

J.D.

Lavelle

**Something
to
Teach**

From the profane to the profound, this is the story of one man's struggle to teach inside a maximum-security juvenile correctional facility.

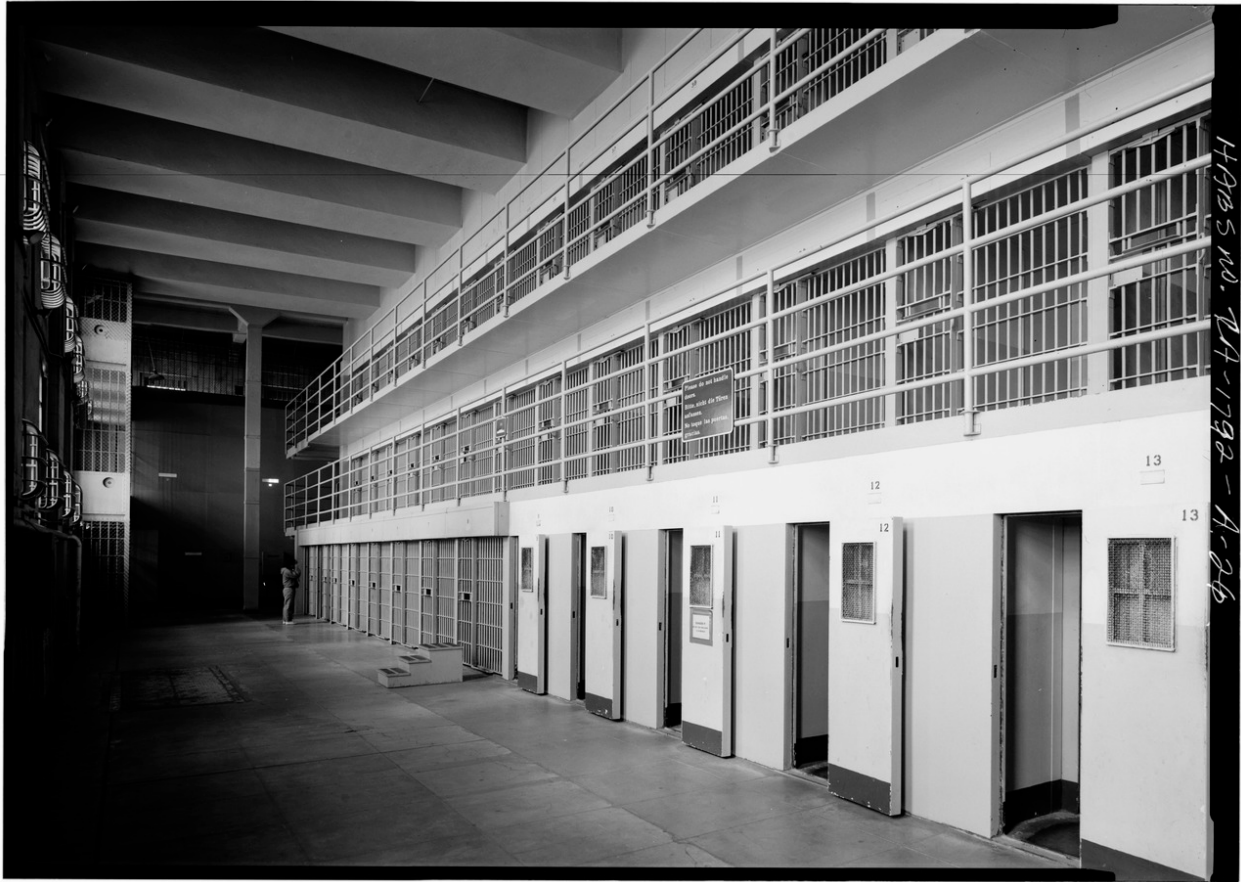
Something to Teach
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Disclaimer

This is largely a work of fiction. The characters found in this work represent composite sketches of several individuals and from my own imagination. No reference to any specific living person is intended. Portions of this novel are derived from real events.

Find out more about the author and his writing at www.jdlavelle.com.



Dedication

This book is dedicated, in part, to my students. All of them. They have taught me much. This book is dedicated, in part, to correctional officers. Some of the best teachers/counselors/guardians/mentors I have known were correctional officers.

This book is also dedicated to the victims of crime. It is my hope that their wounds, both visible and invisible, are healed.

Lastly, this book is dedicated to my parents - my first and greatest teachers. I would not be able to do what I do without their teaching.

Introduction

For many of my students, the prison was a place without hope. They had been removed from all that was familiar - family, home, and friends - and thrust into a place filled with predators, pepper spray, and little time for play. Granted, all had earned their way into that place, but I never thought that I should add to their woes, nor did this mean that I was inured to their suffering. Certainly many of my charges considered schooling of any sort to be a peculiar form of torture. And, many of them insisted that my classroom was one of the most heinous violations of the Eighth Amendment, but my job was not to torture, but to teach.

And so we met at the intersection of our two worlds - the classroom.

In a perfect world, all students would file into the classroom, find their seats, look expectantly at the board for an outline of the day's activities, as well as an appropriately inspirational quote, and mentally prepare themselves for a period of learning. Ours is not a perfect world. At the outset of my teaching career on the inside, many students shuffled into my classroom, flopped into their chairs, or sprawled across the tabletops, closed their eyes, and shut their ears to all outside stimuli – specifically my voice.

Many were not good students and didn't know how to play the game of school, or they simply didn't care enough to play along. Whatever the case, we both had jobs to do. They were supposed to do their school work, every day, and I was supposed to teach them. I had certain expectations.

It was inside an institutional classroom - the intersection of my world of teaching and their world of prison - that my expectations changed. My expectations changed when a young man walked into my classroom from the unit and I winced.

"He won't be in the mood to do any work today," I thought.
"Somebody beat the brakes off him."

He had two blackened eyes - almost swollen shut, a bruised and

battered mouth, and no doubt other bruises hidden beneath his clothing. He was getting ready to complete his program and go home to family and friends, and someone had given him some going away presents to remember prison by.

I didn't tell him to pick up his pencil and get to work. Instead, I said, "Put your head down and go to sleep. I will not bother you. I will not write you up. Let me know if you need anything."

He did this for two days - kept his head down and slept. On the third day, he came to class, still battered and bruised, and said, "Let's get back to work."

And we did.

Another time, I was greeted at the door by a young man who said, "Don't talk to me. I'm not doin' your work today. Leave me alone."

I have gentled the words here. In fact, his statement had been laced with profanity. I merely nodded, followed him with my eyes to his seat, and gave him a moment to get settled comfortably. Later, as I made my way around the room, I wandered nearby, and asked, "What's the matter today? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," came the sullen reply. "I don't want to talk about it. Leave me alone."

I stood there, unmoving, waiting. He stared into space, head raised slightly.

"They found my uncle."

I nodded, waiting for more.

"They found him in the woods. Hanging from a tree. He'd been there a while."

And I was supposed to teach him - to make him see the importance of "he said/she said clauses" while his uncle was hanging from a tree.

My expectations changed because of these young men. My expectations were not lower, just different.

These young men were locked up while the outside world continued

to move along. It was cause for much heartache and hopelessness. The reality of their lives did intrude upon the smooth working of my classroom, but these woes were not insurmountable. They were often offset by these very young men themselves. Their words and deeds were very often my source of hope.

You might imagine that teaching in a prison leaves little room for magical moments of hopeful inspiration. If so, then you are mistaken.

Chapter One

“I was sleeping too. One of my roommates woke me up. He tried to put it in my ear.” The young man faltered. “I mean...he put it in my ear.”

Somehow I knew we were about to tread upon a road less traveled by most teachers. Like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, whom I had just finished quoting, this pronouncement was waving us to removed ground. And, like the sweet prince, I did not heed the voice in my head that said, “ ‘But do not go with it.’ ”

I should have listened to that voice.

“It?” I inquired.

“His dick.”

“He put his...” I said, pointing below my belt. “In your...” I continued, pointing to my ear.

I was at a loss for words.

“This can’t be happening,” I thought. My heart began to beat faster and beads of sweat appeared on my brow. When I was learning to be a teacher my professors routinely stressed the importance of connections between students’ lives and classroom materials. Any connection that a student made between the two was to be celebrated. I’m sure they didn’t have this in mind. There was never a mention of making connections between Shakespeare and sex offenses. “It’s Hamlet, for God’s sake.”

But a connection had indeed been made.

On this day, all I wanted was to let my students watch Mel Gibson’s production of Hamlet. I had even printed off copies of an easy-to-read version of the play. We would follow along and read the text as the actors on the screen played the scenes. It was a wonderful plan. One that was being stymied by an unexpected player in this classroom drama. The ghost of King Hamlet had just explained to a tormented Mel Gibson that his death was a result of poison. And now I stood

transfixed as this student made a connection between a king who had a leperous distilment poured into his ear and himself - a young man who had a lecherous dingus placed in his ear.

He stared at me. Waiting.

His classmates stared at him. I gurgled something inarticulate, then managed to ask, "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

Now I stared.

A wiser soul would have done something, anything, to prevent such an aural assault. This young man had apparently done nothing.

And I stood there - doing nothing. Mel Gibson was frozen on the screen and I stood frozen before the class. My class. I was their teacher, but my teaching methods class had covered topics such as literary tools for teaching and not phallic tools for probing.

"Mr. Lavelle?"

A new voice interrupted my reverie. I turned, hopeful that this new speaker would offer a diversion.

"Yes?"

"I done put my dick in lots of different places. But never in nobody's ear."

My eye's widened.

"Please God," I prayed. "Don't let this get any worse."

And then another voice from the chorus chimed in.

"I know the first place I'm putting mine when I get out. My girlfriend had her tubes tied. I'm gonna get up in there and untie 'em. Like this." He rose from his chair and proceeded to demonstrate exactly what he meant. It was a gymnastic display to be sure, but not at all suitable for the classroom.

The outside world suddenly seemed many miles away. Even though it was a short walk to the sallyport - and freedom - the emotional gulf that existed between my classroom and life on the outs was vast. As I

surveyed the faces before me, all clad in khaki jumpsuits, I suddenly realized how much I missed my old life as a teacher. A public school teacher. Now, as an institutional teacher, I was not only dealing with acts most foul, strange, and unnatural within an orchard where a king slept, but those within the confines of a maximum-security juvenile correctional facility where a juvenile offender slept.

“All I want to do is teach,” I whispered. “That’s it. Expose these young men to something better than the banal stapled packets that they’re used to. They deserve something better, even if we are here on the inside.”

I had a dream. A vision. A plan.

Most of my students had not seen much success in school on the outs. I, however, would be the fulcrum for educational and intellectual change in their lives by bringing the light of literature inside the confines of these walls. These walls where they were told when to eat, sleep, and urinate. These walls where there was no freedom. These walls would no longer be home to teachers with sour expressions and low expectations. I would bring my charges to the summit of learning, and from there, we would gaze upon the vast vistas of knowledge.

From Hamlet we would move on to explore the treachery of Macbeth and his witches with their toil and trouble. Then perhaps delve into the poetry of Poe with a black bird tap, tap, tapping on our door. Or maybe we would explore the frozen land of the Yukon with Jack London as we tried to light a fire? Literature offered a vast expanse of experience beyond the confines of the razor-wire topped fences.

But first we had to get past the dick talk.

And I had nothing. I was tapped out. Nothing in my teacher training or previous years teaching in the public school had prepared me for teaching on the inside. Nothing.

I stared at the faces in the room. No one was fazed by the young man’s revelation that his ear had been sexually assaulted, but I couldn’t have the classroom conversation continue in the same vein.

Maybe Hamlet would help? Watching a movie was a rare occurrence, even if it was Shakespeare, so maybe moving on to the next scene would help.

“Gentlemen,” I said. “We need to proceed to the next important scene in the play. Remember that the ghost of King Hamlet has just told his son that he was murdered...by poison in the ear.”

I risked a sideways glance at the young man who’d started this whole mess, then turned to the television screen, and continued, “Let’s see what happens next.”

I pushed play, hoping that whatever scene I had queued up didn’t trigger any more questions or comments that might fall outside the bounds of decorum.

“...and hope,” I prayed silently, “that a few moments respite will give me a chance to collect my thoughts. This class isn’t lost yet.”

I took a deep breath, surveyed my students as they sat and stared at the screen, and told myself that we hadn’t even gotten to the best parts of the play. There was so much more to come. So much more excitement.

And like that old fool Polonius, I was clueless. I had no idea. I stood and stared at the screen as the words of King Hamlet echoed in my ears, “Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold.”

So how exactly did all of this trouble start?

With a dream. A vision. A plan.

Chapter Two

“Are you really sure that you want to work here?” the principal asked. “To be a teacher?”

I sat in the principal’s office – no, I wasn’t in trouble. I was being interviewed. Although it felt more like an interrogation. Somehow, it seemed as though I had not given the right answer when I replied, “Yes, I’d like to teach here. In this facility.”

The principal and vice-principal took turns peppering me with questions, neither one seemed inclined to play the part of the good cop. Up until this point, I had always assumed that there were two roles to be played in this type of situation - a good cop and a bad cop. These two apparently hadn’t gotten the right script because I was being dosed with the bad cop/bad cop routine.

Before I could answer, the vice-principal chimed in. “In a regular school, there’s usually an adjustment period that teachers go through. You learn the lay of the land. You get a handle on the students. It usually takes about two three weeks for a teacher to become acclimated...in a regular school.”

I nodded.

“This isn’t a regular school,” he said. “It may take six to eight weeks before you’re over the hump. And some people never get over the hump. Some people never even make it past training.”

“I understand,” I said, trying to swallow the great lump of misgiving that threatened to choke me. Eight weeks is a long time. It almost sounded like a prison sentence: You are hereby sentenced to eight weeks of nervous tension.

“So...are you really sure that you want to try to teach in this sort of environment?”

Again, I was surprised that this process seemed more of an Inquisition than an interview.

“Yes,” I replied, in what I hoped was a steady voice. “I am really

looking forward to the opportunity to work here.”

I had a vision of myself as a teacher, standing before a class, with bright, hopeful youths listening expectantly to my carefully measured words. My teaching would serve as one small part in the big picture of hope for our collective future.

“And I think that I can make a real difference...” I paused. A form had briefly darkened the window, catching my attention, and disrupting my speech making. “Uh...”

