

Approaching Storm

Francis W. Perry

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Approaching Storm

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Prologue

9:12 p.m., December 28

It was a waste of effort, but she tried to slam the door behind her anyway. The pneumatic closer defied her and slowly eased it shut, sweeping a ridge of snow inside with it. She stomped down the steps, swearing at the door and the world. She'd been inside only ten minutes, but her footprints in the parking lot snow were almost gone. Kicking at what was left did nothing to dissipate her anger.

Stop number one: the police.

She didn't even know where the local police station was, but knew she would find it. If she had to, she would drive down Main Street with her thumb on the horn until they found her.

My bad side, she thought. I don't get angry often, but when I do . . .

As she walked toward her car, she rolled the sheet of loose-leaf and stuffed what she could inside her left mitten. She held that hand against her coat to protect it further and then put her head down, chin tucked behind her scarf. She had to half close her eyes against what were now stinging little pellets of snow.

When she was halfway to her car, she heard the noise of a car engine rise above the wind. She stopped and

lifted her face. A car was now parked two spaces away from hers. Snow covered its roof and hood and a lighter dusting of pellets obscured its windshield, but the engine was obviously running. There were bare patches on the hood where snow was melting, and as she watched, the wipers gave a quick swipe. The black swaths revealed a man at the wheel.

He had followed her.

She kept her eyes on him and moved carefully toward her car. He made no move to get out of his vehicle. He was perfectly still, and although she could barely see his features, she knew his dark eyes were fixed on her.

A sudden squall whipped pellets into her eyes and for a moment she had to turn her face away and bring her right hand up as a shield. When she turned back, she could see that a smile was spreading across his face.

Too late she realized his gaze had shifted to just behind her...

One

The first day of school following Christmas Break is often hectic, and the students and staff of Parker Elementary were living up to that standard. New Year's Day had fallen on Monday, and school reopened on the Tuesday. At five minutes before the nine o'clock buzzer, students filled the corridors and chattered about the holidays. Many children in the lower grades had brought Christmas toys and were showing them to classmates. One fifth grade boy had produced a new remote-controlled monster truck and set it going through the feet of students crowding the corridor. He came close to losing it when it whacked against the ankle of a senior girl whose boyfriend was nearby. The young boy's ability with the control stick got the truck back to him, and he escaped with it into his classroom.

Outside it was a Maine January morning, squeaky cold and still. Town workers had plowed and cleared the snow they had gotten the day before New Year's, so walking to school for those living in town had been easy. Inside the school the corridor floors had been shining and the classrooms tidy, the result of the cleaning staff having days with few interruptions between the holidays, but now students were dragging snow inside with them and already puddles were everywhere.

The mainly female teaching staff clustered near the door to the staff room and welcomed each other back. They exchanged quick hugs, and tossed comments back

and forth about how they had spent their break.

School office staff later indicated that the first hint of a problem was a small boy sticking his head in the office doorway five minutes past the attendance buzzer, trying to catch the eye of an adult. There were only three people in the office at that time. Marg Hipson, school secretary, was at her desk, her eyes fixed on her computer screen. She had turned on what she referred to with a distaste for technology as “the Beast” for the first time since the holidays. She wondered what new tricks it had picked up over the break. Marg was a tall and rail-thin woman. With a sharp face and no-nonsense expression, and with her black hair in its usual pulled back style, she at first glance was taken to be severe to the point of frightening. New students approached her cautiously. Over time, they found she was kind and caring, though a stickler for rules. Marg was soon approaching the less than magical age of fifty, and had been secretary at Parker Elementary since 1977. It was actually the only place she had ever worked since her commercial course in high school.

Wally Polson, the school’s only physical education teacher and currently the school’s only male teacher, was hanging around the office. He generally did that until the 9:15 buzzer, when a class would move toward the gym. Wally was usually in the school before eight o’clock, and would have the lights on in the gym and the change rooms checked and ready. He’d head down to the office about 8:30 and try to listen in on as much news as he could.

There were two small offices to the rear. One of them had the designation of “Vice Principal” painted on the door glass, but there hadn’t been a vice principal in the school since cutbacks a decade ago. They left the signage in hope of a return to better times. That office now housed

the photocopier, storage cabinets, and a table. Principal Jackie Morrissey was at her desk in the other office, writing a few reminders for morning announcements on a yellow legal pad in case the day got crazy and she forgot something. Jackie was dressed for the first day back in a blue plaid suit jacket she'd gotten from her husband for Christmas—on her suggestion—with her trademark reading glasses hanging around her neck on a red cord. While she could have benefitted from wearing glasses full-time, she avoided that and resorted to the hanging pair only when absolutely needed. She and Marg were the same age, and like Marg, she didn't see the approach of fifty as anything to be pleased about. Although Marg was planning on a retirement in five years, Jackie liked her job and planned to stick with the school as long as she could. Jackie was short and tended to be “a bit on the heavy side,”—particularly just after the holidays she'd discovered putting on the new jacket this morning. Her long blond hair was often done up and pinned, but this morning it was loose and cascaded over the shoulders of the new jacket. Today she wore a straight pale blue skirt, black winter tights, and high-heeled boots. The boots were also a Christmas gift. Since she had forgotten shoes at home, she knew she would regret wearing them before the day was through.

Leonard Burns, generally referred to in the office as “Little Lennie Burns,” second grade student from the last class down the hall on the right, didn't mind going to the office. In fact he rather preferred being there with adults compared to what he often saw as confusion taking place in the classrooms, particularly the confusion of the class he had just left. Lennie was an only child, and his parents were strong on including him in family events, even family decisions. He tended to find school was a place where his

opinions were not as well respected as they were at home. His mother called him “mature beyond his years”—and he was. While his classmates were chattering among themselves with no particular notion of doing anything about the situation that morning, Lennie took it on himself to leave the babble of the room and make his way down to the office. Someone should be told, and Lennie was the one to do it.

It was Wally who first noticed Lennie in the doorway, and greeted him.

