed now that the hard part was over.

Brandye looked at the number of her learning carrel and felt a splash of unwelcome shock hit the pit of her stomach. She frowned and shook her head. Her carrel number was wrong. It wasn't 237. They had given her that number at last year's orientation.

This can't be right. They've given me the wrong number. What am I going to do? Who can I tell? Puzzle lines formed between her eyes. She didn't even know where 992 was.

The voice from the front intruded into her confusion. "I believe each of you now has a carrel assignment. You may notice a few changes. We have reassigned some carrels to simplify movement to and from activity classes."

Brandye's head jerked up as she realized what the speaker was saying. That's not fair. They don't have any right to change my carrel. She stared at the paper hoping she had made a mistake. She gave up with a sigh of resignation and a grim look.

Students had begun to get up. She tucked the offending paper into one of the pockets of her jumps and moved down the aisle and out of the auditorium with the other swarming students.

She had started the day knowing what to expect. Now, that comfortable feeling was gone. She was irritated and angry at the unexpected change. When she entered the building, she had known all she needed. She could locate her carrel, she knew where the lunch room was, and she could find the gym. Now she felt lost and confused. She started to rub her nose in frustration. She stopped, remembering the warning that someday she'd rub it right off her face if she weren't careful. Instead, she reached into the pocket of her jumps for the comforting egg of silly putty she always carried.

As she rubbed the plastic egg, she comforted herself with the thought that nothing else could go wrong.

CHAPTER TWO

“Do you know where 995 is?”

Brandye turned. It was the girl who had been sitting in front of her. The one with the dark blue scanning eyes. “No, mine was supposed to be 237, but they changed it. Now I’m 992, so I suppose it’s near 995.”

She looked past the girl’s eyes and saw long sleek blond hair. Her jumps were a beautiful shade of turquoise with multi-colored stripes on the sleeves.

“Did they change yours too?”

“I don’t know. I missed the orientation last year and never had a chance to come ask for it.”

Brandye took the now crumpled assignment out of her pocket. She began to peer at the map on the back. “Well, this thing says we’re here.” She pointed to a pale X.

The drawing showed that the school was built like a wheel. The auditorium, office, lunch room, and gym were located in the middle. Each spoke or wing had a series of learning carrels. There was a classroom at the end of each wing.

Brandye squinted at the drawing. The lines of the drawing were nearly too light to read. “Well, here’s where 232 was and it’s in that direction, so if we turn the map this way I guess it has to be in this direction.” She indicated a spoke to their right.

The girl beside her laughed and pointed to a small sign over the entrance to the hall, which indicated 900-999. “And we think we’re so smart. All we had to do was read.”

Brandye looked up and answered the girl’s comment with a smile. It was the first smile she had used this morning, and suddenly she liked this girl with the beautiful blond hair. “Well, we’d better find them before the computer fines us for tardiness.”

Kids streamed down the halls looking over the door of each carrel for their assigned numbers. As each got to the right number, the student began to punch in the combination needed to open the door. There was much fumbling as they read the number off their assignment sheets and punched the code in at the same time.

Brandye found hers first, and her fellow searcher’s was diagonally across from hers. When Brandye began fumbling to master her combination, the girl looked at the name on the paper. “Oh, you’re the one. What a neat name. I heard it when they called roll.”

Brandye looked up and flushed. “Gosh, thanks. Most people laugh when they hear it. I really hate it when they call it out at the start of school. It’s so embarrassing. What’s yours?”

“Monique. Actually it’s Monica, but I hate it. So this year I’m going to be Monique. It’s close to Monica but so much more interesting, don’t you think? The biggest problem is my last name. It’s Jackson. Monica Jackson was okay, but Monique Jackson sounds goofy. I keep thinking that maybe I can get my mom to marry someone named Croissant or even something better. Then I could use his name. She’s married to a Harralson right now. That just won’t do.”

Brandye laughed. She couldn’t imagine someone named Monique Croissant.

The door to her carrel slid open. Without a backward look, she went in.

This carrel would be home for the next few months, maybe even years. It didn’t look that different from the one she had worked in last year. The whole room was only about four feet square. The walls looked grayish blue, and the floor was covered with a peach colored fuzz. The fuzz was supposed to absorb sound as well as to release soil easily to the auto sweepers.

Brandye had learned about the peach fuzz some years before when she had dropped her silly putty on the floor. It had taken the auto sweepers several days to get it out. She never did figure out how they knew about it, but the lecture she got was one of the few times she had ever been reprimanded at school. Her parents had not been impressed.

There was a small shelf on one side. That was where Brandye stored her silly putty. She never had anything else to put on the shelf.

There was a screen built into the wall with a shelf below it with a keyboard and response pad built into it. Tucked underneath the shelf was a small gray stool attached to the wall. Brandye reached under, pulled the stool out and sat down.

She reached into her pocket and took out her supply of putty and placed it on the shelf to her right. It rocked slightly before coming to a rest. The room was now home to her.

Brandye turned the computer on. The familiar diamond logo appeared on the screen followed by a thumb print. She reached up and touched the print with her right thumb. Instantly, the screen accepted her print which logged her presence into the main computer. At the same time she heard her door slide shut.

She waited in anticipation. Most classes would be the usual. This year, however, was the first year she was to have a creative elective. The school was supposed to use aptitude results to place her. She had spent the last month wondering what she would get.

A message appeared on the screen. “Brandye welcome back to school. We hope that your year at Brentwood Preparatory will be successful. Your schedule has been carefully selected to meet your academic as well as social needs. If the administration can help in any way, please feel free to contact us.” It was signed Margaret Van Buren, Principal.

Below her name was a smaller version of the United Federation of Schools logo. Each side of the diamond represented one of the parties involved in a student's education: family, local district, state, and nation. The large S in the center represented both the school and students.

The message disappeared, and the list of Brandye's classes and times followed.

Most classes were computer assisted instruction that were part of the Federation of Schools curriculum. Everyone had the same information wherever they went to school. A few classes were interactive meaning there was an actual teacher. Most were interactive on screen. A few required physical interaction such as athletics.

Brandye read down the list quickly. Math, English, history, *speech, lunch, recreational period, physical education, *journalism, and Spanish. The stars indicated interactive classes.

At first glance she didn't think it seemed too bad. At least my hard classes are in the morning. Oh, no! I have PE right after lunch. That's the worst time to have it.

She continued to read down the list processing the information.

Journalism.

How'd I get that?

No one told me that I'd have journalism.

Suddenly, she realized why journalism was listed as one of her courses. The knowledge didn't make her happy. That can't be my creative elective. We're supposed to get something we like. I don't even know what they do in there. They must have made a mistake.

Suddenly, the screen changed and was filled with the review lesson on basic math. $1 + 1$ was followed by $3 + 7$ and then $9 + 14$. She punched her way through addition facts, subtraction, multiplication, and division - both long and short. Fractions and decimals followed swiftly. Eventually, she convinced the computer that she remembered when to use periods, how to spell fourteen, and what a noun was. She also proved that she was aware of the date and the importance of the Revolutionary War.

She was glad when her interactive speech class began. At least it was a real person instead of a computer driven program. "Good morning class, I'm your moderator, Ms. Sampson. This is a class designed to improve your ability to think logically and present your ideas orally. Today we will begin to know one another by introducing ourselves and telling what we did on our summer break."

Why don't they have us talk about the color of our underwear or what we ate for breakfast? Brandye complained to herself. The other nine students didn't seem any more excited by the question than she was. Each of them was visible in one of nine

small blocks lining the edge of her computer screen. The center and larger block was the moderator's position in the middle of the screen.

Her turn came quickly. "My name's Brandye." She hesitated for just a moment before deciding that she might as well get it all over. "My name's Brandye Whyne Drinker."

For a moment there was no response; then from one of the blocks on the screen she heard, "You're kidding."

She plastered a smile on her face. "Can you believe it? I have really weird parents." With that, nothing more was said, and she began the recital of her vacation with her parents and brother.

The hour passed and the teacher ended the transmission with the assignment that each be thinking of a topic for discussion. Brandye decided that the color of underwear would not be appreciated as a choice.

On her screen appeared the welcome words, "These are the lunch selections for the day. When you have made your choice, proceed to the cafeteria to pick up your tray. Remember to deposit all trash in proper receptacles." Brandye was glad that she had first lunch shift. She was hungry, and the thought of milling around for 25 minutes in "recreational period" wasn't appealing. At least that much has gone right today.

The lunch selections were numbered, and Brandye quickly decided on number 3 wondering if the food would be any better at this school. She didn't have much hope.

Throughout the morning, the journalism class had been a constant nagging worry. She hadn't had much time to think about it, but it never quite went away. Now that the computer screen no longer demanded her attention, she began to fret in earnest. Tired from a long morning and hungry, she wasn't any happier than when she first read the schedule. She finally gave up and soothed herself with the thought that maybe the class would not be so bad even if she didn't know anything about it.

"Hi, so they let you loose also." Brandye jumped at the sound of the intruder.

CHAPTER THREE

Brandye twisted her head around and found Monique standing beside her door which had opened automatically.

The blond began to chatter. "I was wondering if we all had the same release schedule. Sometimes they do it randomly. How's it going?"

She was surprised at the girl's intrusion but glad too. "Pretty good. I hate that first day review. Do they think we're total retros to forget everything in four weeks."

"Yeah, it gets really boring. Those are great jumps. Did you get them here? I'm getting fuchsia ones next week. My dad, well step-dad, says no pilot would wear jumps like that. I keep telling him that if they had any style they would. Say, do you want to eat lunch with me?"

"Uh, okay. I usually eat alone, but I guess so. Do you think number 6 will be better than 3?"

Monica laughed at her seriousness. "Gosh, who cares? Let's just grab it. I hate that we have to thumb in just to get lunch. As if anyone would want more than one. That way one of us could find a place while the other was in line."

Brandye looked thoughtful for a moment. "I have an idea. The computer only records total number of lunches served for the day, and bills our folk's account once a month. I wonder . . ."

By this time they had reached the Automatic Meal Machine. Brandye thumbed in her choice of number 3 and waited for it to appear below. She then quickly re-thumbed the machine and glanced at Monique with a quick look. "Which one do you want??"

"Three will be fine," responded the girl with a quick grin. Surprising both girls, the meal dropped out with no complaint from the machine.

Brandye handed the package to her fellow conspirator. "All we have to remember is whose turn it is. The machine doesn't care how many, and our folks won't care as long as it is the same number at the end of the month."

Monica slid past the mob waiting to punch in their choice. "What a great idea. Why hasn't anyone else figured that out? Now all we have to do is find a place to sit."

The girls managed to find a spot in a far corner and settled in with their choices. Through her straw, Monica asked, "Well, what's your creative elective? Mine's dramatics. Can't you see me as Christine in 'The Phantom of the Opera?'"

Brandye giggled at the sight of Monique crying over a lost love.

“I think they’ve made a mistake. They’ve given me journalism. I don’t even know what it is.”

Monica’s frowned with concern. “I think they write the school paper.”

“Why would they give me that? I hate to write.”

“I heard it’s really hard. You have to go and talk to people and write down what they say.”

“I can’t do that. How could I go talk to a perfect stranger? It’s just not fair. I can’t believe they’ve done this to me.”

Lunch was over soon, and the two girls moved to the recreational area so that another group could eat. The recreational period was misnamed. Most people just stood around and waited till it was time to return to their carrels. Brandye and Monique spent the time making up silly names for those around them. It was the first time in Brandye’s life that she had bothered to actually look at the other students around her. She was disappointed when the computer bong signaled the end of the time period and she had to go to P.E.

Brandye worked out on exercise equipment and listened to the coach tell them that they were all in terrible shape. As she pumped away on the exercise bike, she had plenty of time to think about her journalism class. It didn’t make her feel any better now that she knew what it was about.

When she returned to her carrel, she punched in and waited for the class to appear. When it did, she blinked in surprise. Filling the screen was a man with a hat on made from a newspaper. He was holding a wicked looking sword in one hand and a giant oversized pen in the other. By the time the surprise wore off, the image was replaced by the familiar squares of an interactive class with the teacher now a smaller square in the center.

“Well, class, we shall learn this year which is truly mightier, the sword or the pen.” A flash in the left corner of the screen of one of the student squares indicated that a boy whose name plate read Ralph was signaling his desire to comment. “Yes, Ralph, and what do you think you can add to my comment?”

“Well, Mr. Smith, it is clearly apparent from all historical data that . . .”

“Ralph, we aren’t talking historical data. We are here to learn. Why don’t you hold onto your data until you’ve had a chance to measure it up against reality. Then you can make a decision.” Ralph blinked at the teacher’s words, but Mr. Smith didn’t seem to notice. He continued with his opening comments.

“We will conduct interviews on Monday. Initially, we will do this as a group, but as you gain proficiency, you will be handling them on your own. I’ll set up the first ones, but I

want you to start thinking of people who can provide you with interview material. Photographs will be taken by students from another class who will have access to your material. They will select the appropriate slides to incorporate into the paper. Layout will be completed by the advanced design class and a new edition will be available on screen for students and faculty beginning on Friday morning. Our deadline will be Wednesdays at 5 p.m. to give me time to look over your material one last time before it goes to layout on Thursday. Thursdays and Fridays we will have instructional periods as well as critique sessions.”

Brandye found herself watching and listening to him hoping for just a small break in the gush of information. How am I supposed to keep up with all this? I don't even know what a layout is. She considered signaling a question, but after the response to Ralph she didn't feel that brave. Instead she peered into the screen and listened harder.

Just as she was wondering if anyone had ever succeeded in getting a course change, she heard her name.

“Ms. Drinker. What do you think is the most important function of a journalist?”

Her first response was that she didn't even know what a journalist really was, but she figured it had something to do with someone taking journalism. She smiled tentatively hoping for a good answer.

“To make an ‘A’?” She was horrified at her statement. It had just popped out.

The others laughed, but Mr. Smith didn't. “Well, we do have much to learn, so I guess we'd better get started. What newspapers do you regularly read, Mr. Chou?”

Brandye relaxed for a moment. At least the attention was on someone else. That didn't make her any happier about her ridiculous response.

Ling straightened up as if the answer would come better if he didn't hunch over the screen. “Sir, I usually run a scan of the Houston Herald.”

“And what do you scan for?”

“Mostly sports and the comics.” The class laughed again. Brandye looked to see the teacher's response. He was rubbing his chin as if in thought.

“So you are into sports and the comics. Do any of you scan for anything else?”

Patty Ramirez chimed in, “I read Ann Landers.” This time no one laughed. Brandye figured they were all beginning to get the message, and even before the teacher said it, she had decided she needed to call up a complete run of the day's paper when she got home.

“I believe what we have here is a serious lack of experiential material, so for the next fifteen minutes I want you to select and read three articles from the menu of today’s paper. Please do not limit yourselves to sports or advice columns.”

With that, Brandye found herself staring at the logo of the Houston Herald. She selected an article on pollution, new products, and school environment. As she read them, she wondered what she was supposed to see. Only the article on school environment was slightly interesting. It discussed studies which showed a decrease in the index of student mental health over the last twenty years. The researcher believed it was correlated to the increased use of student carrels. Brandye had never heard of a student Mental Health Index. She tried to do a quick encyclopedia search, but the screen cleared and her class was back.

“For homework tonight, I want each of you to select ten more articles. Read them and formulate an answer to my question on the function of a journalist. By the way, you are all now journalists and tomorrow we will begin our task by interviewing the principal. Be prepared with at least one question to ask her about the opening days of school. You’ll also need paper and pen to record her responses.”

With that, the screen cleared and was replaced with her Spanish class. She found herself sitting on her stool too overwhelmed to pay attention. She shook her head to clear the thoughts tumbling over themselves. Then anger took over. She had never had a teacher so harsh and demanding. She felt whipped. Even when the bong sounded releasing her for the day, Brandye sat still and determined. Somehow she had to find a way out of this class.

CHAPTER FOUR

“How’d it go?” Monique was standing at the door with one hand on her hip and the other on the door. Her voice broke into Brandye’s thoughts. Brandye whirled around on her stool and grabbed her silly putty from its perch. She peeled it out of its case and began to pull it apart violently.

“You won’t believe this man I have for journalism. He lives in the dark ages. We have to have paper and pen! How am I supposed to get that? Why can’t we use our computer tablets?”

Monique grimaced with her friend. “That’s awful. My brother has paper and I think even a pen. He’s into those kind of things. Maybe he can help.”

“That’s not the point. This man is unreasonable. And the homework he has assigned! It will take me all night.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry. I thought a creative elective was supposed to be fun.”

“I thought so too. Do you know if it’s possible to change from one class to another? I never asked for this. Why couldn’t I take creative dramatics like you?”

“Oh, that would be so wavy. You’d have a great time. It’s even an interactive class like competitive athletics. You get to go to the lab and put on costumes and stuff.”

Brandye’s anger didn’t diminish any as she walked to the school tram with Monique. All she wanted was to get home and tell her parents. They would have to understand and get her out of this man’s unbearable class.