The pair noticed my glance out the window. The principal turned in his chair and watched. He was nonplussed by the khaki-clad form that ran at breakneck speed toward one of the tall fences that surrounded the facility, pursued by a wiry man clad in the blue uniform of a correctional officer.

A voice crackled over a small hand-held radio.

“Attention all staff. Attention all staff. We are under a Signal 2000. We are now under a Signal 2000. Please hold all radio traffic until further notice.”

The vice-principal smiled as he rose from his chair.

“I better let everyone know we’re under a signal,” he said, reaching out to shake my hand. “Welcome aboard, Mr. Lavelle.”

He hurried from the office.

“Thank you,” I said, confused by the vocabulary. I knew about curriculums, conjunctions, and conjugation. I had no idea about signals or radio call signs.

“What’s a ‘Signal 2000’?” I asked. I knew that eventually I would have to learn all of the policies and procedures for the facility, especially the emergency procedures. I didn’t want to be a weak link, thereby putting others at risk. These men had just made it abundantly clear that this was a potentially dangerous place to work.

“Escape,” he said. “Somebody’s running for the fence.”

I must have looked surprised because he looked at me with a slightly jaundiced gaze and continued. “Don’t worry,” he said.

“Nobody ever escapes this place.”

I nodded, somewhat reassured. Outside, I could still see the drama unfolding. The young man had made it to the nearest fence and had just started climbing when the officer caught him. The offender was unceremoniously hauled down off of the metal links and planted on the ground. It didn't look pleasant.

“And that goes for teachers too. You don't want to stay here too long or you won't be able to get a real job on the outs. People will think you're institutionalized. Just like the offenders.”

“Institutionalized?”

He nodded. “Schools on the outs don't like institutional teachers. They think you forget how to teach inside this place.”

“Forget how to teach?” I said.

“Some people get locked up inside this place...” He inclined his head toward the window. The young man now stood with his hands behind his back and handcuffs on his wrists.

“And they forget what it's like to be free.”

Chapter Three

“What are you going to do? Quit?”

I thought this was a rather strange question to ask on our first day of training - our first day as employees of the Department of Corrections. But there we were. Our little class of fresh fish stood and waited while the question hung in the air. I was just grateful that it wasn't directed at me because I wasn't sure how I would have answered.

Shortly before the Question had been posed I had been sitting in a classroom, waiting. Impatiently.

It was fifteen minutes past the hour. Fifteen minutes past the hour when class was to have started. My teacher hackles were raised. I ran a tight ship. When the bell sounded or the clock hand struck the hour, by God, my classroom was at full throttle. There was no gentle easing into classroom proceedings. There was learning to be had.

My blood pressure eased a notch when the door handle turned and a large uniformed man made his entrance. It was a grand entrance.

He was large and easily carried over three hundred pounds of muscle and fat on his oversized frame. His hair was closely and precisely cropped. His lieutenant's bars gleamed in the light, and his eyes were cold and merciless. He strode to the front of the room and stood, surveying the crowd. We stared in return, waiting. As his piercing eyes swept the room, he growled, “How many of you people are gonna be officers?”

Most members of the class raised their hands. The man's expression softened slightly. He nodded.

“Good. That's good. We can always use good officers. Just listen to me and do what I tell you. You'll be fine. If you ever have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me. I'm on H bracket. On the day shift. Just ask for Lieutenant Redley in the Shift Office. Now...what about maintenance staff?” he asked. “We got any new plumbers or

locksmiths?”

A smattering of hands rose. He nodded again.

“We need good maintenance staff to take care of this place. Aside from the officers, you folks are the next most important people here in this facility. Without you we couldn’t keep this place running.”

The officers and maintenance staff must have surely felt good about themselves and their prospects in this challenging setting. And Lieutenant Redley no longer looked like he had indigestion. Then he paused, momentarily lost in thought, and squinted as if a painful thought had suddenly struck him.

“What about counselors? How many counselors we got in here?”

Three ladies raised their hands.

“That’s about three too many, if you ask me,” he said, heaving a sigh. “But they didn’t ask me, so I guess I’ll have to make do with what I’ve got. My job is to make sure you people are trained properly, even if I don’t think you belong in here.” He surveyed the trio, and then snorted. “Some of you won’t make it through the training. And that’s fine with me too.”

I risked a glance in their direction. They were sitting at two tables across the room from where I sat. Their eyes were wide. The lieutenant continued his rant.

“Do any of you ladies know which units you’ll be working on?”

Two shook their heads, while the third raised her hand, somewhat cautiously.

“Yes, ma’am?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m actually going to be the new school counselor. I didn’t know what type of counselor you meant. I wasn’t hired to be a unit counselor.”

Lieutenant Redley nodded. “The new school counselor,” he said. Then he repeated his words, slowly emphasizing each word, “The...new...school...counselor.”

He paused ever so slightly at the word ‘school’. It was as if it held a special place in his heart. A place of contempt. His eyes narrowed as his gaze swept the room. He did a quick calculation and must have realized that not everyone had raised their hands during the introductions of new staff members. I did my own mental math and unhappily concluded that there were few, if any, hands left to be raised.

“Are any of you new people teachers?” he asked. His words oozed disdain.

It seemed to me that during introductions he’d worked his way down the evolutionary scale. Officers were clearly at the top of the scale while teachers, and anything related to education, were at the very bottom, lower, possibly, even than bacteria.

As I prayed a silent prayer that I was not the only person joining the ranks of the correctional facility staff as a teacher, I cautiously raised my hand. There was only one hand raised, and it was mine. I saw other members of the audience wince.

For a long uncomfortable time, there was only silence. Lieutenant Redley simply stood staring at me. He seemed to be searching for the right words. Finally, he said, “I hate teachers. I really do.”

He shook his head, shrugged, and comforted himself by saying aloud, “Well, you can’t be that good a teacher if you’re working in this place.”

I almost risked making a comment, but I held my tongue. I was smart enough to understand that I was at the bottom of the food chain.

“What’s your name, teacher?”

“Mr. Lavelle. I’m an English teacher.”

“Worst subject ever,” he said. “Well, Mr. Smart Teacher, I’ll have to remember that name. Let’s hope you’re smart enough to listen to what I got to say because we’ve got lots to do and you’ve got lots to learn. You got me?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good,” he said. “Since you’re so smart, why don’t you lead the way out the door so we can head inside? You think you can do that?”

I gathered up my things and made for the door, leading the class of new officers, maintenance personnel, and counselors. We shuffled out of the classroom and into the main entrance. There we had to stand, arms and legs spread wide, while an officer patted us down, searching for contraband. Next we filed through a metal detector and stood facing a heavy metal door. Once we were all through the metal detector there was a mechanical click and the heavy metal door eased open.

“Okay,” Lieutenant Redley said. “Step on inside.”

We stepped past the heavy metal door into a small area and stood facing a second door – this one was closed. Once the entire class was inside, there were more mechanical sounds, and the first door slid shut behind us. The heavy metal door moved with the slow mechanical grind of some castle drawbridge from a Bram Stoker tale. We were trapped between a wall, a Plexiglas window, and two massive metal doors.

Sandwiched together, entirely at the mercy of a uniformed officer who peered at us through the Plexiglas, I noticed that the man didn't look happy. I prefer to see happy people at work. I wondered about my own chances for happiness inside this strange new world.

My reverie was broken by a question. An excellent question.

“What is this place?” someone asked.

“We’re in the sallyport,” Lieutenant Redley explained. “Each time you enter or leave the facility you have to come through here. If the facility ever goes on lockdown, then these gates are closed and no one can enter or leave.”

“Why would it be locked down?”

I was wondering the same thing, but I wasn’t about to ask any questions. My goal was to lay low and try not to do anything stupid, or

anything else that would earn the ire of Lieutenant Redley, although I suspected that no matter what I did, even if it was just breathing, that I was going to irk this man.

“If there’s a riot.”

I had never really considered this before. It was, after all, a prison. Prisoners sometimes rioted. Thoughts of Attica flitted briefly through my mind and I felt a twinge of misgiving.

“What’s that?” another person asked, pointing to the wall opposite the Plexiglas. Covering most of the wall was a large board covered with numbered tags that hung on small hooks. Each tag had a number printed above it and the tag itself had the word “In” printed on one side and “Out” on the other side. A small sign atop the board read “Accountability Board”.

“That is our Accountability Board,” Lieutenant Redley explained. “Once you’re done with training. If you make it that far,” he said, eyeing me, “then you’ll each be given a number. This is your number and no one else’s. Whenever you come through the sallyport you have to turn your tag in or out depending on if you’re entering or leaving the facility.”

“Is that how they check who’s here? How they check attendance?”

I understood attendance. I was a teacher. I took attendance in my classroom every day. This seemed like an efficient manner in which to track which employees were present at any one given time.

At this point our host paused.

“Remember what I just said about these gates being closed if this place ever goes on lockdown? Well, if there’s ever a riot and we go on lockdown, then the officers here in Control can check this board and see who’s still inside.”

I looked at the lieutenant, eyes widening. Someone asked the question I was thinking. “Why do they need to do that?”

“In case someone gets taken hostage. We need to know who’s still inside.”

“Hostage,” I breathed, remembering Attica again. Things hadn’t gone well for the hostages inside the walls of Attica.

“What happens if someone gets taken hostage?” a voice asked. “I mean, not what happens to you. But...”

This was the wrong word on which to pause when discussing prison riots and hostage situations.

Lieutenant Redley sensed our unease. “That’s a good question,” he said. “You want to know what the Department of Corrections is going to do if one of you gets taken hostage? Correct?” He surveyed the crowd. All eyes, including mine were locked on his. We wanted to know the answer.

There were murmurs of assent and vigorous nodding.

“Let me start by saying that the department is always looking for good people who are willing to go that extra mile to ensure the safety and security of our facilities. Once you receive your permanent status as a state employee you may be eligible to volunteer for certain ERO positions after a year of continuous service.”

“ERO. What am I talking about?” he asked. “Does anyone have any idea what that means? You,” he said, pointing at me. “You got any ideas, Mr. Smart Teacher?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t about to say a word.

“Emergency Response Operations.”

He paused to let the words sink in.

“They got four parts: CISM, SITCON, SERT, and E-Squad. CISM stands for Critical Incident Stress Management. These people are just counselors. If somebody gets taken hostage, then later on they can go cry on the shoulders of the CISM people. I guess if you don’t know how to handle a little stress, then you can talk to them.”

Being taken hostage seemed more than a little stressful.

“What’s SITCON stand for?”

“That’s situation control,” Lieutenant Redley explained. “Hostage

negotiators. You asked what the department does for folks that are taken hostage? They send in the talkers.”

“I’m a talker,” I thought, intrigued by the prospect of being close to the excitement, but not too close. “Being a coward, I’ve got no desire to expose my precious skin to the tender mercies of rioting offenders, but surely I’m smart enough to get close to the action without actually being in harm’s way.”

This sounded like a golden opportunity.

“What about those other two groups? What do they do?”

“SERT. Special Emergency Response Team. It’s is like a prison SWAT team. E-Squad. Emergency Squad. They do riot control. Shakedowns. So to answer your question. If things ever go south and you end up being taken hostage, then don’t worry. The D.O.C. has the resources to handle it.”

Both E-Squad and SERT sounded unappealing. I was not the physical type. I was a teacher. Matters of the intellect were more my speed. Suddenly worries of being taken hostage were replaced with visions of me wearing a tactical vest with a walkie-talkie in hand, and the situation under control. SITCON. Maybe that was in my future. It was certainly an appealing thought.

“Hey, Mr. Smart Teacher,” Lieutenant Ridley said.

“Yes, sir?”

“You think you’re good enough to join ERO?”

I wasn’t going to be able to wiggle out of this by remaining silent. “I’m not sure,” I said. “Maybe some day.”

“I doubt it,” he said. “You see, you’re a teacher and you may think you’re book smart, but it takes a whole lot more than book smarts to make it on the inside. Besides, about half of you people won’t even last a year in this place. That’s okay. Prison isn’t for some people. Just remember to always turn your tag in or out when you enter or leave. You don’t want to be on the inside if the offenders decide to riot. Right?”

There were nods.

“Right, Mr. Smart Teacher?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, nodding.

Lieutenant Redley looked at me and shook his head, then motioned to the officer behind the window. The unsmiling man pushed a button and the second large metal door of the sallyport slowly churned open. Our leader pointed, and we stepped through the door. There we were, with thoughts of riots, hostages, and heroes running through our minds. Inside.

As we stepped out onto the sidewalk, I looked around, took in the fences topped with razor wire, and thought, “There’s no escape. I’m locked up too. Just like the offenders. I’m in a world where there might be a prison riot. And I might get taken hostage.”

I considered my future, both immediate and long-term, and the sour face of Lieutenant Redley, and whispered a prayer to God. It was a simple favor. Nothing too extravagant.

I said, “God. Please don’t let anything bad happen to me. Please.”

“And don’t let the other people inside hate teachers too.”

As I finished my prayer, I noticed that one forlorn looking soul was still standing next to the sallyport door. The rest of us had followed the Lieutenant a few steps along the sidewalk, but she alone remained by the exit. The look on her face mirrored my private thoughts. Thoughts of Attica may have been flitting through her imagination too.

Lieutenant Redley saw the lone figure and called out, “What are you going to do? Quit?”

She nodded.

The Lieutenant scanned the remaining employees, looking for other potential dropouts.

“Anyone else?” he asked.

He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I stared blankly in return, thinking about my freedom and the outside world. The outs.

“No takers?” he said. “Well, I bet a few more of you people aren’t going to make it. Some folks can’t handle being on the inside. I understand.”

And just like that our class had one less student.

I wondered how I was going to handle being on the inside. Already, my nervous system had suffered several potential overloads, but I was still in the game. I wasn’t ready to throw in the towel.

Yet.

Chapter Four

I was eager to meet my colleagues. My school colleagues. After weeks of training, I had quickly learned to avoid talking about my official duties inside the walls of the correctional facility. Most people held a low opinion of teachers, and I was eager to be around people who didn't snort and look at me funny when I told them that I was a teacher.

My first official day inside the school was a quiet one. The students were only in school for a half day and the students were filing off to their respective units just as I walked up to the door of the school. A large man was talking to a small boy in the prison-issued jumpsuit. The youngster was not happy.

"You wrote me up." It was an accusation. "I got a major 'cause of you."

"Yes," the man replied. "I did write you up. But you earned that major when you went after Johnson."

"That's bullshit."

"No," he said. "It's not."

"What you said in that major was bullshit. You said I swung on him."