“Lennie, my boy! Something you want, fellow?”

Marg turned around to see the child, and her first reaction was automatic:

“Lennie, you know you’re supposed to come to the counter, not just walk into the office.”

“But the window isn’t open yet, Mrs. Hipson!” He pointed to the sliding glass pane normally exposing Marg’s counter to the corridor. She leaned over the counter and slid the glass over to the left, then settled back in her chair.

“Well it is now, young man. Please avail yourself of it.”

Lennie’s face showed a brief flash of annoyance and he took himself back into the corridor, disappeared for a moment, and then stuck his head just above the now open counter by standing on his tiptoes.

“It’s our teacher. Miss Walters. She isn’t here.”

“Isn’t here? Is she late?”

Wally got to his feet quickly. “I guess I better get down to the gym before that darling sixth grade class arrives.” He walked out and headed toward the gymnasium. Jackie Morrissey got up from the desk in her office and came out, shaking her head as she grimaced in annoyance.

“Can’t we have one morning where things start

smoothly? You'd think after ten days holiday everyone would be ready to get down to work." She walked over to the P.A. mike and flicked the switch.

"Excuse the interruption. Miss Walters. Please go to your classroom for attendance. Miss Walters. Classroom." Feeling this would resolve the situation, she walked back into her office and took her chair again.

"Okay, Lennie. You head back to your class now." Marg turned away from the window, and Lennie was dismissed. He wandered back down the corridor, taking a few minutes on the way for a drink at the fountain, and an inspection of the drying puddles on the floor. He could hear the chattering of the other kids in his room, so he knew that Miss Walters had still not arrived.

You had to give the unattended students credit. Most of them knew that making a loud noise or running about was likely to bring someone down from the office. They would rather just sit and talk about the holidays, so they chattered on with their neighbors, keeping one eye on the doorway, seeing if they could drag this lack of a teacher on as long as possible. Lennie said nothing to them when he returned, though they suspected that he probably had gone to the office. That would be like him.

After fifteen more minutes, they knew their free time was ending when Mrs. Smith from the first grade class across the hall stuck her head in long enough to see that no teacher occupied the room, and strode smartly back to her own room. A few minutes later, those near the doorway noticed a tiny redheaded girl in a bright green dress was being dispatched from Mrs. Smith's room to the office, clutching a folded piece of loose-leaf.

The new messenger didn't reach the height of the office window, but she stuck a freckled hand bearing the

note above her and triggered a raise of Marg Hipson's eyebrows. She reached out and took it. Invisible to Marg, the girl turned and headed back down the hall.

"What now?" Marg unfolded the note and read the message from Mrs. Smith, a brief indication that there was still no teacher in the second grade classroom, and her students were being distracted by the talking across the hall.

"Jackie! Still no sign of Kelly Walters!" Marg waved the note in the air as proof, and Jackie came out of her office again. She took a quick walk down the hall to the second grade classroom just to confirm the situation, warned the students to sit quietly while they checked where Miss Walters was, and came back toward the office. She stuck her head in the staff room on the way, but it was empty.

"Call Kelly's home number, Marg. Maybe she forgot to set her alarm after the holidays. See if you can locate her. Call her folks if you have to, if you can find their number."

"There's just her mother, as I remember. Up in Newport."

Five minutes later Marg was at the doorway of Jackie's office.

"No answer at Kelly's apartment, just voicemail. I got her mother at home, but she thinks Kelly should be here. Says Kelly was down there for Christmas and the day after, but should have been up here for the last several days. Hasn't talked to her since before the weekend."

"Well, wherever she is, she isn't here. See if you can get a sub in to cover the class until we find out what happened to her. I doubt if it was car trouble, because she could walk here from her apartment if she really had to."

Marg managed to get a substitute on her first phone

call. In half an hour Glennie Peterson, a recent but yet unemployed graduate from the education program at Presque Isle arrived at the school, excited to have a class for the day. With that second grade class taken care of, Jackie turned her attention to other matters for the morning.

...

Parker Elementary was a tiny school near the edge of Parker Mills, a small Maine town near I-95 just over halfway between Augusta and Bangor. Like many small schools built in the 1960's, Parker Elementary was a single floor structure with a flat roof that leaked on a regular basis. From the outside, red brick veneer hid cement block walls. The classroom and corridor walls were exposed cement block construction, painted a dozen times over the years. Students looking at the ceiling in boredom saw unattractive metal trusses holding corrugated steel sheets, exposed sprinkler pipes, and four rows of hanging florescent fixtures lighting each classroom. Parker was a K-8 school, one of the few in Maine. In an effort to separate the older students from the younger, it had two wings. The wings were generally referred to as senior and junior, though the seventh and eighth grade students generally called the opposite corridor the "little kids' hall." The wings met at the common center facilities: office, library, gymnasium, and cafeteria.

Students graduating from Parker moved on to Nokomis Regional High in Newport, entailing a long and tiresome bus ride. With families needing their boys at home to help with logging and other woods work, often eighth grade was as far as education went. The expectation of that when the school was built was a likely reason for the K-8 range.

When a boy failed to show for ninth grade at Nokomis, school authorities would pester the family for a few weeks and then ignore his absence.

