

claudia mills

# ZERO TOLERANCE



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*claudia mills*  
**ZERO TOLERANCE**

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*To Cat Kurtz*

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# 1

Sierra Shepard sat in the office at Longwood Middle School during lunch recess 5A, waiting to see her principal, Mr. Besser. She adjusted her red plaid skirt so that it draped neatly over her knees and tucked a strand of shoulder-length brown hair back into her matching headband. Outside in the hallway, some kids peered in through the glass windows to see who was in trouble this time. She could tell that they were disappointed when they saw that she was the one sitting there.

*Oh, it's just Sierra.*

Above her head hung the banner she had helped sew with the other seventh-grade members of the Longwood Leadership Club. Letters cut from different-colored squares of fabric were appliquéd onto a large white cloth rectangle, spelling out the four words that formed the Longwood Middle School creed:

RULES

RESPECT

RESPONSIBILITY

RELIABILITY

It still bothered Sierra that the fourth “R,” the one in RELIABILITY, was slightly crooked. She had wanted to tell Em to snip it off and sew it on again more carefully, but Celeste had already been acting so bossy and critical that Sierra hadn’t wanted to sound that way herself.

She would have brought the banner home and fixed the crooked “R” without saying anything. But Mrs. Frederick, who had been the Leadership Club adviser ever since Sierra had joined in sixth grade, had already started folding up the banner to take home to press. So now the “R” was crooked forever.

The “R” in RELIABILITY was unreliable.

The door to the office opened—not the door into Mr. Besser’s inner sanctum, but the door that led out into the hall. Two boys entered—Luke Bishop and another kid Sierra didn’t know. They were herded by a playground lady who wasn’t exactly dragging them by their collars—touching students wasn’t allowed—but who was keeping them in line with her scowl.

Sierra drew herself even more upright and looked down at the folder that she held in her lap.

The playground lady turned to Ms. Lin, one of the two school secretaries.

“Fighting,” she said. “Again.”

“He started it,” the other boy spat out.

Luke sneered.

“I don’t care who started it,” Ms. Lin said.

The playground lady turned on her heel and marched away, as if relieved to be done with the unpleasant duty of delivering them to the office.

Ms. Lin pointed to the appliquéd banner. It really was useful to have it hanging right there.

“Rules,” she read. “You boys know what the rule is about fighting at school. The rule is that all students involved in a fight are punished by in-school suspension. *All* students.”

Luke dropped down into the chair directly next to Sierra, and the other boy into the chair next to him. Sierra thought about getting up and shifting into the remaining empty chair on the other side of her, but that might look rude, and Luke, who wasn’t dumb even though he was in trouble all the time, might say something rude back.

He already called her by her last name instead of her first name, changing it to “Shep-turd.” The only class they had together was health. Sierra was in honors classes for everything else, but there was no honors section for health. Luke had called her by that hideous name one day in health class, and some of the other not-so-good students had laughed.

Luke leaned over and said, “What did *you* do?”

At first Sierra didn’t even understand the question. Then she got it. Was Luke joking?

“I didn’t *do* anything!”

Luke glanced around the office as if to say, *Then why are you here?* He was one of the tallest seventh-grade boys, broad-shouldered, the kind of boy who would have been on the football team if his grades had been good enough to allow him to play. His long dark hair fell over one eye, and his T-shirt was torn, maybe from the playground fight with the other boy, who sat staring straight ahead.

“I’m here to talk to Mr. Besser about an idea I had—that the Leadership Club has—for a new school program.”

It was actually Sierra’s father’s idea—he had read about it somewhere and told her about it—before then she had taken it to the Leadership Club, and they had thought it sounded great. The program was called ZAP, for Zeroes Aren’t Permitted. Any kid who didn’t turn in an assignment had automatic detention that day in a special study hall until he or she got the assignment done. That way no one ever got behind, and lots of kids who were failing wouldn’t fail.

Luke gave a snort of contempt. Sierra clutched the folder that had her typed-up notes explaining this new idea.

“How do you know it’s not a great program?” she asked him. “Actually, it’s a program designed to help kids like you.”

Luke gave her a look of such fury that she wondered if he might have attacked her physically if they hadn’t been sitting outside the principal’s office under Ms. Lin’s watchful eye.

And then she, Sierra, would be in trouble for fighting! Because the rule said “No fighting,” and it didn’t matter who started it. Which did seem unfair, come to think of it. It would hardly have been Sierra’s fault if Luke attacked *her*. It was hardly the other boy’s fault if Luke had attacked *him*.

“Don’t do me any favors, Shep-turd,” Luke snarled.

Sierra wanted to snap back at him, *Maybe there isn’t any program that could help a kid like you.*

But Ms. Lin called over to them, “No talking!” She gave Sierra an apologetic smile, clearly to let her know that the command was addressed to Luke, not her.