Brandye’s apartment was empty when she got home. She assumed her brother Jack was still at football practice, but she’d been hoping at least one of her parents would be there. She turned on the message machine.

“Honey, how was the first day? I’m tied up with a rep from Detroit, but your dad said he’d be home by six. Go ahead and eat without us.” Brandye sighed in disgust.

She headed for the communal cafeteria on the first floor of her building. As she gathered her tray and punched in her code, she saw Ralph from her journalism class. She looked toward her regular table in the corner. Usually no one sat there because it faced a wall and only had one seat. Today, however, someone was in it. As she looked around again, Ralph smiled and waved. He was sitting alone and pointed toward the other chair at his table.

She didn’t know how to handle this new situation. Usually she never even talked to other kids, and she never ate with them. Trying to act like it was the most natural thing in the world to find a friend to eat with, she put her tray down across from Ralph on the narrow table.

“Well, how did you like Ol’ Man Smith?” Ralph took a bite of from his fish stick.

“As soon as my parents get home, I’m telling them I want out. He’s impossible.”

Ralph dipped the fish into a puddle of catsup. “My brother had him four years ago. Said he was great. After today I’m not sure we’re talking the same person. Maybe’s he’s changed.”

Brandye wanted to match Ralph’s banter, but she couldn’t think of anything to say. “So, what questions are you going to ask the principal tomorrow?”

Ralph’s nose wrinkled in thought. She noticed he had rather nice brown eyes. She’d never bothered to look at a boy’s eyes before. His answer came slowly as if he were just deciding. “I believe I want to know why we can’t have more interactive classes. Then I guess I’ll ask the obvious like how many kids there are. What about you?”

Brandye had spent so much time protesting Mr. Smith’s assignments that she hadn’t even worried about questions. “I’m not even going to be in that class, but if I were, I’d ask . . . I know. I’d ask how many kids request and get changes.” She shook her head with new confidence. “That’s what I’d do!” The confidence didn’t last long. “But I’m still going to get out.”

By the time she got back to the apartment, her dad and brother were home.

“Well, little ‘un, how did it go? Did you set them on fire?” asked her dad as she came through the door.

“No, it was terrible. I had an awful day.”

“What made it so terrible?”

“They changed my carrel.”

“Uh, huh. Is that all?”

“No. Then they gave me journalism.”

“Yes.” Her father looked quizzically helpful.

“Am I missing something? That doesn’t sound so bad. Actually, it sounds like fun.”

“Fun! I have Smith.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Dad, he’s this absolutely horrible man. He shouts at us and gives us impossible assignments. I can’t stay in there. I’ve got to get out. Will you call the school and tell them?”

“Now, slow down. Why is he such an ogre?”

“He’s absolutely unreasonable. You can’t imagine what he’s like. I don’t even know why I’m in there. The computer messed up. I hate to write.”

Jack interrupted. “You lucky dog. You’ve got Ben Franklin Smith! He’s so gunky. I would have given anything to take his class.”

“Shut up. I didn’t ask you,” she snapped.

“Whoa,” her father said. “Your brother was just trying to help. Maybe he knows something you don’t. Besides, I don’t believe it is any of my business to interfere with the school’s decision. If you want, you can make arrangements to talk with the principal.” Her dad’s soothing voice just made her angrier.

“I can’t believe you won’t help. You’d do it for Jack.” She stomped from the room trying to make them aware of how she felt.

She slid shut the door to her room and bounced on her air bed. It rolled gently with her weight. She was too angry to cry. She couldn’t believe her father wouldn’t help. He just didn’t understand. Okay. If they won’t help, then I’ll do it. I’ll go talk to the principal myself. They can’t make me stay in there.

With the decision firmly in mind, she found herself staring at her computer and decided to follow up on the question she had thought of earlier by scanning for the student Mental Health Index. Then she would look for the articles she’d been assigned. She didn’t want marks on her record for failure to perform by not having her homework done since she’d probably not be able to talk to anyone in time.

As she sat down, the phone signal beeped from her computer. She touched the answer pad and was surprised to see Monica on the screen. “Hi, how’s it going? Are you still upset about Smith’s class?”

“You’re sure nicer than my dad. At least you care. He said I had to handle it. Lot of good that will do. As if anyone at school will listen to me. I was just getting ready to scan for the ten articles ‘that man’ assigned. Got any ideas for topics?”

“Sure, find out what’s the latest Broadway play? Then who’s going to win best actress this year? And, let me see. Yeah, who’s the youngest person to star in a major role?”

Brandye laughed at Monique’s single-mindedness. “I’ll try. At least it’s a start.”

“I talked to my brother about letting you have some paper.”

“I’m almost forgotten about that. I didn’t even tell my dad about that part.” Brandye wondered if she should make a second appeal based upon this fact.

“He said sure. He thinks everyone should use, as he puts it, ‘the real thing.’ I’ll bring it tomorrow. He even has a pen.”

“I really appreciate this. I guess I’ll need them at least for tomorrow. Tell him I’ll return them as soon as I get out of that class.”

“No prob. Well, I must get my beauty rest. I’m doing a one minute monologue tomorrow.”

Brandye settled down to look for her articles. By the time she finished, she had forgotten her quest for the Mental Health Index. As she slipped off to sleep, she smiled to herself. Two people had asked her to eat with them, and one of them had called her. It wasn’t such a bad start for the first day of school. If only journalism weren’t such a problem. This might be a good year. Tomorrow she’d fix that part.

The next morning, Brandye couldn’t decide how to go about talking to the principal. She had never needed to do anything like this before. She thought about going in early to see the principal, but she was afraid she might be late to her carrel. She decided to stick it out until the end of the day. “Besides that,” she thought, “I’ve already done my journalism homework, and Monique is bringing paper for me.”

During the activity period, Monique regaled Brandye with the tale of her monologue. “I was w-o-n-d-e-r-f-u-l! They all loved me. Juan even said he expected to see me on television tonight. Can you believe?”

Brandye was enchanted with Monique’s enthusiasm. “I can’t believe you have such fun. Aren’t you ever unhappy?”

“Me? Sure, but then I think ‘What’s the use?’ No one would care, so I might as well find the fun. Say, what’d you decide to do about Smith?”

“I’m going after school to see the principal. That is, if I can figure out how. Have you ever gone to the principal?”

“No, but my brother did. Come to think of it though, they came and got him. Seems he colored his monitor with markers once. They discouraged it. He said he was tired of their colors. My parents were worried he was turning into an Incurable.”

“Was he?” Brandye’s eyes opened wide at the thought. She had never known anyone who had an Incurable in the family.

“Oh, no! He never got into trouble again. Say, why don’t we go to the office area? I know where it is. I found it looking for dramatics.”

“Do we dare? I thought we had to stay in this area.”

“Sure we’re supposed to, but no one will notice.”

The girls tried to leave the activity room casually. However, someone noticed their attempted escape.

“Where are you going?”

CHAPTER FIVE

They jumped and turned to see Ralph grinning at them.

Brandye breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, it’s you. You scared us to death.”

“A guilty conscience no doubt, and who’s your friend?”

“Oh, this is Monique/Monica”

“I’ve never met a Monique/Monica. Couldn’t your folks decide?”

Brandye broke in. “Ralph, it’s a long story. Right now, though, we’re trying to find the principal’s office.”

“What have you done, or can’t you tell?”

“Nothing. I’m just going to talk to her after school, and I want to find out where to go. I’m going to change from journalism.”

Ralph’s friendly teasing suddenly stopped. “Why? Smith’s great. You’ll love it. I didn’t think you really meant that you wanted out when you said that yesterday at dinner. I know we were complaining last night, but that’s not a reason to change. Give Smith a chance, you’ll love him.”

“Maybe you’ll love him, but it’s not for me,” she cut him off. “Do you want to help us look for the principal?”

“No, I’ve got to practice note taking before class.” He looked hurt as he walked away.

She and Monique continued their search. They reached the office area and found the room labeled principal but found no one – somewhat to their relief. They looked around feeling more conspicuous the longer they stayed. In a moment, they came upon a partly open door with voices coming from inside. Brandye looked at Monique wondering what to do next. Suddenly, the voices got louder.

“But I can’t do it. They promised me I wouldn’t have to. At my other school they never made me. The counselor told me she would explain this to you.” The words came in waves as if the person couldn’t control the sound of her voice.

“I understand how you feel, and I’ll try to make some arrangements. You’ll just have to make do until then.” It was an adult voice that sounded like someone in authority.

“I can’t. I tell you I can’t. I nearly suffocated yesterday. I won’t go back.”

The two girls blinked at the intensity of the emotion coming from the room. They began to back away.

“Brandye, I don’t think we should stay.” Monique’s voice was a tiny whisper.

“I agree. I can come back later.” Brandye’s eyes were wide.

At every turn they thought they were going to meet someone who would want to know why they were in the hall. The two girls looked guilty and felt it. They reached the cafeteria without being discovered.

Monique began to giggle with relief. “What do you think that was all about?”

“I don’t know, but that kid was really upset. I’m glad they didn’t find us out there. Whatever her problem is it sounds worse than mine.” The signal to return to class interrupted the conversation. “Well, at least I know where to go after school. I’ll call you tonight and let you know what she said. I’m off to my exercise bike.”

Later, as Brandye entered her carrel, she reached up to finger her silly putty. She thought about the girl she had heard. She couldn’t imagine what could have happened to make her so unhappy. Somehow, Mr. Smith didn’t seem so bad.

When class began, she realized that she would have her chance to meet the principal sooner than she had expected.

“Class,” Mr. Smith began. “This is your principal, Ms. Margaret Van Buren. I know you will have interesting questions for her, and we appreciate her giving up time to talk to you. If you did not bring paper and pen for notes, you may use the computer tablet to record her answers. I believe, however, that those of you who actually use the supplies I suggested will be rewarded.”

Brandye scrambled to reach the paper and pen on her supply shelf. She quickly realized why Ralph had wanted to practice. Paper and pen were awkward after using a tablet. She struggled to master these new tools. She started to feel desperate because the questions had already begun. She was about to give up and reach for the computer pad. No. I’ll show them. I can do this, she promised herself.

“Well, Ling, there are currently 1000 students enrolled. We have approximately 250 in each grade level. 100 are housed in carrels on each spoke. Although not every wing is full.”

Brandye scribbled Ms. Van Buren’s numbers down on her paper hoping she would remember what they meant. She was beginning to get the hang of writing on paper. It wasn’t that different from her pad, but it had one advantage. No one else would know what she had written. She could make mistakes and not have them caught by the computer. Even as she considered the possibilities that offered, she heard her name.

Without thinking, she blurted out the question that had been bothering her all day. “Who decides what classes we take, and how can we change them?”

Ms. Van Buren smiled like it was the most innocent question she had heard. Brandye tried to read behind the principal’s smile. “Well, Brandye,” she began slowly as if trying

to get an answer in her head before she continued, “the aptitude scores from previous tests are used by the computer to determine the right choice for each student. Because the choices are made based on objective evidence rather than whim, we discourage changes. I suppose there might be some extenuating circumstance, but I can’t imagine what it might be.”

By the time Brandye had figured out how to spell extenuating, someone else was asking about music in the cafeteria. She hadn’t liked the answer to her question, but at least it was an answer. She continued taking notes, quickly developing a shorthand version that she wasn’t sure even she could read.

The principal never stopped smiling as she continued with her answer. “That is a question that arises every year. As I’m sure you are aware federal legislation prohibits music of any kind in our public schools. The national referendum several years ago was overwhelmingly in support of protecting students from unfavorable influences. Therefore, no music is allowed.”

By now Brandye was beginning to feel like Ms. Van Buren had memorized answers to all their questions. Brandye wished that she would have a chance to ask a question that Van Buren hadn’t memorized an answer to. This sudden desire to be difficult surprised Brandye. She had never been a problem student. As a matter of fact, her school reports always had a code for cooperation on it.

Mr. Smith’s voice interrupted the questions. “Ms. Van Buren, I know the class appreciates your openness and honesty with them.” The teacher was doing something really strange with his voice. It was softer than yesterday and didn’t sound like the demanding teacher Brandye had heard the day before. The principal’s face faded from the center of the screen and was replaced with Mr. Smith’s.

“Okay class, now’s the time to turn all this into a coherent account for others to read. We are not going to worry about journalistic style this time. Just write it in a way that you believe others would find interesting. The best of the lot will be published on Friday.” The demanding voice from yesterday had returned.

CHAPTER SIX

The change in his voice jerked Brandye back to memories of the previous day.

“You have until class tomorrow to compose 250 words based upon this interview. No padding. I want compression. Say what needs to be said, use her words where it is appropriate, and proof it carefully. Let’s see if you remember anything we’ve taught you all these years.”

Now she remembered why she had wanted out. She scribbled down on her paper, “What is this man? Jekyll and Hyde? One minute he’s soft and smiley and the next he’s mean and demanding.”

The screen went blank followed by the message, “The remaining time will be used for individual study.” Brandye decided that meant that she better get started writing.

She gathered her scribbled notes and typed, “Ms. Van Buren spoke to us today.” Suddenly, she growled at the screen and deleted the sentence one letter at a time. “I can’t do this. Who does he think he is?” she said to the screen. It didn’t answer her back, but she began again. After ten minutes she had made some progress, but she was not any happier with the results. She was glad when the screen suggested she save her work because Spanish class was to begin.

She met Monique in the hall as they left for the day. “Brandye, are you going to the principal’s office?”

“I don’t think it will do much good. I asked her about it during the interview.”

Monique’s eyes went wide. “You asked her! Wow! I’m impressed.”

Brandye smiled once again at Monique’s enthusiasm. “I guess I’ll just have to stick it out. Say, what about that girl we heard? I wonder what was wrong.”

“Who knows. I just hope they worked it out. She sounded really desperate.”

“Well, it’s off to the word processor. I have to write an exciting article for you to read on Friday.”

“Really! I hadn’t thought about you having a real article in the Brentwood Blizzard.”

“The Brentwood Blizzard! You’re kidding. That’s the school newspaper’s name?”

“Didn’t you know? Remember, I have an inside source. My brother.”

“Must be nice. The only thing my brother can tell me the name of next year’s quarterback.”

Brandye waved as Monique entered her tram after each promised to call the other. Her trip home seemed happier than usual. She spent the time trying to put the interview into words while she wondered if Ralph would be in the cafeteria.

As the opening days passed, Brandye's carrel began to look rather messy. There was paper from the note pad crumpled in the corner and her silly putty was squashed onto the desk with the shape of a smashed hand in the center. She had spent many frustrating hours learning how to write in a way that satisfied Mr. Smith. Her article had not been selected for that first edition of the paper, but he had told her he admired the directness of her questioning. She had resigned herself to the fact that she couldn't change the class.

Brandye and Ralph had developed quite a friendship in the apartment cafeteria. Oblivious to those around them, they hunched over the table trying to decide if she should cut the last paragraph or add it to the third.

The pattern of class remained the same. Smith released them to write during each class period, but not without monitoring. Brandye had discovered that once when, stuck on a particular sentence, she had begun to daydream. Suddenly, the monitor no longer contained her word processing effort. Mr. Smith's face appeared which had startled her back to awareness. "Problem, Ms. Drinker?"

"Oh. No, sir. I was just thinking."

"You seem to be on the right track. You might consider the use of more active verbs and fewer passive ones. Try this material and let me know if you need help."

Just as suddenly he was gone. In his place on the screen was a discussion of active and passive verb usage. Brandye had watched it, surprised that it did help get her started again. She was also careful not to let daydreaming keep her from using the allocated time in class.

Today's assignment had been another group interview. This time it was the cafeteria supervisor. They had learned more than they wanted to know about meal choices and planning. Brandye had asked why they couldn't sometimes have a surprise meal like a picnic lunch. Mrs. Johansen, who looked stern, had blinked at her question. "I suppose that is something we might consider," had been her reply. Brandye hadn't expected that. She had figured an answer such as, "That is not feasible with the equipment and planning necessary."

Brandye was struggling with the lead for the article. During the last few weeks, she had actually learned some new terms and loved to drop them at home. Even Her brother Jack seemed impressed.

She had discarded the idea of a plain vanilla lead like "Ms. Johansen, cafeteria supervisor, offered answers to questions about lunch." She knew Mr. Smith would edit

beside it, “be more specific.” Brandye frequently asked herself what good all those years of learning to pad answers had done when she couldn’t use them now.

Suddenly, her words disappeared from her screen, and she blinked at the sight of Mr. Smith. She hastily dropped her silly putty and smiled her teacher smile.

“Ms. Drinker, I’m sorry to interrupt your work, but I was wondering if you would come see me during your recreational period tomorrow?”

Her mouth suddenly dried up, but she was too aware of her beating heart to notice. She couldn’t imagine what she could have done. “S-u-r-e, Mr. Smith.”

“My office carrel is 213 in the teacher’s wing. Can you find it?”

She hoped politeness would save her from some of the trouble she was in. “Yes, sir.”