Later I learned that the wording had to be very precise on such matters. The slightest mistake on the part of the writer could mean that a major infraction would be dropped altogether or reduced to a minor infraction.

"Yes. You did. I saw it."

The young man just shook his head.

"I didn't swing on him. I was trying to jab him in the eyeball. I got played."

The man shook his head. "We'll talk about it this afternoon. During treatment team. Go with your unit."

Still shaking his head, the juvenile turned and made his way along the sidewalks. “I got played big time,” he muttered as he walked past me.

The large man just smiled as he shook his head. “There goes one of our school’s finest. A future senator. And you must be Mr. Lavelle. The new English teacher.” He extended a hand.

We shook hands.

“Yes, that’s me,” I said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Mr. Gibbs. Special Ed Math. I hope you don’t hate it here. We need good teachers.”

I was slightly taken aback. “I hope I don’t hate it here either,” I said. “It’s my first day here.”

He shrugged. “Where’d you go to high school?”

I blinked. “Uh...St. Michaels.” I hadn’t been asked about high school for many years.

He nodded. “Small school. Good athletics. What about college?”

“Indiana University,” I said, unsure why I was being grilled.

“Come on. Let’s go inside. You can meet some of the other teachers.”

We stepped into the hallowed halls of learning. It looked like any other school.

“Are you Mr. Lavelle?”

A grim form was shuffling toward us. The woman looked unhappy, and her face resembled a melting candle. The years had not been kind.

“Yes, I am.”

“Hmmm...” She stared at me for a moment. “Well, I’m the department chair. I’m going to show you the ropes.” She looked at Mr. Gibbs, and said “Okay. You can go now. I’ll take over from here. I want to show him how to do things the right way. He’s got to understand how we do things here.”

She looked back at me, and continued. “I’m Sally. Sally Roberts. I’m the department chair.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said. “I’m looking forward to working here.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “I guess. We’ll see, won’t we?”

Mr. Gibbs, smiled at me, extended a hand, and said, “Good luck. And don’t forget. She’s the department chair.” To her, he smiled and said, “Sally, try not to make Mr. Lavelle regret his decision too soon. Maybe he’s a good teacher.”

We shook hands and he turned and left while my department chair stared at his retreating form with a dour expression on her face. She said nothing for a long moment, then shook her head.

“Your room is down here,” Mrs. Roberts said, pointing. “Close to the sergeant’s desk. That’s a good thing. In case, there’s trouble.”

“Trouble?” I asked. “What sort of trouble? No one said anything about trouble during training.”

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough. Let’s go to your room and I’ll explain how you’re going to teach.”

Up until that point no one had made mention of how I would be teaching. I was hired to be an English teacher. That’s what I was going to do. Teach English. She ushered me to the door of my classroom and we went inside. It looked like a regular classroom, except that there were long tables instead of desks. There was a teacher’s desk and several filing cabinets. There were even some posters hung up on the walls from the previous occupant of the room.

“What happened to my predecessor?” I asked, curious. “Did he or she retire?”

“Retire?” Ms. Roberts snorted. “Of course not. She couldn’t take it any more and up and quit one day. That was it. She turned in her keys and was done. She walked out at the end of her shift and left everything in the classroom. It happens. Don’t worry though. Maybe you’ll last longer. We’ll see, won’t we?”

I was already seeing plenty. Everyone seemed to hold a dim view of the teaching profession, including some of my colleagues. And apparently teaching on the inside was a trifle harder than teaching on the outs. I remained undaunted though. I was reasonably confident in my abilities to make a connection with my charges. We would share the bond of common literary experiences. We would cry at the deaths of Romeo and Juliet and rejoice in the courage of Huck Finn. Literature offered a unique freedom within the walls of a correctional facility. I would be their Virgil - their guide to intellectual freedom. I basked in the warm glow of these thoughts until Ms. Roberts ushered me over to the filing cabinets and pulled open a drawer. Inside were numbered manila folders.

“Here is what you will be teaching,” she said. “Packets. Lots of packets.”

My eyes widened, but I managed to nod.

“There are packets for Language Arts and packets for Reading. Each offender has a folder with his work in it. I pass out their folders at the beginning of each class and they work on the packets at their own pace. When they finish one packet they turn it in and you give them another one. Once they complete all of the packets, then they earn a credit for the class.”

“But what do I teach?”

To me it was a filing cabinet full of busy work. Endless worksheets of boredom. This was not English class. This was torture.

She looked at me, then at the filing cabinets. She pointed and said, “Right here. This is what you’re going to teach.”

“But I’m not actually teaching if all I do is hand out these packets.”

She pursed her lips in disapproval and shook her head. I saw the look that suggested I had best tread lightly. I ignored the look and tried a different approach.

“What about students who aren’t reading at grade level? I would imagine that we have some freshman that can’t read beyond fifth

grade stuff. Do I still give them the freshman reading packets?”

“If someone is a freshman, then he gets the freshman packets. If someone is a sophomore, then he gets the sophomore packets. It’s that simple. Don’t make things complicated. You need to understand something. These young men are criminal offenders. If they wanted a better education, then they should have stayed out of prison. The only thing you need to do is hand them their packets when they ask for packets. Otherwise, I recommend that you sit at your desk and keep the phone close by. You could carry a radio, but most teachers don’t. Radios are for the officers.”

“The phone?” I asked. “Why would I need to sit by the phone? I thought I would be moving about and answering questions. Helping them.”

She shook her head. “No. You don’t move around the room and answer questions. You sit at your desk by the phone and monitor your class while they do their work. You need to be close to the phone in order to call for help.” There was a pause. “When there’s trouble.”

Not “if” but “when”.

This didn’t sound like teaching to me. It sounded more like baby-sitting. I asked one more question.

“Wouldn’t there be less trouble in the classroom if students were more engaged? If there was something more to teach?”

She stared at me. The look was one of patient suffering mixed with disdain.

“There is something to teach,” she said. “These packets.”

I must have looked confused because Ms. Roberts sighed. “You don’t get it,” she said. “Don’t worry though. You will. Give it a few months, if you last that long, then you’ll see. Also, keep your bathroom locked and don’t let anyone use it.”

“Don’t let anyone use the bathroom?”

“Don’t let anyone use the bathroom,” she repeated slowly. “The offenders. Don’t let them use the bathroom in your classroom. They’ll

smear poop on the walls or try to kill themselves. They urinate on the floor. They stay in there too long. Whatever.”

“But what if someone needs to use the restroom?”

“Not in my classroom.”

Her classroom. Her classroom didn’t sound like a fun place to be. For a long moment I considered my colleagues, the teaching materials, and the students. My enthusiasm was waning. Suddenly I wasn’t so eager. I thought of the conversation I’d witnessed between Mr. Gibbs and the young man at the door to the school. The young man had been convinced that he’d been played. The words struck a chord.

Had I been played too? I thought of Gibbs’s earlier warning about regrets.

“Just remember,” Ms. Roberts continued. “I’m the department chair. You’re not here to do anything fancy. Just do your job and you won’t have any problems.”

I considered my new colleagues and the work before me. I had hoped to find an oasis of intellectual hope when I stepped inside the school. Instead, there were packets, premonitions of my doom, and little possibility that I would be doing any real teaching.

Chapter Five

And then that fateful day arrived. My first day of teaching on the inside. As my charges filed into the classroom, I stood at the door, feeling confident in my abilities, greeting their sullen stares with hellos and nods. The bell sounded and I walked to the front of the room to retrieve a stack of papers. These papers held the key to a successful beginning – an auspicious entrée into a relationship that would be built upon mutual respect and a love of learning. I held them before me, eager to introduce myself. Eager to teach.

“Good morning,” I said, using my best teaching voice. “My name is Mr. Lavelle and welcome to English class. I am about to hand each of you a piece of paper. This paper lays out my expectations for this classroom. Please read it carefully, gentlemen.”

I was proud of both the document and my calm demeanor. During my initial forays into the classroom as a student teacher, my mentor commented that I had a lovely teaching voice.

“You sound very relaxed and genial,” she said crisply.

I had smiled, a touch proud, enjoying the fact that I had a calm way about me. I was not easily ruffled.

“I wonder,” she mused aloud, “What your voice might sound like when you’re not so relaxed?”

Resisting the temptation to raise an eyebrow, I thought, “Surely our young charges will listen to the voice of reason. My voice. My reason.”

I had nodded in agreement, and kept my thoughts private.

“How difficult,” I wondered, “could it be to guide a group of students? A simple rational request made by an adult should suffice to make for an orderly classroom.”

My mentor nodded too. I think she understood a great deal more than I did.

On my first day as an institutional teacher - I walked amongst the

tables, handing each student a paper, then strode to the front of the room and stood, carefully watching. This was their first test. How well could they read? How would they react to this compact between teacher and student? This Magna Carta of Education.

**Welcome
to
English Class – Mr. Lavelle – Room 402**

I would like to extend a formal welcome and invite you to consider this time as a dining experience. We will not be sampling lapin ragout, crème brulee or other such culinary delights during our dining experience, but rather we will share in the Language Arts, a much heartier feast. In order to fully enjoy a meal, or a book, we must adhere to a certain dining etiquette.

1. It is not necessary to respect the host at the outset of the meal; however, it is genteel to address the host in a polite fashion. To this end I would ask that you refer to me as “Mr. Lavelle”. I hope to earn your respect over the course of the meal, provided my cooking is adequate. I will, in turn, address you in whatever fashion you prefer.
2. The meal may consist of items entirely new and possibly offensive to your tender palates. Gerund phrases and Shakespeare may turn your stomach as much as lima beans and brussel sprouts. Rather than spiriting these unsavory items away in your napkin, I would ask that you sample them. I know a thing or two about spices, and it may surprise you to learn that Wordsworth is rather tasty with a touch of salt.
3. Be polite and respectful of your fellow diners. Please don’t jostle their elbows when asking for the pepper. An impolite request may lead to indigestion and spoil the meal.
4. You must eat slowly. If you eat too quickly, you might find yourself prematurely full and miss the subtle nuances of each

course. Literature is not meant to be swallowed in one bite – rather it should be savored.

5. Feel free to compliment or criticize the meal. When complimenting the chef be as flattering as possible. You might possibly get a second helping of dessert. If perchance you found the meal unsatisfying, please endeavor to cite specific items on the menu you found displeasing. The menu is easily amended.

6. Good guests DO NOT simply sit silently and chomp away. They converse with one another and perhaps even engage in polite arguments over the course of the meal. I expect similar behavior.

7. A good host DOES NOT dominate the conversation, rather he serves to stimulate guests with good food and witticisms. I shall attempt this too.

Again, I graciously extend the warmest of welcomes and wish you all...bon appetit!!!

Sincerely,

Mr. Lavelle, your host and chef

I stood watching, waiting expectantly for a smile, or perhaps even a giggle. Even the slightest acknowledgement of my efforts would have sufficed. Nothing. In fact, as the minutes seemed to stretch, I saw looks of confusion spreading across their adolescent brows. The silence grew painful.

“Does anyone have a question?” I asked, muttering a prayer under my breath.

A hand rose quickly. Hope flickered.

“Mr. Lavelle,” he began, a look of utter seriousness on his face. My eyebrows raised a notch further, hopefully.

“Are you gay?”

A chorus of “Yeah’s” echoed in the classroom.

“No,” I said. “I’m not gay.”

“Then why are you such a bitch?”

“What did you say?” I asked, not having enough sense to ignore such a comment.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Lavelle,” a voice reassured. Still in shock, I looked down at another young man seated near the front of class. His lips were a bright shade of red. I didn’t have time to wonder where he might have obtained lip coloring.

“It’s okay if you’re not gay...yet.”

“Excuse me?” I said, taking a step backward. “My sexuality isn’t really an appropriate topic of discussion here in the classroom.”

“You might not be gay right now, Mr. Lavelle, but you let me put a little of my magic in that wand and you might be gay for the stay.”

“Gay for the stay?”

“Yes, sir,” he said slowly, licking his lips. “Gay for the stay. While you stay in prison, you get a little gay. Don’t you worry none. When you quit teaching here you just go and kill your homo. You’ll be fine.” He looked me up and down approvingly. “Fine, indeed.”

I stared in disbelief. To no one in particular, this young man turned and said, “I’d turn him over, turn him sideways, and turn...him...out.”

I was saved from further sexual harassment by another question. “Are you from another country? ‘Cause you talk funny and this paper you gave us to read sounds funny. If this is English class, then it sure don’t sound like it.”

“ ‘Doesn’t sound like it,’ ” I corrected, trying to hold on to some semblance of teaching and learning. “And no. I’m not from another country. I’m...” I didn’t know what to say. I was still trying to process what it meant for me to kill my homo when I wasn’t aware that I had a homo to kill.

“Well, this paper don’t even sound like nothing. I mean, you making me hungry. I thought we was gonna go to Dining Hall and eat or something.”

At this point several hands shot up in the air. Dismayed, I pointed at one especially earnest-looking young man.

“I swear, I thought we was gonna have lunch in here or something. I was like, I don’t even know what you’re tryin’ to say. I mean, this is supposed to be English class – not Cooking class. That big fat lady whose class is near the sergeant’s desk teaches cooking.”

I stood, staring, speechless. I was supposed to be a teacher. I had attended a fairly prestigious college to learn the mysteries of educating today’s youth. I had taken courses in classroom management, educational psychology, and curriculum development. I was supposed to be an expert, and with expertise came fluency. Words were supposed to flow effortlessly from me. Yet, instead of a lecture on literature, I stood frozen. These young men were more interested in licentiousness than language arts.

Rather than risk saying something foolish, I nodded at a young man who sat in the corner with his hand raised. He had strange, staring eyes, as if he were looking through me. Of this world, but not in it. It was probably a mistake to call on him, but I needed a minute to collect my thoughts - to figure out how to get things back on track. I would let him speak, then I would regain control of the class.

“A kid named Alec just walked by. He looked in the window at me. I know he was looking at me.”

“Okay,” I said. “Perhaps he recognizes you.”

“He does know me,” the young man continued, his voice flat. “I was at a placement with him before. He wants to kill me. He looked at me just now and I know he wants to kill me.”

My eyes widened.

“Maybe...” I started.

“I’m gonna have to kill him first.”