The other office door opened, and Mr. Besser stuck his bald head out. A lot of kids made fun of Mr. Besser for being bald—he made fun of it himself—but Sierra liked how he looked, with his bright eyes and waggling, bushy eyebrows.

Mr. Besser scanned the lineup of kids in their hard plastic chairs. He gave the two boys a stern stare. He gave Sierra a friendly wink.

“Sierra was here first,” Ms. Lin said.

“All right, Miss Shepard, come on in,” Mr. Besser said. “Tell me what I can do for you today.”

As Sierra accepted the principal’s invitation to follow him into the inner sanctum, she heard Lulu mutter something. She was glad that she couldn’t make out the words.

\* \* \*

After her short meeting with Mr. Besser, who had promised he would give the ZAP idea “serious consideration,” Sierra hurried to her locker to get her lunch. At Longwood Middle School, the lunch period was divided into an eating part and a recess part. Sierra had recess 5A and ate lunch 5B. So did her friends Emma Williamson, Lexi Kruger, and Celeste Vogel, which was lucky.

Sierra opened her locker, glancing at the things she had taped to the inside of her door—a picture of snow falling on the mountains that she had made in art class last semester, some goofy pictures of her and Em taken at a photo booth in the arcade at the mall, a printout of her goals for the semester which she had made just over three weeks ago, on New Year’s Day: *Speak up more in class. Read a library book every week. Don’t let people push you around.* “People” meant Celeste. *Get more involved in Leadership Club.* She had done that one already, with her ZAP idea. *Don’t think so much about B.* “B” meant “boys.”

And “boys” meant Colin Beauvoir, who was in her accelerated language arts class, her math class, and her French class, as well as in the Octave, the elite eight-student a cappella choir that practiced Tuesday and Thursday mornings before school. Colin with the dreamy gray eyes and the slow, shy smile. Sierra loved the way his hands trembled just a little bit when he had to read aloud in class.

Sierra grabbed her insulated lunch bag and slammed her locker shut. She was definitely doing better at *Get more involved in Leadership Club* than at *Don’t think so much about B.*

The noise level in the cafeteria was deafening as Sierra headed to the table by the window where her friends sat every day. She had thought Celeste wouldn’t be back yet from getting her braces tightened, but there she was, her long, straight blond hair easy to see even from across the room. Tim, smart-mouthed Lexi sat next to her; brainy, bookish Em was sitting across from them.

Sierra sat down next to Em.

“Do your braces hurt?” she asked Celeste sympathetically.

Celeste nodded. “But look.” She flashed her smile; Sierra saw that Celeste’s braces were now blue—the same blue as her eyes. “I got sick of pink. Pink is so last semester, don’t you think?”

Sierra knew Celeste was joking, pretending to be a big authority on fashion. But Celeste definitely was a big authority on a lot of things.

“Did you talk to Besser?” Celeste asked Sierra.

“Uh-huh.”

“And?”

“He said that ZAP was a great idea, and he’d give it serious consideration.” Sierra felt herself beaming.

“Grownups say that when they’re not going to do anything,” Celeste said.

Sierra was glad to see Lexi give Celeste a withering look. All three girls were in Leadership Club with Sierra.

“Well, they do,” Celeste said. “I’m just saying.”

Lexi crumpled up her sandwich wrapper into a small, hard sphere and tried to toss it into the trash can, the way the boys did. She missed.

“Are you just going to leave it there?” Sierra asked.

“I’ll get it when the bell rings. On my way out.” As if registering Sierra’s disapproval, Lexi added, “Look, it’s not like it’s going anywhere.”

Sierra hopped up and walked the ten feet to the trash can, collected Lexi’s wrapper, and disposed of it properly.

“You can’t stand for a piece of litter to be on the floor for half a minute,” Lexi teased when Sierra sat back down at the table.

“You shouldn’t make Sierra throw away your trash for you,” Celeste scolded.

“I didn’t make her do anything. It’s not my fault if Sierra’s so anal.”

Sierra knew that “anal” was a psychological term for someone who was compulsively neat and organized, which she was—well, neat and organized, not *compulsively* neat and organized. She hated the word, though. It made her think of Luke’s nickname for her.

“Aren’t you going to eat your lunch?” Celeste asked Sierra.

Sierra wasn’t really hungry; she was too busy mentally replaying her conversation with Mr. Besser. And, unlike the grownups of Celeste’s apparent acquaintance, she knew that Mr. Besser did mean what he said.

Celeste never seemed to want to give anybody else in Leadership Club credit for having good ideas. It was one of the most annoying things about her. Sierra had become friends with Celeste mainly because they were the only two seventh-grade girls singing in the Octave; Colin was the only seventh-grade boy.

Sierra opened the Velcro flap on her lunch bag. Hungry or not, she’d better eat something, or her stomach might start rumbling in French class, right as she was sitting next to Colin.