“I see from your schedule that you have first lunch shift tomorrow, so I’ll see you after that.” She blinked as his face disappeared. Somehow she didn’t care if her lead was vanilla. Maybe it wouldn’t matter when she found out why he wanted to see her.

She’d only met with one teacher in all the time she was in school. It had been over the silly putty incident. She looked guiltily at the smashed mess on her desk. But I’ve been really careful with it. It hasn’t stuck to the floor or anything. She didn’t think that would save her.

That night, Monique was sympathetic. “Maybe he wants you to autograph your last article?”

“I doubt it, but thanks for the hope.”

“How bad can it be? It’s probably something really stupid. But I’ve got to go practice my lines. See you at lunch.”

Monique’s face disappeared leaving Brandye with the thought that for all the girl’s flightiness she put a lot of energy into her dramatics class. That would make a nice interview someday, she thought.

At dinner, Ralph was enthusiastic. “Wow, what a great opportunity. Tell me what it’s like. I’ve never been to a teacher’s carrel. Just think. A great feature, ‘a visit to the inner sanctum of education: a teacher’s carrel.’ I can see the headline on page three.”

Finally able to laugh, Brandye shot back, “What only page three - surely front page left!”

By the next morning she was more anxious than scared. It seemed forever to rec period. She waved a cheery goodbye to Monique as she turned left to find the carrel. She knocked, not loudly, and had to knock again. Mr. Smith opened the door and turned away in one movement waving his hand toward a chair. He moved behind his desk, sat

down, and leaned far back. The chair squeaked. Brandye couldn't help make a mental note for Ralph - chair needs oiling.

“Didn't you bring paper and pen?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brandye discovered where all the scared had gone. It was waiting for her in this room. “No. I’m sorry. I didn’t think about it.”

“Well, Ms. Drinker, a good journalist is never without the tools of her trade. Surely, you don’t think you will always have a computer screen.” He slid across the desk toward her a funny looking short note pad. It was about four inches by six inches and had a metal binding at the top. It folded over and made a good writing surface she soon discovered. A pen followed the pad across the desk.

“It’s time for each of you to begin to branch out into single interviews. However, I like to have a chance to talk to students when they get their first assignments. I’ve been noticing the questions you have been directing toward our guests. You have a journalistic mind. It goes for the jugular and looks for deeper answers.”

She found herself staring at his face. He looked quite different in person. His eyebrows were funny. They wobbled as he talked looking like caterpillars trying to wiggle off his face. The image distracted her for a moment.

Smith’s voice intruded into her thinking. “This child has an interesting point, and I believe we should not ignore the news angle.”

Brandye’s head jerked up. What kid? What did I miss? Fine reporter I am. She covered her confusion by assuming her best journalistic look. “And what did you say her name was?” she asked as she prepared to record it.

“I didn’t. It’s unusual. Her name is America Gratzel. I understand her parents are immigrants.”

“And what angle do you want me to pursue?”

“That’s your decision. But I believe there is more to this than a question of a door.”

Something about a door struck her, but she couldn’t figure out what. “So how do I meet with this person, or do I get her code?”

“I’ve set up an appointment for you. You are to meet her at the counselor’s office right after school tomorrow. She knows about this and will be there. That will give you a chance to notify your parents of your later arrival home?”

“Is there anything else I need to know?”

“During class today I want you to record your intended questions. Just remember. Surface questions will get you surface answers. Go for the real material. That will give me a chance to review your focus before you begin the interview.” The teacher stood up and Brandye tried to leave gracefully.

“Oh, here’s your note pad.” She started to tear off the top sheet.

“No, it’s yours. I started with one much like that. Use it to good advantage.”

Brandye skipped out, knowing that Ralph would be chartreuse with envy, and she could hardly wait to tell him tonight. If only she knew what this girl’s problem was that she was supposed to be asking about. That’s the last time I daydream, she promised herself.

“Brandye, that’s quirky. What a weird name, America.” Monique, full of questions, had been waiting anxiously for Brandye to return from her visit to Smith’s inner sanctum.

“I know, but the real problem is that I don’t know what her problem is. Mr. Smith said something about doors.”

“Doors?”

Suddenly Brandye knew. “Doors! I know who it is. That girl we heard. You know when we went looking for the counselor’s office to change my schedule. The one who said she’d suffocate.”

“Her!”

Brandye nodded. “Yeah. That’s spooky.”

“Well, what are you going to ask?”

“Oh, that’s no problem. I’ll start out real slow, just like Smith told us. I’ll warm her up with – her name, of course. I can really relate to that. Then find out what this door thing is all about.” Brandye could feel her smile spilling out all over her face. This is going to be fun.

At dinner that night with Ralph, she suddenly realized what she was facing. “Ralph, how can I get down everything she says? Up till now, we’ve been in the carrel. We only asked a few questions and could take down each other’s material. How will I be able to write enough?”

“You’ll do fine. Smith wouldn’t have asked you if he didn’t think you could do it. Now tell me again what the office looked like.”

She spent her spare time plotting strategy and found it almost impossible to concentrate. By the time school was over and the door of her carrel finally slid open, she was halfway out before she remembered Mr. Smith’s note pad. She grabbed it and started toward the interview. Before going out the door, she took a moment to give a reassuring pat to one pocket of her jumps.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sitting outside the office in the “waiting chairs” was a girl with big pale blue eyes, honey blond hair braided down one side, and rings on her long thin fingers. Brandye took all this in with one look. What most surprised her, however, was that she didn’t have on jumps. The girl was wearing a dress! Brandye hadn’t worn a dress to school in years. No one else did either. This one was soft and yellow and flowed about the girl. Suddenly Brandye realized it was the girl on her aisle the first day. It was the one who sat rigid waiting for the assembly to end.

“Hi, I’m Brandye. Are you America?”

The girl looked up shyly and smiled. She was so quiet and calm Brandye felt like a drum in a library. The girl stood up and reached to shake hands. At first Brandye didn’t know what to do. She wasn’t used to shaking hands with anyone, much less another kid. She shoved her note pad into her other hand and reached out. Surprisingly, the handshake felt good. It gave them an immediate bond, and Brandye’s nervousness was less when the moment passed.

Brandye looked around and made a quick decision. “This isn’t a good place to talk. Let’s see if we can find a bench outside.” America nodded and smiled with the saddest look Brandye had ever seen. She couldn’t imagine being so unhappy that it showed when one smiled.

“We have something in common,” offered Brandye as they walked outside.

“Yes?”

“Unusual names.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yours is America, and I’m Brandye Whyne Drinker. I know how I got mine. It was my Aunt Bess’ idea and my parents went along with her. How’d you get yours?”

“I was born a week after my parents arrived here. They were so grateful to be out of that terrible place that they named me for their new home. At least that’s how they tell it. My name makes all this worse. In a land founded on freedom, how can all this be happening?”

“What is going on?”

Suddenly the unhappy girl looked intensely at Brandye. “You don’t know?”

“No, not really. I overheard you talking to the counselor the first day, so I know you are unhappy about something to do with a door. When Mr. Smith gave me the assignment to interview you, I didn’t get many other details.”

As they sat down, Brandye pulled from her pocket a small metal card. It was about the size and shape of a credit card. It had been a gift the previous year from her parents. Up until now, she only used it to listen to music chips at home. She'd never brought it to school before because of the rule forbidding music, but today it seemed important. She pressed together the two small circles on the top and placed it between them.

"Now, Mr. Smith says we should use paper and pen. I'm going to do that while you tell me, but I'm also going to record this interview. Okay?" Brandye had taken over in a way that surprised even herself. She was glad she had brought along her recorder. She didn't think paper and pen would be enough today, no matter what Mr. Smith believed.

A sigh escaped from America. "Sure. Whatever."

"Don't look so discouraged. This is your chance to tell your side." Brandye couldn't imagine what was so awful to make America this sad. School just had never been that bad. Sure, sometimes boring, but never awful.

"Now what about the door?"

"I don't want the door closed to my carrel."

"Why not?"

Beginning to look even more miserable, America seemed to droop. "I did not think I would have to go through all this again. I am so tired of trying to explain. No one seems to understand."

This interview wasn't going well. Brandye had to do something to make this girl feel better or she would never get the information she needed. She reached into one pocket of her jumps and pulled a bright, smooth green plastic egg. "Here, this helps."

America took it with a puzzled look on her face. "What is it?"

"Silly putty. Works great. I always use it when I'm having a bad time at school. It helps to just squish it. Just pull the case apart." Brandye reached over to show her how to separate the case.

"What do I do with it now?"

"Roll it around in your hands." Brandye unpeeled the green glob and began to roll it in her hands. "Here, you try."

The other girl rolled it tentatively in her hands. "That's right. You've got it. Now as we talk, you won't feel so awful." Working the magic Brandye had hoped, the silly putty seemed to relax America. After a moment America began to talk.

"It is a long story. I hate to tell it again. I told the counselor, the principal, and the student liaison. It was supposed to be all settled when I left my other school. I cannot believe that I am having to go through this."

"Has this thing with the carrel door always been a problem?"

"No, just since third grade. I got locked in my carrel. It would not open."

"What did you do? I'd have been really scared."

"At first, I just waited. I tried to be calm. I kept calling up the exit request. It kept approving it, but nothing happened. I did not want to yell. That would have been too embarrassing. Finally, I did, but no one heard me. It was terrible. I got all cold and sweaty and thought I would faint. I did not know people really felt like fainting. Finally, someone heard me. They got the maintenance people to come."

"That's awful. I would die if that happened to me. No wonder you don't want the door closed."

"You do not understand. That is not it."

"What do you mean?"

"It was later. Everyone said it would go away in a few days. I would forget about it. But it did not. It happens even when I am not thinking about it. All of a sudden, that creepy cold and hot feeling just washes over me. I keep fighting it. I keep telling myself it will go away. It does not. I have to request an exit. Every time that I do, I feel like a child. Like a failure. At my other school, they just arranged to have the door open. After that it was fine. It was supposed to be arranged here. But it was not."

The girl was pulling apart the green putty as if she were trying to snap the tie which bound her to this problem. Her hands were shaking even as she tugged at the putty.

Brandye was writing furiously on her pad. For a moment there was only the sound of a pen scratching across a page and that of silly putty being pulled apart.

"What does the school say?"

"They keep telling me just to request an exit. They do not understand. They keep saying that it would be a distraction and against policy to leave the door open. Besides the computer is not programmed to do that."

"What do your parents say?"

"They keep telling me that I have nothing to worry about. That it is all in my head. They do not understand. I think I am going crazy."

"What is going to happen?"

“ I do not know. I spend all day worrying that it will happen. When it does, I spend so much time trying to make it go away that I cannot even think about school. I know I am going to be placed on probation. My parents will be so angry at me for failing them.”

Brandye had never seen anyone so upset. She was afraid the girl was going to space out. She was beginning to cry and shake at the same time. Mr. Smith had never mentioned this kind of problem in his lectures. Interviews were supposed to go according to plan, like the list of questions Brandye had clutched into a wad. What am I supposed to do? What if she really is going crazy? Should I go for help.

CHAPTER NINE

Brandye was getting desperate. She didn't know how to regain control of the conversation. At a loss for anything else to do to get things back to normal, she tried a distraction.

"That's a great dress. How come you don't wear jumps?"

America looked surprised at the change in subject. Then she stopped snapping the silly putty and began to roll it softly in her hands.

"My parents do not approve. They believe I should dress this way. I used to feel like I did not fit in, but now I think I like it."

"You don't have any jumps at all?"

A small smile crept in and America looked nearly mischievous. "Actually, I do. They are bright pink with daisies embroidered on the shoulder. I do not wear them to school, but I can wear them for recreation."

"Oh, they sound great. I have a pair that my Aunt Bess embroidered butterflies on. They go down one leg like this." Brandye demonstrated the placement going from the top of one leg all the way to the ankle.

"I would love to see them."

"Sure, I'll probably wear them next week."

America seemed less distressed now, and Brandye tried to continue her questioning. "How long has this problem been going on?"

America began to press harder into the ball of green putty. "For about five years, but this is the first time it has been a problem at school. The other schools seemed to understand."

"Is it a problem at places other than school?"

"It used to be just school, but a few years ago, it started to hit in elevators and small rooms like at the doctors."

"How about cars?"

"No, as long as I can see out, it is okay."

"Does that mean that if you had a window on your carrel door it would be okay?"

For the first time, the girl looked interested. "Yes! Just so I can see out of the room. Do you think they would do that?"

“I don’t know, but it’s worth a try. But first, I need to get the rest of my facts. What’s your full name, and spell it for me.”

The rest of the interview went smoothly. Brandye could hardly wait to get home and try to make some sense of her notes. She wanted to tell this girl’s story in a way that would make others pay attention to her plight. She wanted others to feel the pain she saw.

Brandye worked on the article harder than anything she’d ever written. She couldn’t decide how to put it all into words. She could hear Mr. Smith’s lecture on editorializing whenever she tried to tell the girl’s side. The results didn’t satisfy her.

From the look on Mr. Smith’s face when he broke into her writing time, she couldn’t tell what he thought. “Ms. Drinker, how was your interview?”

“Fine, Mr. Smith.”

“I have the feeling from your article that you were leaving out something.”

“I tried to report the facts.”

“You have done that. Perhaps, now you need to take another avenue. Would you like to attempt an editorial response to this situation?”

“I guess . . .”

“Review this material, and tomorrow turn in a 250 word editorial on the girl’s predicament.”

His face disappeared and was replaced with a lesson on editorials. As she read it, she knew exactly what she wanted to say. It was harder, however, than she had thought it would be. She wanted to yell, but on paper it only came out a whisper. It began, “Are learning carrels prisons or classrooms?” As she finished her 300th word, she realized that she was angry. Writing the words helped her feel not only America’s frustrations, but also her own.

On the phone that night, she tried to explain to Monique. “I’ve spent the last ten years just accepting the rules. If the school said to turn left, I did. Even if I wanted to turn right.”

Monique chimed in. “Yes, I know. It’s like the music thing. We want to do a musical in creative dramatics, and they won’t let us. Ms. Deck just reminds us of the rules against all music devices. It’s so stupid.”

The next day Mr. Smith’s only comments were, “You’ve made some good points. However, we only have space for 250 words. Practice your compression skills and edit 50 words from your material. We’re going to run both articles in Friday’s edition.”

She could feel an idiot grin spread across her face. “Thanks, Mr. Smith.”

“No thanks are necessary, Ms. Drinker. You’ve written a balanced article and a thoughtful editorial. Our readers should find them both informative. Do you have any ideas about next week’s interview?”

“Yes, sir, I believe I do.”

“Good. We don’t want to rest on our laurels. First year journalism students sometimes forget that with the publication of one issue that another is already facing them. It’s important to be looking ahead to that next story.”

Brandye could hardly wait to tell Ralph in the cafeteria that night, and he was properly impressed. “Two. Wow, I can hardly wait.”

“Gosh Ralph, I’ve been so excited and busy I never asked how it went with your maintenance interview.”

“Not bad, actually. Did you know that it takes four hours for the auto sweepers to cover the building? And that the doors to the carrels open automatically as they near each one? It was rather fascinating. Smith said they’d keep it in reserve as a filler feature and would probably use it pretty soon.”

“Hey, that’s great. I can hardly wait to read it. Did I tell you about the time I got called on the carpet,” she grinned at her pun, “about getting silly putty stuck to the floor in my carrel?”

“No, but it sounds like something I could use as a sidebar for my article.” He pulled out a pad of paper and pen from a lower jump pocket. “Smith’s got me afraid to leave my carrel without these. I keep hearing him say, ‘News won’t wait until it’s convenient to record.’ So now when was this?”

Brandye was impressed with the directness of his questions and the speed with which he got all the details from her. She found it interesting to be on the other side and wondered how it would feel to see herself quoted in print.

The next morning she could hardly wait to get to her carrel to call up the Brentwood Blizzard on her screen. As she waited for the blizzard logo to dissolve, she wondered where her article would appear. She hadn’t even told her parents about the momentous occasion figuring she would print out a page at home and casually drop it on the table. It was amazing to her how involved she had become. Now she knew why her brother Jack didn’t seem to mind when her parents worked late. She had always envied his involvement in sports which filled all his free moments. It made her feel important to be able to say, “I won’t be home until after five. I’m going to the city library to look at some old newspapers they have on display. Some are even from 1965. Mr. Smith has made arrangements for us to take them from the case.”

Then she saw it. There it was. Her name in print. Her first by-line! She could only stare at it for the first few moments. Then it hit her. Front page, right corner! She’d made front

page. It had been too much to hope. She turned around wanting to share this moment with Monique. And stopped. She couldn't. Oh, she could tell the computer to let her exit, but she couldn't get Monique's to open. She couldn't even contact her by screen. The only screen contact was with teachers or the office. She'd just have to wait until lunch which seemed hours away. Brandye had just the smallest inkling of how America must feel. She didn't feel trapped, but she didn't feel very free either.

CHAPTER TEN

At lunch both Ralph and Monique shared her enthusiasm. “Wow, a published author. Before long, they’ll be able to say they knew us when,” breathlessly exclaimed Monique. “Now, if they’ll just let us do that musical.” The actress-in-training threw back her shoulders and opened her arms in a mime of a Broadway musical.