I was not used to students making death threats during classroom discussions, nor was I used to the possibility a student might actually carry out such a threat. This topic hadn’t been covered in my teaching

methods class. Instead, we'd discussed the importance engaging students within the first two minutes of class – holding their attention. The topic of different learning styles had been dissected at length. I could design a lesson plan for auditory, visual and kinesthetic learners without batting an eye. However, I was unsure about how to handle a discussion on homicide.

“Let's not talk about killing,” I said, struggling to think of some way, any way, to move the conversation back to something more appropriate.

“Why do you look so nervous, Mr. Lavelle?”

I wasn't nervous. I was terrified. This was not teaching. This was chaos. I was supposed to be the conductor at the helm of an orchestra. This classroom - my classroom - was supposed to be filled with bright, young souls eager to partake of the fountain of knowledge. I would lead them to the fountain so that they could slake their thirst for learning. I was a teacher. I had a piece of paper that said I could teach.

Here though, I wasn't a teacher. I was fresh fish.

“Maybe you shouldn't teach here if you're so nervous.”

The voice came from the middle of the room where a young man in a faded jumpsuit with a dingy white t-shirt underneath sat. He smiled at me.

“Now look...” I said, and was interrupted.

“You know what I'd do if you was on my unit, Mr. Lavelle?” He said, watching me carefully. “You know what I'd do if you was locked up inside this place with me? I'd put you on tile restriction.”

A few of his classmates snickered.

“You know what that is? Tile restriction.”

I knew that I didn't want to be locked up – ever. What I didn't know was whether or not I still wanted to be a teacher. Nothing in my teacher training had prepared me for this. Nothing in my teacher training could have prepared me for this.

“I’m not worried about tile restriction,” I said, still trying to use my calmest teaching voice, although there was an edge to my words. “I’m worried about English.”

“Oh, you’re worried all right,” he said. “I can see it. I can hear it in your voice.”

My voice? My teaching voice? Where had it gone?

“But don’t worry,” he continued. “I’d be scared too, if I was you. Tile restriction is when I make you stand on one of the floor tiles in the room...all night long. You stand there and you don’t move, while me and my people take turns watching you. And if you take one step off that tile, then I have my people take care of you.” He smiled, but there was an edge to his voice, and his eyes held a cold gleam.

“Okay,” I said through gritted teeth. “That’s enough.”

“And you wouldn’t eat,” he said. “I’d take all your food at Dining Hall. I wouldn’t even let you eat the jello.”

“You know what I wanna eat?” a new voice called out.

“We’re not eating anything,” I said, increasingly desperate.

He told the class. I cringed.

Before I could get in a word edgewise, he continued. “You know what I’m talking about, Mr. Lavelle. I bet you was eatin’ some of that stuff last night. Let me see your tongue. Come on. Show me that tongue.”

Riotous laughter erupted. My breathing was coming in short, ragged gasps. The situation was out of control.

“This sort of conversation is not appropriate,” I said, panting, but no one was listening. Everyone was laughing. At me.

And in that horrible moment, as I stood alone, I was completely and utterly lost.

“Enough!” I shrieked. My teaching voice had morphed into the Mr. Hyde to my earlier Dr. Jekyll.

“There will be no talk of tile restrictions, killing people, or being

gay,” I hissed, eyes narrowed, veins bulging. “I will have none of it. This is an English class. We are here to discuss literature. And we are not talking about eating...anything, including the Jello. Are we clear?”

A new voice sounded. It was calm and genial, like mine had been at the beginning of class.

“Mr. Lavelle?”

My eyes zeroed in on the target. I was ready to pounce.

“In all fairness, this piece of paper is all about food. I get that it’s a metaphor and all, but you’re the one who started the whole food talk.”

My narrowed eyes started to twitch and the color drained from my face as realization dawned. This was unlike any other classroom. Nothing in my previous experience could have prepared me for this. I didn’t know that some students could barely read, much less understand a metaphor, and that dog magazines were, for some, pornography. I didn’t know that some students could read and write at the college level and that they liked to rob pizza delivery men with samurai swords. I stared, unable to speak – hopeless. And the one young man who seemed to be the very potent potion that had brought about my transformation into Mr. Hyde sat smiling at me, shaking his head.

I had lost. And they knew it.

Chapter Six

“I’m gonna kill me one of you sex offenders. You hear me?”

Sex offenders were housed in C Complex inside the facility. They had their own housing unit entirely to themselves. However, they mingled with the rest of the offenders inside the school. As a population, they were unloved.

I scanned my seating chart, found a name. I peered at the speaker, remembering a snippet of my training - something about making threats.

“Mr. Pittway?” I asked.

He stared at me. I nodded. It was fine if he wanted to ignore me. He didn’t have to acknowledge his name, but I would address his speech.

“Mr. Pittway,” I said. “I don’t want to hear that sort of talk. Not in my classroom. Please.”

“But it’s true,” he said, leaning back in his chair and casually surveying the room. “I’m gonna kill me one of them.”

“Not today,” I countered. “And not in this classroom. You can’t talk that way. That’s considered threatening and intimidating.”

No one said a word – the sex offenders, that is. I guess they knew better. Mr. Pittway was smaller than most of his peers, but I could already see that he did a fairly good job of intimidating others just by his icy demeanor.

“Ain’t none of them gonna talk back or say nothing to me, Mr. Lavelle,” he replied.

A bold pronouncement!

I held up a finger, and started to speak, “Mr. Pittway...”

“And you know why? Because everybody in this place hates sex offenders. They have sex with their mamas and llamas. They all sick in the head. And they know better than to argue or talk back to me or

anyone else from the other units.”

There were numerous nods in agreement, as others muttered their own not-so-veiled threats.

“And I don't make threats,” he said. “I make promises.”

And class hadn't even officially started. It was still the passing period, a brief and dangerous time when students had three minutes to make it from one classroom to another. Early arrivals, such as Mr. Pittway, had a minute or two of down time. It was this down time that Mr. Pittway filled with his threats. My nerves were already a touch raw from my disastrous first day. It had already been an adrenalin-hiking beginning to my teaching career inside a correctional facility, and I didn't want to stroke out before lunch or have to referee a fight, verbal or otherwise. Mr. Pittway's words were definitely provocative. There must have been a glint of insanity in my eyes, or the gritted teeth, because he grinned at me.

“All right,” he said. “I quit...but I'm still gonna kill one of you sex offenders. Just not today.”

Mercifully, the bell sounded and quiet descended as I handed out folders and the students fell into the dull habit of routine. Most sat in stony silence, staring at the packets before them. They were not engaged. They were not learning. I was not teaching. But there was quiet. I was willing to settle for quiet. For now. Cautiously, I moved back to my desk and surveyed the landscape. Uppermost in my mind was, “Where will the first fire break out, and how will I douse it?”

It didn't take long for sparks to fly.

“Hey, Anderson,” a voice asked. “I heard Sherwood broke up with you.”

Without batting an eye, Mr. Anderson looked up from his work, and said matter-of-factly, “Nah, I broke up with him.”

“Thank you, gentlemen,” I said. “That's enough. Let's try to worry more about your work and less about Mr. Anderson's possible emotional distress.”

I was ignored.

“Hey, Anderson? Are you gay for the stay or are you really gay?”

“You see, Mr. Lavelle?” Mr. Pittway interjected. “This is why I’m gonna kill me one of these C complex people? They always talking some gay shit.”

“Gentlemen,” I warned. “That’s enough. Let’s try to concentrate more on literature and less on love. Shall we?”

Gay for the stay. This was a phrase that had been foreign to me. Until my time inside. There I learned a whole lexicon of prison lingo. During my initial training with the Department of Corrections, I had heard this phrase in passing, but didn’t pay it much heed. It was only when I was placed in charge of a classroom and witness to the social dynamics therein that “gay for the stay” began to have any real meaning for me. It must be noted that there is no such thing as consensual sexual relations within the Department of Corrections. It does not matter if both parties are willing participants in whatever form of sexual activity takes place – there was no such thing as consensual sex within the confines of our facility. However, sexual activity did occur. Young men who were putatively heterosexual prior to being locked up, but engaged in homosexual activity while they were incarcerated were considered “gay for the stay”. Once they left the confines of the correctional facility, they would have heterosexual sex. This was known as “killing their homo”. Engaging in heterosexual sex after a steady diet of homosexual sex somehow negated any homosexual proclivities.

Anderson shook his head, looking disgusted. “Dude,” he said, “I am straight up gay. None of this gay for the stay bullshit like Carson. Isn’t that right, Carson?”

And that’s when the fight started. Apparently Mr. Carson didn’t appreciate being outed in front of his peers. I found out later that he was supposed to be in a gang. Being “gay for the stay” was not an option for most gang members, so he needed to address the matter as forthrightly as possible.

Carson leapt up out of his chair and crashed into Anderson. The two rebounded off of tables, offenders, and the walls, as I stood frozen.

A fight, a full-fledged, bare knuckle brawl was taking place in my classroom. And I didn't call for help. I didn't even think of reaching for the phone. I panicked. And I ran.

I ran straight for the pair who'd managed to end up wrestling against a shelf which ran along the back wall of the classroom. I couldn't very well pull them apart. They were both too big and in the throes of an adrenalin-filled rage. I remember jumping on top of them, grabbing at their jumpsuits, and yelling. They were like a wave of unbridled energy and I was like a surfer trying to stay afloat. I was yelling, grabbing, and pulling, and largely ineffectual.

We must have made quite the ruckus because two blue-clad figures suddenly appeared on either side of me and unceremoniously wrenched the pair apart. I stood there panting, my heart racing, and eyes bulging.

The two combatants were handcuffed and hauled away to the segregation unit for fighting. I walked shakily back to my desk and tried to regain my composure. A few minutes later Lieutenant Redley's large frame suddenly darkened the door to my classroom. He scanned the classroom with a sour expression on his face before looking at me. My classroom was quiet. They knew better than to talk when the shift supervisor was in the classroom.

"I'm gonna need that paperwork as soon as possible," he said. "Write a major for both of them. Fighting. And an incident report."

"Yes, sir," I said.

He looked at me for a moment longer, seemingly lost in thought, then asked. "Did you try to break up that fight?"

"Yes."

He nodded, and then said, "For such a smart teacher that was pretty stupid. That's a good way to get hurt. When they start fighting you let them fight. Teachers don't try to help. They sit and watch and let

Walk Patrol handle it.”

I must have looked confused.

“Where did you think we are?” he asked.

I managed to regain enough of my composure to answer properly.

“In a school,” I said. “And this is my classroom. And I won’t have any fighting in my classroom.”

I wasn’t about to admit that I hadn’t thought of trying to handle anything on my own. I’d simply panicked and reacted. I was, however, sure of one thing. Even though we were inside of a maximum-security juvenile correctional facility, I was not about to let violence mar schooling. I was not going to let that happen. Period.

He chewed the inside of his cheek, then nodded. He turned to survey my students one more time.

“You listen to what this man has to say,” he warned. “And don’t give him any more trouble. I want it quiet in here.”

The door closed and I heaved a sigh. I hoped that Lieutenant Redley’s warning would serve as a deterrent to further disruption. It didn’t.

“L.T. is right, Mr. Lavelle.”

“Mr. Pittway,” I said. “We need to get back to our studies. Let’s not worry about anything else.”

He ignored me. “Let me explain something to you, Mr. Lavelle. People on the inside fight for all sorts reasons. Maybe you’re getting debt-dogged on the unit. You’re tired of having your shit taken, so you fight back. Maybe you need a vacation from the unit, so you get in a fight and take a little vacation in seg. But...” he paused, “...sometimes people get into fights in order to hit staff. You’re lucky they was fightin’ about some gay shit and not looking to hurt you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I will certainly take that into consideration the next time I witness an altercation, however, I will not have fighting in my classroom. Ever.”

“Uh huh,” he said, nodding. “I got you. No fighting in Mr. Lavelle’s room.” He shook his head. “You keep telling yourself that bullshit.”

“Yes. I will.”

And then there was quiet. Students returned to studying their packets, but few actually put pencil to paper. Ms. Roberts had made it clear that as long as they did some work, however little, that I was not supposed to interfere with the educational process. It seemed to me more like the educational equivalent of treading water, but I was not the department chair.

“They need to do their work and leave each other alone,” she said. “That’s the only thing you need to worry about.”

As I worried about a whole host of things, I managed to take a few deep breaths.

“Eight weeks,” I said to myself. “Eight weeks of this until I feel comfortable in the classroom. Eight weeks until I am over the hump.” That’s what the principal had said during my interview. Eight long weeks until I had my sea legs. At that moment, my legs were shaking from the post-fight adrenaline dump.

I needed to figure out how I was going to teach - and survive. This baptism by fire was not bolstering my confidence.

Then there was a knock on my door.

I moved to the door and pushed it open. There stood the Assistant Superintendent of the facility. The second-in-command. One of the senior counselors was in tow. I recognized both from an earlier training session when we’d been introduced to important staff members outside of the school setting.

“Oh God,” I thought. “I don’t need this type of attention. The last thing I want is to have someone in here chastising me for not having better control of my class.”

“Good morning, Mr. Lavelle.”

“Good morning,” I said.

“I heard there was some excitement in here earlier.”

I winced.

“Do you mind if I speak with your class?”

“Certainly,” I said, hopeful. “They’re all yours.” I turned to face the class, waiting with bated breath. Maybe I would have help from these two people? Maybe the second-in-command and a counselor would be able to help me maintain order? Maybe they could offer some insight into how I might be successful on the inside?

She surveyed the faces before her, still smiling, and paused, nodding judiciously, as if considering each young man in turn.

“You know,” she said slowly. “School is cool.”

Had I heard correctly? It seemed as though I were suddenly in a waking nightmare. Had the words “school is cool” actually been proudly offered to my students? Surely the wind whistled through my gaping mouth as I stared in horrified shock.

“Yes,” she repeated. “School is cool. You gentlemen need to understand that.”

I think my students were in shock too because they simply stared, whether in awe, bewilderment, or confusion, I could not tell.

The counselor stepped up to me and whispered, “This was my idea.”

“Really?”

My opinion of this stranger plummeted. The Assistant Superintendent continued to blather inanities while the counselor offered an explanation.

“We’re going to start talking to the kids on the units about how school is cool,” she said. “It’s part of our strategic plan to institute change within the facility. We’re hoping to change their mindset.”

I was hardly listening. School might be cool someplace else, but not in a bloody prison. It was clear that most of the students hated school. Hatred that was compounded by the themeless drudgery of grammar packets. And yet, with smiles on their faces and three simple words, these dear ladies thought they would cast a spell that would sow a miraculous change in the hearts and minds of hardened criminal

offenders.