She opened her sandwich and was about to take the first bite when she looked at it more closely. It was *ham* and cheese, not plain cheese. She must have grabbed her mother’s identical lunch bag by mistake: Sierra hadn’t eaten ham or pork or bacon ever since reading *Charlotte’s Web* back in third grade.

“Great,” she said. “I took my mother’s lunch, and she took mine.”

Irritated, Sierra dumped the contents of the lunch bag out onto the table. The loathsome sandwich, two oatmeal raisin cookies, an apple, and a paring knife to cut it with.

Sierra stared at the knife as if a coiled serpent had appeared from her mother’s lunch bag, poised and ready to spring.

“Uh-oh,” Lexi said.

“No weapons” was the biggest rule of all the rules at Longwood Middle School. No guns, not even toy guns. No knives, not even plastic knives.

For the first time since Sierra had come to the table, Em spoke up. “Just put it back in your lunch bag. It was your mother’s knife, not yours. No one’s seen it but us.”

Lexi, who couldn’t be bothered to pick up her own trash, quickly snatched the knife and stuck it back in the lunch bag, safely out of sight.

“It was just a mistake,” Em said. “You took the wrong lunch. It could happen to anyone.”

Celeste didn’t say anything.

“No,” Sierra said. “The rule says ‘no knives.’ Period. Not ‘no knives unless you have them because of a mistake.’ Or ‘no knives except if they’re not very sharp.’ I’ll take it over to the lunch lady, and she can put it in the kitchen or in the office, and my mom can come and get it when she picks me up after school.”

Before she could change her mind, Sierra gathered up the rest of the contents of her lunch, put them back in the bag, and got up from the table. Carrying the lunch bag with the knife inside, she walked over to Sandy, the lunch lady.

She would explain everything to Sandy.

And then everything would be all right.

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## 2

Sandy presided over the Longwood Middle School cafeteria. She was about the same age as Sierra's parents, maybe a little bit older, and definitely a lot heavier. Sandy never got off her stool unless there was a major spill or an outright brawl. She was generally good-natured, but you didn't want to be the kid who made Sandy have to get off her stool and actually do something rather than calling out the same ineffectual reprimands: "No running!" "No pushing!" "Keep it down, kids!"

"Yeah?" Sandy asked when Sierra approached her stool, lunch bag in hand.

"I took my mother's lunch by mistake," Sierra said.

Sandy didn't appear to be impressed. "So? Can't you just eat it?"

"But—"

"Look, by the time you call home, lunch'll be over with. We're talking five minutes until the bell."

"No, I mean, I can eat it"—well, not the ham on the sandwich—"but she had an apple, and—"

"No running!" Sandy yelled to a boy who was racing over to the conveyor belt with his tray.

"What's wrong with an apple?"

Sierra opened up the lunch bag and extended it so that Sandy could see the knife, visible next to the sandwich and cookies. "She had this to cut it with."

Sandy's eyes widened. "You're not supposed to have that at school."

"I *know*. That's why I'm giving it to you."

Instead of simply accepting the knife—as if even a grownup weren't allowed to touch such a forbidden object—Sandy slipped down off her stool.

"Look, I can't leave these kids alone. Take that thing to the office. Just go there directly. Do you hear me?"

Despite her insistent tone, Sandy looked worried. Sierra could tell that she was wondering whether she'd get in more trouble if she abandoned her post in the cafeteria or if she let a weapon-wielding student walk unsupervised through the halls.

"Margie!" Sandy called over to one of the ladies behind the counter. "Margie, hold the fort for me. Will you? I've got a situation."

Sierra winced at the word.

"Come with me," Sandy said.

\* \* \*

When they arrived at the office, Ms. Lin looked up and started to give Sierra an automatic smile, but the expression on Sandy's face caused the smile to vanish before it had reached past the corners of her mouth, well before it had reached her eyes.

“She brought a knife to school,” Sandy said to Ms. Lin.

“I *didn't*. I didn't even know I had it until—”

“Show her,” Sandy ordered.

“It's my mother's knife. I took her lunch by mistake.”

As the two women stared at her—glared at her?—Sierra had no choice but to reach in the lunch bag, pull out the knife, and set it down on Ms. Lin's desk.

Ms. Lin gave an audible gasp. The other secretary, Mrs. Saunders, looked up from her computer.

“I guess you can take it from here,” Sandy said. “I'd better get back to our little darlings before someone gets killed.”

It felt like a strange joke to make with a knife lying right there in plain view.

Just then the bell for the end of 5B sounded.

Ms. Lin put the knife back in the lunch bag and stashed it on a shelf behind her desk.

Now Sierra would have to go to French without eating anything. Maybe she could retrieve her oatmeal raisin cookies and gobble them on her way to class. But something made her think she better quit while she was ahead.

