

★ Secrets

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of the

★
Poisoned
★



Politician

Beverley Holden Johns

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Chapter 1

Ashton commented, “I won’t argue that your district sure needs to be cleaned up. What a year you’ve had! First your principal was murdered and then the porn ring was discovered. Thank goodness, Jessica will never be a teacher or union representative again. She’s probably going to serve quite a bit of time in prison.”

Ashton and I were having a nice quiet dinner at my condo here in Hallicott City. We had both been in the mood for pizza on this Friday night. We savored quiet moments after what the year had held. I loved my condo with its cream-colored furniture brightened with yellow and orange pillows. It was a comforting place to come home to each night after tiring and stressful school days.

It was now the middle of April and I was counting the number of days until summer vacation. It had been a rough year in our school. During the first semester, our previous principal was poisoned with a cherry pie. This past semester our replacement principal was fired because he was framed in a pornography scheme. It turned out that the school superintendent was the ring leader and was working together with Jessica, a former local union officer, along with some other teachers. Just thinking about it made me sick.

“Are you sure you want to run for union office, Dana?” Ashton, my boyfriend of two years and the Assistant Chief of Police in our community, asked me.

“I know what you’re asking. It’s a tough decision to make. After Jessica, our last union representative not only failed to do her job but ended up being arrested, I think it’s time we clean up some things in this district. Reba and I both feel we have an obligation to run for office in the district teacher’s union.”

“I understand.”

I continued, “I just feel that I need to do my part to bring back some peace and quiet and respect to our school district. Reba feels we have a lot of skills to offer and I agree.”

“Well, you clearly have the skills. If it wouldn’t have been for you and Reba, we might still be trying to solve the murder and trying to figure out the culprits in the porn ring.”

“Oh, Ashton, that’s nice of you to say, but you really solved the cases.” I got up and went around to the other side of the table and hugged him. I was so lucky to have such a great boyfriend.

He hugged me back and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Let’s just say, we make a great pair.”

“Agreed. Hey, can I get you some more wine or a decaf?”

“A little more wine would be great. “Ashton paused, and I picked up his wine glass to refill it. He went on to ask, “So tell me more about these union positions.”

“Reba is running for president and I’m running for vice-president.” Reba was my best friend and a third-

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grade teacher at Lincoln where I was a fifth-grade teacher. I continued, “We actually are running unopposed. Ballots are going out on Monday and the winners will be announced on April 30. Then we take office May 1. Yikes.”

“It’s not surprising that you’re unopposed. Who’d want to go up against the two of you? Wait a minute; didn’t you tell me Jenny Craig is also running?”

“You’ve got it. She’s running for treasurer, unopposed. The current secretary has a two-year term, so he will still be on the board. I think he honestly tried to stay out of the messes that Jessica created and seems to be honest.”

“What’s happening with Jenny and Brett?” Ashton asked. Jenny was our school social worker, and she had just started dating Brett, whose ex-wife was implicated in the pornography ring. Brett was retired military and had never known what his wife was doing on the side.

“Jenny and Brett seem to be going strong. Brett is supporting her run for the union. He really seems to admire all she does for the students in our school and realizes what a wonderful lady she is.”

“I certainly support you for the union position. You are the most understanding woman I know and put up with all my police work. I’m with you 100%. I just thought that maybe you and Reba and Jenny would want a break after what you’ve been through this year. What work is involved in the union?”

“Reba and I have met with our state union representative, and she gave us an overview of what we will need to do. Obviously the first thing we have to do is unite the staff and most of that will have to take place when school starts again. We don’t have to work on a new contract for two years. Thank goodness. But, here’s the thing. She said that since we live only about thirty miles from our state capitol, Clarksville, the state union officials would like us to come over and help with some legislation.”

“What kind of legislation will you help with?”

“Right now, there is legislation pending on teacher evaluations, the state testing process, funding for schools, and whether parents and students should have the right to opt out of state testing.”

“Sounds like you’ll be busy with that. How long will the legislature be in session in Clarksville? I want us to have some time for our vacation together in July.”

“Not to worry. They should be adjourned by the end of June. Since we get out of school the end of May, we’ll have some time to go over and help however we can.”

Ashton changed the subject. “Speaking of state testing, didn’t I see where the test scores for this year were released yesterday and were in the newspaper today?”

I frowned, “They sure were. I’m upset about them.”