The Parker Mills community had always taken pride in its school. In summer, flowerbeds of marigolds flanked the doorways and circled the flagpole, and the hedge running along the main entrance walk was well trimmed. A committee of dedicated parents did much of this, since the school was vacant for the summer months. A little care made the school attractive in spite of its age. On this January morning of school restarting, the lawn was buried in several inches of snow, the leafless hedges wore a white topping, and the flowerbeds were only brown dead stalks sticking up through the snow. The day custodian had freshly scraped the sidewalks, but students still created a number of shortcuts through the snow across the lawn. Built when school districts reacted late to the Baby Boom, Parker Elementary had initially housed two classes at each grade level. Now there were only enough children from the surrounding area for one class of each grade. With a surplus of classrooms, they had converted one into a science lab for the upper grades, and used several others just as storage rooms. A small number of students walked from the town, but most traveled by school bus from the surrounding catchment area, where there were many gravel roads leading into the forest and houses were widely scattered. As Parker attendance fell, several one-room country schools had been closed in favor of their students being bused to Parker. Some of the buses took almost an hour to make their run, picking up the first children just before dawn at this time of year, on back roads deep in the woods. The bus headlights often picked out one or two children by the side of the road standing in complete darkness, a

mother in a parka clutched over a housecoat just behind them, flashlight in hand. It wasn't uncommon for bus drivers to see lone children standing by the side of the road in pitch dark, blinking at the headlights, sometimes peering over banks of snow. The community population depended on the market situation for logging and related lumber industries. Over the past decade, student numbers had been falling as families moved up near Bangor and Brewer where there were more jobs, or off to the coast to try to get involved in fishing.

...

About 2 p.m., Jackie asked Marg to make another call to Kelly Walters' apartment and see if anyone answered. She had to start thinking about tomorrow's staffing.

Marg was in the midst of that, and coming up with nothing when Gary Smith stuck his head in the office doorway. Gary was in his mid-twenties, and had just taken over as day custodian this year. He was extremely capable, but was one of Parker's eighth grade graduates from a decade ago who failed to find his way to Nokomis High, and his lack of education currently limited him to the custodian job. Jackie found him an excellent member of staff, though a little obsessive at times. He kept a log book and recorded every aspect of his work, sometimes showing up at the office with the book to complain about an issue that Jackie didn't recognize as a problem. She suspected he would not be with them longer than it took to find a better paying job.

"I see Kelly showed up finally."

"She did? First I heard of it!" This annoyed Marg, since she had just filled out the substitute form for Glennie

for the full day. If Kelly was here, what happened to Glennie? Were they both here?

“Well, I see her car’s in her parking space. I noticed it when I was tidying up the parking lots after lunch.”

“So she’s back, is she? Well, I’d like to talk to her.” It was Jackie coming out of her office and moving to the P.A. mike. “Excuse the interruption. Would Miss Walters see me at the office right after dismissal today? Thanks.”

An hour later, in the quiet that followed the dismissal of students and the last bus departure, Jackie and Marg realized that although Kelly Walter’s blue Cavalier was in fact in the parking lot, Kelly was still not in the building. Glennie dropped in the office on her way out and confirmed that Kelly had not been to the classroom, and asked if she was needed for the next day. She was told they would contact her.

When Jackie left for the day, at almost 5 p.m., she noticed that the only cars still in the staff parking area were Kelly’s Cavalier and her own white Intrepid. Two cars belonging to the evening custodian staff were on the other side of the lot near the maintenance entrance. *Where is that girl?* she asked herself, and took a walk over to the Cavalier. Its doors were locked. The car was empty.

...

Wednesday morning Kelly failed to show again. Glennie was called for subbing, and after Marg was unable to learn anything new over the telephone, Jackie considered what to do next. When she looked out the window, it was another blue-sky clear day, but warmer, and the sun was starting to melt the snow. The street in front of the school

was already down to bare pavement, and the edges of the school roof dripped water just in front of her view.

Jackie Morrissey had been in teaching for almost twenty-five years, the last five as principal of little Parker Elementary. The problem of the missing teacher disturbed her, beyond just her administrative concerns. Nothing like it had happened before. She liked Kelly Walters. Kelly was generally a quiet young woman, though Jackie discovered she did have a temper when pushed. Kelly was in her first year of teaching. She worked hard and stayed in her classroom a lot, getting things prepared for her lessons. Her tendency not to frequent the staff room was a reason no one noticed her absence on opening day. The little Jackie did know about Kelly told her that this absence without any contact was not like her.

“Marg?” She spoke over her shoulder, still gazing out her window. Leaning toward the glass and looking to the far left, she could see Kelly’s blue Cavalier in its parking spot. Snow was melting off it and creating wisps of steam.

“Yeah?”

“Call Kelly’s mother again. Ask her if she has a key to Kelly’s apartment.” She paused and swallowed. “I’m starting to get worried. This isn’t like Kelly.” She settled back into her chair and started sorting through some paperwork on her desk. She opened a filing cabinet in the far corner and looked for a bank folder to store some school board papers about air quality.

“She has one.”

“What?”

“Kelly’s mother. She has a key. Kelly has a cat, and her mother had a key to go over and take care of it when Kelly went to Montreal before school started. I’ve

got her on the line.”

“Ask her if she would mind looking in Kelly’s apartment. Lord knows, Kelly could be in there sick.”

Jackie started out of her office. Marg looked at her, one hand covering the phone receiver. “She’ll drive down here, but she wants someone to come with her to Kelly’s apartment. She’s getting pretty worried now. I can hear it in her voice.”

“Tell her I’ll go. What time will she be here?” Marg spoke into the phone again.

“She says she’ll be here just after lunch. Want her to come to the school?”

“Tell her to meet me at the apartment. I want to take my own car in case she has to stay.”

...

Most of the streets in Parker Mills had been paved, although sidewalks and curbs were limited to the business section. With the passage of time, a number of the older large houses had been made over into three or four apartments, sometimes with a common front entrance, sometimes with the apartments accessed by open stairways fastened to the sides of the buildings. Kelly Walters had a second floor apartment in one of these houses, about five blocks from the school. The house had a common entrance hall that once might have been grand, but now had two doors to the lower floor apartments, and a walled in staircase and door that led to Kelly’s apartment above.

Mrs. Walters was short, like Kelly, barely over the five-foot mark, with tightly curled hair in an old-fashioned style. Although they were in midwinter, her face was brown, probably as much from wind exposure as suntan.