Their laughter grew solemn when Brandye told them how she felt back in the carrel when she had been unable to share her excitement. Monique nodded. “I know. Sometimes it gets to me too. We’re so used to just doing what they say. But why didn’t you request an exit and then just knock? I’d have requested an exit which would have opened the door.”

With a sheepish look, Brandye shrugged her shoulders. “I guess I just never thought of that. How long do you think the computer would give us before we had to be back?”

Ralph was looking analytical. “About ten minutes. No more. Once I got really sick and it wasn’t much longer than that before a monitor came looking for me in the restroom. Say, did I tell you about my interview with the maintenance person about how they keep the doors open to clean?”

“Doors!” Brandye quickly developed an intense interest in Ralph’s interview and began to press him for answers. “He said the auto sweeper’s electric eye activated the doors? Did he say anything more?”

“No, just that occasionally they got out of alignment and required repair. He told me this funny story about finding one that had been going back and forth all night because someone had accidentally blocked the access eye. He said that didn’t happen often, though.”

“Did he say where the access eye was?”

“No, but I imagine it’s sort of low near the door since those sweepers are pretty small. Why?”

Brandye suddenly saw America with her tray start to sit down at another table and called out to her. The girl looked up like a startled rabbit who had been unaware that anyone had seen her. “Oh, hello.” She looked shyly at the two others sitting with Brandye.

“Come on over. We’ve got room.”

The pretty girl set her tray on the round table and slowly moved in between them.

Trying to be a good hostess – which she’d not had much practice at – Brandye introduced America to the other two. She found it amazing that she had three people sitting with her at lunch. It hadn’t been that long since lunch meant finding a corner where no one was sitting.

“Well, did you read the article?”

“Yes, it was awfully nice. I did not know how I would feel. It is not something I like to talk about. I have to admit, though, it actually helped a little. It does not seem as shameful now. I only had to request an exit once this morning. You know that silly putty you gave me. I forgot to give it back. You are right. It does help. When I felt myself start to get scared, I took it out and rolled it around. Somehow it made a difference.”

America’s quietness seemed strange after the Monique’s banter. But Brandye thought the contrast was interesting. “I still think a window isn’t too much to ask. If that’s all it would take. What does the school say?”

“That is why I was late for lunch. I do not think it is going to matter. The counselor said that if my grades did not improve I was going to be transferred to another school. It is not that I cannot do the work. It is just that I spend so much time thinking about this problem of mine that I cannot concentrate.” Tears began to well up inside her eyes.

Monique reached over and touched her. “Now, look. We won’t let that happen.”

“I do not know how you can stop it.”

“I don’t either, but there’s got to be a way. After all you have two great journalists and a dramatic actress on your side. What’s your creative class?”

“I paint. I work primarily in water color.”

Ralph got that look again of a professional journalist. “You say that like it’s something you’ve done for a while. I gather this wasn’t something they just stuck you in.”

For a minute America smiled a truly happy smile. “That is correct. I have been painting since I was very young. I was four when I first began.”

“Four!” The three just looked at her.

“I wasn’t even very good with crayons at four,” said Ralph with a raised eyebrow.

Monique jumped in. “Can we see what you’ve done and do you know anything about painting sets?”

America was a little shaken by their enthusiasm. Before they could overwhelm her any more, the signal to return to carrels sounded. “Brandye, here’s your silly putty. I will have to get some myself.”

“Hey, keep it. My brother gives it to me by the boxes. He hates buying presents, and it’s something he knows I love. If it helps, that’s what matters. Just don’t let this get to you. You’re not alone. What’s your carrel number?” The girls began to walk back to their carrels.

“837. What is yours?”

“992. If you are in the 800s, Ralph’s on your spoke. Here’s my home code. Call me tonight.” Brandye waved as she moved toward her wing. Somehow, she thought, there’s got to be a way to help America.

That afternoon Brandye kept thinking about her lunch conversation. She hoped America wouldn’t be transferred. She was just getting to know her. Imagine, she thought, being able to paint. She wanted a chance to see some of her work.

In the middle of her last class, Brandye suddenly signaled for an exit. Her door slid open and she stood outside studying the frame. She nodded her head as if an answer were visible. She returned to her desk and reached up to thumb back in, but then she stopped. She looked down at her thumb and then at the silly putty smashed beside the key pad. She picked it up and pressed her thumb into the putty. It made a clear print and she decided to try it. Carefully holding the tacky substance, she pressed it gently onto the screen and waited. The screen cleared of its waiting logo and displayed the Spanish practice she had left. She discovered she had not been breathing as a sigh escaped. She could hear the door slide shut behind her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brandye was delighted when America called that night. America seemed shy at first. "Hello. You said to call. I hope I am not disturbing anything."

"No, that's great. I've been thinking about you a lot. I'm working on an answer. Don't let all this get you down. We're not going to let them transfer you. What course is the biggest problem? Maybe we can help you study a little."

"Actually, Brandye, your silly putty is helping already. Just looking at it while I am in a carrel makes me feel better. Talking about it with you helped too. Always before, I figured people would think I am going crazy or at least laugh at me. You all are so nice. How long have you known Ralph and Monique? And why is she sometimes Monique and sometimes Monica?"

Brandye laughed. "I know it's confusing. She just feels more like a Monique although the school still lists her as Monica. It seems like I've known them a long time, but it's only since the first of school. Ralph lives in my complex and we eat together sometimes. And Monique is in my learning wing. Do you want their calling codes?"

"No, I do not think so. Not yet. It still seems funny to have a friend. I spent so much time being scared I did not have a chance to get to know anyone. It did not help that my family comes from another country. They were always so afraid I would embarrass them. That is why this has made me so miserable. I keep thinking how they would react if I caused trouble."

"Well, you've got friends now and we won't laugh. At least not at you. We'll find you at lunch tomorrow, so look for us."

"I will. And I will not forget my silly putty." The girls laughed at their shared secret.

After America's face left the screen, Brandye spent some time thinking about America's problem. After a few minutes, she started a Boolean search for school intersected with rules. Her computer indicated thousands of resources, many of them going back a hundred years. She reduced her search area to the previous 50 years. That helped some. She could tell from the titles of the articles that at one time clothing and hair requirements seemed to be the focus of most discussions. Then the regulations outlawing music became a more frequent topic.

She downloaded a few of the articles and began to see a pattern. References to the index of student mental health kept appearing, so she tried a search for it.

It had been established 25 years before, about the time that learning carrels were introduced. One side argued that it was more cost effective to have students access school computers from their home, and the other side believed that child care costs would be reduced if students were tutored from a single location. All kinds of statistics proved that students learned best in carrels. The student health index had been started

as a way to show that students were healthier - at least mentally - in a school environment.

About once a year, some kind of article compared the scores from year to year. The scores had been going down every year since it began. Brandye read all kinds of discussions about why the experts thought this was happening. Some said it represented a trend in the population as a whole – everyone was unhappy. Others said it was the result of an increase in the number of divorces. Someone argued with him, showing that the number of divorces went down for five of the years. Some said it was a fluke. They believed that the test was invalid.

No one talked about the carrels.

Brandye thought that was interesting. She wondered if Mr. Smith would also think it was interesting. She tried to do a search with three parameters: the index and rules and schools, but there were no matches.

About the time she had a grasp of the history, the clock told her that she would have to give up the chase for facts until the next day. She went to sleep looking forward to Mr. Smith's class.

The next day in class when she had a chance, she signaled a request to talk to Mr. Smith.

"Yes, Brandye?"

"Sir, I've been reading about schools and rules and wondered if I could do an article on the subject?"

He looked at her strangely for a moment. "I suppose so. We can always use a feature filler. But it must not interfere with your other work."

"Oh, it won't. I've got a lot of time at home."

"Then, I'd recommend that you begin by doing some in-depth research. Make sure that you are aware of all the factors before you start looking for answers. It will make a difference in the outcome, I can assure you. Tonight, begin by surveying all the sources you can think of. Make a list for me of the places you intend to search. I'll look over them and tomorrow I'll offer additional suggestion. Don't rush this."

"I've already started. But I'm getting really worried. There's too much to read and I haven't even looked at technical material. How do I cut it down?"

Her teacher smiled a look of satisfaction. "Brandye, congratulations. It takes many students years to figure out that they have to work smarter instead of longer. I see real potential here. First of all, you need to think about your search areas. Did you refine the question enough? What limits did you place on the search?"

“Just schools and rules within the last 50 years. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Then survey a few of the sources you found and see if you can see a pattern. Maybe something will occur to you. Don’t get discouraged. All journalists follow a few dead leads before they find the right path.”

Suddenly, Brandye was excited at the opportunity to get to talk about her project with someone - even a teacher.

“I think I know some angles. I’ve been reading about the student health index. Did you know that it has been going down for the last few years?”

“I think I’d read something about that. How do you see that fitting in with your subject?”

“Carrels were put into schools about 25 years ago. They started tracking student mental health at the same time. Every year it gets lower.”

“Whoa. What makes you think there is a significance to such a correlation? Maybe it’s just a coincidence?”

“I don’t think so, but I don’t have to find a way to prove it. I just need it as supporting evidence for my article. I want to talk to students about their feelings. I want to talk to adults who never had to be confined to a carrel. I want to talk to school psychiatrists to see what kind of psychological problems kids have. I can’t believe no one else has looked at this.”

“Actually, I imagine some have. Try looking up outbreaks of rebellion at schools.”

“That’s right. I’ve only been looking up rules. Not people trying to break rules. Thanks, Mr. Smith.”

“I’m glad to see such enthusiasm.”

Brandye flipped open her note pad. “Now, Mr. Smith did you have learning carrels when you were in school?”

For the blink of a moment, the teacher looked surprised at the question. “No, as a matter of fact I didn’t. They were put in the first year I began to teach.”

“Could you give me a summary of your experiences?”

“Since I’ve never taught under any other system, it is hard for me to compare. I can tell you that students learn very well using self-contained learning modules. Discipline is seldom a problem. Test scores began to come up the first few years and remain high. Parents are pleased by the school’s success.”

“Do you see any areas you believe could be improved?”

“I sort of miss the hijinks.”

“Hijinks?”

“Yes, the silly things we used to do. It’s almost like you are robots out there. The articles and photo shots that are turned in are technically correct. Spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure are fine, but there isn’t much zip. I miss the energy. I remember when we were in school. It was Halloween. I was about 14. Mrs. Simple - boy did we have fun with that name. She left the room for just a minute. But we were ready. We took her desk and turned the entire classroom around. Moved everything in a matter of minutes. When she came back in, we had absolutely blank faces. She walked right over to where her desk was supposed to be. Then she just stopped. We couldn’t stand it any longer and burst out laughing.”

“What did she do?”

Mr. Smith’s eyes looked like he was seeing the event from many years before.

“Strangely enough, she turned around to the class and laughed herself. Then she acted like the room had never been moved. We started to move it all back, but she said not to. Told us she wanted to see the look on the next class’s faces.”

“How many students were in your class?”

“I guess about 30, maybe 35.”

“What was that like?”

“I never thought about it. We were used to it. But I can tell you we didn’t learn as much. The teacher was always having to send someone to the office. We’d talk and disrupt things. And no one could tell if you were doing your work. There were computers, but they weren’t tied to a main system. There also weren’t any parental fines if you were a problem. It wasn’t a very efficient system.”

“So you think this one is better?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Thanks Mr. Smith. I appreciate your answers. Do you know of anyone who taught under both systems?”

“I’ll have to think about it. I’m one of the oldest teachers in the system. Most retire by this time. But I’ll let you know if I can come up with anyone.”

“That would be great. I’m going to try to finish up my computer search tonight.” Surprised at her own bravery, Brandye asked one more question, “I also want to talk to Ms. Van Buren. How do I get an appointment - without being in trouble?”

“I’ll take care of that. You just get your questions ready.”

At lunch the next day, all four gathered around what they considered their table. Suddenly Brandye tipped over her milk carton onto the floor. The other three scrambled to help her, but Brandye calmly touched the call pad and waited for the auto sweeper to appear. When it arrived, she looked carefully at the squatty square machine. “Ralph, do you think that’s its access eye – the one that opens the doors?” she said pointing to a tiny red light.

“Probably, but what difference does it make?”

“Well, it just looks like an ordinary infralight. I wonder where we could get something like that?”

Monique smiled. “We have one in the prop room. I saw it the other day. It doesn’t work anymore, but they used it last year for a production of Our Town.”

“Do you know what’s wrong with it?”

“No, it just sits and whirs. It won’t move.”

“Can you get it for us?”

“I don’t think so. Besides its so big. How would I get it out without being caught?”

“Oh, I don’t mean the whole thing. I just need the infralight. I’ll bet I could hook it to a battery.”

Monique looked at Brandye liked she was asking for too much. “I don’t even know how to get it out.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard,” said Ralph. “There’s got to be some way to get into it for repairs.”

“Okay, I’ll try, but I’m an actress not a technician.”

“You’ll probably need some kind of tool,” said Brandye with an encouraging smile.

“There’s a tool box they use to do sets with. I can use what’s in there. I’ll try to get it out during class.”

America could stand it no longer. “Why are you all doing this? You’re going to get into trouble.”

Brandye reached over and patted her hand. “It’s okay. We’re not doing anything wrong. We’re doing this for all of us, but mostly for you. Let’s wait and see if it works. Monique, call me tonight and let me know how it went.”

Once again the signal ended their conversation. Brandye spent the afternoon trying to concentrate on her classes while she wondered if her plan would work.

When Monique's face appeared on the screen that night, Brandye could tell it had gone well. Her face beamed with the enthusiasm she showed only for creative dramatics class. "Well, I have talents I never dreamed of!"

"I gather that means you were successful."

"Yes!" She held up a tiny light with some wires attached. "It wasn't too hard once I figured out that there was a lift-off panel on the front. Those things aren't as complicated inside as I expected."

"Great!" Brandye stared at the little light trying to see exactly what it looked like. It didn't seem too unusual. As a matter of fact, she realized, it looked a lot like the little light in the flashlight she had in her drawer.

Brandye started digging in her desk, as she talked to Monique. "Meet me outside our carrels tomorrow morning. Then don't be too surprised if you see me later." Brandye giggled. Already her mind was spinning with possibilities. "First, I need this flashlight and maybe some new silly putty . . ."

The next morning she waited impatiently for Monique to arrive. The first signal had sounded when she saw her coming down the hall.

"Sorry, but things didn't go too well this morning." She handed the little infralight to Brandye. Brandye could tell Monique wanted to see what she was going to do, but there wasn't time.

Brandye hurried into the small cubicle and coded her screen. She had to wait until mid-morning to signal for an exit. She didn't want to look too obvious, but the wait gave her time to hook the infralight into the flashlight. It worked better than she had expected. She only had to take out the original light and replace it with the one from the auto sweeper. She couldn't believe how easy it was. Now, if it will only work, she thought.

She carefully prepared the silly putty with her thumb print, signaled for an exit, and waited for the door to slide open. She waited a few minutes so that it would seem realistic to the computer that kept track of all the intervals. Then she used the silly putty's thumb print to signal her return by pressing it on her monitor and scooting out of the room before the door closed. Now the computer would think she was inside. Standing outside the door, she felt like an alien. If this didn't work, she was in big trouble. She didn't know how she would get back in before being caught.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brandye turned on the flashlight, beamed it at a spot near the floor, and waited. She had to wave it around a little, but in a moment she heard the click and saw the door slide open. Releasing a sigh of relief which had been stuck in her throat, she returned to her computer and quickly began to work, hoping the interval hadn't been long enough to notify the computer. Her hands were shaking so much she found it hard to key in the correct responses to the questions.

In a few minutes, when she finally relaxed a little, she got back up to trigger the door to close. She was glad that it had stayed open while she worked. She had wondered if it would close by itself. She could hardly wait until lunch to show the others.

But Ralph and America weren't in the lunch room when the other two looked for them. "Maybe they have activity period first. You know they rotate wings. My brother says it's to keep us from getting too used to things," said Monique as they looked around.

"Okay, then let's go find them."

"You're crazy, Brandye. What about lunch?"

"You get our lunches, I'm going to find them."

They weren't hard to find. She wandered casually into the rec room where she found America and Ralph standing around talking like everyone else. For a moment, Brandye was a little angry when she saw them.

"There you are. I've got to talk to you."

"Brandye, what are you doing here? This isn't your rec time, is it?" Ralph looked confused.

"No, I snuck past the monitor." She turned to America and said, "I had to tell you that I found the answer. I know how to fix the door problem."

"You do!"

"Yep. I've got to get back, but I wanted to tell you. Can you meet me right after school?"

"Yes, of course. Where?"

"Let's see. I'll come to your carrel, so just stay there and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Okay if I come too?" Ralph looked a little ignored.

"Oh, yeah. I'll tell Monique to meet us there." Brandye began to move toward the door looking for the monitor.