I stared at the pair and wondered how they could have risen to such positions of power when they clearly had no sense about them.

The Assistant Superintendent ended her speech, sighed happily, and turned to me with a smile.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Lavelle,” she said, then turned back to my students, and said, “And remember...school is cool.”

I vaguely recall mumbling something in return, still shell-shocked. The door closed and I turned to face them. Mr. Pittway looked at me and smiled.

“Don’t...” I started, holding up a hand, but it was no use.

“Those are some stupid bitches, Mr. Lavelle,” he said.

In that moment, I realized that I couldn’t count on anyone to help me. I was all alone. I must have looked lost...again.

“Mr. Lavelle?”

“Yes, Mr. Pittway?”

“You know what else I was just thinking?”

I was fairly confident that I didn’t want to know what he was thinking. Maybe he would surprise me? Maybe he would have an insightful comment?

“What?”

He looked at me, smiled, and said, “Those ladies came in here because those two were fighting. Right? Now I bet you want to kill a couple of them sex offenders too.”

Chapter Seven

“Do students ever go to the Media Center?”

Ms. Roberts looked at me with a jaundiced gaze. She didn’t speak. She just sat and stared at me. When the silence grew uncomfortable I pressed onward.

“It seems like a natural fit,” I said. “I mean, I teach an English class. I could take my classes to the Media Center and have them check out books. We could do a period of sustained silent reading. Maybe twenty minutes. Or even fifteen. I’m not sure how much reading stamina they have...”

“None,” she interrupted.

“Maybe they’re out of practice?” I said. “They have lots of time on the units when they could read. We could even do mini-reviews of the books. It might be a nice change of pace.”

Ms. Roberts sat back in her seat and sighed. She deliberated silently for another long minute, and then shrugged.

“I suppose you could try. It won’t work though. Most of them can’t read read. Or they won’t read. But I suppose you new people have to find out the hard way. This isn’t like other schools. These aren’t like other students.”

Briefly, I was tempted to suggest that our students didn’t read because we didn’t offer up anything worth reading, but I had what I wanted - permission - and I wasn’t going to push my luck.

“Thank you,” I said, and quickly ducked out of her classroom to find the librarian, Mr. Mack. When I approached him with my suggestion his eyes lit up.

“Yes, that would be wonderful. Do you want to bring all of your classes down here?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he said. “Why don’t you bring them down the first twenty

minutes of each period. I have other classes that come down during the second half of the period. Just call me when you are ready to head this way. I will meet you at the door.”

“Sounds good.”

“Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes,” I said. I was willing to comply with any reasonable request from the man.

“I don’t allow profanity in the Media Center. I’m fairly strict about that rule.”

“I understand completely.”

Most libraries were quiet places. His request was entirely reasonable. Granted, it would seem that many, if not most, of my students’ vocabularies tended toward the profane, but surely a word or two of caution before we entered the Media Center would be enough to get us in the door and amongst the reading material.

Later, after the students had arrived, I made a phone call, lined up my students, escorted them past the sergeant’s desk, and we stood before the door of the Media Center. I knocked. Mr. Mack looked up from his computer and smiled. He stood up and made his way to the door. We would be personally ushered into his domain. The wonderful world of books.

“This is going to be our first small step toward a better classroom experience,” I thought.

Mr. Mack stepped out into the hallway, surveyed my khaki-clad crew, and said, “Gentlemen, welcome to the Media Center. If you need any help finding a particular book, please let me know. We just got a load of James Patterson books. Very popular. If this is the first time you’ve been to the Media Center and you haven’t checked out a book before, don’t worry. As long as you have your wrist band, you should be able to check out a book. Questions?”

There were only stares.

“Good. Then if you will follow me,” Mr. Mack said. “We can step

inside. Oh, I almost forgot. There's no cursing in the Media Center."

"What the fuck?"

My eyes went round. It was a voice from the back of the line. This was our golden moment. The moment where we would cross over the threshold to the world of fiction. An escape from the boredom of incarceration.

"Excuse me?" Mr. Mack said, paling.

Frantically, I shook my head.

"What...the...fuck?" the young man repeated. And then a torrent of profanity came gushing out of his mouth. He was upset at the idea of not being able to curse.

Mr. Mack struggled to catch his breath, "Mr. Lavelle," he wheezed. "I think it might be best if..."

I held up a hand, saving him from having to offer any further words of explanation. It looked as though he was struggling to find the right words.

"Ain't no mother..." the lone protester said, continuing his profane diatribe. My right eye started to twitch.

"Very succinctly put, young man," I said, my hopes dashed. We wouldn't be setting foot in the Media Center today.

"What the fuck did you just say to me?"

"I said, 'It's time to go back to the classroom.' "

And then the doors from the Recreation area burst open. All eyes turned at the sound and our ears were treated to a new round of profanity. A diminutive form was being dragged/escorted by an officer. The officer was the target of the curse words and threats. The school sergeant, ever vigilant, heard the commotion and headed toward the trouble. And my class.

I didn't see her because I was watching the drama unfold in the opposite direction. I jumped when she yelled.

"Get down on the ground," she barked.

I spun around and stared. I had no idea who she was talking to, but my students did. They dropped to the tiles and moved up against the wall, eager to watch the show. Mr. Mack wisely retreated to the safety of the Media Center and watched from behind a pane of glass. I stood standing in the middle of the hallway as all parties converged on one location. Mine.

In one perfectly choreographed moment, the young offender wrenched his arm free and swung on the officer. The man bobbed, but didn't quite weave fast enough. The fist caught the officer on tip of his nose. There was not enough contact to break it, but there was enough to make the man's eyes water and a splash of blood dot the walls. Just as quickly, the school sergeant drew a pepper spray canister from her belt and depressed the nozzle as she brought her arm up and around. The orange liquid arced in a graceful stream. It splashed against the retreating officer's chest and caught his attacker in the forehead. And me. As I stood in frozen fascination, the stream stained the left sleeve of my dress shirt and traveled up and up to the exposed skin of my face.

Burning!

The liquid seared my skin wherever it touched. I lurched backwards and brought my hands up defensively, but it was too late. The only thing that saved me from being totally blinded by the painful liquid were my glasses. Both lens were covered with the potent spray. My eyes watered as I pulled them off of my face and continued to retreat from the confusing shuffle of additional bodies as more officers arrived.

I blinked against the pain and used my clean sleeve to mop the pepper spray from my face.

"Damn," someone hooted. "Mr. Lavelle just got sprayed."

I was too distracted by the melee and the discomfort to ask him to refrain from cursing.

Later, after the excitement died down, the paperwork had been signed, and the offenders had left the school for lunch, I stood at the

school sergeant's desk. She had apologized for spraying me during the ruckus. My face still burned. And it wasn't just the lingering effects of the spray. Lt. Redley was standing there too. It was just my luck that he was the shift supervisor that day. It fell to him to look over the paperwork.

"Well, Mr. Smart Teacher," he said. "I guess you're not smart enough to get out of the way of trouble. Are you?"

"No," a voice said. "He's not."

It was Ms. Roberts. She'd come shuffling up to the desk too. The whole school knew that I'd been sprayed. Word traveled fast on the inside.

Lt. Redley's eyes narrowed at the sight of Ms. Roberts.

"It's his own fault," Ms. Roberts continued. "He tried to take his class to the Media Center. I told him not to, but nobody wants to listen to me. Maybe now he'll listen and learn."

The woman walked past us and into the school's administration office.

The Lieutenant just stared at her retreating form. When the door to the office closed behind her, Lt. Redley looked at me and asked, "Why'd you take them to the library?"

I shrugged. "To get books. So they could read."

He chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment, then looked at the school sergeant, and said, "I hate these teachers. Nothing but trouble."

It was bad enough that I had to listen to my department chair give me grief over the incident. I didn't want to hear it from the correctional staff too.

He tapped on the desk in goodbye and started walking to the shift office.

"Some of them though..." he said to himself, but loud enough for us to hear. "I don't hate so much."

I smiled at his retreating form.

“Maybe,” I thought. “Just maybe. Things are going to be all right. It’s been a rough start, but maybe I’ll be fine.”

The door to the office opened. The school counselor escorted a young man to the sergeant’s desk. It was Kevin Pittway.

“Sergeant,” the counselor asked. “I had Mr. Pittway in my office while the other units were being called out. Can you call him back to the unit?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said. “Get over here, Pittway. And don’t talk to me or Mr. Lavelle. You hear?”

He shuffled over to us, grinning.

“Hey Sergeant,” he said, ignoring her directive. “Guess what I learned today in Mr. Lavelle’s class?”

“What?”

“I learned about prepositions, proper nouns, and possessives.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You see,” he said. “There was a theme today. The letter ‘P’. That’s what makes Mr. Lavelle such a good teacher.”

Pittway paused. I was waiting for it. So was the sergeant. She was trying not to smile. And losing the fight.

“And Mr. Lavelle learned about the letter ‘P’ too.”

Pittway looked at me and shook his head.

“Look at you, Mr. Lavelle.”

“I told you not to...” she started to say, but it was too late. Her eyes were shining as she tried to hold back the laughter. At my expense.

“You learned about pepper spray. If you hadn’t gone and done something stupid like taking us to the library, then you wouldn’t be standing here with them red cheeks. You ain’t nothing but a pepper-sprayed bitch.”

The school sergeant doubled over her desk, convulsing in laughter.

I fanned my face.

He continued.

“You got to stop trying to be a teacher, Mr. Lavelle.”

The radio crackled. It was Walk Patrol. Mr. Pittway could be released onto the sidewalks. The school sergeant, tears still streaking her face, pointed at the door.

“Leave Mr. Lavelle alone and get outta my school.”

“Your school?” Pittway countered, casually sauntering to the exit.

“Yeah,” she said. “My school. And Mr. Lavelle’s.”

Pittway paused, halfway out the door. He nodded.

“Anybody slow enough to get sprayed up in here...yeah. I guess he owns a piece of this place.”

“Thank you,” I said, nodding in appreciation.

He grimaced, letting the door close. Through the glass he yelled, “You still a pepper-sprayed bitch. And stop trying to teach me.”

And he turned and was gone, still shaking his head at me.

Chapter Eight

“I’m leaving. Now. I don’t have to listen to what you say.”

I stood in front of the door to the classroom and blocked his way. He had red hair, freckles, and a crazed look in his eyes. The young man was skinny and stooped and his nervous eyes furtively flicked this way and that. He was a brand new student - new to the facility and new to the school. That made two of us. This was my first time dealing with a new arrival and my first time dealing with someone who wanted to escape. The young man wanted out of my classroom and he wasn’t going to take “no” for an answer. I looked at the name tag emblazoned on his jumpsuit.

“Please have a seat, Mr. Carter,” I said. “Class is about to get started. Let me show you to your seat.”

“Maybe he’s scared?” I thought. “I can put him in the back row. With no one at his back. A safe seat.”

A front row seat guaranteed new arrivals plenty of scrutiny from their peers. Such scrutiny was often accompanied by vocal wagers on their prospects of survival. This young man’s prospects didn’t look good.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“No,” I replied. “You’re not. Please have a seat, Mr. Carter.”

He stepped closer, his fists clenching and unclenching. He stood staring at me, unmoving. Waiting.

Other units were still making their way into the school, so a steady stream of students was filing past my door. Some watched the drama as they passed. Others didn’t care.

There was a knock.

“Oh no,” I thought. “Is this young fool going to try to get past me when I open the door? He looks scared enough to try something. Something really stupid.”

I stepped forward, closer to Carter, hoping that he wouldn't take a swing at me for invading his personal space, and pulled open the door. I wanted to let any incoming students in without letting Carter escape. He tried to move around me, but I held out my arm.

"You're not leaving this room, Mr. Carter."

Carter could have easily swatted my arm aside. I wasn't in the mood to wrestle with him, and I didn't want to have to write any paperwork. I just wanted him to sit down so that we could get class started without any incidents. He took a step toward me. I took a deep breath and tensed, waiting and watching.

Mr. Carter stopped. Frozen. His eyes were staring past me.

I risked a sideways glance and saw Mr. Pittway standing in the door frame. He looked at Carter, looked at me, and sized up the situation in a heartbeat.

"Mr. Lavelle," he asked. "You want me to take care of this? I got you."

"No," I said through gritted teeth. "Leave it alone."

But it was too late. Pittway's eyes narrowed as he turned on Carter and snarled.

"You get your ass in a seat right now. Before I split you."

Carter's eyes went wide as he retreated. Pittway followed.

"Mr. Pittway," I said. "That's enough. I don't need..."

Pittway ignored me, stalking his victim to his chair. Carter slunk to his seat and cowered.

"Don't you get out of that seat. You hear me?"

I didn't know whether to laugh at Carter's sudden retreat or cry with frustration at my inability to maintain some semblance of control. However, I was comforted by the knowledge that Pittway's control was only through the threat of violence. My goal was to maintain control through mutual respect.

As I struggled to regain my composure, I glared at Pittway and

ignored Carter as the waters calmed. Shortly I was able to breathe normally, hopeful that we could have a productive class period. It didn't take long for my hopes to wither.

Tap, tap, tap.

It wasn't The Raven and we weren't reading Edgar Allen Poe. It was a lone pencil. Like a metronome - steadily tapping away.

"Please stop tapping that pencil," I said.

The tapping continued.

"Yeah, lifer," someone offered. "Cut it out."

I swept the classroom with what I hoped was a fierce gaze.

"We need to get class started. Please stop tapping. There is a lot that you need to get accomplished today. Let me pass out your folders so that you can get started on your packets."

Tap, tap, tap.

"Cut it out!" It was Carter, adding his own voice to the mix. Apparently, he'd gotten over his fright. It was not appreciated. The young man with the pencil, held it up.

"You want me to stop tapping this pencil?"

"Yeah," Carter whined.

"This pencil?" he repeated.

Something bad was about to happen.

I started moving toward them, hands outstretched, hoping to intercede.

"Gentlemen, please," I said. "Let's..."

"Why don't you take it then?" The young man drew back his hand and launched it at Carter's face. It connected.

Carter jumped to his feet, Pittway's earlier admonition to remain seated ignored, and started screaming inanities. I moved quickly. Carter picked up his chair and held it over his head, preparing to launch it at his foe.

