

Secrets  
of the



Teachers

Lounge

Beverley Holden Johns

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## CHAPTER 1

I will not allow this man to intimidate me. I know what I saw and I reported it to the Department of Children and Family Services. Wanda Terrill hit Jason in the face. I did the right thing. Thoughts and fears are rampant in my mind as I sit in the school office waiting area outside the principal's office.

It's now after school. All the students are gone and only a few teachers are still here. I have been called to the office.

I have that same feeling that one gets when waiting in the doctor's office for an appointment. My nerves are shot, my blood pressure is high, and I fear bad news that is coming. I know my face must be beet red. I look over my notes about the incident to keep myself busy. My mind wanders and I watch all around me.

Mrs. Depper, our school secretary, says smiling, "I'm sure Mr. Caton will be off the phone in a little while. Can you believe what that Mrs. Terrill actually did to Jason? I knew she was burned out of the job this year—too bad she didn't take a leave of absence. She just can't control her anger."

I smile knowing that I had better keep my mouth shut. I am already in enough trouble for reporting Mrs. Terrill for child abuse. I also don't know what Mrs. Depper may say to Mr. Caton.

Mrs. Depper figures out that I'm not responding, so she replies, "Well, I'm just the school secretary. What do I know about anything other than all this paperwork? I'm sick and tired of having to keep track of all this student activity money for Mr. Caton. It was never this difficult before to get accurate records of the money."

The phone rings. Mrs. Depper answers, "Lincoln School, how may I help you?" There is a long pause, "Yes sir, I will give him the message you called. I'm sure he'll call you back as soon as he gets out of his meeting."

When Mrs. Depper gets off the phone, she looks at me, "Well, seems like you have caused quite a stir. That was Mr. Clyde calling, and he wants to hear from Mr. Caton as soon as your meeting is over." Mr. Clyde is a school board member and his wife, Maybelle Clyde, teaches at our school.

Maybelle is a number one troublemaker in our school and is a good friend of Wanda Terrill. Oh, no, now I am in even more trouble. What have I done?

Out comes Mr. Caton from his closed-door office, scowl on his face, as he says, "Dana, come in here." I walk in his office and sit down in the closest chair. He closes the door. I am already feeling very uncomfortable. I am working hard to be calm and act in control of the situation.

Mr. Caton has been our principal for the last three years. I have never felt comfortable around him. I find him slimy; there is something about how he eyes all the women and how he seems like a fake with the students. I have been in the district 19 years. He is younger than I am. My fellow teachers and I guess he's about 35 years old. He is about 5 feet, 6 inches tall.

We joke all the time that he has a complex about his height and tries to intimidate everyone around him. He's not bad looking, but sure not my type with his domineering obnoxious personality.

Is it warm in this room? Am I having a hot flash or is it sweltering?

Caton starts in on me, "Now, Dana, what is this preposterous story that you saw Wanda Terrill hit Jason? I'm sure there's some misunderstanding. I have known Mrs. Terrill since she has been here and you and I both know she would never do anything like that". What were you doing out of your classroom in the first place?" Mr. Caton is still standing; he is in front of me, looking down at me. Another intimidation tactic I recognize from him.

I say very calmly, although I feel like I could cry any minute, "I have my notes about what I saw and what I conveyed when I called the Department of Children and Family Services. I'm happy to review those with you."

Mr. Caton is getting red in the face. He gets loud and glares at me, "Wait just a minute. What did you say? You called the Department of Children and Family Services and didn't tell me? How dare you not follow proper protocol in this school? You may be one of the senior teachers here but you will follow orders." If looks could kill, I would be dead.

I say in a matter of fact tone, "Mr. Caton, I am a mandated reporter. When I see an incident that involves abuse of a child, I'm required to report it, and that is what I did."

"You should have come to me right away before you made such a call," Mr. Caton bellows.

I talk fast, "Mr. Caton, I did come right to the office to report to you when it happened, and Mrs. Depper said you had left to go to a meeting and wouldn't be back until after school. When I told her I had to see you, she tried to reach you on your cell phone but there was no answer. I knew this couldn't wait so I called the Department and spoke to an investigator." By now, my hands are sweating and I feel like my face is on fire.