Just as she nearly got out it, she heard a voice say. "Excuse me, but where are you going?"

She jumped at the sound and turned to find a very stern looking building monitor standing behind her. "Oh, sorry, sir. I just had to come tell my friends something. I just came for a minute."

"Are you aware that the rules do not allow students to move from one area to another?"

"Uh, yes, but . . ."

"And what is your name?"

Brandye wondered how she was going to get herself out of this mess. She tried a smile, hoping it would make things better. It didn't.

"I said, what is your name!"

"Brandye Drinker."

The monitor looked like he didn't believe her. She'd never faced that problem before. Sure, people laughed, but it had never gotten her in trouble. She wondered if her parents had ever considered this side of their little joke on her when they agreed to let Aunt Bess choose her name.

"I know you don't believe me, but it's the truth. My aunt has this weird sense of humor. My name's really Brandye Whyne Drinker. You can check."

The teacher gave her a funny smile like he appreciated the joke. "All right, Brandye. Now, I don't want to have to report you, so follow the rules and don't let me catch you here again."

As Brandye walked away, glad to have survived that brush with the law, she wondered if maybe just once her name had been a help. All she knew was that the building monitor had seemed a little more sympathetic than one might expect.

Monique's worried look changed to curiosity when Brandye sat down and started eating the waiting lunch of spaghetti. "Did you find them?"

"Uh, huh. We're going to meet right after school at America's carrel. I'll show everyone. How hard do you think it would be to get those little lights like you took from the auto sweeper?"

"Brandye, what are you up to now? There aren't any more in the prop room."

"Oh, I know that. I mean where could one buy them?" Brandye had gotten a faraway look and was chewing on her bottom lip in deep thought as the lunch period ended.

When the door slid open at the end of the day, she gathered up silly putty and flashlight and went to meet the others.

They looked at her expectantly as she gathered them together in the carrel. "Does anyone know how long these doors stay open at the end of the day? They don't stay open all night, do they?"

Ralph assumed his best reporter look. "No, or the auto sweeper wouldn't have to be able to access them. It can't be long, let's just wait to see. But, we are dying to know what you've figured out. I couldn't concentrate all afternoon."

The others nodded looking expectantly toward Brandye. Just then the door slid closed. They all looked startled as it came to a close.

"O.K.," Brandye said. "This is great. We'll have a chance to see the solution first hand. America, you are going to thumb print in - but with a difference."

The girl looked confused and scared as she reached toward the computer screen.

"Wait!" Brandye handed her a piece of silly putty and began to demonstrate the thumb print technique.

"That's a great idea," said Monique, "but will it work?"

Her answer came as Brandye touched the screen with the sticky stuff. It indicated an acceptance and waited for a command. "Now, request an exit."

The door slid open.

"Okay gang here's the scenario," said Brandye in her most conspiratorial voice. "Watch!" Brandye proceeded to demonstrate how the light could open and close the door.

"America, all you have to do is enter, thumb in using the silly putty, scoot out before the door closes, and then get the door to open up again using the infralight. Go back in, go to work, and the door stays open because it thinks the sweepers are at work."

"But won't it close eventually?" America didn't look like she completely believed in this solution.

"No, the computer doesn't care how long the sweeper is in here, so it stays open until it leaves and triggers the light on the outside."

Suddenly, on the computer screen, a face appeared. "Is there a problem?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The four conspirators looked guiltily from one to another. Ralph was the first to come up with an answer. "Oh, no. America just forgot something. We're going now." The group backed away and out into the hall.

When they recovered from their fright at nearly being caught, Brandye went back to her original concern. "Now, if I could only figure out where to get infralights for all of us . . ."

"Let me ask my brother's friends." Ralph said. "Some of them are into electronic stuff. Maybe they will know."

"Oh, that would be great. Meet me at dinner and we'll talk about it."

But when Brandye looked for Ralph at dinner, she couldn't find him. She found a one person booth and began to eat. It was the one she used to use all the time. She'd never minded it before, but it had been a long time since she'd eaten alone. It felt strange now. She and Ralph ate together nearly every night. Sometimes one or both of her parents came to eat at the same time, but she'd separate and go to find Ralph. They talked about school, Mr. Smith, and just silly stuff. She never thought of him as a boyfriend even though her folks were always teasing her about it.

"What, no Ralph?" Brandye looked up, startled out of her quiet thoughts.

"Hi, Dad. No, I was supposed to meet him, but he isn't here."

"Then why don't you move over here with me. I never get to see you anymore. I miss our chances to talk. I don't think it will scandalize the rest of the complex if you are seen with an older man."

"Dad, quit it. You know Ralph's just a friend." She was transferring her tray of Beef Stroganoff to the next table. She was glad to have the company even if she wouldn't admit it to her father. And he was right. They hadn't had much chance to talk this year. She had become so wrapped up in school and all of America's problems that there was time for little else.

"So what's going on at school? You know we were very impressed by your articles. What is going to happen to the girl? What was her name?"

"America. And what's happening is awful. They want to transfer her and it's not her fault."

Her father seemed taken aback by her enthusiasm. "Well, that's too bad. She's not an incorrigible is she?"

"Of course not! She's the quietest, nicest person ever. She even wears dresses."

"Well, that certainly doesn't sound like an incorrigible."

Brandye felt a little guilty about not telling him about her solution to America's problem, but it didn't seem like the right time.

"Well, Dad, how's business at the Purple Peanut?"

"Not bad. The lunch trade is holding up pretty well. They didn't need me tonight, so I thought I'd get home in time to eat with you. Your mother thought she might make it too. You know, you and Ralph could take the tram out my way some night to eat. We haven't poisoned anyone in several months."

"Sure, Dad. We could do that, but you know we're pretty busy with homework most nights. This is just quicker."

Her dad gave her a funny sad sort of look. The whole conversation seemed strange to Brandye. She'd hardly seen her parents this year. Her mom's dealership always had some crisis and her dad's restaurant demanded his attention during the evening hours when she was home. It used to bother her, but this year she didn't care at all. It was really more fun to talk with Monique.

Brandye changed the subject. "So, Dad, did you have learning carrels?"

"Not really. They were just coming into the lower grades when I was in high school. They added some each year, and I was gone by the time they reached my level."

"Did you ever talk to anyone who had classrooms and then had carrels?"

"Yeah, I did. My little sister. Your Aunt Bess. She really hated them. Said she missed getting to shoot spit wads." Brandye made herself a note to call Aunt Bess when she got back to the apartment.

"Spit wads?"

Her dad looked at her strangely as the realization came over him that she didn't know what he was talking about. "Little bits of paper that you roll into balls and put in your mouth to get wet. The moisture makes them heavy enough to throw. Although it's better if you have some kind of tube like an empty ball point pen case."

"Yuck. Why would you want to do that?"

"Just for fun. And to aggravate another kid or the teacher."

"And Aunt Bess missed that?"

"That's what she said. She always was a little bit of a mischief maker. My mom, your grandmother, was always having to go to school for something or another that she did. I remember once she . . ." Brandye's dad stopped, as if realizing that some family tales might not be a good idea to share.

The sight of Ralph with his tray ended their conversation.

“Sorry, I’m late. Hi, Mr. Drinker. Mind if I sit with you all?” Ralph breezed in looking like he’d won the lottery.

“Sure, Son. I imagine Brandye would rather talk to you anyway. So, how’s it going?”

“Just fine, Sir.” Ralph turned to Brandye and blurted out. “I got them. That’s why I was late. My brother’s friend had all kinds because he is building some kind of project so closets and drawers can be opened only by authorized personnel. I didn’t understand how he was going to do it, but I got four of them.”

Brandye’s father looked interested. “What are you two up to?”

“Oh, Dad, it’s just an idea for school.” She waved the question away and focused her attention on Ralph.

“That’s great, Ralph. Can you bring a flashlight? I don’t think I have enough. I’ll call Monica and have her bring one too.”

She and Ralph got up to leave about the time her mother arrived. They didn’t notice the look her parents exchanged as she went off chattering.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Brandye returned to her room, she decided to follow up on her idea about calling Aunt Bess. Her aunt's face changed from a frown of aggravation at being interrupted to one of delight when she saw who was calling. "Why Brandye, what a wonderful surprise!" Her aunt's hair was untidy, and she was dressed in old style jeans that looked like they needed to be discarded rather than washed.

"Hi, Aunt Bess. I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Gosh, no. I was just repotting my geraniums. With the weather about to change, I want to keep a few inside for next year. They've been really beautiful this year. I have a purple passion that is nicer than I ever remember. But enough. I know you didn't call to hear about my gardening."

"No, I didn't, but it really is interesting. Sometime I'd like to interview you on your experience with plants. Most people I know don't grow anything. I don't even think about the weather changing."

"I can imagine that's surely true. When they keep you locked up all day in those horrid carrels, why would you care? But here in Arkansas there's still a few of us who think life was meant to be less restrictive. That's what's wrong with the country today. . ." Aunt Bess laughed at her own enthusiasm. "But again, you didn't call to hear me preach from my soapbox. You've heard it enough already."

"Actually, I did sort of call about your soapbox. I have been talking to people about the learning carrels. I'm trying to find people who went to school both ways. Dad didn't. They didn't faze them into his grade level until after he left."

"Lucky duck. He never did appreciate what he had. He always kept telling me that the new way was better, and I should appreciate the improvements in education. He could say that. He didn't have to live with it. I still can't believe they haven't dumped that inhumane method of educating our young as if they are some kind of robots that just need to be trained to perform. Kids aren't robots. They are people who need to have other people around." Brandye was scribbling as fast as she could. Her aunt was talking so fast and furiously that it was hard to keep up.

"Could you say that again?"

"Say what again, child?"

"That part about robots needing to be trained."

"What are you doing? Is this some kind of assignment? And what do you have there?" She pointed at Brandye's note pad.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Mr. Smith told us to explain what we are doing and to ask for permission. I guess I was so excited I forgot. I'm doing a newspaper article on the carrel system of

education for my school paper. But it's really not bad. I'm learning so much and it's such fun."

"And I bet you can't do it locked into a horrid carrel all day."

"Well, yes, most of the time. I've been able to do all my preliminary research using my computer's search, and I can interview most people from my screen. Just like right now."

"But you didn't tell me what that thing is."

"Oh, this is my note pad. Mr. Smith says we won't always have a computer available so we should be prepared to take notes using this. I'm getting used to it."

"I think I might like your Mr. Smith. Say, I knew a Smith in school. Actually, I knew several. But this one was always talking about being an internationally famous reporter. What's your Mr. Smith's name?"

"Benjamin Franklin Smith."

"Thought so. He always was a rabble rouser. Just like me. Tell him hello for me. I always wondered what happened to him. So he's a teacher." Aunt Bess looked like she was seeing into her past and this wasn't getting Brandye what she needed.

"I'll be sure to. But Aunt Bess, what did you specifically object to about carrels?"

"Well, let's see. I felt all closed in. I felt like my mind couldn't get loose to think. There wasn't anybody to talk to. Just those four walls and that computer screen. Nothing seemed real. But mostly I missed the chance to be with flesh and blood people."

"Did you talk to anyone about how you felt?"

"You can be sure of that. I talked until my folks - your grandparents - finally told me they didn't want to hear any more about it. I went to administrators. I even went to the local board of trustees, but they were just figureheads by then. The national board was the one who made the decisions. That's when I started the protest."

"What protest? I don't know anything about a protest."

"Your father didn't tell you? I guess that's not surprising. It got us all into a lot of trouble. They hadn't put much teeth into the fine system or it would have been worse. I guess I was sort of incorrigible."

"You were an Incorrigible!" Brandye nearly gasped.

"No, not like that. At least I wasn't labeled one. Although I guess maybe I was sort of one. I know that I was really angry. I wanted the school to listen. That's why I got all the kids to agree."

“Agree to what?”

“To the shutdown.”

“Shutdown?” Brandye wasn’t sure where this was leading, but it was much more interesting than she had anticipated.

“We shut down our computers.”

“How did you do that?” Brandye was developing frown lines as she tried to follow her aunt’s story.

“We all agreed to unplug them every morning at 10.”

“How could you unplug them?”

Aunt Bess gave a funny little laugh. “That’s true. You can’t unplug them anymore. I always wondered if that was because of our shut down. But we could and we did. Boy, were they mad. It took about a week. We only did it for a minute at a time. And at first only a few of us did it. But you know how kids talk. It must have spread like wildfire. It really messed up the system at our school. I think by the end, some kids at other schools were doing it too.”

“What did they do to you? How did they find out it was your idea?”

The older woman got a gleefully guilty look. “I sort of told them.”

“What! Why?”

“They were threatening to punish everyone. That wasn’t fair. It had been my idea, so I went to the principal and told him. I think he already knew. The only problem was that it was sort of hard to stop once we got it started. Of course, they called in my parents. They were really upset with me. They agreed to transfer me to a private school. I only had 18 months to go to graduation. It was okay with me. At least at the new school they hadn’t installed carrels yet.”

“Do you think you learned better at the new school?”

“Not really. But I was a lot happier. Unfortunately, you can’t measure that very well. That’s always been the problem.”

“Actually, Aunt Bess, that’s not entirely true. Have you ever heard of the student Mental Health Index?”

“Don’t think so. Tell me about it.”

“It’s just a psychological record they’ve been keeping on students for a long time.”

“What does it show?”

“It shows that kids have been getting unhappier for the last 20 years.”

“Bingo!! I knew it. What are you going to do with the information?”

“I’m not sure yet. But with the information I’ve gotten from you and some other resources, I think I’ve got what I need. I really appreciate you talking to me.”

“No problem, Brandye. It’s a pleasure. And holler if I can help in any other way.”

The next morning the four schemers met early and rigged their flashlights. Brandye gave an egg of silly putty to each, and they scurried off to their carrels feeling smug. Brandye again waited an acceptable time to request an exit and then triggered her door to remain open. It was a strange feeling and she kept waiting for someone to notice the open door. She kept glancing toward it all morning and found herself unable to concentrate at times. She wondered what the others were doing. She wanted to go across to Monique’s carrel but couldn’t figure a way to leave without the computer noticing. Somehow it wasn’t much fun.

About eleven, however, a noise on the floor attracted her attention. It was a silly putty egg rolling toward her chair. She heard a giggle come from across the hall and knew Monique had found a way to communicate. She reached down, picked it up, and opened it. Inside was a piece of gum. She popped it into her mouth trying to think of something to send back.

Glancing down, she spied Mr. Smith’s note pad and tore off a piece of paper. She scribbled a note which only said “Thanks. See you at lunch,” but it made her feel like she was getting away with something. She rolled it across the hall and returned to her chair before the history exercise was too far along.

Lunch was fun. She and Monique giggled at the thought of their eggs rolling across the hall. But Ralph and America were once again on opposite schedules, and they missed sharing the laughter with them. Brandye wanted to see how America’s morning had gone. When the bell chimed to have them move to the rec area, she pulled Monique aside. “Let’s stay here. We can get a chance to talk to the others.”

“Brandye, we can’t do that. You know the rules. They’ll find out.”

“I know, but what can it hurt? We won’t be eating or anything. We’ll just move out with the others and then find a way back in.”

Monique looked unhappy at the choice, but followed Brandye’s lead. They managed to get back in without getting caught and found the two others.

America looked up and smiled. “How did you get in? We thought you had a different lunch.” America looked more in control than she had only days before.

“We did, but I wanted to know how it went this morning.”

“Great! Once I had the door open, I never thought about it again. I whizzed through five quadratic equations.”

Monique giggled. “We’ve found a way to get messages to each other. It’s the Silly Putty express.”

Ralph was impressed and promised to try it with America that afternoon. Brandye was surprised to notice that she didn’t want him sending messages to America, which didn’t make much sense to her. After all, she reminded herself, they were all friends.

“Excuse me, Ms. Drinker, but is this your scheduled lunch time?”

Brandye jumped in fright and looked up to see yesterday’s building monitor standing beside her. “Oh. Uh, no, uh, I’m sorry, but I just wanted to talk to my friends.”

“And these others. What lunch are you scheduled for?”

America and Ralph looked scared, but Monique was totally pale. “I, uh, I’m.”

Brandye leaped in. “The others are all where they are supposed to be. I’m the only one who isn’t. I’m sorry. I’ll go back right now.” She got up to leave.

“I don’t believe that you will. This is the second time in two days. I let you off last time. This time I believe we need to look into this more. Come with me.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brandye had no idea what was about to happen. She wondered if they would call her parents. The walk down the hall lasted hours, and she was glad to be told to wait in the chairs in the office when they finally arrived at the office. She didn't even know who the monitor was. He seemed nice enough the other day. He didn't even seem too mad today. Mostly he just looked like one of the many grown-ups in her life or like those she saw on the tram or in the cafeteria. She'd never thought about them much, and she was too scared to think this time.

A man came out of the office and walked toward her. She became frozen as she read his name plate. "Hello. Brandy, is it? I am Juan Velasco, your student liaison." Of course, Brandy knew all about liaisons, but she never expected to need one. They were just for students who were in trouble and needed someone to represent their interests when dealing with school authorities.