She wore no-nonsense winter boots, faded jeans, and a short winter coat of some kind of brown camouflage pattern. Jackie found her waiting in the entrance hallway. Mrs. Walters immediately handed the key to Jackie, and stood back against the opposite wall as if she was fearful of what opening the stairway door would bring. First they tried knocking, got no answer, and then Kelly's mother yelled, "Kelly! Kelly! Are you up there?" several times, her voice surprisingly loud for a small woman. Jackie worried that another tenant would open a door to see what all the noise was about, but none did. The mother's voice suddenly dropped and became softer with her last call, as though she realized the attempts were futile. Jackie could sense a fear in the woman growing by the minute. She kept her own thoughts pointed toward carelessness of some kind, though she had trouble relating that to what she knew of Kelly. She wondered if she should ask Mrs. Walters to wait in her car, but was afraid of entering Kelly's apartment without at least the mother's authority.

Jackie inserted the key, the lock clicked, and she pulled the door open toward them. The stairway was right in front of them, and unlit. A small grey and white cat sat on the third step, staring at them, visible only from the dim light of the hallway. It let out a mournful wail and started climbing down toward them.

"Oh, Boots, you poor little thing!" Jackie moved to one side, and Mrs. Walters scooped up the little cat and cuddled it in her arms.

"Kelly! Kelly! Are you here?" Jackie called as they went up, but there was no response. When they reached the floor it became apparent that Boots was living alone. The stairway brought them to a living room kitchen combination, where there was only a single couch opposite

a television on a low credenza, and then a small round dining table with two chairs before the kitchen started with an open counter. Two well-polished cat food dishes were against the base of the counter.

“Boots is out of food. That’s not like Kelly at all.” Mrs. Walters rounded the counter and opened the refrigerator to look for some open cat food.

Jackie walked around cautiously. The apartment had two bedrooms, but the first one had been made into an office of sorts, a desk pushed into one corner with a two-drawer filing cabinet on the floor next to it. Several cardboard boxes were against one wall. Most of the room was bare. Like the entire apartment, the walls were off-white and the flooring was worn softwood boards painted grey. A laptop computer sat open on the desk, and when Jackie moved her finger on the touchpad, the screen brightened. She looked more closely and could see that there was an Excel spreadsheet open with a listing of Kelly’s students and letter grades for various projects. Jackie’s belief in a logical explanation for Kelly’s disappearance started to erode. Something had happened to the young woman.

The other room had a queen-sized bed with no headboard, and one large bureau with a mirror. An oval braided rug was on the grey floor between the bed and bureau. The bed was unmade, but the blankets and blue flowered comforter were only tossed back on the side near the bureau. Jackie wondered then if there were any men in Kelly’s life. That idea hadn’t come to her before, but the bed didn’t seem to indicate there had been anyone joining her the last time she slept there. A red flannelette nightie decorated with images of candy canes was tossed on the bed, and there were several piles of discarded clothes on the floor.

Three blue suitcases stood in the corner of the bedroom nearest the closet. Jackie lifted the first one and its lightness indicated it was empty. She opened a folding closet door and noticed that clothing hung on hangers the full length of the small closet. Numerous shoes of different kinds littered the closet floor.

“Her suitcases seem to be here, Mrs. Walters,” she called back toward the kitchen.

“Are they blue?”

“Yes, they are. Are they all she has?”

“They’re mine, actually. She borrowed them for the move down here, and used them when she went to Montreal. I don’t think she has any of her own other than a small red overnight bag.” Mrs. Walters was coming out of the kitchen, so Jackie closed the closet door and met her in the hallway. She had already noticed the red overnight bag in the closet.

“Mrs. Walters, I’m going to leave you here. You take care of Boots. I’m going back to the school. Kelly is obviously not here, and it looks like she hasn’t been here for a few days at least.”

“But where is Kelly? Where do you think she could be?”

“I don’t know, but I think perhaps we should contact the police. She isn’t at school and no one there knows where she might be. She isn’t here. She hasn’t told us anything, and she hasn’t told you, her mother. I don’t know what might’ve happened, but I think we need to get some help.”

“But you said her car is at the school. Could she have gone off with someone else?”

“None of the staff at the school knows about other friends she might have. She tended to spend her time at

either the school or here at her apartment. Do you know of any friends she might have gone away with over the holidays?"

"I don't know. Her best friend was Bev Hamilton, but she's way down in Boston. I don't think she was up this way at all over the holidays."

"As soon as you get a chance, call this Bev and see if she knows anything. I'm going back to the school, but I'm afraid I'm going to call the police and just report it. I'd like your approval of that."

Mrs. Walters dropped her head and stared at the counter top and the half-used can of cat food. Jackie could tell that moving the matter of her missing daughter up to the level of calling the police was a serious thing to her. It was opening up a door to possibilities she hadn't wanted to think about. She spoke without looking at Jackie.

"Well, if you think it's best. She could turn up almost any time; we just don't know what might have happened. She might just come up the hall here in a few minutes. She might even wonder what we're doing in here." She looked up and smiled crookedly at that but Jackie could sense that tears were not far away. Mrs. Walters moved away and rummaged in a drawer for a fork, then scooped some cat food into a bowl.

"I'm putting on some lights here. The place looks dismal." Jackie reached for a wall switch and the brighter kitchen looked less depressing. She found another switch near the top of the stairs that lit the stairway. "I'll be at the school if you hear anything, anything at all."

As she drove back, Jackie was troubled by Kelly's apartment. It had all the signs of someone who had not gone away for a planned trip. While she didn't know if some clothes were missing, certainly the suitcases were

there, and she couldn't imagine that Kelly would have left with her computer still on, in fact it might be more likely that she would have taken the laptop with her. Certainly there was the issue of the cat being left as well.

Back at the school, she called their number for the Maine State Police office in Skowhegan, was handed on to an officer by the receptionist, explained who she was, and described the situation with her missing teacher. She didn't get an impression that he was taking the matter too seriously, though his interest did perk a little when she mentioned Kelly's car being in the school parking lot. When she left at about 4:30 that afternoon, she noticed a police cruiser was pulled in near the Cavalier, and one of the two officers was looking into the car through the windows. He tried the doors. She sat in her own car for a moment and watched, but after what seemed to her like a quick once-over, the officer got back in the cruiser and they drove out of the school grounds. So that was that.