I truly don't know what possessed me. I should have remembered Lt. Redley's earlier admonition about interfering with offender fights. I should have stepped back and let him throw the chair. I should have done a lot of things. Instead I lunged forward and grabbed at Carter's arms desperately. Carter stumbled backwards, into one of his peers, and I held on for dear life as the three of us crashed into the wall. He dropped the chair as we all fell to the floor, a jumble of arms, legs, and panic. Somehow I managed to hold onto an arm, and tried to use it to pin him to the floor. It didn't work. We struggled and in the struggle, Carter managed to get his other hand and arm free. He put them to good use. He reached up and punched me square in the nose.

All I wanted to do was teach. I wasn't asking for miracles. Just fifty-two minutes of their time. Was that so difficult? What did I get for my troubles? A punch in the snout.

I think I made some indescribable noise, something guttural and primeval, because I recall seeing students scatter out of the corners of my eyes. I grabbed a double handful of jumpsuit and hauled Carter to his feet in one motion. With gritted teeth, I made for the door, Carter stumbling as I push/pulled him forward. We made it to the door, the rest of the class parting like the Red Sea. I held him with one fist and yanked on the classroom door with the other. I shoved him out the door and followed, blood in my eye.

Thankfully, one of the sergeants happened to be walking past my room just as Carter came stumbling out. I turned to her and said, in my calmest teacher's voice, "You need to call a Signal Ten."

Then all hell broke loose. I didn't realize that my simple request would set off a storm. There were different radio call signs for the various crises that happened on the inside. A Signal 2000 meant there was an attempted escape. A 10-10 meant that two or more offenders were fighting. A Signal 10 meant that a staff member had been assaulted. It was true that I had been assaulted, but it was just a single punch to the face. At the moment, I didn't care. I made the right call, and I wanted Carter in cuffs. I didn't realize that instead of just the Walk Patrol officers responding to the call, officers from all over the

school building responded.

As I went snarling after Carter, faces crowded the window to my classroom - eager to see the conclusion of the show. Carter and I took another tumble to the ground. As we panted, heaved, and struggled, I managed to grab both of his arms and lock them behind his back.

He started yelping, "I'm gonna cuff up! I'm gonna cuff up!"

And, as if on cue, handcuffs descended from above and clicked on Carter's wrists. I struggled to my feet, panting, as the Walk Patrol officers hauled Carter up and away. The sergeant looked at me and said, "You need to go to Medical. You're bleeding."

I reached up and touched where my glasses had cut my nose, and nodded.

Paperwork," I panted. "I need to fill out the appropriate paperwork too. Use of Force, Incident Report, and two majors."

"That's right," she said, then paused. "But I gotta tell you, Mr. Lavelle. You walked out of your classroom and said just as calm as you could be 'Signal 10'. At first I didn't know what was going on but I figured I better call it in to be safe. You had everything under control."

"Under control?" I said, still breathing heavily. I didn't have anything under control. Least of all my class.

"Yes sir," she said, ignoring my comment. "Under control."

I didn't want to disabuse the lady of any notions about my competence, so I said nothing. Instead, I went through the ritual check-up at Medical and was dismissed shortly thereafter. By the time I returned to the Programs buildings the tale had grown. Mr. Pittway kept repeating, "He went E-Squad on his ass."

E-Squad? Emergency Squad. The part of Emergency Response Operations that dealt with prison riots? Not hardly. My actions had not been heroic. They were borne of panic. Despite my protestations, the students were convinced that I had special military training. By the end of class, there was relative quiet. I thanked them for their patience and apologized that their work time had been interrupted.

With scant seconds remaining, Mr. Pittway spoke up.

“You people better remember to listen to Mr. Lavelle from now on. ‘Cause he’s the white Jackie Chan.”

The bell rang and students filed out of the classroom as Mr. Pittway dropped into a fighting stance and began kicking and punching the air. I pointed to the door.

“Go.”

“You know what, Mr. Lavelle?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want to know, Mr. Pittway. The bell rang. It is time for you to go. I will see you tomorrow.”

“That’s what I was going to say. I can’t wait to see what happens in your class tomorrow.”

Chapter Nine

It was morning and I was not ready for the day. I hardly noticed the sound of the large metal doors of the sallyport grating as they opened and closed. I didn't even blink at the Accountability Board as I turned my tag from "Out" to "In". I was inside. What would the day bring? Would there be another fight? Would I get pepper sprayed?

Wearily and warily I made my way along the sidewalk to the school, too wrapped up in my own thoughts to notice that there was no movement on the walks. The offenders were not moving to and from Dining Hall or Medical – the normal day-to-day goings on within the facility. Nothing.

I went to my room and prepared for the arrival of students. The appointed hour for school came and went and still there were no students. I was curious, but only mildly so. I needed to mentally and emotionally prepare for what the day might bring, so I busied myself with folders and packets.

After several minutes of undisturbed busy work, the loud speaker blared.

"Attention. All teachers please report to the staff work room. All teachers please report to the staff work room."

I poked my head out of my classroom and saw teachers leaving their rooms and walking toward the main office. I made sure that my computer was off, closed and locked my door, and followed the stream of people.

"Do you have any idea what is going on?" I asked Mr. Gibbs.

He shook his head and shrugged. The man seemed unfazed by the announcement, so I decided that I wouldn't worry about anything until there was reason. The teaching staff trickled in until we were all gathered. The principal didn't mince words.

"The facility has gone on lockdown."

Suddenly I was reminded of an earlier conversation in the sallyport.

A conversation about riots, lockdowns, and tags. My own tag was turned to the red side that read “In”. I was inside, and I would not be leaving until the facility came off of lockdown. I had no idea what this meant. I was at a loss.

Fortunately our principal was a man of few words. He was direct and to the point.

“We’ll be doing a shakedown of facility today.”

We? Surely he had misspoken? I was a teacher. I knew about literature, not lockdowns. I knew about Shakespeare, not shakedowns. Perhaps the man had merely chosen the wrong pronoun?

“Grab your rubber gloves people,” said Mr. Gibbs, “and your nose plugs.”

He turned to me, smiled, and asked, “Do you like the smell of pickled booty?”

“Excuse me?”

“Pickled booty,” he repeated. “You ever smell that before?”

I was hopelessly confused. I knew of kimchi, but this didn’t sound like something I wanted to taste...or smell.

“Well, get ready because you’re about to get your first taste of it.”

There were grumblings from some corners of the room. Ms. Roberts looked as though she’d just sucked on a lemon. She sighed and asked, “Is there a reason why we have to do this? A good reason, I mean.”

“Well,” the principal continued, ignoring her attitude, “there’s been some talk about students rioting.”

Lockdown. Rioting. I recalled from my training that there was such a thing as Emergency Response Operations. E-Squad, SERT, and SITCON. This seemed liked a situation that needed to be controlled. Just not by me. I wanted no part of anything that even faintly whiffed of violence.

And my red tag was still marked “In”.

“Apparently there’s talk of the white supremacists rioting. I don’t think that’s going to happen, but the administration wants staff to search all of the units and look for weapons and other contraband. Staff includes us.”

“We’ll meet in the gymnasium where we’ll be joined by maintenance personnel and the unit counselors. The officers will be breaking us up into groups and taking us to different units.”

After a brief orientation, one of the unit sergeants led me and a small group of my colleagues to D Unit where we were met by the unsmiling face of Lt. Redley. D Unit housed older offenders. Most of them were locked up for violent crimes. Assault, armed robbery, battery, et cetera.

“You people need to be careful,” Lt. Redley warned. “I want a thorough search of the each unit. Everything gets searched. We’re gonna start with D-9 and work our way around. I want the Day Rooms checked too. From top to bottom.”

Mr. Gibbs nudged me. He handed me an extra pair of latex gloves, and whispered, “Stuff these in your pocket,” he said. “You’re going to need an extra pair. Trust me.”

Shortly thereafter, I stepped inside one of the rooms and gasped. One of our compatriots, a female officer, couldn’t take the smell. She retreated from the room, exclaiming, “Oh, my Lord! I’m going to throw up.”

Mr. Gibbs sniffed the air with the confidence of an air quality connoisseur.

“Pickled booty,” he said simply. And it was.

Inside a laundry bag, there was a broken latex glove that had been filled with hot sauce. The hot sauce and dirty clothes had combined to form a noxious gaseous compound. It was this chemical concoction that rendered the room all but uninhabitable. The smell of pickled booty.

Our job was to strip the blankets and sheets off the beds, search the mattresses, all of clothing - clean and dirty - and everything else in the room. It was bad enough to have to go through the personal effects of the offenders, but combined with the fact that some of them lacked certain basic hygiene skills and you have a recipe for appetite loss – for a week.

My disgust didn't end there. Mr. Gibbs held up a pair of dirty boxer shorts and said, "I've never seen such skid marks. He must have hit a deer."

I was saved from further damage to my nose and psyche by a familiar voice at the door.

"Hey," Lt. Redley said. "Mr. Smart Teacher. Mr. Lavelle."

He called me by my name. I didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

"They need your help in the restroom. The officer needs to do strip searches. Go help."

"Huh?"

Rifling through dirty laundry had been enough of a shock to my system, but adding strip searches to my menu of new experiences was an even greater shock. I must have had a blank look on my face. The look on the lieutenant's face was decidedly not blank. He sighed and pointed.

"The bathroom," he said slowly. "Go to the bathroom."

Tentatively, I moved to the door of the unit restroom and pushed it open. I looked questioningly at the officer inside.

"The lieutenant said something about doing searches," I said. "Strip searches."

The man laughed. Clearly, I looked uncomfortable. I could handle suffixes and sentences, but not strip searches. I was being stretched beyond my limits.

"You don't need to do any of the strip searches," he explained. "All I need you to do is stand there while I do the searches. I just needed a

witness.”

“A witness?”

“Somebody has to be a chaperone during the searches. Male officers have to do the searches on male offenders, but I need a witness. You don’t actually have to do anything. I’m gonna have the offenders strip inside the shower stalls while you just stand there.”

“Okay,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. Strip-searching had not been a part of my student teaching, and I had no real desire to strip search a student that I might see in my classroom. No sooner did I shudder at this thought when my reverie was broken by a familiar voice.

“Aw, hell no!”

It was Mr. Pittway. His scrawny self was already stripped down to boxer shorts and sandals.

“Mr. Lavelle,” he said. “This is messed up. I can’t have my teacher searching me.”

The officer was in no mood for complaints. “Shut up, Pittway,” he said. “And get your ass in that shower.”

“I am not doing the search, Mr. Pittway,” I reassured him. “I’m just supposed to be a witness. I’ll be standing over here, away from the stall. The officer’s going to do the search. Not me. And besides, I don’t want to participate in this process any more than you do.”

“This is straight C complex shit,” Pittway complained.

“No, it’s not,” corrected the officer. “It’s called a shakedown. Part of shaking down a facility is performing strip searches on all offenders. We need to look for contraband. And don’t bother telling me that we won’t find anything. We always find something. I’m gonna personally toss your cell, Pittway. Now hand me your boxer shorts and sandals.”

“You mess up my cell and I’m gonna lodge a complaint,” Pittway said. “I’m gonna call the state and report your ass. I’m gonna get both you and Mr. Lavelle fired.”

“Open your mouth.”

“And I’m gonna kill me some white people when I get out of this facility. Some white people just like you two.”

“I said open your mouth. I didn’t say talk. Stick out your tongue, and stop making threats. I’ll write you up for threatening and intimidation. What do you think L.T. would do to you if you got written up while we’re on lockdown?”

“Lt. Redley ain’t gonna do shit,” Pittway countered. “And neither am I. When we get back to school I ain’t doing no more of your work, Mr. Lavelle.”

“Lift your arms,” the officer directed. “Lift your sack.”

“You act all crazy. Trying to teach us stuff.” To the officer, he said, “You should’ve seen what he had us read that first day in his class. It was some messed up stuff. Something about food and metaphors.”

“Turn around. Bend forward at the waist. Maybe you should listen to what he has to say?”

“This is prison,” Pittway replied. “Are you slow? Besides, you’d think he was teaching in a regular school or something. Giving us that extra shit to make us think. Just give me my packets and leave me alone.”

There was no doubt in my mind that we were inside a correctional facility. Between the packets and the naked body parts, there was no mistaking this for the outside world.

“Get your clothes on.”

“Mr. Pittway?” I asked. “What would you think about reading something different? Instead of the reading packets?”

The young man pushed open the stall door and stepped out, shaking his head. He looked at the officer and said, “You see what I mean? He’s slow in the head too. He wants me to read Shakespeare or some shit like that.”

The officer pointed to the door. “Go have a seat in one of the chairs in the Day Room. When they’re done searching you can go back in your room and clean things up.” He paused, looked directly at

Pittway, and said, “And listen to your teacher.”

“Both of you crackers are slow,” he said, sauntering out the door. “And remember, Mr. Lavelle. I ain’t doing shit for you in your classroom.”

The door closed and the officer sighed, shaking his head. “I hope he makes it on the outs,” he said. “He’s a smart kid. He could do all right for himself. And he likes your class.”

“Really?” I asked, confused. “What makes you say that?”

“He said that you’re a good teacher. He doesn’t understand half the stuff you say, but he likes it. He told me that if you were his teacher on the outs that he would get high, skip his other classes, and just go sit in your room to hear what you had to say.”

I was incredulous. Mr. Pittway didn’t seem to like my class. He didn’t do any work and his editorial comments made teaching difficult.

“It doesn’t feel like I’m a good teacher,” I admitted. “I think all I’ve done is mess up.”

The officer shook his head. “No,” he said. “You’re doing fine. Just keep doing what you’re doing. They like you. At least the ones on my unit do.”

“They do?”

“Yeah. They do. They said that you want to try to teach them.”

“But that’s what I’m supposed to do,” I said. “I mean, I’m a teacher. That’s my job.”

He cocked an eyebrow and looked at me with a jaundiced gaze.

“Do you think everybody in here tries to teach these kids?” he asked.

“Uh...” I wasn’t sure.

I was saved by a sudden commotion in the Day Room. A knot of people gathered outside one of the rooms. The officer cursed under his breath and moved quickly. In a heartbeat, he was out of the bathroom door and moving quickly. I followed, albeit more slowly. I

wondered what would make people move so quickly. A fight? Or something worse?

“Oh God,” someone said. I saw one of my fellow teachers turn away from the door, looking decidedly green.

I stepped closer, trying to see over heads and shoulders. A female officer muttered, “Somebody ought to write a book. ‘Cause you just can’t make this stuff up. I swear to God these kids are gonna kill me...”

“What happened?”