She was halfway to the door when Ms. Lin called out sharply, “Where do you think you're going, missy?”

*Missy?* Ms. Lin had never spoken to Sierra in that way.

“To French. I have French sixth period.”

“You're not going anywhere.” Ms. Lin pointed to the same row of chairs where Sierra had been sitting earlier. “Mr. Besser is out of the building right now, but I expect him back some time this afternoon.”

This *afternoon*? Sierra couldn't miss French; they were having a quiz on irregular verbs. She didn't want to miss art. If she missed art, her pot might not be ready for the kiln by Friday, just two days away. And then there was the science lab where they'd be dissecting a worm. And, yes, dissecting with a knife.

“Couldn't you tell Mr. Besser what happened? That it was all a mistake? I have a quiz in French and—”

“You'll just have to miss it.”

“But ... can I at least go to my locker to get my French book so I can study while I'm waiting?”

Ms. Lin shook her head.

Sierra felt her cheeks burning. She couldn't believe how unreasonable Ms. Lin was being when it was as completely obvious as anything in the world could be that an honor student like Sierra wouldn't bring a knife to school on purpose. Maybe Lexi and Em had been right. She should have just hidden the knife in her lunch bag.

Celeste had been the only one at the table who said nothing. Would Celeste have turned in the knife if she had been in Sierra's place? Or did she just want to see what would happen if Sierra did?

Tears pricked Sierra's eyes. She blinked them back and stared straight ahead. What if...? No. She had clearly done the correct thing by giving the knife to Sandy. If only Mr. Besser would come in soon and straighten this out so that she could be back in French class before sixth period was over.

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# 3

It was halfway through seventh period before Mr. Besser appeared, bustling into the outer office from the hallway. He was still in his overcoat and the fur hat that made him look like someone from a Russian movie. Another man was with him, a man Sierra hadn't seen before. Maybe someone's dad. But he didn't look like a dad.

"Ms. Lin," Mr. Besser began, "I'd like you to meet Elliot Granger. He's the new principal over at West Glen Middle School. He's here to check out some of the terrific programs we've put in place at our school."

His gaze fell on Sierra. "And some of our terrific students!" he added heartily, giving Sierra his usual big grin.

Sierra forced a smile as Ms. Lin and the other principal shook hands. Why, oh why, couldn't Mr. Besser have been alone? How could she talk to Mr. Besser and explain everything with that other principal there? Mr. Besser was busy now, too busy to deal with what was, after all, just a very small misunderstanding. But right now it didn't feel small to Sierra, not if it was making her miss a French quiz *and* pottery *and* maybe even a science lab.

Mr. Besser and his visitor turned to go into the inner office.

"Mr. Besser," Ms. Lin called after him. "I hate to disturb you, but something fairly urgent has come up."

Well, it certainly felt urgent to Sierra.

"A student brought a weapon to school today."

Sierra's breath caught in her chest.

Mr. Besser's eyes registered a flicker of irritation. He couldn't be pleased to have this news item blurted out in front of the visitor he was clearly trying to impress. Then he got his expression back under control.

Before Sierra could speak, he said smoothly, "Elliot, this will give you a chance to see how we operate here at Longwood. When I took over here, three years ago, discipline was ... Well, the kinder way of putting it is lax. As a result, our best students were transferring out in droves to charter schools that took academics seriously and created a climate in which students actually came to school to learn."

Mr. Besser gestured to the banner above Sierra's head. "Every single student knows our core values now. Rules. Respect. Responsibility. Reliability. I can't say that every single student lives up to them, but at least now we all know what we're aiming for."

His genial smile fell again on Sierra. "In fact, I believe this young lady was one of our fine student leaders who sewed this banner for us. Isn't that right, Sierra?"

Sierra suddenly realized: *He doesn't get it.* Mr. Besser clearly had no idea that she was the student who had “brought a weapon to school today.”

She had to tell him, but she didn't know how to interrupt.

“How *do* you handle a weapons incident?” Mr. Granger asked.

“We have a zero-tolerance policy for both weapons and drugs. No exceptions. No excuses. All our students know that.”

But surely “No exceptions” didn't mean no exceptions even for an honor student who brought her mother's knife to school by mistake. Surely “No excuses” didn't mean no excuses even for a student leader who turned in the knife the minute she found it.

Mr. Granger gave an approving nod.

“Who was it?” Mr. Besser asked Ms. Lin. “Have you called his parents yet?”

He turned back to Mr. Granger. “And all our students know that zero tolerance doesn't mean a slap on the wrist, writing on the chalkboard a hundred times ‘I will not bring a weapon to school,’ or a three-day in-school suspension.”

“So it means...?”

“Expulsion. Mandatory expulsion. It wasn't Luke Bishop, was it?” Mr. Besser asked Ms. Lin.