She assumed that the police would do whatever they did in these situations—put Kelly Walters on a list of missing persons, get a picture from her mother, look in the apartment with Kelly's mother, but Jackie had enough to do at the school that she had to pull back and let them handle it. The next day they called Glennie again and told her she was a substitute for the week. They warned her that it could end at any time if Kelly showed up explaining her strange absence.

The Cavalier stayed in its parking spot. She wondered what to do about that. Kelly's mother probably didn't have the ability to get it removed, but perhaps the police would arrange something.

Kelly's second grade class seemed to get along well with Glennie. Jackie went down to the class on Thursday,

and tried to explain to them that Miss Walters was away and they did not know when she would be back. One of the girls asked, "Will she ever be back?" That caught Jackie by surprise, and she knew she stumbled a bit coming up with an answer.

"Oh, I'm sure she will be. Something has come up all of a sudden I guess."

She had been about to leave the room, when she noticed a small girl with dark, somewhat oily hair that badly needed cutting sitting near the back of the room. Her desk was pulled away from the other rows and was almost at the window. Jackie turned around and looked at her. The girl seemed distraught, and when she turned away Jackie thought she saw eyes that were shining with tears.

"Who's that little girl at the back by the window?" she whispered to Glennie as they huddled by the door.

"Belle? That's Belle Lapointe. She's new this year I guess, doesn't seem to mix well with the other students. I think she's from Quebec. I don't know what it was like between her and Kelly, but I think she's taking Kelly's absence very hard for some reason. I tried to get her to talk about it yesterday, but she just turned away from me."

"I remember the name now from the student lists, but I've never met her I guess. She hasn't been around the office."

"She hardly ever leaves this room."

Jackie took one final look at Belle, but she had her head down all the way on the desk now. She thought at the time of going down to talk with the child, or even calling her up to the office for a chat, but she had a meeting at the Board office in half an hour, so she shrugged her shoulders at Glennie, told her to try her best, and left for the office.

...

School continued without incident for the balance of the week. The blue Cavalier was a continuing reminder of their missing teacher, but otherwise it was business as usual.

On Friday, Jackie was just going into her office after watching the students during the afternoon attendance buzzer when she looked the length of the empty junior corridor and noticed one girl remaining in the hall. Even from that distance she could see it was Belle, from her thin stature and the hair that was too long and stringy. She was not moving and seemed to be looking back at Jackie, clutching her book bag against her chest. Then she turned and went into the classroom.

An unusual child, Jackie thought, and made another mental note to talk to her if she ever got some time.

...

The weekend turned mild, a full January thaw, and when they came back to school on Monday there were only scattered patches of snow still on the ground. When the students came into the school, many of them had their winter coats unbuttoned and even the smaller ones had no mittens on their hands, though a few had them hanging from yarn ties safety-pinned to their sleeves.

It seemed like the start of a normal day at school, and Marg fielded the expected call from Mrs. Walters and reported the standard, "I'm sorry. No news yet, dear."

At about 10:30, a half hour into the second teaching period, Wally Polson came into the office, walked right past Marg's desk, went straight into Jackie's office, and

shut the door behind him. Marg looked up, and thought to herself that he didn't look well. She reached in her desk drawer for the substitute list and started to scan whom they might get in a hurry to cover gym classes.

Jackie looked up from her desk when Wally came in, and raised her eyebrows in question when he shut the door behind him. The anguished look on his face was something she had never seen before, and she put down the Board policy binder she had been searching through.

"Wally, what's wrong? Are you sick?"

"I think we got trouble, Jackie. Big trouble." His eyes were darting around the room, but they never made contact with hers.

"What's happened? Did someone get hurt?"

"I don't know what we do next, Jackie. I don't know. I just don't know. I think it's trouble. Big trouble."

"I can't do much about that, Wally, if you don't tell me what it is. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

He shook his head rapidly. "You know Kelly's car . . . over by the corner of the gym?"

"I know that. I saw it was still there."

Wally sat quietly, one hand pulling on the fingers of the other hand. Jackie was getting a little annoyed, but more than that, a growing apprehension was starting in the back of her mind now that he'd mentioned the car.

"What about the car, Wally?"

"A couple of the boys . . . I had the sixth grade kids out on the field. It's pretty wet, but I wanted to get them out in the fresh air. You get tired of that gym all the time." He stopped again.

She rolled her hand at him to hurry it along.

"A couple of the boys came to me and told me. I didn't know what they were talking about at the time. They

wanted to come to the office themselves. I just kept them on at the little games we were playing. Then it dawned on me. I knew what it might mean. I don't know if they noticed me or not; I had to squat down on the field. I felt so dizzy. They probably think I'm sick. I sent them back in through the door by the library. They're in the gym. I told them all to be quiet. They're in the gym."

"Told you what, Wally? Told you what?"

"There was a 'stink' they called it. A smell. Over by Kelly's car. I thought it was just oil, or gas, or something. I could see them talking to the other kids and holding their noses."

"A smell?"

"After I sent them back in the school the other way, I went over near Kelly's car by myself. It's warm over there, and the heat is coming off the bricks at the back of the gym wall. Real warm. That blue car is likely hot. There's a smell all right."

"Of what? Oil? Gas? Is the car leaking something?" In the back stairway of her mind, something was climbing, but her forward mind pressed it down and reached desperately for an explanation that was logical and yet didn't clash with the haggard look of her phys. ed. teacher.

"Nothing like that, Jackie. I've smelled it before. There's something rotten in that car. Something bad. Real bad. We gotta get help. There's trouble. Real trouble."

She could see Marg looking at them through the glass between her office and the outer one. Although Jackie knew Marg could probably not hear their conversation, she realized that the secretary was reading Jackie's face, and Marg's worried look reflected it.