Mr. Caton's face looks like a red light. "Can you imagine how I felt when I got back to this office and had a message to call the Department of Children and Family Services? Then, when I called them, I was told that an investigator will be here tomorrow morning. How dare you report something when you may not even know what you saw? How dare you go over my head? We should handle this inside our school building, within our family here, not going outside." Caton stretches his arms out.

He continues, "This is just absurd. Did you say you have written notes about this situation?"

"Yes, I do, and I've made you a copy for your records. Please do read it over and let me know if you have questions. I'm very upset about what I saw."

Mr. Caton takes the paper from me, gets an even worse look on his face, and sits down in his chair. At least he is no longer hanging over me.

I feel a little more relaxed but the feeling doesn't last long as he looks up from the

paper and responds, “Now you have Mr. Bates involved in this? How did he see what was happening? It isn’t any of his business—he’s the janitor. If he would spend more time cleaning this building, we would all be a lot better off. I know you would agree with that statement, Dana. We all know that Mr. B. is getting old and doesn’t clean well.”

Mr. Caton is trying to get me off track. I don’t take the bait, “Mr. B. did see what happened, and he also called Department of Children and Family Services right after I did. I had just taken my students to music, and was walking down the hall. I went by Mrs. Terrill’s room. She was speaking loud to Jason.”

I pause and continue, “She was yelling at him. The door was open to her classroom and I stopped to see what was going on. Mr. B. had been cleaning a spot off the hall carpet and heard the noise, and came down the hall. Mrs. Terrill didn’t see us and kept screaming at Jason. Jason then called her a name, and she slapped him in the face. Both of us saw it.”

Caton responds, “Well, sometimes our mind plays games with us. You may have thought you saw something, but you may not have really seen her slap him. You did say that he called her a name. Maybe she was just trying to get his attention. I’m sure there’s a logical explanation.”

Caton pauses and speaks in a very formal tone, “Miss Lawrence, you are free to go. I want you to think long and hard about your actions, and what you actually saw. I am sure Wanda can explain what happened. Did you even bother to ask her about what happened?”

I say in a firm voice, “No, Mr. Caton, I didn’t ask her what happened.” It’s my job to report what I saw so someone else can investigate it. It isn’t my job to investigate it myself.”

Mr. Caton opens the door for me to leave, “I will see you in the morning, Miss Lawrence, that will be all.”

I have definitely been dismissed. I’m shaken. I’m not sure what to do or where to go. I need to talk to someone. I head toward the teacher’s lounge.

## CHAPTER 3

I comment as we walk by the lounge on the way to our classrooms. “Reba, look, the lounge is taped off with yellow police tape. The cherry pie I put away before I left yesterday is out again.”

Reba asks, “Oh, no, why is there police tape there? I know Mr. Caton was found there, but Mr. Nollwood said it was a heart attack. What’s going on? Are you sure you put the pie away?” Reba looks at me doubtful like I just thought I put it away.

I respond, “Police tape means there was a death. It’s usually done at all scenes of death, including accidents. After school, I’m calling Ashton to see whether he can tell me what’s going on.” Ashton is my boyfriend and works as a lieutenant at the police department.

Reba answers, “Well, let’s just keep walking. I’m not going near the lounge today. It gives me the creeps.”

We keep walking toward our classrooms. Reba’s classroom is in the same wing as mine and the teacher’s lounge. It’s before mine so I tell her a half-hearted, “Have a good day and see you for lunch.”

Wanda Terrill isn’t in her room, and neither is Maybelle Clyde. Oh well, it’s only 7:30. Reba and I had arrived early and together after deciding neither one of us wanted to enter the building alone.

I empty my tote bag, put the writing papers on the students’ desk and straighten out the desks. I think I am ready for another day but this is unlike any day ever at the school. Our principal is dead. We don’t know what happened.

Why is that tape keeping us out of the lounge? Why is the cherry pie out when I’m sure I put it away?

It will be hard to have a normal day with the students. The hum from the intercom breaks my thought pattern. After the hum comes a loud but shaky voice. “Teachers, this is Bill Thomas. I’ll be your acting principal until further notice. We will have a short staff meeting at 8:05 a.m. in the conference room. Please be there on time. Thank you.”

A few minutes later, Reba appears at my door and says, “What do you think this is all about, Dana? And did you see Wanda Terrill isn’t in her room? Have you seen her or Maybelle?”

I answer, “I haven’t seen either one of them yet. You know Maybelle may come waltzing in a little late with her usual flair. She thinks she can do what she wants since her husband’s on the school board.”