“No.” Ms. Lin looked at Sierra. “You tell him.”

This couldn't be happening. There had to be some way to make it come out right—there had to be. Sierra said, “It was me.”

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# 4

“It was a mistake,” Sierra said. How many times had she said those words already? How many more times would she have to say them? She was afraid she’d cry if she tried to explain the rest.

Ms. Lin finally helped her out: “She says the knife was in her mother’s lunch, and the lunches got switched.”

Sierra let herself glance at Mr. Besser. She had never seen him this way before, as if he had somehow stumbled into a blind trap. He was obviously stalling to give himself time to think about what to do next.

“Look,” he finally said. “I can’t deal with this now. Mr. Granger has given up his afternoon, taken time out of his busy schedule, to come meet with me. Ms. Lin, call Sierra’s parents and explain what happened. Tell them that they need to come and get her and that I’ll meet with them first thing in the morning.”

Sierra wanted to say, *But what about my science lab?*

She didn’t.

Sierra wanted to ask, *But why do you have to have a meeting with my parents when this is obviously just a terrible mistake?*

She didn’t.

Maybe the other principal would give some kind of chuckle, and it would become a friendly joke—a joke partly on Mr. Besser for just having said all that stuff about mandatory expulsion, with no exceptions ever, for weapons or drugs in his middle school. And partly on Sierra for having gotten herself caught up in such a ridiculous mess.

The two men disappeared into the inner office, and the door shut behind them.

“Should I try your father first, or your mother?” Ms. Lin asked Sierra.

“Can’t I go to eighth period? For my science lab?”

For an answer, Ms. Lin picked up the receiver and poised her finger, ready to dial.

“My mother,” Sierra said.

She gave Ms. Lin the number, and Ms. Lin made the call.

\* \* \*

Sierra’s mother didn’t really work. Well, she thought she did, but the kind of things she did all day didn’t seem like an actual job to Sierra. Her mother was trying to write plays. No one was paying her money to write them; she was just writing them because she wanted to. She took it seriously—she went to a playwriting group, and she entered playwriting contests. She had gotten an honorable mention in a contest last year. Sometimes, to make a little bit of money, she substituted in Sierra



former preschool. That's where her mother had gone today, with the wrong lunch bag.

Had her mother even noticed that she had taken Sierra's lunch? Had she thought to herself, *What about the knife?*

Apparently not.

Her mother didn't notice things like that.

Her father did.

Just as the dismissal bell rang, Sierra's mother came bursting into the office, coatless despite the January weather, her frizzy hair standing out from her head like a wild halo.

The first thing she did was gather Sierra into a hug, holding her so close that Sierra could feel her mother's heart throbbing.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner," she told Sierra. "There was no one else to watch the children."

Sierra couldn't help herself. A gulping sob shook her shoulders. It had been too awful. Kept out of all her afternoon classes. The way Ms. Lin had called her "missy." That terrible trapped look in Mr. Besser's eyes as if he might really be ready to expel her—to *expel* her—for one tiny, infinitesimal moment of carelessness as she had grabbed her lunch off the kitchen counter.

Her mother held Sierra for a long moment. Then she turned to Ms. Lin. "We cannot wait until tomorrow morning to speak to Mr. Besser. I need to see him now."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," Ms. Lin said, making a big show of busying herself at her computer. "Mr. Besser is in a meeting."

"Where is his meeting?"

Ms. Lin didn't answer.

"He's in his office, isn't he? I'm sorry, Ms. Lin, but he is not sending this poor child home to worry about this ridiculousness all night long."

Sierra had never seen her mother so angry. Before Ms. Lin had time to leap up and block the door—if she would have done such a thing, which Sierra doubted, even on this bizarrely topsy-turvy day—Sierra's mother had pushed her way into the inner office.

"Stop," Ms. Lin called after her. "You can't just barge in there like that."

Sierra didn't follow after her mother. She couldn't bear to see the kindly, affectionate light gone from Mr. Besser's eyes when he looked at her. She lowered herself back down onto the hard plastic chair where she had already spent her long, miserable afternoon.

Two minutes later, her mother was back, eyes flaming, cheeks burning.

"Let's go," she told Sierra. Then she turned to Ms. Lin. "Sierra's father and I will see you tomorrow."

Even if Sierra's mother couldn't fix this hideous mess, her father could. Her father had to.

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# 5

When Sierra turned on her cell phone in the car to check her messages, she had three texts.

Celeste: *Why weren't you in French?*

Lexi: *What did Sandy the lunch Nazi do to you?*

Em: *Call me.*

Sierra decided she would call her friends, not just text them, but waited until she was upstairs in her bedroom with the door closed.

She called Em first.

“What’s going on?” Em asked.

Sierra could hardly bring herself to say it. “Ms. Lin and Mr. Besser? They’re making a big deal about this.”