“You have no idea...” She walked away, muttering and shuddering.

“Fecal fun.”

It was Mr. Gibbs. He shouldered his way through the crowd.

“Excuse me?” I said. “Fecal...”

“Poop play,” he explained. “It was Burris. He doesn’t belong on this unit. We’ve told ‘em before. He should be on A unit. He’s crazy. But they say he’s too old to be over there.”

“So what did he do?”

“He took a crap in one of his chip bags. Barbecue flavor, I think. Then he took the turd and wrote, ‘Let me out’ on their window. Print not cursive.”

I stared, thinking, “Let me out too.”

Burris was bundled off to the segregation unit and we continued our search for contraband. It was a long day filled with noxious smells and grumbles from the offenders who didn’t appreciate having their things rifled through. And it wasn’t over. We learned that the facility would be on lockdown for at least another day. There would be more searches, and there would be no school. In a way, it was a relief. I didn’t have to worry about what was going to happen in my classroom the next day.

As I walked out of the facility that day, I turned my tag to “Out” and stood waiting for the sallyport door to ease open. Mr. Gibbs happened to be leaving at the same time. He looked at me and smiled.

“That’s a good feeling, isn’t it?”

“What?” I asked.

He turned his own tag. “Turning this thing around,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t really think about it.”

“Any day that you can walk out of here alive and free is a good day. No matter what else happened.”

I stopped. It had been a rough day. And it had been a rough start to my teaching career on the inside. Being punched, pepper-sprayed, and subjected to profanity was not pleasant, but I was still alive and free. I had never really understood what it meant to be free or appreciated my own freedom. It was something that I’d always taken for granted.

“You’re right,” I said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, then paused and looked at me. “And even though we’re teaching inside a prison, you’d be surprised at how free we are to try new things. This is a different sort of population. Sometimes what works on the outs doesn’t work in here. And,” he paused to look at me with a raised eyebrow, “your department chair is not your supervisor.”

Truer words had never been spoken. As I walked away from the facility, razor-wire topped fences receding in the distance, I considered his words. I was certainly not happy with the curriculum that was provided to me. Packets were sorely lacking in educational value for this population. Things were not working well as far as I was concerned. What did I need? More freedom...and a good hook. I needed something to ensnare my students. I needed something to teach.

Chapter Ten

“I need a ghost story.”

It was a tall order and I knew it. I didn’t care.

Instead of searches the next day, the teaching staff had been directed to report to the Media Center. I had arrived early. I had a plan, and I needed help.

I was not about to keep handing my students packets. Something had to change. My students needed something more. They needed something to spark their interest in reading. A connection - even the most tenuous of strands would do. I was convinced of it. There had to be a connection between their interests and the wide world of literature.

It would not be easy. But perhaps it would be possible for them to see the links between literature and life on the inside?

Ghosts. Everyone loves a good ghost story - a tale that causes a tingle of fear that creeps up and down the spine. But how could I get my hands on a good ghost story inside a prison? I hoped that Mr. Mack could help me.

The man barely hesitated. With furrowed brows and a frown he rose from his chair and said, “Follow me.”

I was expecting something along the lines of Washington Irving’s *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or maybe even Poe’s *The Cask of Amontillado*. No. Mr. Mack had a far grander vision.

He led me to a section of the stacks reserved for staff members.

“Okay, so you’re going to need a good story. I have an idea. What do you think about one of the most famous ghosts in literature?”

I stared. Mouth open. He spared me further embarrassment, by pulling a smallish book from the shelf.

Hamlet.

“Of course,” I said, “Hamlet’s father. ‘Doomed for a certain term to

walk the night’.”

“ ‘And for the day confined to fast in fires,’ ” Mr. Mack continued, smiling. “I have copies of an abridged, easy-reading version of the play. The reading level should be low enough so that everyone can access the text. But I wouldn’t start off with the book.”

Again, the confused look on my face tipped him off. He was several steps ahead of me.

“You need to hook them,” he said. “Give them the ghost scene first. Make them want to read the book. Let them see the play. Give them a taste of the movie before turning them over to the text...”

And then it hit me. A sudden realization.

“ ‘The play’s the thing...’ ”

“Yes!” Mr. Mack said. “Wherein you’ll catch the conscience...” The man paused. “Well, maybe not their consciences, but certainly their attention. Although that scene comes later in the play.”

“Yes. Yes,” I said, nodding. “The ghost scene, of course. Did you say you have a copy of it?”

“I have a copy of the movie here, and a DVD player. All you have to do is cue up the ghost scene and let the fun begin. This production is excellent. Mel Gibson from 1990. It’s one of my favorites.”

It was like manna from heaven. And he didn’t stop. By the time everyone had gathered in the Media Center and it was officially the start of the day, I had a list of scenes that I would play after the ghost scene, and famous quotes from these scenes. I had a plan. Now it would be possible to enact my vision - the dream.

“Thank you,” I said.

At last...I had something to teach.

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you want to use this stuff. It’s being wasted just sitting in here not being used. And remember...come and see me when you’re ready for more.”

Mr. Mack was right. There were a great number of things being

wasted. My students were just sitting in the classroom and not using their brains. It was time for things to change.

The winds of change must have been in the air. Once the day officially started and staff members were settled around the tables in the Media Center, our principal posed a question.

“How can we do things better?” he asked.

I almost leapt from my chair, hands raised, and shouted to the heavens that there was about to be radical changes in my classroom. I wanted to. But I was still the new person. Instead, I waited and watched. There were shrugged shoulders and thoughtful stares. Ms. Roberts sat with a sour expression on her face.

“I have a suggestion,” a voice said. I turned at the sound and saw an older, well-groomed gentleman. Mr. Gibbs whispered, “Wait. This ought to be good.”

Someone shushed him.

The principal nodded at the man.

“Well,” he said in a slow measured tone. “I was thinking about programming in the Recreation area. We seem to be able to offer a good deal of recreational activities to the offenders, but I thought it might be a good idea to change things up. I was thinking that roller skating might be a nice change.”

Someone coughed. My eyes widened. Mr. Gibbs instantly called out, “I second that motion.”

Gibbs said it with a straight face too. I couldn’t have managed such a feat. The principal favored Mr. Gibbs with a jaundiced gaze, then turned back to the speaker. He said gravely, “Thank you, Dr. Hartford. It might be best to speak with the two gentlemen who are in charge of recreation first. They might have some insight into their needs. Thank you.”

“Who is that?” I whispered. I was desperate to know who could possibly think that roller skating was a good idea inside the walls of a maximum-security prison.

Mr. Gibbs grinned. "That's our school psychologist," he said. "Dr. Hartford. And yes. He was serious about roller skating."

I stared.

"Don't worry," Mr. Gibbs said. "We try to keep him away from the offenders. We don't want him to get hurt."

I could understand why. Further musing on the incompetence of my colleagues was interrupted by Ms. Roberts.

"I don't see why we need to make any changes," she said. "My classroom runs smoothly enough. Students are earning credits."

"But isn't this more about simply earning credits? Shouldn't we be trying to reach them? And teach them? Something more?"

I should have kept my mouth shut. Yes, I had committed the cardinal sin of opening my mouth. I should have just gone about my business and not said a word.

Mr. Gibbs whistled through his teeth. "Now you've done it," he said, shaking his head. "Poked that bear." He turned in his chair and stared at me intently. "Let's see how you wiggle out of this one. Go ahead."

"Did it ever occur to you that if these gentlemen wanted a better education then they should have stayed out of prison?" Ms. Roberts asked. Her words dripped acid.

"Well," I said. "They're going to get out of here some day. They aren't going to be locked up forever."

There were snorts. Some of our students didn't make it long on the outside. For some, the transition from our juvenile facility to an adult facility was a rather speedy process.

"So shouldn't we at least try to give them something more than just...packets?"

"Oh, by all means. Let's do that." Ms. Roberts looked around at her gathered colleagues, amused at my ignorance. "Exactly what did you have in mind? Wait. Let me guess. Shakespeare?"

"Actually," I said, smiling. "Yes."

Chapter Eleven

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

I prayed that Hamlet would save me. There was still the dream. The vision. The plan.

I nodded at the words. Indeed, there were more crimes that had been committed than I could possibly dream of.

“What’s he talking about, Mr. Lavelle?”

It was Mr. Pittway. I paused the play to answer his question.

“Well, Hamlet has just seen the ghost of his father,” I said. “He spoke with the ghost of his dead father. Hamlet is basically telling Horatio that there’s many strange and scary things in this world.”

“I saw something strange and scary last night.”

I shook my head, held up a hand, and started to speak but it was too late.

“I saw Sherwood running around the unit just about buck naked. He’d skinned down to just a hairnet and then greased himself up with lotion. The officer had to chase him down and...”

“We’re not talking about that,” I said. “Just Shakespeare. Just Hamlet.”

The young man opened his mouth, but froze when he saw Pittway.

“Sex offender,” he said, shaking his head. The young man stopped talking.

I hit play. Hamlet continued.

“Here,” he said. “As before, never, so help you mercy, how strange or odd some’er I bear myself - as I perchance hereafter shall think meet to put an antic disposition on...”

“Is he gonna act all crazy?”

“Yes,” I crowed, pleased that Pittway had caught the gist of the

language.

“Because Dess tried that shit on our unit. Started talking to himself. Saying some crazy shit. He wanted to get moved over to A Unit. Our counselor kept telling him that he wasn’t gonna get moved. No matter what. But Dess kept it up - started talking even crazier. So we jumped his ass. He stopped acting all crazy after that. Told him that any time he started up again that we’d jump him.”

I was hoping that we could discuss the juxtaposition of Hamlet’s feigned madness with Ophelia’s real mental health issues. It was not to be.

Instead, I pushed on to that famous scene where Hamlet pondered whether to be or not to be.

“I told my Social Studies teacher that I was thinking about killing myself.”

It was a new voice. With a new connection between literature and his life.

“He let me go talk to the psychologist. I got a sucker and a phone call home.” He paused. A thought struck him. “Mr. Lavelle, this Hamlet shit has me thinking about...”

I shook my head. No sucker. No phone call. Just Shakespeare.

But the Bard couldn’t keep me from thinking that my dream was nothing more than a waking nightmare. I looked over at the filing cabinet filled with packets. At that moment, all I wanted was a handful of packets. Packets meant peace.

Instead, I was grateful that there were no dogs in the play. Even the slightest reference to something canine might have triggered animal longings in more than one of my students.

Desperate, I fast-forwarded the film to the final fight between Hamlet and Laertes. The pair duelled and Hamlet scored a hit. The Queen caroused to his good fortune and raised the poisoned cup to her lips. It was a tense moment. Would she drink? The class watched in rapt silence.

“I tried to poison my family.”

I closed my eyes against the pain. “I don’t need this,” I thought. “I really don’t.”

“Bitch, you better shut the hell up.”

It was Pittway, again. He was entranced by the play and did not appreciate the repeated interruptions. Nor did I. But the newest voice would not be deterred.

“I crushed up my meds and put them in my sister’s drink. She’d didn’t die though. At least not yet...”

Queen Gertrude, however, did die. The onscreen death was enough to momentarily distract all parties. Long enough for Hamlet to tell the King, “Drink of this potion! Is thy union here? Follow my mother!”

There was silence. Blessed silence.

For just a moment.

Pittway stared at the screen and said, “Damn. That shit was tight.”

It was not tight. It was not right. Nothing about this class had been right.

Shakespeare was not literature. It was a litany of crimes. Crimes committed by the characters in the play and the characters sitting in my classroom. The play was indeed the thing. The thing that triggered their criminal inclinations.

I let the play continue. There was little else that could be said or done to top what had already transpired. As Hamlet breathed his last and whispered, “The rest is silence,” I thought about what tomorrow would bring.

Tomorrow would bring a return of packets and blessed silence.

The bell sounded and I heaved a sigh of relief.

“It’s over,” I said softly.

As I watched my charges file out of the classroom, one forlorn figure caught my eye. It was the young man who was fast developing a fear of having a penis placed in his ear. Unlike some of the more common

phobias such as a fear of heights or a fear of enclosed spaces, I figured that this was probably unique to correctional facilities.

“What would it be called?” I mused. “Perhaps Oticularmanephalluphobia. OMPP for short. I doubt it’s going to be added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.”

To him, I said, “I want you to make sure that you talk to your counselor when you get back on the unit and put in a request to switch rooms. Let’s hope you don’t have to wake up like that again. Okay?”

He nodded, looking a little less forlorn.

And, I added silently, “Let’s hope your counselor can get you moved quickly...and that you’re not a side-sleeper and a mouth-breather.”

Pittway hung back. He seemed lost in thought as he approached my desk. A few new students entered the room. They jarred him from his reverie. Pittway looked at them, and said, “You bitches better listen up today. Mr. Lavelle has got something to teach. Something good.”

I stood staring at him. Something good? Was he serious?

He turned to look at me, cocked his head to one side, and said, “You know what, Mr. Lavelle? If we was on the outs and you was my teacher, you know what I would do? I’d get high and skip all my other classes and come hang out in your room. All day. I didn’t understand half the shit they said in that play, but I liked it. It was good. Like this class.”

To date, that is the greatest compliment that I have ever been given as a teacher.

Epilogue: Hope

“Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrata!”

“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!”

Dante Alighieri

What would we do with our newfound classroom freedom? Not just me, but we, because a classroom contains teachers and students. For starters, we both started working harder. As a teacher, I went from having a complete curriculum - everything from start to finish - to nothing. All I had was a wide world of literary possibilities that I might teach. Nothing was set in stone. These possibilities had to be sifted through and made classroom-ready. It was a daunting task, but such was the price of my own freedom in the classroom. “How can we do things better?” meant that I was going to have to work a great deal more outside of the classroom in order to improve what happened inside the classroom.

For my students, I asked them to stop reading paragraphs and answering questions about inferences and main ideas and to start thinking about what they wanted to read. In the beginning, I had an unlikely ally in a young man who had just recently been released from long-term segregation. He was quiet, respectful, studious, and very dangerous.

“I don’t mind reading, Mr. Lavelle,” he said. “It’s the only thing that kept me from going crazy over in seg. I used to hate it, but when I was reading I totally forgot about being locked up in that little cell for months and months. Those books took me to different places in my mind.”

No one argued with him, least of all me.

And once we started exploring the host of different literary offerings that the world had to offer, I asked them to start thinking about what they’d read and talking about what they’d read too. I asked them to

share their thoughts. For many, this was a novel experience. They were not used to it on the inside or the outs.