This is worse than I thought, she warned herself. The liaison motioned her into a small room. The principal was waiting. Brandy wondered if she sat there all day just waiting for someone to get into trouble. No, she thought, she takes time out for interviews with the journalism class. This made Brandy feel some better, but not a lot.

Then the student liaison voiced Brandy's worst fear. "Ms. Drinker do you want your parents present? In an interview of this nature, it is not required. But I am legally bound to offer you that choice. You are aware that as a minor, the law requires that you have an advocate. The state provides my services to you, and I am on your side."

Brandye's eyes got wide with fear. "But I didn't do anything that bad. I just wanted to talk to my friends."

"I understand that, but in the recording of this meeting, I must first have a statement indicating whether or not you wish to have a parent or guardian present."

"No, that's okay we don't need to call them." Brandy kept shaking her head as if to underline the importance of not calling anyone. Brandy couldn't imagine how her dad would look if he had to come. She didn't want to find out.

"Then the record will show that no parent is requested."

Ms. Van Buren suddenly took over. "Now, the monitor indicates that this is the second time in two days that you have been observed in an area other than the one you are assigned to. The first time your name was recorded, but no action was taken. Today, a monitor found you in the cafeteria with three others. You admitted that you were not in compliance with your schedule. Is this all correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was just talking to my friends. I wasn't doing anything wrong."

“Brandye, we have rules for a reason. With this many students, we cannot allow you to wander at random. What would lunch be like if you could choose to come and go as you please? We couldn’t accommodate all of you at lunch at the same time.”

“Couldn’t we at least eat with our friends?”

“We would surely like to arrange that, but for logistical purposes it is just not possible. Now, I want your assurance that you will abide by our rules. They are there for your safety and convenience. Can you tell me that you will no longer attempt to circumvent your schedule?”

“I guess so.”

“Your previous school record shows no indication of disciplinary problems. I am going to assume that this is a single incident which will not be repeated.”

The principal looked more closely at Brandye making her squirm even more.

“Aren’t you in Mr. Smith’s journalism class?”

Brandye wondered if she were going to get into trouble with him, too.

“Yes.”

“I thought so. I read your article on that unfortunate child America Gratzel. Your editorial was interesting also. I look forward to seeing more of your work. You may return to your carrel. I will see that your absence is accounted for with the computer.”

Brandye tried to leave gracefully, but she felt like a rabbit escaping a large dog. It was hard not to run. She got to her carrel and punched in her code to open the door. Looking down the hall, she could see Monique’s door was open.

Suddenly, the girl’s blond hair appeared. A look of relief on her face spread from ear to ear. “You’re back! I was so worried. Thanks for not telling. How did it go? Did you get into much trouble? What did they say? What are they going to do? Oh, I’ve got to get back. Meet me after school.”

Brandye smiled at the girl’s concern for her. It made her feel better knowing that someone had been worried about her. She had never had anyone but her parents worry about her. It felt better than she expected to have a friend when one was in trouble.

The afternoon went fast enough, and she finally had a chance to talk to Monique. As they walked toward the tram, America and Ralph joined them.

Brandye tried to reassure her friends. “It was okay. I even had a student liaison. The principal just warned me not to do it again.”

Monique started looking concerned again. “You don’t mean even the principal was there! Oh, Brandye, what will your parents say?”

America joined in with more intensity than they had seen before. “Oh, Brandye, I was so worried that you got into trouble because of me. I didn’t even think about my door all afternoon. I just kept rolling my silly putty.”

Ralph’s brown eyes looked worried too. “Yeah, I was wondering if I was going to get to write the story. ‘Student arrested for cafeteria caper’ seemed like a good head.”

She appreciated their concern, but the more they talked the angrier Brandye got about the situation. “You know, I didn’t do anything so terrible. All I wanted was a chance to talk to you all. That’s not so much to ask. I tried to explain to Van Buren, but she didn’t listen. All she kept telling me was that the cafeteria couldn’t handle us if we did. It’s a lot like America’s problem. They keep telling her the school can’t allow her door to remain open. And, Monique, when they won’t let you all do a musical just because of some stupid rule. It makes me mad.”

Ralph laughed and pretended to pound his fist. “Right, what is this a school or a prison? We need to do something about it. They can’t hold us down like this. We have rights too.” His pantomime at an end, he added, “Come on Brandye, you know we have to follow the rules.”

“Ralph, I’m serious. I know that rules are important, but there has to be a better system. And I’m going to find a way.” Ralph gave her a worried look as they got on the tram and waved goodbye to the others.

That night Brandye was surprised that both her parents came home in time for dinner. “Hi. Gosh, how’d you both get home at the same time?”

“Your father and I took the afternoon off to discuss a situation we are not pleased with.” Brandye’s mother looked like the conversation hadn’t gone too well.

Her father motioned for her to sit down. “Brandye, we need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Your mother and I were notified by the student liaison that you had been sent to the office.”

“Oh, that. I didn’t know they would do that. Don’t worry. It was nothing.”

“It didn’t sound like nothing. Tell us about it. We aren’t used to this kind of problem from you. This isn’t like you at all.”

Her mother stood beside him. “Brandye, is it those new friends of yours? Do they get into trouble? Are they getting you into trouble?” Her mother hesitated for a moment as if

afraid to ask the next question. She took a breath, bit her lip and asked, "Are any of them possibly Incurrigibles?"

"No, Mom." A look of dismay came over Brandye's face at this attack on her friends. "I can't believe you'd ask that. They're great. I just wanted to talk to them. That's all. It wasn't a big deal."

"Better start at the beginning," said her dad.

"You don't understand. There is no beginning. I just went to talk to Ralph and America because they had a different lunch schedule and I wouldn't get to see them. The monitor caught me and took me to the office. I won't do it again!"

Her father took over the discussion. "We have considered a number of alternatives. One of them was to remove you from this school and place you in another learning environment, since it appears that this school may be contributing to your defiance."

This was worse than she had thought.

"Oh, Dad. Please don't do that!"

"Actually, that isn't the plan we have decided upon. Instead, we will restrict the time you spend with your friends so that you will only see them at school. One of us will be home in time to eat with you each night, so you will not need to eat with Ralph. If that doesn't improve the problem, we will take other action. Do you understand the situation?"

"But, Dad. I won't get to talk to my friends at all. I can't even see them at school."

"We understand that, but I want you to understand that we love you very much. We are very concerned about this. We have never before had to worry about you or your brother. You realize that you could be labeled an Incurrigible if this problem isn't resolved."

"But that won't happen."

"We have no reason to believe that any longer."

"Yes, you do. I'm telling you." They didn't seem to be hearing her.

Her mother had been standing back during most of the exchange. Now, she stepped forward. "In addition, I'm not at all sure that this is enough punishment. You've got to understand how serious this is."

Her father moved nearer his wife as if he thought she needed physical support from him. "Now, Kay, we've discussed all this. We agreed to give it a chance."

Brandye went over to give her mother a reassuring hug. “I promise. I won’t get into any more trouble. But, Mom. Dad. How long will this last? I really miss my friends. I never had any before.”

“I don’t know,” said her dad. “We’ll just have to see. Now, who’s hungry?”

Brandye wasn’t, but she decided that she wasn’t going to have much choice. Her parents had become her wardens.

Brandye didn’t see Ralph in the cafeteria. She was glad since that would have only made her restrictions seem worse. It was better when dinner was over. It seemed like her parents - mostly her mother - kept watching her for signs of incorrigibility. She wondered if horns appeared on those kids sentenced as Incorrigible.

When they got back to the apartment, she was relieved to have homework as a reason to go to her room. At least her parents couldn’t stop her from doing that. However, even that didn’t fill up the hours till bed. She found herself rolling silly putty with a vengeance as a way to counter the feeling of frustration that gnawed at her.

The next morning, Brandye saw Monica as soon as she got to her carrel.

“What happened? I tried to call, but I got a ‘Brandye is not receiving calls at this time.’ message.”

“You’re kidding. I didn’t know they had done that too. I can’t believe I’m in such a prison. They won’t let me see anyone. I can’t see either you or Ralph. All I can do is come to school. They are really mad.”

“What happened?”

“The school notified them about me being in the wrong area.”

Monique’s blue eyes got round. “They did? I didn’t know that they’d do that.”

Then in a whisper Brandye added, “They might label me an Incorrigible.”

Monique’s eyes got even wider and she backed away as if afraid of contamination. “An Incorrigible! Oh, no!”

The chime sounded for the girls to enter their carrels before Brandye could explain any more. The day didn’t go well. She was prodded twice by the computer for failure to respond in a reasonable time. She found it getting harder and harder to focus on each lesson.

When her father came in the door that night, Brandye was waiting for him.

He smiled at her as he came in the door. “So, how’s the homework going?”

She was not interested in pleasant chatting. “I’m finished with it. Why didn’t you tell me you had restricted my communication access? You just said I couldn’t see my friends.”

“I guess I didn’t think about it. Your mother . . . and I . . . just thought that it would be a good way to insure that you weren’t distracted by your friends.”

“Well, I think it was absolutely unreasonable. The least you could have done was tell me. I can’t believe you all are acting this way. I’m not a criminal. I didn’t know I’d done anything all that wrong. When do you plan to lift the restriction?”

“I suppose when we are convinced that you are responsible enough to handle it.” Her father’s eyes were getting dark with anger. Brandye’s matched his. Suddenly, she didn’t care if she were an incorrigible. It was too much to bear.

“I can assure you that I am responsible enough now. For all these years, you’ve trusted me. I came home, I did my homework, I took care of myself, I ate by myself when no one was here. Now all of the sudden, I’m an incorrigible.”

“Not incorrigible. But not the Brandye we once knew.”

“I can’t stay the Brandye you once knew. I’m me. I can’t always be the perfect little Brandye Whyne who wanted to be invisible. But I haven’t done anything wrong. It’s the school that’s wrong and I’m going to prove it.” She walked off with her head held high, ignoring the look of distress on her father’s face.

In a few minutes, he came to her door. “Are you interested in getting something to eat, or do you intend to sit in your room all night and pout?”

His words made her so angry she could barely speak through her teeth. “No thank you. I don’t believe I do. Feel free to go without me. And it’s fine to place the barrier code on the door. I wouldn’t want you to worry that I might leave without permission.” The sarcasm deepened the anger between the two.

“Fine. I’ll be back later.”

The silence in the house seemed louder than she remembered. She was used to being alone, but this aloneness was not friendly. She wondered when her brother would be home, or her mother. For a moment she considered going down to the cafeteria after all, but changed her mind. She was still too angry. She knew she would just continue the fight with her father.

Tears rolled down her face. “What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with everybody? All we want is a chance to be with our friends and not feel so alone in the carrels. Why don’t they understand? What was it like when they were in school? Didn’t they feel the same way?”

She was so unhappy that she didn’t notice when her father returned although she did hear her mother come in. She could hear her folks talking in the next room in concerned

whispers. She heard their whispers rise and fall in anxious talk. She didn't hear her mother say, "I'm going to talk to the school tomorrow. I think it's time to get some help with this. We can't let this continue."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next morning while she was trying to choose between Napoleon and Mussolini as an answer suddenly her screen cleared. It notified her that she was to go to the office of Dr. Tal Smitherman. There was a map showing her the way from her carrel. It took her a moment to realize that this was the school psychiatrist. The thought came to her that no student could be declared an incorrigible until the psychiatrist had investigated.

Maybe I really am in incorrigible and this is the first step. I don't think I would like that at all. I wonder what they let you carry with you. They probably don't let you take journalism either.

Mr. Smitherman's carrel didn't look much different from a teacher's. It had the same desk and chairs that Mr. Smith's had. Once again Brandye found herself rubbing the smooth silly putty case in her pocket.

Her thoughts were not comforting.

"Sit down, Brandye. How are things going for you?"

She didn't trust his friendliness. But he did have nice eyes. They were brown like Ralph's. They were soft and accepting. They were the kind of eyes that didn't seem to always be looking for someone to make a mistake.

"OK., I guess." Brandye waited for him to make the next move. He leaned back in the chair and then forward, reaching for a small black platform with tiny figures stuck on it. He began to pull the figures apart. They were magnetized. Brandye found herself forgetting the purpose of the visit as she watched him stack one on another. In a moment, they toppled over and the psychiatrist laughed.

"Want to try? I can never get more than five."

Brandye leaned over and began to move them carefully into an upward pyramid.

"You're doing a good job. I'll bet you're one of those who attends to details."

"Sometimes. If it's something I care about."

"I've been reading your work in The Blizzard. It's nice stuff. I really liked the one on America. Did you always want to be a journalist?"

"No! As a matter of fact, I wanted out of the class when I first started. I didn't understand why they put me in there. That's when I first found out about America and the door."

Brandye added one more figure to the top of the pyramid. It was too much. The small metal figures crashed.

Dr. Smitherman handed them back to her. "You did better than I. You had six." He again leaned back in his chair. "How did you meet America while trying to get out of journalism?"

"I was in the office looking for someone to complain to and heard her talking. Do you know her?"

"Yes, we've talked some. She's a very interesting person. I know she appreciates the silly putty."

"She told you about that!"

"Uh, huh. She even lets me roll it occasionally." Brandye could imagine the sight.

"Is she going to have to leave?"

"Not if I can do anything about it. Her grades have come up and she is doing better."

"I know that, so it's not fair to send her away. She's not an Incurable or anything." The sound of the dreaded word hung in the air scaring Brandye. For a moment nothing happened.

The psychiatrist broke the silence. "I don't believe she is either. How do you feel about Incurables, Brandye?"

Brandye's eyelids began to flutter as if she were afraid to let anyone see into her thoughts. "They're terrible."

"How do you know?"

"Everyone knows. My parents . . ."

Breaking into her discomfort, Smitherman changed the direction of the conversation.

"Let's talk about this project of yours. I understand that you've put in a lot of work on it."

"You know about that also?"

"Yes, Mr. Smith tells me you are very curious about schools and their rules."

"Yes, and what I need to know is what you can tell me about the Mental Health Index."

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," added the psychiatrist. "There's nothing to it. It's something that the media latched onto and keeps dredging back up. There's no scientific evidence. Originally, it was just a hodgepodge of anecdotal responses that the press picked up as scientific

evidence. Now, about every six months, some mention of it reappears. There is absolutely no correlation between the use of carrels and student 'happiness.' Whatever that is."

Brandye sat in the chair with a look of dismay on her face. She was too surprised to do anything else. She could feel all her plans falling into small pieces around her like confetti. She had no idea what to do next.

Dr. Smitherman jerked her thoughts back from her predicament. "So what else can I tell you?"

"I guess there isn't anything else."

"You seem to be having trouble with rules lately. I understand that you brought a recording device to school?" Brandye's eyes widened. What else did this man know?

"Just to record my interview with America. I was afraid I'd miss something important."

"Are you aware that such devices are not allowed at school?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"I'm afraid there are no exceptions. I want your assurance that it won't happen again."

"Oh, it won't. I'm really getting much better at taking notes during interviews. I won't need it."

"I'm glad to hear that. I've enjoyed our little chat. Come back again anytime and I'll let you aim for a seven person pyramid." He ushered her from the room and the door slid shut. Brandye wasn't sure what to think about her meeting. He had seemed friendly enough.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In spite of Dr. Smitherman's comments about the Mental Health Index, Brandye looked forward to her time in journalism. She wanted some more answers. She hadn't been able to talk to Mr. Smith for several days, but she was going to make sure she did today.

"Mr. Smith, my Aunt Bess said to tell you hello."

"Bess Drinker! I haven't heard anything from her in years. And how is she doing?"

"She's still in Arkansas."

"I'll bet even in Arkansas she is stirring up excitement."

"I don't know. Nobody has said anything."

"So you talked to her?"

"Uh, huh. I didn't know about the shutdown. It's pretty interesting."

"True. I was wondering if anyone would tell you about that. And what are you going to do with the information?"

"I have an idea. But I still need to talk to few more people. Am I going to be able to interview the principal?"

"Yes, I've talked to her and you can go this afternoon. Be sure that you have your questions prepared. You don't want to look like an amateur."

"I won't." Brandye wasn't sure she could live till the end of the day. The principal's interview was all she could think about. It made her forget her time with Smitherman.

Brandye was glad she was wearing her favorite emerald green jumps as she sat outside the principal's office waiting. It made her feel a little better. She laughed to herself as she thought, I've spent more time outside the office this year than all my other years put together. Maybe I am turning into an Incurable.

The door opened and the principal walked out slowly. Brandye jumped up, scrambling for her note pad. "Come in Brandye. I'm delighted to have a chance to talk with you for something other than disciplinary purposes."

"Me, too, Ms. Van Buren."

Brandye followed the woman into the office and tried to look as if she knew what she was doing. The room didn't seem any bigger than the last time. Ms. Van Buren sat in one of the chairs and motioned Brandye to the other. As she sat across from the principal, the woman folded her hands under her chin. Brandye thought the principal was the one who looked like she knew what she was doing.

“So what do you need from me?”