“What kind of a big deal?”

“I don’t know. Just a big deal. Like, they wouldn’t let me go to any of my classes, and they called my mom to come get me. My dad’s going to go ballistic when he finds out. Em, what will I do if they expel me?”

“Get real. They’re not going to expel someone like *you*,” Em pointed out. “Not for something like this, whatever the rule says.”

Sierra was lying on her bed, her beautiful four-poster bed with the old-fashioned blue-and-white fabric canopy like the ones in Colonial Williamsburg. Her cat, Cornflake, was lying there with her. It was hard to believe that anything too bad could happen when an overweight orange tabby was purring on her chest, one lazy paw stretched out across her shoulder.

“I know,” she said, trying to sound confident. “It’s just über-annoying. Now I have to make up the French quiz and the science lab, and it’s, you know, one more thing.”

“Colin asked me where you were in French class,” Em said.

Sierra jerked up so abruptly that Cornflake jumped off her chest and settled himself nearby on the blue-patterned log cabin quilt.

“Did he really?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“He said, ‘Where’s Sierra?’”

Sierra laughed. “How did he look when he said it?”

“Like he always looks. His voice was quiet—you know how it’s almost whispery, sort of?”

Sierra did. His soft voice made him sound not wimpy, but soulful and poetic.

She felt embarrassed asking the next question, but she couldn’t resist. “I mean, did he look

worried?”

There was a silence: Sierra knew Em was carefully considering the question. Em never said anything that wasn't as accurate as she could make it.

“Not worried as much as puzzled. Because you were there for language arts and math this morning and then you weren't there at French.”

Sierra felt a twinge of disappointment. She didn't want Colin asking about her out of idle curiosity.

“What did you tell him?”

“I just said you had some stuff you had to do in the office.”

“Then what did he say?”

“He said, ‘But she's missing a quiz.’”

That sounded more like being worried than being puzzled. She could hear him saying it, too. *But she's missing a quiz*. Colin had definitely been concerned, concerned about *her*.

Sierra called Lexi next.

“You should have just kept the stupid knife in the lunch bag,” Lexi moaned. “Em told you, and I thought so, too. Then none of this would have happened.”

“Well, you were right, I guess.”

“Lin is a bitch,” Lexi said.

A few hours ago, Sierra would have said, *Oh, she's not so bad*. And “bitch” was such an awful ugly word. But right now it seemed pretty accurate.

“You know what she did to me once?” Lexi went on. “I was running down the hall by the front office—not completely running, but going pretty fast. And she made me stop. Okay, I can see making me stop. But then she said, ‘Now go back to the library, and let me see you walk down the hall like a young lady.’ It was so demeaning. Like I was two. And the bell rang, and she still kept watching me to see if I was walking slowly enough to please her, and I was late for pre-algebra.”

“She called me ‘missy,’” Sierra confessed.

“I hate her,” Lexi said.

“I hate her, too.”

Sierra didn't feel like calling Celeste. Celeste's silence at the lunch table had felt so superior, even smug. But if Sierra didn't get back to Celeste, Celeste would just keep texting.

“You weren't in French,” Celeste said as soon as she answered her phone. “And I heard you weren't in art or science either.”

“Well, you know Ms. Lin.” Sierra tried to put the best face on it. “She's such a stickler for rules. She just has this huge thing about them, so I had to sit there forever to wait for Mr. Besser, and then I couldn't really talk to him anyway.”

“Are they going to let you go to school tomorrow?”

The question punched Sierra like a fist in the stomach. What if she didn't get to go to class tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that? What if she really did get expelled and never returned to any of her classes ever again?

She couldn't let herself think that way.

“Of course!”

“Then why wouldn’t they let you go to class this afternoon?”

“Because Ms. Lin’s crazy.” Sierra still couldn’t bring herself to use Lexi’s word. “And Mr. Besser was busy in a meeting with this other principal who was doing a tour of our school to get ideas for his school.”

“Sierra,” Celeste said as if she were a grownup trying to get a child’s attention. “Don’t you get it? If anyone brings a knife to school, *for whatever reason*, they get expelled. You could get *expelled* for this.”

Sierra’s chest tightened. What if Em was wrong and Celeste was right?

“Look,” Sierra snapped. “They’re not going to expel someone for a total and complete mistake. Anyway, I’ve got to go. I have a ton of homework.”

“Okay,” Celeste said mildly. But then she asked, “So you’ll be at choir?”

Sierra *wasn’t* going to be at choir tomorrow morning. During the before-school choir practice, she was going to be in a conference with Mr. Besser and her parents. But she couldn’t bear to say that to Celeste.

“Sure,” Sierra said with false bravado. “See you then.”

Maybe she’d be done with the meeting in time to get to choir after all.

Or maybe she’d never be allowed to go to a choir practice ever again.