And we all started writing. I started writing because there were a few students that flat out refused to read anything. They felt no connection between their own lives and the written word, so I penned a tale of one young man's struggle to survive on the inside and the outs. I knew I was onto something when one of these challenging young men read what I had written, raised his hand, looked at me, and said, "More."

This was all the motivation I needed to keep writing. My students needed considerably more motivation to write, but some surprised me.

One such young man was named Aaron. He was a quiet young man, almost pathologically quiet. He was also not terribly inclined to do much, if any, work in class. One day I asked him about this lack of motivation. I figured that if I couldn't get him to do any work, I would at least like to know why.

"Aaron," I asked. "Did you like school on the outs?"

"I stopped going to school when I was in middle school."

I let an eyebrow raise a notch at this revelation. He was seventeen years old.

"Why did you stop going to school?" I asked.

"I just didn't feel like going any more. So I stopped."

There was a pregnant pause as I considered his words. "What did your parents think of this decision?"

He shrugged. "They didn't make me go to school, so I didn't."

"And so..." I searched for the words, trying to wrap my head around the fact that a parent would allow their child to simply not attend school. "What happened?"

"A few years later," he said. "I decided that school might be a good idea after all. But then I got locked up."

"So now you have to go to school," I finished, nodding. "And you

haven't been to school in years? And you really don't like school all that much?"

Aaron nodded. He didn't have enough credits to graduate from high school, and he didn't have the academic skills to pass the GED test. So what was he going to do? What was I going to do? We both knew that I couldn't actually force him to put pen to paper and write something. He would sit quietly and not cause any trouble, and I would dance about, prodding and pleading.

We went about our day-to-day business, my teaching and Aaron doing his imitation of a bump on a log, until one fateful day. I stood before the class and announced, "Today..." I paused for dramatic effect, surveying the skeptical crowd, "we are going to write poetry."

I wanted them to write. I was forever lecturing that the ability to put thoughts onto paper is an invaluable skill. It was a Sisyphean task to try and conjure up new ways to entice them to put pencil to paper. Good writing prompts were treasure. Unfortunately, most books that purport to have writing prompts guaranteed to garner student interest were either boring, profoundly stupid, or entirely unsuited for writing in a correctional setting.

For example, one time I purchased a book of writing prompts from a local teacher. A lovely lady. She taught at a fairly prestigious local private school.

"Surely," I thought, "this will be filled with gold."

Imagine my surprise when I opened the book and read, "Have you ever felt guilty about something you've done?"

Pandora's Box. That's what that was. I paused, absorbed in the horror of actually presenting my students with such a writing prompt. I envisioned their words on paper. And shuddered.

"I did sorta feel guilty when I pistol-whipped that old man. But his stupid ass wouldn't hand over his wallet fast enough..."

Or, "I guess I should feel guilty about having sex with..."

No. I didn't want to go there.

We would write poems instead. Poetry was safe. Well, safer.

This was met with the usual grumbling.

“Your poem doesn’t have to be long,” I countered. “but I want it to be heartfelt. I want you to write about something that you feel strongly about.”

I then offered the standard disclaimer that they could not write about sex, drugs, alcohol, shooting or killing someone, or anything else that might be construed as criminal.

“Then what the hell are we supposed to write about?”

“What about something scary like Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*? Something terrible tapping on your cell door as you sleep?” There were a few nods as heads suddenly bent over their paper, pencils scrawling.

“What about song lyrics?”

It was Aaron.

“I used to write song lyrics,” he continued. “Can I write some song lyrics?”

I flung my hands skyward in both praise and enthusiasm. “Of course!” I crowed. “Song lyrics would be wonderful. Think about Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison. Many consider their lyrics to be poetical in nature.”

He nodded, and miraculously, started writing. For a few minutes silence reigned supreme as the class pondered and penned their verses. Eventually, most finished their attempts at poetry.

“All right everyone,” I interrupted the few remaining writers. “It’s time to share what we have written. I would like a few volunteers to read your poetry. You don’t have to share...but I think it is important for people to hear your words. To hear your written voice. Remember, part of the writing process is to publish your work. Think of this sharing time as publishing your work.”

This part of the writing process was a dangerous time. Few students wanted to expose themselves to the tender mercies and

almost assured ridicule of their peers. Many of these young men lacked certain social graces – empathy and tact being first and foremost. However, there was also the unspoken threat of my becoming an unhinged, raving lunatic if someone so much as snickered. This helped to maintain some semblance of order and civility.

The poetry slam commenced with the usual suspects offering up their words.

One enterprising young poet tried to disrupt the proceedings with the following poem.

“Hickory, hickory dock.
Y’all a bunch of bitches,
And Mr. Lavelle can suck my cock.”

After this profane recitation, we continued with what I hope would be more serious efforts. I was wrong.

“Can I read mine?” Mr. Pittway asked.

“Certainly,” I said. “Go right ahead.”

He picked up his paper and read slowly.

“Make a new fi. Take a hella deuce after Dining Hall. Write my mama. Put new roommate on tile restriction for the night. Tax the other bitches on the unit. Ain’t doing shit in school today ‘cause it’s Friday and I don’t do shit in school on Fridays. I’m out.”

“Mr. Pittway,” I started, then paused, searching for the right words. “Was that free verse? A form of poetry without the more traditional constraints.”

“Poetry?” he said. “I didn’t write no damned poem. This is a list of what I’m gonna do today.”

“But the assignment was to write poetry. To practice using the language. To explore your ideas through words.”

“I wrote down what I was thinking about.”

“Good enough,” I said. “Let’s move along.”

I didn't need Mr. Pittway giving voice to any more thoughts in his head. Some of these young men didn't mind speaking in front of their peers as they were inclined to rebut any negative comments with fisticuffs. However, it was sometimes better to limit the opportunity for discordant voices and possible violence. Truth be told, on that day, I had asked for it. Warily, I coaxed a few more recalcitrant speakers onto the classroom stage.

As the end of the period drew nearer, I was ready to wrap things up. Aaron raised his hand.

"Aaron?" I asked, slightly incredulous. "Did you want to share your writing?"

"Yeah," came the quiet reply. "If that's okay. I wrote song lyrics."

"That would be wonderful," I said. "The stage is yours. Go ahead when you are ready."

He nodded, picked up his paper, and very softly began to sing. I sat stunned. Naturally, it made sense to sing the words to a song, but he had only written lyrics, not any sort of melody. No one else in the class had ventured anything so daring. Yet there he was – singing.

It was atrocious. He could neither carry a tune nor was there a tune to carry. I risked a glance at Mr. Pittway – the one soul in the class I was most worried about who might spoil Aaron's performance – and saw him look back at me, trying and managing to control his features. He didn't say a word. Not a single word. No one said a word. There was not a single snicker or mocking glance. There was only respect. Respect for someone who hardly ever lifted a finger to do his work suddenly putting himself out there. As the final strains of Aaron's song faded, silence reigned supreme.

"Aaron," I said. "You did an excellent job." My words were hardly a fitting coda to what he had just done, but I wanted to forestall any sudden attempts at levity at his expense. Miraculously, there were none. Only nodded heads in agreement. I think they understood the magnitude of this moment.

Some naïve soul might say, "Oh, you created the environment wherein he felt safe to share his song. How wonderful."

No, it wasn't me. I think it was these young men treating one another with dignity and respect – a rarity. It wasn't me. It was them. This was how I found hope in a place filled with much hopelessness.

At the end of the period, my students filed out of the classroom as their units were called. Mr. Pittway sat at his desk lounging. His was the last unit to be called out. The classroom was all but empty.

“You know what, Mr. Lavelle?”

“Yes, Mr. Pittway?”

“That bitch-ass cracker couldn't sing for shit. But for once, he actually did some work in this class. That's all right.”

It was all right. It surprised me and gave me hope.

Postscript: A Christmas Season

“Humbug,” said Scrooge.”

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. The Christmas season was upon us. A dreaded time.

Students often acted out. There was fighting, bullying, stealing, and general unrest. Sometimes the unrest grew to a point where the administration ordered a lockdown of the facility. The young men were locked in their rooms and only released to go to the bathroom. Being locked down wasn't such a bad thing in their eyes. No school, no programs, no recreation. Nothing. It was a perfect time to catch up on sleep. Granted, meals were delivered to the units in the form of sack lunches and their rooms and persons were all searched with methodical implacability, but they were still able to retreat into blissful, forgetful sleep. And sleep they did. It seemed as though sleeping through the holidays was the preferred way to deal with being in prison.

My colleagues and I had other plans. With the help of Charles Dickens we would see to it that life on the inside would be no humbug. All of the English teachers, including Ms. Roberts, were given copies of *A Christmas Carol*, and everyone agreed to read it during the month of December. It was a united front of learning, and it wasn't just the English teachers that would be involved.

We enlisted the aid of the Culinary Arts teacher and she agreed to host a Victorian Christmas dinner party as a culminating event for the unit. She would order all of the food and her students would prepare and serve the meal. There would be turkey or ham, green beans, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and pie for dessert. It would be a Christmas feast.

There was a catch.

Students had to meet certain expectations in order to participate. They had to be good. They had to do their work. They couldn't get kicked out of their classes.

We couldn't give them presents. We couldn't give them their freedom. But we could give them something they all liked. Food. So we would feed the ones who were good. Anyone who could meet our expectations would attend the Victorian dinner celebration.

We had no idea how many would attend. It all depended on them. They would be responsible for their own behavior. If they could behave in all of their classes, complete all of their assignments, and not get kicked out of class, then they would get a good feed.

There were so many students that earned the reward that we had to feed them in shifts.

On the day of the feast, my crew stood lined up outside of the Culinary Arts classroom.

"Welcome, Mr. Sanders," I said to the first student. "I'm glad you're here, Mr. Simms," I said to the second student. I greeted each by name, and then commenced with directions.

"Okay," I said. "You're going to file in and go to the back of the room to hang up your coats. Then find a seat at the table. You can sit anywhere you like."

There were nods of understanding. With a final flourish, I led them into the Culinary Arts room where a holiday table was set up before them. There were widened eyes and a few exclamations of surprise as they saw the tablecloth, real forks, knives, and spoons instead of sporks. There were multiple plates at each place setting instead of the single tray. There were napkins, sugar, table decorations, and the best of all...a fully decorated and lighted Christmas tree. The Culinary Arts students were faded into the background in hairnets, gloves, and white serving jackets. They were respectfully silent and ready to serve.

When everyone was seated I stood at the end of the table and paused. Something needed to be said. I had to offer something in the way of thanks, but how would I solemnize this event? I couldn't say a

prayer. One student was a professed Rastafarian and there was surely a smattering of Muslims, gang members, or Wiccans present who might find offense in any words that suggested Christmas. And yet this was decidedly a *Christmas Carol* celebration.

“Thanks to Mrs. Barrett and her students for preparing and serving this meal,” I began. “And I would like to thank all of you who earned the privilege of being here today. I am extremely proud of you.”

And then I finished with Charles Dickens.

“Do you gentlemen remember the last words of the novel?” I asked. There were some nods and some perplexed stares. “How Scrooge knew how to keep Christmas better than any man?” More nods. “And what was the last line? What did Tiny Tim say?”

I paused.

Thankfully, someone remembered. “God bless us, everyone,” he said.

There were nods and an “Amen”. I smiled and said, “Bon appetit!”

My eyelid twitched and my pulse quickened in panic and nausea as I suddenly remembered that these were the words from that first fateful day of teaching on the inside. In my introductory letter that I had penned so carefully, I had wished them “bon appetit”. Things were better now.

I watched as the young men before me fumbled with which fork to use for the salad and where to set their spoon when they were done sugaring their tea. Mostly though, they munched happily, basking in the warm glow of the spirit of the Christmas season.

After dinner was over, we filed back into the classroom. There were satisfied belches. The bell had just rung signaling the beginning of the last period of the day. There was shuffling of papers, handing out of pencils, and a general settling down into the normal classroom routine.

“Mr. Lavelle?”

It was Sam, a quiet young man, lately more quiet as recently he had

made the mistake of asking me aloud how to spell “DNA”. His peers had yet to let him live down his mistake.

“Yes, Sam?” I asked.

“I gotta tell you I was real nervous back there,” he said.

My brows furrowed with concern. “What was wrong, Sam?”

“That dinner,” he continued. “It was real nice. But I gotta tell you that’s only the second time in my entire life that I been to a formal dinner. I was real nervous. I had to keep trying to remember to keep my elbows off the table. And the food was good too. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sam,” I said. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

A formal dinner? Certainly not by my standards, but this young man had been impressed. It made me wonder about the world he’d come from.

At the end of the period, a letter appeared on my desk. It was from another of the dinner attendees. I picked up the letter and began to read. He wrote about his life. He told me about his relationship with his mother. He had been mean to his mother, cursed at her, pushed her down to the ground, told her how he hated her – and how she had died from lung cancer. He was struggling with her memory now, and at the end of the letter he thanked me. He thanked me for reading *A Christmas Carol* in class. He said that the novel taught him about the real meaning of Christmas.

“The real meaning of Christmas,” I thought. My reverie was broken by the sound of raised voices.

“Mr. Pittway,” I said. “Please refrain from threatening to stab your classmate. It’s the Christmas season after all. Okay?”

“Yeah, Mr. Lavelle,” he said. “I got you. It’s Christmas. That’s my gift to you.”

And I was grateful.

And I knew that sometimes, despite the challenges, I really loved teaching.

Biography

Mr. Lavelle is an author, coward, raconteur, teacher, husband, and father. He is lazy and resents having to do anything that resembles honest work. He would cheerfully tilt at windmills were it not that he finds horses rather disconcerting.

Of himself, he writes, "I've always wanted to write a book so I could write the bio page and lie shamelessly about my achievements."

He taught inside a maximum-security juvenile correctional facility. It was on the inside that he developed a distaste for institutional food.

Mr. Lavelle claims to be a would-be musician, a historian of sorts, and a reluctant grammarian. He loves to sleep and would much rather rise at a decent hour, sometime after 9:00 a.m., take a long nap in the afternoon, and retire early. How he manages to write or teach is a miracle considering his proclivity for laziness.

His wife is beautiful - another miracle that continually amazes the author.

At one time he dreamt of riding in the Tour de France, but his knees bother him in cold weather. Instead, he enjoys raking leaves, reading boring books about history, writing, making a nuisance of himself to those around him...and teaching.

Believe whatever you like about the above.