Reba continues, “Dana, who’s going to clean our rooms? Mr. Bates has been suspended, and we’ve never heard from him. I’m worried.”

I respond, “Well I hope we get some answers at this meeting. Hey let’s head down to the conference room.”

“Hi Sara.” Passing down the hall we see one of our favorite substitutes unlocking

Wanda Terrill's classroom door. "Oh, Wanda isn't here?" Reba and I both ask the question in unison. We can tell we have worked a long time together.

Sara answers, "No, Mr. Thomas called this morning at 6:30 and said Wanda had just called in sick, so here I am. He said he had seven teachers call in sick today here at Lincoln. After what happened last night, it doesn't surprise me. I'm a little freaked out myself."

Reba responds, "We all are for sure. Well, see you later. Mr. Thomas has called a staff meeting and we're headed down there."

Sara questions, "Gosh I wonder whether I'm expected to be there? I'll get settled and wander down just in case."

Maybelle's room remains locked and deserted. Did she call in sick too? I wonder.

Arriving at the door of the conference room, we pause. No one is here yet but it's only eight o'clock, and we still have five minutes. We take our usual places. Mine is always on the right side, the first chair. Reba's is on the right side, the second chair. We do have seniority in the building, and this reminds us of our role in the school structure. Our unwritten faculty curriculum dictates where we all sit.

This room usually has a homey feeling. A committee of several of us in charge of beautifying the building decorated it with large silk plants, some soft cushion chairs and a rocker. For today's meeting we know to sit around the large conference room table. The room and the table seem so sterile. The room smells of the sweet pumpkin diffuser we have in the room.

We've figured out that Mr. Caton's death was ruled suspicious. What happened? Did someone hurt Mr. Caton? My mind is racing with questions. What about that car that I saw cruising through the parking lot when I left?

Why is Wanda absent? Even though there were several of us who didn't like Mr. Caton, he was still the principal and it was hard to think that he is dead. I feel a bit guilty about his death. While I didn't like him, I sure didn't want to see him dead.

In a couple of minutes, Maddie arrives. She is one of our lunch bunch and has been here at Lincoln for 6 years. She teaches 4<sup>th</sup> grade. We call her the sandwich filling. I teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Reba teaches 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Maddie teaches 4<sup>th</sup>.

Maddie blurts out, "Can you believe this nightmare? Dana, can we have lunch in your room since the lounge is closed. I don't understand what's going on. Mr. Caton was in good health. He exercised all the time."

I explain to Maddie, "We know the death is suspicious. I can't figure out what happened. He was fine when I left though he sure was mad at me. I filed that report on Wanda hitting the student."

Reba chimes in, "Well let's have lunch in your room, Dana. We should keep our eyes and ears opened today to figure out what's going on. Maybe we'll know more after this meeting."

Here come the primary wing teachers from the K-2 end. They take their designated

seats on the other side of the table. The intermediate wing sits on one side and primary sit on the other. A few minutes later, Mr. Thomas walks in very quickly and takes his place at the head of the table and remains standing. While he is trying to act in control, he looks very unsure of himself. Typical administrator can be late, but teachers better not be. Mr. Thomas is probably in his 50s, short; the little bit of hair he has is gray. The frown on his face this morning makes him look even older.

Maybelle never arrives. There is dead silence as Mr. Thomas begins. He clears his throat and coughs a few times. He has a piece of paper and he reads what appears to be a prepared script. "Good morning, staff. First of all let me say how sad I am about all that has happened and our thoughts and prayers go to the Caton family." Oops, the thought comes to my mind; we aren't supposed to talk about prayer in the school.

Mr. Thomas continues, "I appreciate those of you who have come in. We have had to get a number of substitutes because of the number of absences here today. Those are understandable. If students ask questions about Mr. Caton, please tell them that Mr. Caton died last night, and if they would like to talk to our school social worker, Jenny Craig, they can do so."

Jenny Craig has always been a good sport about her name. Jenny has been a social worker here at Lincoln since I arrived and could really use the services of the diet. Such a pretty face and short curly black hair but an extra 80 pounds on that 5' 4" body is just too much.

What an irony that Jenny is going to talk to the students about Caton's death. I know she hated him because he frequently poked fun about her weight. Caton loved to bully the staff, and so many of the staff had been his victims, me included just yesterday.