Jackie sat quietly for a moment and then picked up

the phone and called the police. She talked for a few minutes, then opened her door and called Marg over. Wally was still in the chair near her desk, his head in his hands. She found her voice was shaking slightly, but didn't care.

"Marg. Make an announcement. No students or staff are to leave the building for any reason until I say otherwise. Lockdown. Stay in their classrooms. Get Gary the custodian and tell him to go to the staff parking exit. Tell him not to let anyone out that doorway. No one. Get the Superintendent on the phone for me." She could see Marg's eyebrows rise in question, but offered nothing more.

She wanted to talk more to Wally, but as she turned from Marg's desk, he dashed out of the office and down the hall. She went into her office and could hear the P.A. announcement go out. In a minute Marg appeared in her doorway and told her the Superintendent was on the phone. She picked it up, talked for a few minutes, and was telling him what she knew when she saw a police cruiser enter the grounds. There must have been a car right in town.

"I've got to go; the police are here. I'll call you right back." She went down the hall and passed Gary without a word, and stepped outside the end door onto the parking area. Two troopers had gotten out of the cruiser, and were looking at her. They weren't familiar to her. Perhaps they had been pulled right off I-95.

Jackie pointed. "That blue car. Over there. It belongs to a teacher who is missing." They walked over toward the car, and moved around it. She noticed one of the officers, a tall man with a shaved head, pulled back and said, "Whoa!" to his partner. They talked for a moment, and then while the tall one waited, the other moved the cruiser forward between the school and Kelly's car so it at

least partially blocked the view. The tall officer reached onto his shoulder and triggered his radio, talking into his mike for a few minutes. He spoke to the other officer and then opened the trunk of the patrol car, reached in, and came out with a metal bar. They disappeared behind the cruiser for several minutes. She could hear a noise of metal screeching, then all was silent for a moment. The taller one came around the cruiser and walked toward her.

“You the Principal?”

“Yes, I’m Mrs. Morrissey. What’s going on, officer?”

“How long has that car been there, Ma’am?”

“A week, maybe more. Maybe a week and a half. It was there when we came back after the holidays. Some other officers looked at it already last week. I reported it last week.”

“I’m sorry Ma’am. I’m afraid you gotta get these children out of here. And I guess your staff. At least for now. The staff I mean. We gotta call some people to come up here. Can you do that? Right away?”

Jackie’s mouth was suddenly dry. She had to run her tongue around to gather some moisture to the front before she was able to get out a reply.

“Yes. I can do that. That’s probably the best thing to do. Get these kids out of here. Yes, we can do that. I’ll call for the buses. It’ll take a while, because we have to start calling parents of the kids who live in town, and getting them to come and get their children. We can do that.” Her words were running on, and she felt her face redden.

“Are these all teacher cars?” he asked. Jackie nodded. “Can you get us the keys of the cars in these two rows? We’d rather the teachers didn’t come out here. I’ll move their cars over to the front there.” He motioned to-

ward the visitor parking area. He could see the questioning in her eyes. "It's bad, ma'am. It's very bad. I don't want no kids around here. Especially no kids."

"Yes. Yes. Of course." She felt stupid. Thoughts were bouncing in her mind but nothing was settling, other than that Wally was right when he came into the office. They had trouble. Big trouble.

Jackie turned back toward the building, wavering on weak knees. As she grabbed the metal railing to steady herself, a motion caught her attention and she looked toward the second grade classroom to the left of the entrance doors. Someone was standing at the window. Both hands placed flat on the glass, Belle Lapointe was staring out. From the anguish on the girl's face, Jackie knew that the girl had been watching, and that somehow she understood just as much as Jackie did.

Their missing teacher had been found.

Two

9:32 a.m., Monday, September 13

A sign indicated staff parking over to the right, but Ruth Hammond knew that sometimes spaces were at a premium at a school. She didn't want to start things off by taking a parking space that belonged to one of the teachers with whom she would soon be working. Three spaces directly in front of the main entrance were each marked as "visitor", so she swung carefully into one of those. No doubt the office would tell her which space to use when she came for her assigned days.

Ruth was uncertain about this two day a week assignment at Parker Elementary. It was part of what should be a promotion, but her hope was to be in a full-time administrative role with the Maine Department of Education. Ruth was only thirty-two, but in the eight years she had been a school counselor she'd worked hard to get the attention of board administration in every locale where she worked. She went out for every training opportunity that became available, and applied for every guidance related committee that was struck. It had left her with a social life that was nil, but she had moved ahead. She knew her resume was impressive.

In the spring she'd applied for a position of Guidance Consultant with the education department, and in June

was called and told she had the position. Then she got another call in mid-August, telling her that due to financial restraints, they were combining some department roles and were cutting her position of guidance consultant back to three days a week. She would be working for two days a week with a local board where there was an urgent counselor need. She was later told she would be a counselor at Parker Elementary for the two days, and to report there September 13.

She knew why, or at least the Parker Elementary why. She had been a counselor at a large elementary school in Portland for the last five years, and like everyone else in New England, she had heard of the tragic death of a teacher at Parker Elementary almost two years earlier. At that time she was told to be on call to go to Parker, since a crisis response team was formed and counselors were directed to that school for weeks afterward, but it was a little school and drawing counselor and psychologist staff just from the schools near Parker Mills was deemed sufficient to cover the need. Removed from the tragedy in Portland, Ruth still visualized the situation in Parker Mills, because she once had counseled at a school where a teacher died suddenly in a car accident. It was a difficult thing to deal with in a school of young children. Staff members were even more affected, but tried valiantly to do their jobs, and sometimes hid their feelings too well. She personally felt that Parker should be outfitted with a full-time counselor, but with budgets being tight, someone apparently came up with the idea of stationing Ruth there for two days.

It was quiet as she entered the lobby area of the school; one small boy was walking away from the office and down the hall. Classes were in session, since it was just after 9:30 a.m., but she had been asked to show up at

that time to meet the office staff. Presumably they would show her where her office would be, and address the issue of parking.