“I was wondering if you have ever had any other problems in the past with students unhappy about the carrels and being locked in?”

“Let me think.” The principal pressed her lips together and rolled her eyes back in thought.

“A couple of times. Usually it’s just a phase a child is going through. The system monitors itself so well that there is little students can do to defeat the process. They don’t have any choice but to comply.”

“Did you have carrels when you were in school?”

“Yes, for the last few years. They had only just begun to install them when I entered middle school.”

“Did you like them?”

“Actually, yes I did. I found it easier to learn. There were far fewer distractions. I could concentrate without some other student creating a disturbance. I could work at my own pace. I didn’t have to wait while a teacher dealt with some incorrigible. Of course, then we didn’t deal with incorrigibles as we do today. Instead, we let them run our schools.” The principal took a deep breath as if surprised at the strength of her outburst. Her hands were now clenched instead of folded.

“I suppose I sound like I’m preaching. It’s just that I believe very strongly that carrels have done more to improve education than any other change we have made in education.”

“But what about kids like America who can’t think while they are in a carrel?”

“I find it hard to believe that anyone is that distracted by a closed door. After all, one may request an exit at any time. Some students feel it is necessary to attract attention. We, as a school, deal with those problems regularly. Appropriate action is taken when necessary.” Ms. Van Buren’s mouth tightened as she spoke.

“Does that mean you will transfer her?”

“Brandye, that is not information I can discuss with you. I can assure you that the appropriate action will be taken.”

Brandye looked down at her note pad hoping to find the next question. She was afraid she had made the administrator angry with her questions, but she couldn’t stop. She decided to try another set of questions.

“Ms. Van Buren, how many interactive classes do we have? And do you think we should have more?”

“Interactive classes are essential to the development of certain skills. However, I think they are frequently overrated. They are expensive to maintain in both space and personnel. We can offer far more cost effective instruction using national instruction lecturers or preprogrammed materials. Interactive classes frequently require a classroom or lab and an individual instructor. Discipline is always far more of a problem in these situations. I would not encourage more such classes for our school.”

“And how many do we offer now?”

“Let me think. We have athletic programs, drama, journalism, speech, and art. I believe in the past we offered music, but of course, with the regulations regarding music in schools, that was abolished.”

“Thank you very much, Ms. Van Buren. I appreciate you being willing to talk to me. Oh, what can you tell me about the student Mental Health Index?”

The principal’s eyes opened wide for a brief moment and then closed down again. “Why, Brandye, what makes you ask about that?”

“I’ve just been reading about it. What is it?”

“Just some figures they compile based upon a number of variables.”

“Variables?”

“Yes, just like in math. A number that changes depending upon the circumstances.”

“What does it show?”

“A variable shows . . .”

“No, I’m sorry, what does the Mental Health Index show?”

“It depends on how you evaluate the data and how accurate the data is.”

Brandye was beginning to think she wasn’t going to get an answer. “What do you think it shows?”

“I don’t believe it shows anything because they use data which is too subjective and too dependent upon whim.”

The principal stood up and Brandye knew that there would be no more answers. She gathered her note pad and left.

She sat in her carrel looking around at the walls and imagined a school filled with classrooms filled with kids. She didn’t know if she would like it or not. At times, she liked her safe little carrel. She knew what to expect. She found some of the classes interesting. Brandye didn’t think others would be fun even if there were other people

around. But she didn't think that rotating lunches was necessary. She also didn't think someone like America should suffer. And Monique should get to have her musical.

She was determined to find a way to make some things better.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

That night her terminal stared back at her in defiance. Brandye was lost. For a few days the excitement of the search had filled her hours. She had begun to have a sense of power at the thought that she might be able to make some sense of the school system and maybe even make some difference. Her enthusiasm drained away leaving a puddle of misery. All that was left was trouble at school, a set of parents who thought she was an incorrigible, and no friends to talk to. Even iridescent orange silly putty didn't help. What she did know was that she believed in the Mental Health Index no matter what Ms. Van Buren or Dr. Smitherman said.

Brandye spent the night at her computer writing furiously. She was ready the next day when she got to school, but she had to wait until that afternoon for Mr. Smith's class.

She didn't get a chance to talk to him until nearly the end of class time. "Sir, I have an editorial I wish to submit."

"That's fine, Ms. Drinker."

"It is listed as 'freedom' in my file."

"I'll be very interested to read it and to consider it for publication."

Brandye smiled for the first time that day. She wanted out from under the cloud of anger and disappointment at the adults around her that had hung over her since the day before. Having turned in the article helped some. She even considered requesting an exit and opening her door, but school was nearly over.

She saw Ralph on the way home but didn't tell him anything. She wanted to surprise everyone.

The next day she hoped Mr. Smith would say something about the article, but he didn't until the end of class. "Ms. Drinker, your point of view is well taken. I would like to see it in print, but that will not be possible."

"Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing is wrong with the quality of writing. You are actually turning into a good journalist. However, the material is inflammatory, and the school will not allow us to include it in the publication. I know that is difficult to accept, but it is a fact that the school must protect its interests. I don't particularly approve of this form of control, but . . ."

"What can I change to make it okay?"

"I don't believe that there is anything you can do without sacrificing the heart of your argument. However, you are free to try, and I will re-read it."

That night Brandye tried to re-word the article in some way that might make it acceptable. She wasn't sure what was "inflammatory" but she did her best to sound a little less angry. She wasn't satisfied when she gave up. Mr. Smith had been right. It was hard to cut out much without losing what she wanted to say.

She tried to talk to her dad, but he wasn't very sympathetic. "Brandye, schools have rules for good reasons. They don't write them just to make you miserable. They have many students to care for. Without a consistent method of handling them, there would be chaos."

"But, Dad, I'm not talking about anything that would hurt anyone. I just want to be able to see my friends."

Her brother Jack had been listening with interest. "Hey, little sis, don't fight the small stuff. It's not that big a deal. You know they rotate you, so it won't be long until your friends will have the same lunch again."

"Jack, you don't understand. It's not just lunch. It's all of it."

"Whoa, Brandye," said her dad. "This isn't like you. Don't get into such an uproar. It can't be all that bad."

Brandye stormed from the room again, unwilling to hear any more consoling words. This time, however her father didn't give her that option. "Young lady, come back here right now. That's no way to handle this situation. We need to talk this out."

She returned unwillingly, giving her father and brother glaring looks as if to show them that she would return but not listen. "Now, tell me from the beginning what is bothering you so much. It can't just be this lunch thing. Even I'm beginning to worry about your incorrigibility."

"Dad, we can't do anything. Monique wants to do a musical. The school won't let her because of that stupid rule against music. America can't stand to have the door closed, but the school says the computer isn't prepared to handle open doors. I can't even see or talk to my friends unless it is lunch or rec period and we have the same schedule. All I ever see is a monitor and review drills or faces. If I stop for even a minute, the computer alerts on us and records the infraction. And when I wrote about it, Mr. Smith said it was inflammatory and won't print it. It's not fair!"

Having run out of breath, Brandye stopped to see what the reaction was to her tirade. She hoped her father might have a suggestion. Instead, he only looked worried.

"I can see this is really upsetting you. I wish I could think of something reassuring to tell you. We all face times when others seem to be controlling our lives. There's not much we can do about it. I suppose you have talked to the administration about your concerns."

“Well, no. They won’t listen. They made the rules.”

“Probably, but it is worth a try.”

Brandye didn’t think it was. She thought she’d try something else instead. It took her a while, but she finished that night.

The next day at school she waited as long as she could to signal for an exit. She took her time returning to her console and then used the silly putty trick to make the door remain open. She found that she could leave for a few minutes at every change of lesson if she anticipated her timing carefully. The computer didn’t alert as quickly at those times. She used the minutes to slip copies of her editorial under the door of the carrels in her wing. About an hour after she started, Monique’s door opened.

“Brandye, what is this?”

“Just a way to get our point across.”

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll get into trouble?”

“Why should I? I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, don’t worry. I’ll see you at lunch.”

Brandye spent the time in class when she wasn’t out in the hall, trying to figure a way to get to the other wings. As a result, she wasn’t paying attention in speech.

“Brandye, I asked what your opinion was.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. My opinion about what?”

“Our school colors!”

“Oh, they’re fine. Who picked them out?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps you could research that for us next time.”

“Oh, I will.” Brandye just wanted to get Ms. Sampson off her back. She didn’t need any more teacher trouble.

At lunch she noticed some kids with printouts. They were reading them to others and seemed to be talking about them. Monique even had hers.

“How many of these did you hand out?”

“Oh, just our wing. What do you think?”

“Well, I agree, of course. Why didn’t you just put it in the paper?”

“Because Mr. Smith said he couldn’t print it. I’m just so tired of being told no. I wanted someone to have a chance to read it.”

“Gosh, Brandye, do you really think it’s that bad? I mean, sure, I want to do the musical, but it’s not life or death.”

“Well, at least I tried.”

When Brandye returned from PE, a message was waiting for her. She had just logged on when it appeared. “Please come to the office immediately.” Her door opened as if waiting for her. She thought to gather an egg of silly putty and left the small room. She took time to signal a close not knowing how long she would be gone.

Once again she found herself sitting in the waiting chairs. This is getting to be a habit, she thought to herself. And, again the student liaison came to get her.

“Brandye, I’m surprised to meeting you here again.”

“You’re not the only one. Do you have any idea why I was called? I haven’t been anywhere I wasn’t supposed to be.”

Oops, she thought at her inaccuracy, Well at least not that anyone knows about.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Ms. Drinker, I have called you here to discuss this printout that was found in the cafeteria. Can you give me some information?” The principal’s face looked stern and angrier than Brandye thought was necessary. Brandye couldn’t imagine what was making her so upset.

“Yes. I guess I can. It’s not that big a deal. I just wanted to tell other kids what was going on.”

“Is it true that Mr. Smith, your journalism teacher, already told you he would not print inflammatory material?”

“Sure, but he didn’t print it. I did.”

The student liaison interrupted. “Then perhaps we have a misunderstanding here. Do you realize that the nature of your editorial would be inflammatory no matter who printed it?”

“It didn’t seem inflammatory to me at all. I couldn’t see why he wouldn’t print it. I even tried to change it, but he was right. It didn’t come out like I wanted it to.”

The principal still wasn’t smiling. “Are you aware that the code of student conduct prohibits student publications without the consent of the administration?”

“But this wasn’t a student publication. It was just a printout from my computer at home.”

“Ms. Drinker. That will be enough arguing. You have committed a serious breach of conduct. We cannot tolerate these actions, and we will not. I am instructing the liaison to contact your parents and have them meet with us. Until they arrive, you are to return to your carrel and continue your work.”

Brandye backed out of the room wondering what hornet’s nest she had tripped over. She didn’t think her parents were going to be too pleased, but surely they would see her side of all this. She rolled the plastic egg in her pocket as she walked back toward her carrel.

The wait took a long time. Finally, the message came instructing her to return to the office. Then she wished the wait had been even longer. Her parents were standing at the waiting chairs. Their expression told her that she was right about them not being too pleased.

When the student liaison appeared, her father broke the silence. “Sir, may we have a chance to talk to our daughter alone for a few minutes to hear her side?” With a grim nod, the liaison took them into a small room and closed the door behind him.

“Mom. Dad. I’m really sorry. I don’t know why they are making such a big deal of all of this. I didn’t do anything. I just handed out some printouts of my editorial they wouldn’t put in the school paper. I didn’t hurt anything.”

Her dad looked more concerned than she would have liked. “Brandye, do you realize that you have violated a strict school regulation? We sign an agreement every year that indicates you are aware of the school rules. This is one of them.”

“But, Dad, I didn’t . . .”

It was her mother’s turn. “Brandye, that’s not the point. The school believes you have broken a rule or they would not have called us here. You know we’ve been worried about the change in your behavior. You are not the child we are used to. I really think those friends of yours have been a bad influence.”

Brandye began to cry. It wasn’t what she wanted, but she couldn’t help it. All the frustrations of the last few days took over. Her dad reached out to give her a hug, but she pulled away. “I can’t believe you are on their side. I didn’t do anything. Why can’t you understand that.”

“Brandye,” her father said, “we do understand that you were unaware that a rule had been broken. We are on your side. We love you and want to help you.”

“The important thing,” said her mother, “is that we get this mess straightened out. We want your assurance that this will not happen again. You have never been a discipline problem and that should be in your favor.”

“But, Mom, what about my side? What about the musical, and lunch, and America’s door? Am I supposed to forget about all that?”

“If that’s what the school wants, then yes. Those things are none of your business. Your business is to go to school and learn. You can talk to your friends some other time. America’s door is her problem, and you know as well as I do that no music can be allowed at school. We’ve discussed that with both you and your brother often enough.”

Through her tears, Brandye looked at her mother. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She’d never crossed her mother before. She’d never wanted to. She’d always tried to do what her parents had wanted.

Brandye reached over for a tissue on the table and blew her nose. Things had changed. No one was going to help her. If things were going to work out, then she would have to do it. The girl’s eyes turned dark with determination. Straightening her shoulders, she turned to her parents. “Okay. What do you want me to do?”

Her parents looked pleased and relieved. Her father grimly suggested, “Let’s go talk to them and get this over with.”

Brandye took the lead and walked out of the room.

They took their place in the chairs again while the liaison went to get Ms. Van Buren. Brandye felt she knew the waiting chairs very well now. She stuffed the wet tissue in the pocket of her jumps and waited.

The principal arrived with handshakes for all as if they were there to buy a car. The adults' eyes met over Brandye's head looking as though they would be glad to finish with the details of an unsavory deal. Then for the third time, Brandye found herself in the principal's office. It was crowded. The adults moved chairs around trying to make the room not seem so small. Brandye took her seat and waited.

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Drinker, for taking the time out of your schedules to come discuss this matter with us. We have found that students respond more quickly to discipline interviews if their parents are present. That way we, as a school, know that you are fully aware of the situation."

"Thank you, Ms. Van Buren, Brandye's mother and I fully agree. We have talked with her and she understands the seriousness of her actions."

Coming to Brandye's defense, her mother added, "But you realize that Brandye is not an incorrigible. We have never had so much as a tardy fine for her."

"I understand that. However, her recent actions make me wonder if her behavior pattern has changed. We are beginning to see a trend here that worries me. She cannot be allowed to break the school rules with impunity." Ms. Van Buren was beginning to scare Brandye. She still didn't think she had done anything all that wrong, but she did seem to be in real trouble.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brandye looked around the room wondering if she could get herself out of the predicament facing her. She didn't want to lie. She didn't want to tell them she regretted her actions because she didn't. She'd never been in such a difficult position in her life. She was scared. The tears which had begun to roll down her cheeks again weren't washing away any of the fright. They just added to her misery.

The principal continued. "I must advise each of you that these proceedings are being recorded. Are there any objections?"

"Is that really necessary?" asked Brandye's father.

"Yes, Mr. Drinker, it is. If we find it necessary to take extraordinary action, these records will be vital."

"Do we need a lawyer then?"

"Mr. Velasco, your student liaison, can act as your advocate; however, we can adjourn until you secure outside legal council if you wish."

Brandye watched her father's eyes while she wondered what he would do. She didn't want this to wait. It had been awful enough earlier.

"I can't believe this is serious enough for that. I'm sure Mr. Velasco can give us whatever advice we need. Sure go ahead." Her mother nodded in agreement and reached out to squeeze her husband's hand. They both looked at Brandye with so much concern that it made her heart hurt. She was beginning to wish she had never thought of the editorial.

The principal opened a file sitting before her. "Before we look into this most recent matter, let's review Brandye's history of infractions. We have two notices for failure to remain in a designated area. The first time she was given a warning and the second we notified you. Is that correct?"

Brandye nodded.

"I also see here a note from the psychiatrist that indicates that indicates you brought a recording device to school earlier this year. Is that true also?"

Again Brandye nodded.

"Why weren't we notified about that?" asked her father. His forehead wrinkled in worry.

"I have to admit, Mr. Drinker, that until I reviewed her files before you arrived I too was unaware of this. It appears that the information was acquired after the incident and was merely placed here for future reference. I believe you can begin to see why I am having such grave concerns about Brandye's behavior.

She turned to Brandye. "Can you give us your version of this story?"

"Ms. Van Buren, it's just like I told you. I didn't know that I couldn't print the editorial. I just thought the school couldn't. I didn't mean to do anything wrong."

"Tell me, how did you get this 'underground' newspaper into the hands of the students? Did you hand them out at lunch?"

Suddenly Brandye realized that her trouble was even worse than she thought. They didn't know about the doors and she didn't want to tell them. She found herself stuttering an answer. "Uh, Uh, y . . . e . . . s."

"That's not a very confident answer. Did you hand them out at other places?"

Again, she couldn't answer with any comfort. "No, not really."

"Brandye," intervened her father, "that's no way to answer Ms. Van Buren. Either you did or you didn't. Which was it?"

Brandye put her head into her hands as if hoping when she looked up all this would go away. It didn't.

"Brandye, look at us," insisted her mother. "Why won't you give us an answer?"