He was known for calling teachers and other staff into his office and pointing his finger in their faces and telling them everything they did wrong. He would raise his voice in staff meetings so we knew he was in charge.

Mr. Thomas continues, "We'll try to have as normal of a day as possible. After the students leave, I must ask for your cooperation. The police will be here to continue their investigation into Mr. Caton's uh...death. You may be interviewed by them. I must remind you that you are to answer only the questions that they ask. You are not to give any additional information to the police. Our school attorney will be present during the interrogations."

At the word "interrogations" Reba's hand flies up. Teachers are so used to expecting students to raise their hands that they do the same thing. Mr. Thomas nods for her to ask her question.

Reba speaks cautiously. She is very upset, as I am, since the reality that this situation just keeps getting worse is sinking in. "Mr. Thomas, why are the police interrogating us? Mr. Nollwood said that Mr. Caton probably died of a heart attack."

Mr. Thomas's face begins to turn red, and he appears to be thinking about the right words to use. After all, he has been asked something that obviously isn't on his prepared script. "I must inform all of you that even though there is no definitive proof, there is suspicion that his death was not a heart attack. It could be a homicide."

All of us gasp. A homicide at our school. This is a bad dream.

“I must ask all of you to keep this information quiet. You are not to share it with your students or anyone outside this building. I hope all of you understand my message. If I find out that anyone disclosed information to anyone outside this building, there will be serious repercussions. Thank you all for being here today. I trust you all of you will work hard to have as normal of a day as you can.” Mr. Thomas walks away from the head of the table and exits the door.

The faculty appears to be shocked and stunned, silence overwhelms us. We all just sit there. The sounds of the bus engines remind us that we have students to teach today. We get up like zombies and walk back to our classrooms. How is it possible to have a normal day?

## CHAPTER 4

My stupid classroom door shakes again. It happens when someone knocks. The shaking creates a scare in me every time. Today, even more so, since I'm on edge anyway.

It's only 10:30 and I feel like it should be 5:00. All the students look to the door and then to me to see what I am going to do. Even though there is a small window on the door, it's hard to see who is there so I'm going to have to leave my students' briefly to answer the knock. I announce to my students, "Ladies and gentleman, I would appreciate it if you would continue to work on your math project while I answer the door."

When I open the door, I see the acting principal, Mr. Thomas. He has a scowl on his face. Oh no, now what has happened? What else can go wrong today? I am soon to find out. I just realize how tall he is. It seems like he is towering over me.

Mr. Thomas says in a very agitated tone, "Miss Lawrence, there is a caseworker here from the Department of Children and Family Services. She says she needs to speak with you about a call you made to the Department yesterday. Something about suspected abuse of a student by Mrs. Terrill.

"Oh, what should I do about someone watching my students?" I ask.

"I didn't know what she was talking about." He pauses, "I'm sorry to say. You had better explain this whole thing to me right after school. I don't want to take any unnecessary time out of our instructional day. I'm going to cover your class while you go meet with the caseworker and answer her questions. After school I want to see you in my office."

"Thank you, Mr. Thomas, I'm sorry I haven't had the time to tell you what happened yesterday. I will come down right after school and explain the situation. I need to go back inside and get my notes before I go down to the office. I'll introduce you to my students."

Mr. Thomas comes into my classroom.

"Ladies and Gentleman, thank you for doing your work. I really like the way you are working hard on that math project. This is Mr. Thomas, our acting principal, and he will be filling in for me while I go to a short meeting. I know that you will show him all you are doing." I take my notebook out of my desk and leave the room.

As I walk out of my room and stand in the hall, I am feeling overwhelmed at the thought of being interviewed by the Department of Children and Family Services. I wish it was time to go home. What a day. I pause and take a deep breath.

I then realize I have to get down to the office, so I walk down the hall. As I go by Maybelle's room, I see a substitute teaching since Maybelle must have called in sick. I wish I would have done the same thing but I don't do that. In the last 15 years I have only taken four sick days, one when I scratched my eye with my contact lens, and the other days when my Mom was in the hospital.

Maybelle Clyde is always calling in sick. She has had to use the sick leave bank a couple of times. We all donate an extra sick day or two each year so that someone who has a catastrophic illness can use days from the bank. Maybelle sure hasn't had a catastrophic

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