There was an open window from the office to the corridor, so she bent down a little and spoke to the secretary.

“Ruth Hammond to see Principal Morrissey.”

“Yes, come right in! You’re our new counselor.”

“Well, part-time counselor at least. I’ll just be here two days a week.”

“Two days is better than nothing. I’m glad to see you, and I know Jackie is. I’m Marg Hipson. You’ll get to know me, for sure. I can handle your typing, help you all I can, unless you do all your own things.”

“That’s great. I usually do most of my own letters on my laptop, but we’ll see how it goes.” Ruth came in the office door, and Marg stood up and came around her desk.

“Jackie is in her office, and I think she’ll be able to see you right away.” She led the way to the office at the back, and leaned in the doorway.

“Jackie, it’s Ruth Hammond, the counselor. Can you see her now?” She backed out even before getting a reply and motioned Ruth to go inside.

Jackie Morrissey was getting to her feet behind the desk as Ruth came into the room. She was wearing a grey suit with a white blouse and a black string tie. Her trademark reading glasses were dangling from strings that circled her neck. She extended a hand.

“Welcome, Ruth. We’re glad to see you. I requested a counselor last year, but they’re skimpy with elementary counselors. We’re just too far from other elementary schools to make a good itinerant position at several schools, and too small for our own counselor full time.”

“I guess they thought I could manage it with my consultant job the remainder of the week, but I don’t know how it will work out. I’ll waste hours just in travel time. But I’m here.” Ruth sat in the nearest chair and pulled it a little closer to the desk as Jackie sat back down.

“Your secretary called you ‘Jackie’—is it short for Jacqueline? But you go by Jackie?”

“Yes, they all call me that around here. Except a couple of the new teachers, I guess, who still call me Mrs. Morrissey, no matter how many times I correct them. They make me feel old, but I guess it’s hard for them to address their principal by her first name. I suppose I’m twenty-five years older than them. Scary. You don’t mind that I call you Ruth, I assume.”

“Ruth it is. Can’t shorten that much. And I’ll try to call you Jackie, at least when the students aren’t around.”

Jackie looked at the new counselor opposite her. Ruth was about in her mid-thirties, she suspected, an attractive young woman with thick straight brown hair that just touched her shoulders. She was wearing a black and white sweater in a large plaid pattern, over black dress pants. Ruth used just a little makeup that brought out her large dark eyes and accentuated nice cheekbones and jaw line.

“So will you be providing us with a schedule of when you’ll be at the school, or is it fairly straightforward?”

“I’m open to suggestion. It would probably be better if I were here for two days together, rather than for separate days of the week, to lessen my travel time. I live in Augusta, and will be working there the other three days. Your board is willing to pay for one overnight at a hotel. I think they know they’d be paying for travel twice otherwise, and I get a feeling that they are quite anxious to have

me here. I expect the department is kicking in some of the cost.”

“That’s probably because I’ve been hounding them for the last year and a half for some help. They probably want to shut me up.” Jackie grimaced rather than laughed as she made the comment.

“There is still a problem, then?” Ruth knew the likely reason for needing help.

“Yes, there is, and since it may well underlie a lot of what you do here, I’d better fill you in before you go any further. I don’t know if you have any options for second thoughts, but I will assure you we need you.” Jackie pulled her chair closer to the desk and rested her elbows on the blotter. It was a signal that what she was about to say was going to be serious, more serious than she would like, so Ruth pulled her chair closer.

“You know about what happened here almost two years ago.” It was a statement. Jackie was aware by now that almost everyone in eastern North America was aware of the school and its tragedy.

“I know about the teacher being killed. I was on call for possibly coming here at the time, but it never materialized. I know very little of the details.”

“Perhaps you’d rather not know, but I think you have to be informed to handle any questions from the students.” Jackie took a pencil from a cup on her desk and started doodling on a sheet of paper. Ruth watched her, but it seemed only to be a nervous habit.

“Did they catch the person who did it?” Ruth had heard nothing in the news, but sometimes the news interest faded and you didn’t hear how a story ended.

“No. That’s one of the problems. They caught no one, and as far as I know, they know little more now than

when it first happened. It's been over a year and a half, and I wonder at times if the case is even still open. Some of the locals feel it was a drifter, who just dropped into Parker Mills off I-95, and chanced on Kelly in the schoolyard after dark. Perhaps he tried to pick her up and she rebuffed him. Sounds far-fetched to me, but you never know. I haven't heard a word all summer. A detective was in a few times last year, but when I ask for an update, it's always 'nothing new'." She took a breath.

"The day I called the police and they came and found Kelly Walters, they sent everyone home, at least all the students. We called for the buses and phoned the parents of town students to come and get their children. Staff were advised to go home, and to come back the following day.

"She was in the trunk of her own car, you know. Dead. She'd been dead, as far as the medical examiner could tell, for about ten days, probably from back just before the weekend started." Jackie's voice was low, but betrayed little emotion. She'd probably told the story many times since it happened. Ruth wondered how much Jackie was holding inside, and if many of the staff were repressing their feelings about the incident. She'd found that school staff kept far too much bottled inside when tragedy struck, in order to be strong for the students and reassure them that things were all right. Sometimes they were not; sometimes they were definitely not.

"She'd been hit with a tire iron, many times, mostly on the head. Her head was apparently beaten in quite badly." Jackie gave a little shudder. Even telling it many times failed to soften some of the story. Ruth looked down at her shoes and swallowed. "The tire iron was there in the trunk with her, but there were no fingerprints on it. It was

apparently just a common one; you could buy it at a hardware store, but it was decades old. The police said they had no chance of tracing it. Maybe whoever attacked her was wearing gloves. There was nothing except smudges on the iron and on the trunk. It had snowed about six inches on Friday, the fellow who plows the parking lot went right past the back of the car on Saturday, and then they hauled the piled snow away with a loader. If there was anything on the pavement, they never found it.