She pulled Cornflake close to her after she hung up the phone, wanting the comfort of the cat’s warm, plump body cuddled against her, but Cornflake struggled out of Sierra’s embrace and stalked away.

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## 6

Sierra had thought her dad might come home early—she knew her mother had called him at the office—but he stayed at work even later than usual, so Sierra and her mother had dinner alone. She heard her father's car pulling into the garage at half past eight and hurried downstairs to see him.

Before he even took off his coat he said, “Sorry I’m late. We’re just two days away from trial on the Wilson case. I had to take care of some things tonight in order to clear my calendar for tomorrow morning so that I can go into school with you and your mother and see what the hell is going on there.”

“I saved you some taco casserole,” Sierra’s mother told him.

He waved her away. “We had dinner delivered at the office. Sierra, honey, you tell me everything that happened. Okay? Every single thing.”

Sierra’s mom hung his coat for him in the hall closet as he settled himself at the kitchen table and opened his laptop to take notes.

Sierra couldn’t decide if she felt relieved or even more frightened. Her dad was an attorney, one of the best in the city, or at least that’s what everybody always told her, including her dad himself. But the grim set of his jaw and the way he drew his eyebrows together made him look as if he was preparing himself for a battle, and not a little battle, either.

Sierra told him how she had found the ham sandwich and then realized she had the wrong lunch bag. She told him how she had spilled out the entire contents of the lunch bag and seen the knife.

He stopped her. “You should have called me right then. That’s what you have a cell phone for. Not to text your friends all night long, but to call us in case of an emergency.”

Sierra felt as if she were facing her father in the courtroom, waiting to see if he was going to stop her for cross-examination after every single sentence.

“We’re not allowed to use cell phones at school,” she explained. “That’s the rule.”

“None of this would have happened if you’d called me first.”

Sierra was curious now. “What would you have told me to do?”

“I’d have told you to put the fool thing away before anyone else saw it, and I’d have sent your mother over to school to switch lunches with you immediately.”

“I couldn’t have left work like that,” Sierra’s mother put in. “Not in the middle of lunch. It’s our busiest time of the day. As it was, I couldn’t even get away until almost three.”

“So this is what we ended up with instead? Hell, I’d have left my meeting and hightailed it over to your school myself. Okay. Go on. What happened next?”

“Well, I took the knife to Sandy—she’s the lunch lady—and she went with me to the office, and then we gave it to Ms. Lin—she’s the school secretary.”

Her father interrupted her again. “And neither of those women had the sense to have you call your parents to come get the knife right away, before all this got blown out of proportion? A murderer gets to make a phone call, but a seventh grader who took the wrong lunch to school by mistake isn’t instructed about her legal rights?”

He was typing furiously on his computer as he spoke.

Sierra told him about Mr. Besser’s arrival in the office with the other principal and the conversation the two men had had about Longwood’s zero-tolerance policy for weapons and drugs.

Her father stopped typing.

“Oh, this is bad.”

Sierra’s heart clogged her throat. “It is?”

“I know Besser. My office did some work for his wife’s business years ago. He’s a decent enough guy. A bit in love with himself, as principals tend to be, a man surrounded all day by a bunch of women, spending most of his time bossing around short people.” Her dad gave a mirthless chuckle.

Sierra would have expected her father to want her to have respect for school principals in general and her school principal in particular. This was the first time she had ever heard him talk about Mr. Besser in this way. But it was also the first time Mr. Besser had ever done anything to upset him.

Her father continued: “But, as I said, he’s decent and he means well, and I give him credit for turning the school around, reclaiming it from the druggie kids and their loser parents, and making it a place where smart kids get the education they deserve.”

Sierra’s dad raked his hand through his thick silver hair. His hair had turned completely gray before he was forty.

“But now he can’t back down, don’t you see? Because the other guy has heard him do all his grandstanding. Now he can’t do what any reasonable person with half a brain and half a conscience would do and forget all about this. Because he’s painted himself into a corner.”

“The other principal seemed pretty nice,” Sierra said timidly.

“Nice has nothing to do with it.”

Sierra remembered that trapped look on Mr. Besser’s face. Now she saw that same look on her father’s face, too.

“Next time...” her father said. “Next time anything like this happens, ever, you call me. I don’t care what rules there are about cell phones. You call me.”

“Sierra,” her mother said. She had been so quiet during the last few minutes that Sierra had almost forgotten she was still there. “Why *didn’t* you put the knife back in the bag right away? Why did you give it to Sandy?”

Sierra wasn’t sure she even remembered. It all seemed to have happened so long ago.

“I just thought I was supposed to turn it in,” she said finally. “I just thought it was the right thing to do.”

The bell for the start of first period was at 8:05. Sierra and her parents were in the school office waiting for Mr. Besser's arrival, at 7:15.