Taking a deep breath, she looked up at her mother knowing that what she was going to say was not going to make things any better. Brandye reached into her pocket for the plastic egg of putty and squeezed it tightly in her hand.

"I didn't hand them out. I slid them under the doors into the carrels."

"Why didn't you tell us that before," asked her mother.

The principal interrupted. "When did you pass these out?"

"This morning."

Ms. Van Buren had a puzzled look. "When this morning?"

"I don't remember."

This time her father interrupted. "Brandye, that's not an answer. When did you do this?"

"Dad, I really don't remember. It took most of the morning."

"Most of the morning! How could that be? You're in class, aren't you." Her father turned to the principal for confirmation.

"Yes, Brandye is supposed to be in class. How did you get out of class?"

“I requested an exit.”

“That would not have allowed enough time. Monitors would have come to check on you.”

“But they didn’t.”

Ms. Van Buren’s squinted with a look of concentration. “Why didn’t they come, Brandy?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Brandye gave up. It was no use. They would find out eventually. "Because I signaled that I was back and then used an infralight to get back in."

Her father looked up suddenly. "That's why you wanted the light."

"Yes, Dad. Ralph got them for us." Immediately, she regretted those last words.

"Us, who is us?" asked the principal.

This time her mother jumped in. "I told you it was those friends of hers. They're the ones to blame. She would never have done this alone."

"No, Mom. That's not true. I was the one to think it up. They just helped me when I showed them how." She turned back to the principal. "The others didn't do anything. It really was just me."

The principal seemed stunned at the information she had just heard. "Are you telling me that you figured a way to leave your carrel without the computer registering it?"

"Yes ma'am."

"How?"

Brandye opened her hand and revealed the silly putty egg clutched there. As she opened it, she explained her plan to the adults sitting around her. Anger, concern, and amazement were visible on their faces.

"Ms. Van Buren, I'm sorry that I broke the school rules. I really didn't think I was doing anything very wrong." Brandye was looking her straight in the eye, hoping that might make a good impression. She needed all the good impressions she could get.

"Mom. Dad. I'm sorry you had to come here. I know that I've been acting different. But it really is a good different, not a bad one." She turned back again to face the severe looking principal.

"Ms. Van Buren, I promise not to send out any more of my letters to the students. I promise not to go to the other recreational area during lunch. Or to do anything else I'm not supposed to."

"I'm glad to hear that you accept the fact that you have not been obeying school rules. That is a positive step. It is unfortunate that you were not made sufficiently aware of what those rules were." The principal glanced toward her parents and back toward Brandye. "However, that doesn't remove the need for some kind of disciplinary action."

"Oh, I didn't think it did. I just wanted you to know that I won't do anything else."

Nothing Brandye said seemed to be making any difference. The principal still looked severe. "Brandye, it is true that you do not have a previous record of infractions, but I must see that you understand the seriousness of your actions. The woman waited a moment to let her statement sink in. "So I am imposing a quarantine while we consider a ruling of incorrigibility."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Both Brandye and her parents gasped at the severity of the punishment.

The principal went on, as if unaware of their response. “During this time, you will be restricted to your carrel. Your lunch will be brought to you, and you will not be allowed recreational interaction with other students. I am quite concerned that you may be infecting other students with your incorrigible attitude. You will not be allowed to request an exit, and you will be detained for 15 minutes at the end of the school day so others may leave first. Your parents should arrange for you to arrive 15 minutes after the other students. If they do this, no penalty for lateness will be assessed.”

Brandye’s mother broke in. Her voice sounded desperate. “But she’s not an Incorrigible.”

“I do not know that, Mrs. Drinker. She is on a very dangerous path.”

Brandye watched her mother’s eyes fill with tears and her father reach over to comfort his wife. Brandye couldn’t believe this was happening. Why was Mrs. Van Buren saying such terrible things about her to her parents?

Looking more worried than she had ever seen him, her father turned to the principal. “Ms. Van Buren, how long will it take for the decision to be made?”

“Mr. Drinker, there will be a probationary period during which we will be observing and monitoring Brandye’s behavior very carefully. We do not want to rush this or make a hasty decision. However, before all this occurs I will hold a formal hearing tomorrow. This will allow us the chance to hear from Brandye’s teachers and others involved in this episode.”

“And what happens after the probation?”

“A decision will be made regarding her status as an Incorrigible.”

Stumbling over his words, her father asked, “Do we have any other choices?”

“Mr. Drinker, this is a very serious step. I would hope that before any decision is made that you and your wife will review all options for Brandye.”

Brandye’s mother was holding her head and crying into her hands. Brandye didn’t know how to make things better for her, but she wanted to. Even her father’s shoulders seemed to sag. She’d never seen either of her parents like this, and she didn’t like it.

The principal turned to Brandye again. “Brandye, do you understand these restrictions?”

“Yes. I guess so. I have to stay in my carrel and I can’t go to lunch with my friends.”

“And your behavior will be monitored carefully.”

Brandye tried to smile. It didn't come. She wasn't sure she remembered how.

"If all this is clear, then you may return to your carrel."

Brandye turned to hug her parents. It wasn't very satisfying. Her father returned her hug with a warning. "Your mother and I will see you tonight. We will both be home in time for dinner. Wait for us." Brandye just wanted to get back to the security of her carrel.

Again feeling like a rabbit escaping a trap, she left the principal's office. She really wanted to talk to Monique, but she couldn't afford any trouble. That was the most important thing at the moment. Everything would have to wait until she could think through what had happened. She was too scared to think right now.

The rest of the day passed in a daze. She answered questions by rote not even thinking about them. She was beginning to understand why America's grades dropped. It was very hard to think about school when so many other things on her mind kept crowding out school thoughts. The word "Incorrigible" echoed through her head. It still didn't seem possible. Incorporrigibles wore horns. Incorporrigibles were sent away. No one ever saw an Incorporrigible. How could she be one? She hadn't meant to get into trouble. She had just wanted to help. She hadn't done it for herself. She had done it so America wouldn't have to go away. She had done it so Monique could have her play.

By the time Brandye got home, she didn't know what she thought. She sat huddled on her bed just waiting for her parents to arrive. She didn't want to face them, but she could find no way out.

It seemed to take forever. She had thought they would be home early. They were not. When she finally heard the door slide open, she breathed with relief. It was better than waiting. Suddenly she realized that there was another voice added to the two she was used to hearing.

Her mother appeared at the door of her room. Brandye looked up from her misery and saw a familiar face standing behind her mother. Her short cropped hair sprang out as if unruliness were part of its life. "Aunt Bess!"

"Hi, kid. I hear you've got yourself into some trouble."

Brandye ran to her aunt and hugged her, for the first time in many hours feeling some safety. Through her tears, she looked up at her mother who was actually looking down with a soft smile. "You two take a few minutes to talk. Then we'll get something to eat. I think we have much to discuss as a family."

Aunt and niece sat down on the bed, rolling gently together on the air pockets before finally managing an upright position. "So tell me about it."

"Aunt Bess, I was just trying to help. I wrote an editorial talking about the carrels and the Mental Health Index, but they wouldn't print it, so I did."

“I see. What did I hear about doors and silly putty?”

“Oh, I just found a way to make the doors stay open, so we weren’t locked in all the time. See America got locked in once and she was going to be transferred because she couldn’t concentrate.”

Her aunt didn’t seem concerned that there was no logic to Brandye’s explanation. Instead she listened and nodded.

“Do you have a copy of this infamous piece of journalism?”

“Uh, huh. I made copies here at home on my printer since the school wouldn’t.” She handed the one page “broadside” to her aunt. Brandye watched the older woman intently as she read the editorial.

“Brandye, you have the makings of a journalist. This is well written. What did Smith say about it?”

“That it was inflammatory.”

“Hum. Yes, I suppose it is, but that still surprises me. I wonder what’s happened to his belief in personal freedoms.” The woman reached over and gave Brandye another hug. It felt nearly as good as the first one.

“So, what are we going to do about this?”

“We?”

“You didn’t think I’d let my favorite niece fight the establishment alone, did you. Your folks mean well, but this just isn’t their cup of tea. Your dad called this afternoon to tell me what had happened, so I just hopped a plane. They were nice enough to pick me up.”

“I don’t know. I’m not an incorrigible.”

“Of course, you’re not. That’s a given.”

“I don’t want to be sent away. I’ve finally got some friends. Even if I can’t see them at school right now or call them. Aunt Bess, this is the best year I’ve ever had.” Tears started to leak down Brandye’s cheeks.

“Then you should fight this. Make them see your point. You’ve done all the research, now use it.”

“I don’t know how. I’m just a kid. What can I do?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“You can do plenty. That’s clear from what I’ve seen already.” Aunt Bess rolled off the air bed with some difficulty. “I’ll don’t know how you stand that thing. Your folks need to give you a real bed.” She glared at the offending bed but quickly turned her mind to other things. “I’m starved. How about you?”

“I guess. Lunch was a long time ago.”

“Good, then we’ll get your folks to relax a little. They are really stressed out about all this. You’d think you were the first kid to get into trouble.”

Dinner was fun. Her brother Jack even showed up in time to go with them all, and the five of them laughed and plotted their way through the meal. It was the first time in a long while that Brandye remembered her family acting like that. Even her mother seemed less worried when they got back to the apartment. And perhaps most amazing, her folks released the communications access allowing Brandye to call her friends.

She spent the evening talking to America and then Monique. Both were horrified at Brandye’s punishment and wanted to help in any way they could.

Ralph was particularly incensed when she told him what had happened. “They can’t do that. What about freedom of the press?”

“They said it was against school policy.”

“What did Mr. Smith say?”

“I haven’t talked to him yet.”

“He’ll be on your side.”

“I hope so.”

“Well, I’m on your side.”

Brandye was glad that Ralph was on her side.

The next morning Aunt Bess gave her a thumbs up sign as she left for school. Brandye spent the morning waiting for something to happen. Lunch was lonely as she sat in her carrel eating from the tray brought to her. She couldn’t imagine spending all her time in this isolation. It was even worse than she had expected. She was surprised how much she missed being with her friends.

It wasn’t until later in the afternoon when she was signaled to come to the office. She breathed a sigh of relief. She had begun to decide that the hearing had been called off or postponed.

This time the waiting chairs were filled with her aunt as well as her parents. They were all ushered into a room with a long table. Brandye was glad it wasn't the principal's office this time. She'd seen all of it that she wanted.

Ms. Van Burn greeted them all looking no happier today than yesterday.

"Brandye, do you understand the purpose of this hearing?"

"Yes, ma'am. I have to explain what I have done. Are the others going to come?"

"Yes, that is why we have moved to this larger room. They will be here shortly."

For a few moments no one said anything else. It was awkward and too quiet. Everyone looked uncomfortable. Fortunately, about the time Brandye didn't think she could stand waiting any longer, the door opened and Mr. Smith and Dr. Smitherman came in followed by Monique. Brandye was surprised to see Monique there and hoped she wasn't going to get into trouble also.

No one seemed to know where to sit, and Monique looked lost and scared. Brandye knew how that felt.

The principal cleared her throat. "Now that everyone is here. We can begin. I believe not everyone has met. So if each of you will introduce yourselves . . ."

They went around the table each one giving their name and their relationship to Brandye. When they got to Monique, she hesitated. "I'm Monica. I'm Monique sometimes too." For a moment the adults smiled. It broke the tension. "I'm here because Brandye is my friend and because I was there when she got into trouble."

It was Ms. Van Buren's turn again. "Thank you. Now we have called this hearing at my request to gather information regarding rule infractions of Brandye Whyne Drinker. As I believe each of you know she is being evaluated as a possible Incurable. We want to insure that she has an adequate amount of time to explain her actions."

Brandye's mother nodded seriously as if to indicate that she knew this could all be cleared up easily.

Ms. Van Buren continued. "So, Brandye, what do you want to tell us?"

Brandye took a deep breath remembering all the encouragement her Aunt Bess had given her, remembering that she was the only one who could make a difference.

"First, I really do want everyone to know that I'm sorry. I never meant to get into trouble or to do anything wrong. I just wanted to make things better. I've talked to all of you about what it was like before carrels and what the Mental Health Index means."

Dr. Smitherman leaned forward and smiled. "But Brandye I told you that it had no validity."

“I know that’s what you said, but that’s not the point. Whether you can measure mental health or not, we are being isolated and it’s making some of us unhappy. America needs a door open or at least a window. No one seems to care. You just want to send her away if she doesn’t fit in. That’s not right. The school needed to help. It wouldn’t, so I tried to.” She turned to the principal with a look of quiet determination. “Ms. Van Buren, can America have a window?”

The principal acted surprised at the request and hesitated. “That’s really not the point of this meeting. But we’ll have to see. We generally do not make special exceptions.”

“That’s the point I was trying to make in my editorial. We are all exceptions. You can’t make us fit into the same mold. Why do we have to be rotated at lunch? We make friends and then you change things so we can’t talk to them.”

“It’s a logistical problem. The schedule requires that some students have lunch at different intervals.”

“Then why can’t we visit back and forth?”

“We cannot afford to lose control of the student population in that way.”

“Why not?”

The principal’s eyes flashed. “Are you being impertinent, young lady? That may be the foundation of your problem.”

For a minute Brandye was afraid she would not have nerve enough to go on, but Aunt Bess caught her eye and winked.

She decided to try another way. “Dr. Smitherman, why do you need to talk to most students?”

“Because they show evidence of some dysfunctionality. Like your friend America.”

“And why do you have things on your desk to play with?”

For a moment he looked confused. “As an ice breaker. It’s a way to make the room friendlier and for me to seem less intimidating.”

Suddenly, the counselor grinned as he began to follow her logic. “And, of course, I see your point. A feeling of friendship between me and a student is important in order for us to have a productive session.”

“That’s right, Dr. Smitherman. And we need friends in order to be productive at school. Lunch is our ice breaker. Can’t you help us with this?”

Smitherman looked thoughtful for a moment and then nodded his head. He turned back to the principal and said, “Ms. Van Buren, maybe we need to look into this a little more. The child has a point.”

Her eyes still flashing, the principal gave a shake to her head showing neither agreement nor disagreement. “I suppose next you will want music piped into their carrels.”

The adults laughed briefly. Brandye didn’t. “No, that would be too disturbing.”

“I’m glad to hear that since we are dealing with a federal mandate here.”

“But, isn’t there any way that the dramatics class can perform a musical? I don’t know what all the rules are, but you do.”

Brandye noticed Mr. Smith blink as he heard Brandye make her request to the principal. He looked as if he suddenly remembered something. “Ms. Van Buren, it seems to me that there is an exception to that regulation.”

“Ben, I can’t imagine. The law is very clear about musical devices.”

“Oh, I know that. But what about a *cappella*? Would that be violating the rules? It seems to me I remember an article once . . .”

The principal began to rub the side of her face in thought. “I know the one you mean. I suppose we could consider that.”

Smith looked back at Monique. “Could you all learn to sing your parts without any instruments, just using a tone to establish the note?”

Monique’s blue eyes shone with delight. “Boy, could we. Why we’ve got this one kid who. . .” She shut down as soon as she realized that everyone was chuckling at her exuberance. “What I meant was, yes, we surely could.”

The journalism teacher turned back toward Brandye. “Okay, we have that one under control, but there is another infraction to consider. I understand that not only did you go against my decision to print your article, but that you brought a recorder to school to do an interview.”

Brandye looked down trying to avoid his eyes and then back up at him. “Yes, sir, I did. I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to get all of America’s story. But it didn’t have any music on it.” She added forcefully, “And I did still take notes just like you taught us. I’ve not used it since and I won’t do it again.”

Mr. Smith didn’t look particularly angry which made Brandye feel a little better. “Now, about the article. What do you have to say about that?”

“I don’t. I was wrong.”

“Yes, you were. A good reporter does not break the rules unless there is a good reason. However, maybe there was. I seem to remember once. . .” Smith looked over at Aunt Bess and smiled a faraway smile.

Ms. Van Buren broke into his reverie. “Well, Brandye you seem to have convinced these people that there is another side to consider; however, I hope you don’t expect to convince me that we should eliminate carrels.”

“Oh, no. I love my carrel.”

This was clearly not the response the principal expected. “You do?”

“It’s a great place to learn. It’s my own spot. I don’t have to share it and I don’t think I would like spit wads at all. They sound horrid.”

At that everyone laughed except Monique who whispered to Brandye, “What’s a spit wad?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

Brandye waited impatiently for the door to slide open at the end of the day. It had been a long month, but she knew quarantine was better than a charge of incorrigibility. The only comfort she had during that time was knowing that America’s door was open even when hers was not. As a matter of fact, once the computer had been reprogrammed, any student could work with a door open if he or she wished.

At least her parents had not imposed a quarantine at home. She had spent every evening catching up on the day’s news. Monique’s play was nearly ready, and Ralph. Well, Ralph was Ralph. America had promised to show them all her latest art work when Brandye finally got to eat with them. And rumor had it that America had some beautiful hand-painted jumps that she wore occasionally. Brandye could hardly wait.

THE END