“They did the usual searches of the trunk, of her body. There was nothing. The police said it looked like she was struck several times outside the car, then rolled into the trunk and beaten more as she lay there. There was a lot of blood in the trunk apparently, but all hers.”

“Nothing under her fingernails, or anything like that?” *I watch too much TV*, Ruth thought as she said that.

“She was wearing mittens, though one was off and in the trunk. It was a cold time of year.”

“How did he get the trunk open?”

“We’re not even sure that it was a ‘he’, though I suppose it was. Kelly wasn’t a large girl. He took her keys, they think. They were never found.”

“But they’re sure she was killed right here, in the school yard? The car could have been driven here from somewhere else after he killed her.”

“No, they only found Kelly’s fingerprints on the steering wheel and gear shift. No smudges, even from gloves. She must have had her mittens on only outside the car. The police are fairly certain that it took place right where the car was. Because of that, they feel it might have been in the evening or early night Thursday, since someone would have seen something if it were daylight. The medical examiner estimated the time of death at about that

time.”

“Lord, that’s awful! How horrible for all of you. How horrible for Kelly and her family!”

“She only had her mother, and a few other relatives more distant, but they all took it very hard. Her mother has never come back to the school, though I call her every month just to say hello and see how she’s doing. My husband Peter and I went to her house right after the funeral, but she was in no state to talk. We sat in the living room with her, pictures of Kelly all around us, and we said the usual useless things. She left the room, and when she didn’t return we finally went looking. We found she had just gone to bed. She was curled up in a ball, completely under the blankets, crying softly. We let ourselves out. I mean, we’re talking way down on the scale of human understanding here. This was a nice young woman, probably didn’t have an enemy in the world—or at least we thought that—boy, were we wrong! Beaten to death with a tire iron, left in the trunk of her own car for days . . . and almost two years later, they still haven’t brought anyone to justice! It doesn’t get any worse than that.”

“No, it sure doesn’t.” They were silent for a while. Ruth didn’t know how to respond. Jackie’s story of Kelly’s mother had almost brought tears to Ruth’s eyes. Finally she tried to move the topic on. “What about the students? How did things go there?”

“I don’t think they went well. That’s why I’ve been pushing, I guess, and that’s why you’re here. The children weren’t back for the rest of the week, so we had no way of knowing how they were feeling. It was a poor decision. We tried to get permission to have them meet at one of the church halls, but the board staff didn’t approve that. They seemed to think that bringing the matter up would only

cause more trouble.” She shook her head. “Crazy!”

“I guess it is! You have to handle things when they happen, not try to hide it away. Some of those kids might have fine families who talk to their kids and get the feelings out, but a lot of them probably found the same attitude at home: ‘forget the bad things’. It doesn’t work that way.”

“The staff came in the following day, and the police interviewed everyone to see if they knew anything, knew any reason at all for what happened, but of course, no one did. Or at least I think no one did. They never told me, anyway. Kelly had no boyfriend, wasn’t seeing anyone, had no apparent enemies. In fact, she seemed to be living like a nun for those four months . . . working here, going home to eat and sleep was about all she had going.

“They had the end of the parking lot taped off, and a lot of police vehicles parked around. They parked one of those mobile crime labs by the gym doors. The staff went home after their interviews, which was Tuesday of the week they found her, and no one came back until the next Monday. On the weekend the police cleared out their vehicles, towed Kelly’s car away, and we put an announcement on the radio that school would be open on Monday. That was January 15, I think. We had several counselors and two school psychologists with us that day, and a minister from the church over on Main Street. They set up all over the school in case any student wanted to talk, but very few of them did. Except talk with their teachers, who unfortunately were having their own sweet time trying to deal with things. Two of the counselors and Rev. Pardy spent more of their time in the staff room dealing with teachers. A couple of them were basket cases. Couldn’t handle it at all in the classroom. We had brought in all the subs we could to cover classes, and we needed them all. Three of my staff

went home at noon. I sent them. God knows, I felt like running most of the time myself.” She covered her face with her hands, but didn’t seem to be crying. Ruth watched her and kept silent. Certainly there was a lot of work still needed with staff, even with this principal. Would Ruth find the time with two days a week?

“So you don’t think things were handled well?”

“How could they be? Most of the students didn’t talk. The staff were so distraught that I think a lot of them started changing the subject whenever students wanted to talk about it in the later weeks.”

“Students often won’t talk to strangers from outside, people they don’t know and don’t have a comfort level with,” said Ruth. “They’re not sure what is acceptable, and are afraid that they’ll say something that is wrong. A lot of them are probably thought that their feelings were not like everyone else had, when of course they likely were. Even if they weren’t, we all have a right to our own reactions.” Ruth paused. “That’s the trouble when extra help is parachuted into a school. It takes a long time to develop relationships like the ones they have with their teachers.”

“But it’s still there. The trouble.” Jackie shook her head. “It was never really dealt with the way it should have been. Or, I don’t know, maybe that’s just the way it is. All I know is that every time something happens—some kid gets hurt, something happens in a family, like a grandparent dying—Kelly appears again. I had a girl in here last week. First day of school. Fourth grade. Had been in Kelly’s second grade classroom when Kelly died. Her great-uncle died on the weekend. Eighty-nine years old. Been sick for years. I don’t think the girl was even close to him. But his death was really bothering her. Sat crying at her desk, until Shauna sent her down here and asked if I could talk to her.

I have no training in that, I just do what I can. But the girl was sitting where you are, blubbering away about her great uncle—‘Martin’ I think his name was. Then out of the blue she says it. Caught me by surprise. Took me a minute, and then it registered.”

“Said what?” Ruth felt she knew what was coming.

Jackie bit her bottom lip. For the first time she looked close to crying.

“She says, right out of the blue, talking about her uncle Martin, about her great-uncle, mid-sentence even: ‘She shouldn’t have died.’”

“She?”

“Yes, ‘She’.”

“Kelly Walters.”

“Our Kelly. Who else?”

Who killed Kelly? Why?

What does Belle know?

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