"We want all this crap taken care of so that you can be in your seat when your first class begins," Sierra's father had told her as he had backed the car, too fast, out of the driveway. Sierra hoped it would all be taken care of even sooner than that: in time for her to go to most of choir practice.

The Longwood Middle School halls were empty at that hour except for a few teachers hurrying to their rooms to prepare their lesson plans for the day. No students were allowed in the building until 7:45 unless they were there for a before-school extracurricular activity, like the Octave. Or there, Sierra was, with their parents.

Ms. Lin and Mrs. Saunders were already at their desks when Sierra and her parents came in.

Mrs. Saunders gave them a worried-looking smile as Ms. Lin greeted them.

"Good morning! There's a coatrack over there if you want to leave your coats. And may I get you anything while you wait? Coffee? Tea?"

Ms. Lin seemed to have had a personality transplant overnight. Sierra suspected it was occasioned by the presence of her father, Gerald Edward Shepard, Esquire, attorney-at-law.

"Thanks, but we're fine," her dad said.

Sierra had a feeling her mother might have accepted the offer of tea if her father hadn't spoken first. Her mother loved tea, and if they were all sipping tea together, maybe it would seem more like a friendly social visit. Her father removed his coat, and Sierra's mother shrugged off her jacket; her father hung them both up on the coatrack. Sierra kept hers on. She was cold, more from fear than from the frigid January morning.

She wondered if her dad would yell at Ms. Lin, call her grossly incompetent to her face, demand an explanation for why Sierra hadn't been directed to make a phone call to her parents.

He didn't. He just sat reading the copy of *The Wall Street Journal* that he had brought with him. Sierra remembered he had once said that he didn't "waste energy on flunkies."

Neither Sierra nor her mother had brought anything to read. Her mother took Sierra's hand and rubbed her thumb gently against Sierra's wrist.

The office door opened, and Mr. Besser came in wearing the same big coat and fur hat he had worn yesterday.

"Hello, Gerald!" he greeted Sierra's dad, who stood up to accept his handshake.

Her dad was taller than Mr. Besser, but by barely an inch.

As he shrugged off his coat and removed his hat, Mr. Besser turned toward Sierra's mom. "Hello, Angie."

Neither Mr. Besser nor Sierra's mother gave any sign of acknowledging that they had spoken unpleasant words to each other just yesterday.

"And Sierra." Mr. Besser hung up his coat and hat; he smiled at Sierra without meeting her eyes. "Well, come on into my office. Can Ms. Lin get you some coffee? Tea?"

Sierra's father shook his head, less graciously than he had before, as if to say, *Let's cut the crap.*

Mr. Besser replaced his welcoming smile with a look of sad seriousness.

Sierra followed her parents into the inner sanctum and took one of the chairs facing Mr. Besser's desk. He probably had three chairs for his guests because he so often met with a problem student and the student's parents.

Luke Bishop must have sat there with his parents. Now Sierra Shepard was sitting there with hers.

Sierra's father spoke first.

"We're here to demand an apology for the unconscionable and illegal way in which your staff treated our daughter yesterday. She is to receive a full apology from you and your secretary. She is to receive an excused absence in the three classes she was wrongly forced to miss."

Sierra's father always said that the best defense was a good offense.

"Mr. Shepard," Mr. Besser began. Apparently they were no longer on a chummy, first-name basis. "Our school has a policy—an ironclad policy, I might say—that prohibits any weapons or any drugs on school grounds for any reason. For any reason whatsoever. Indeed, the existence of that policy is one of the main reasons that parents choose to enroll their students here. All students who enroll here and all parents who enroll their children here, know that policy and sign a form stating that they are fully aware of what that policy entails. You and Mrs. Shepard signed the policy; we have your form on file."

"But that policy needs to be administered with a small dose of common sense," Sierra's father interrupted.

"Please let me finish."

Sierra's mother took Sierra's hand again.

"Do I think that Sierra brought that knife to school on purpose?" Mr. Besser said, speaking slowly as if to convey to Sierra's dad his unwillingness to be rushed. "No. Do I think she acted appropriately in turning it in? Yes. Do I think that what has happened here is unfortunate? Absolutely. But does that mean that I can make an exception in her case? No."

Sierra's mother was rubbing the side of Sierra's hand so hard that it felt as if she might wear a hole in the skin.

"A zero-tolerance policy has risks that some innocent student, like your daughter, will be an unintended victim of the policy. I would be the first to say how distressing this is, for all of us. But it's even more distressing when a student gets stabbed with a knife, or slashed with a switchblade, or shot with a handgun. Zero-tolerance policies exist to make sure that these far worse tragedies don't happen."

Mr. Besser seemed to have finished his speech. Now it was Sierra's father's turn.

"You cannot sit there with a straight face and tell me that you could possibly believe that you have made this school safer in any way whatsoever by taking action against an honor student who brought



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