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Ashton asked, “Why? Aren’t the test scores for your students good? After all, you’re the best teacher in the district.” Ashton said with a proud smile on his face.

I had to smile back, “Ashton, you’re a bit biased. My scores are usually good, and they were good this year. Over 70% of my students exceeded the state average in both reading and math.”

“Wow, you are terrific. Why do I feel there is something you haven’t told me yet?”

“Yes, there is. Turns out that Mandy Christopher, the fifth-grade teacher over at Washington School, had better scores from her students than I did.”

Ashton was trying to make me feel better as he said, “Maybe she has a smarter group of students.”

“Good try, Ashton, but I don’t think so.”

“What’s the problem then?”

I raised my arms in frustration, “Mandy Christopher is a terrible teacher. Everybody talks about how lazy she is and how many sick days she takes. I heard she got a ‘needs improvement’ on her last evaluation. But the big thing is,” I paused, “she isn’t very smart. I’ve participated in curriculum committee meetings with her, and she never seems to understand what we’re talking about. How her kids could do so well is beyond me.”

“Could she have cheated somehow on the test? I mean, could she have given her kids the answers?”

“Good question, Ashton, and I intend to find that out.”

Chapter 2

Ashton had just finished another piece of pizza and asked me, “Has anyone said anything to you about Mandy’s test scores being better than yours? I mean how many people will notice that small of a difference?”

“I know her students were only three percent higher in the exceeds category, but I know it and it bugs me.”

“How did the other fifth-grade classes do in the district?”

I answered, “There are six other fifth-grades in the district. Mandy’s scores were the best, then mine, and the rest of the fifth-grade classes only had twenty to thirty percent exceeds.”

“Whoa, then you should be proud, Dana.”

“I know. I just can’t get over my suspicions that Mandy’s scores aren’t reflective of her teaching.” I paused, “I’m sorry. All we’re talking about is my week. What’s happening with you?” I dug in to another piece of pizza and poured Ashton and me some more wine.

Ashton answered, “For the police department, nothing much out of the ordinary, but I’ve got to tell you we had two bad instances of domestic abuse this week.” He frowned as he shook his head.

“Oh really. Did the wives follow through on charges against the spouse?”

“That’s just it. In one of the cases, the woman was really bunged up. Even though she called us, the woman refused to press charges when we got there.”

“Isn’t that typical?” I asked. “The woman is so afraid and the man apologizes. She believes him and won’t press charges.”

“You’re right. It happens that way more often than we like to think it does.”

“What about the other case?” I asked.”

“It was a daughter who had beaten her mother.”

“Oh no, that’s awful! Why would she do that?”

“Good question. From what we were able to put together, her mother is living with her, and her mother didn’t do what the daughter wanted her to do. She slapped her once and then kept hitting her.”

“That’s terrible! I can’t even imagine lifting a finger to my mother, let alone hitting her repeatedly.”

“I can’t either,” Ashton answered.

I pried further, “How was the mother able to call the police if she was hurt?”

“Oh, she didn’t call. A neighbor heard the mother screaming for help and the daughter telling her to shut up.”

“Ashton, how awful! What ended up happening?”

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“We took the mother to the hospital. We called Family Services and the mother, who is eighty-five, has diabetes and has lost one leg, is being placed in a skilled care facility.”

“What happened to the daughter? I hope they locked her up after what she did.”

“The mother didn’t want to press charges against her daughter who has taken care of her for the last two years. Her brother came and took his sister home. He said she’s been under a lot of stress this year, and he promised to get her counseling. He also promised that she wouldn’t be around their mother unsupervised for the next six months.”

“What kind of stress was she under that would make her harm her mother?” I asked.

“According to the brother, she loves her mother and has never done anything like this before. She seemed to have just snapped. She works in one of the schools here in town, and he said she was very upset that she had just gotten an unsatisfactory evaluation.”

I was puzzled. “Was she a new teacher at one of the schools in this district?”

“No, according to her brother she has taught twenty-five years and always received the highest ratings.” Ashton stood up to throw the empty pizza box away.

I poured us some more wine as I said, “I wonder what happened that she got an unsatisfactory evaluation.”

“Dana, I can’t give you any more details but something tells me you’re going to hear more about it.”

I had a confused look on my face.” Why do you think that, Ashton?”

“Because, my dear Dana, she works in your school district, and her unsatisfactory evaluation was because of the test scores we’ve been talking about.

Chapter 3

As I took a sip of my Moscato, I asked Ashton, “Wait a minute. How could she have gotten a bad evaluation from those test scores? They were just released to the public today.”

“Weren’t they released to the public today but the district got them earlier?”

“Oh, that’s right. We saw the results last week. Oh, my goodness! I bet we will be representing her through the union if she works in this district.”

“Dana, I don’t understand why teachers can get a bad evaluation based on test scores. That seems unfair when teachers can’t decide who is in their class and who isn’t.”

“That’s right, Ashton; it is pretty unfair.”

“Then why is the school district doing it?”

“Good question. It pertains to the legislators at our state capitol.”

“What do you mean?” Ashton asked with a confused look on his face.

I explained, “A few years ago there was extra money from the Federal government that states could get for something known as Race to the Top.”

“That sounds great that the state could get more money.”

I frowned, “Ha, not so fast. There were strings attached to the money.”

“What kind of strings were attached?”

“It seems that if the states wanted to be eligible for the money, they had to promise to do a number of things. One of those things was to tie teacher evaluations to test scores.”

“That’s ridiculous and so unfair.”

“It sure is. So our General Assembly agreed to do this ridiculous system and guess what.”

“I don’t have a clue but obviously the state went ahead and did it.”

“You are absolutely right. They went ahead and did it, and then they didn’t get any of the Race to the Top Money.”

“You have to be kidding.”

“I wish I was. The state sold its soul to get this money and then didn’t get a dime. What a bunch of fools! The check wasn’t in the mail.”

“How could legislators be so gullible?” Ashton asked.

“Exactly and that is what I want to learn more about over at the State Capitol. I can’t wait to set them straight on what their promise has done for our schools.”

Ashton commented, “I hope you can set them straight. These politicians don’t have a clue what happens

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in the real world. They are always claiming police brutality when officers have to make an arrest. They don't realize how sometimes we have no choice but to use some force. Wonder what they would do if someone spit in their face or kicked them when they have to make an arrest."

"I hear you, Ashton. It's too bad they often pass legislation without having all the facts." I took another drink and looked at Ashton. "I wish they had to teach in the classroom for just one day, and then they wouldn't think of using test scores alone for measuring the worth of the teacher." I laughed as I added, "I bet most of them would get an unsatisfactory evaluation. It makes me so mad that they don't understand our jobs or yours."

"I'm glad you're going to have this experience at the Capitol. I probably will learn a lot about the process from you."

I added, "I can also get some helpful hints from my brother Bud. He has spent a little time at the Capitol before when they were messing with insurance issues. Bud says that legislators are short term thinkers. They aren't strategic planners. All they are interested in is what it will take them to get elected the next time, and they have huge egos." My brother works in insurance and just like in education, the government is always trying to mess with it.

Ashton stood up to throw the pizza box away and took it over to the garbage can as he said, "Right now, I am pretty fed up with politics. We were supposed to get a grant from the state to add a couple of positions to combat the drug problems in the community."

“I thought you got that grant, Ashton.” I said with a confused look on my face as I stood to help Ashton clean up.

Ashton clarified the situation, “Well, we were supposed to, but you’ve probably read that there is no state budget. The governor and the speaker of the house are playing power games and until there’s a budget, no grant for us.”

“Sounds like Reba and I are going to be busy in June. Hope we can make a difference.”

Ashton gave me a big bear hug and said, “Hey, do you realize the weekend is ours. I’ve been waiting all week for time alone with you.”

“Me too. Ashton, do you think you’ll get called in anytime?”

“I sure hope not, but I do need to call in to see if everything is quiet on the station front. Do you mind? It won’t take me long.”

I answered, “Not a problem. I’m going to check my texts while you do that. I thought my phone beeped.”

While Ashton went in the kitchen to check in at the station, I checked my text messages. I read the message from Reba, “We’ve got a problem. One of the fifth-grade teachers over at Washington School has asked our union to represent her.”

I quickly texted back, “Oh no! It isn’t that Mandy Christopher, the one who beat me out of having the highest test scores, is it?”

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Within seconds, Reba texted back, “No, it’s the other fifth-grade teacher who has taught there for years. She got a bad evaluation because her test scores were not good like Mandy’s.”

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