

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

by *Lara Zielinsky*

(c) 2006

### Chapter 1

*The gymnasium?* Margaret looked down at her attire and sighed. The one day she chose to wear a skirt to make an impression with her new colleagues, and Steven Harper was going to have a start of the year 'pep rally' in Winslow's gym. She watched the other teachers flowing through the mailbox room as she squeezed the notice of the meeting in her hand discreetly.

Each teacher pulled a large bundle of papers from his or her mailbox, chatted with a neighbor, catching up, and paired off for the walk to the other end of the school.

Walking alone, Margaret followed the flow. Steven had given her the full tour last week, naming teacher as they passed the empty classrooms, describing a few in his unique way. She now tried to place names to the faces.

Harvey Lipschulz was easy. Not for his age, though he was clearly the most senior member of the faculty, but instead she overheard his complaint-riddled response to the simple greeting, "How was your summer?"

Margaret made a mental note to only engage the man in conversation when she had a lot of time on her hands. Or, she thought, I could just introduce him to my father. The mental image of her Irish Catholic father and the proud Jewish historian Lipschulz arguing everything under the sun gave her a chuckle.

"What's funny?"

Margaret turned her head and slowed her steps unconsciously, welcoming the blonde presence at her side. Ronnie Cook, she thought. The unforgettable woman wore a comfortable looking pair of tan slacks and a cotton blue v-neck cling top. The blue eyes focused on her blinked abruptly and Margaret could tell she had startled the younger woman. The pink edge of a tongue wet full lips. Quickly Margaret turned her gaze away.

"I... uh, w..." The dark blonde brow furrowed and Margaret turned back at the confusion in time to see Ronnie collect herself. "What are you doing here?"

"Steven called me to replace an English teacher who transferred."

"English?"

Margaret nodded. "That's what I teach."

Her blonde companion seemed to shake herself. The reaction puzzled her, though perhaps Ronnie Cook was simply suffering from *deja vu*, as she finally realized where she had probably seen Margaret before. Obviously it had been a very busy month. *Well, easy enough to make reintroductions*, though she was a little crestfallen at having been forgotten. "I'm Margaret O'Halloran," she said, holding out

her hand.

Ronnie's brow relaxed but her expression was still mildly distressed.

"I'm sorry if the teacher I'm replacing was a friend."

"Oh, I... No, I can..." Ronnie held open the door to the gym and gestured Margaret through first.

"Did you pass your tests?" Margaret asked, recalling the woman had been studying for area certifications when they last spoke.

"Hmm? Tests? Oh. Yes. Yes, I did."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." Margaret withdrew her hand from Ronnie's arm, just a supportive gesture that had naturally accompanied her praise. However, the woman had reacted uneasily, staring at the point of contact.

The sounds of the cavernous building finally sunk in as Margaret realized she had gotten lost in studying the profoundly disturbing swirls of blue that could not seem to let go of her. "Guess we had better take a seat," she said gently.

When Ronnie's gaze broke from her, it was to abruptly brush her left hand through her loose hair. Margaret could then turn and she found Steven Harper standing up from the front row of bleachers where he had obviously been talking to the teacher to his left, a young woman with something of a "deer in headlights" look about her when the principal moved away.

Steven took the microphone from Scott Guber, who had been ineffectually requesting that teachers take their seats. The way he took it, however, Margaret realized that Scott could easily annoy Steven. His voice however was warm and cheerful as he addressed the teachers.

"I'd like to welcome everyone back to Winslow High. We've got a few new faces but we're all together the heart and soul of Winslow Wildcats."

His voice had risen steadily into almost a cheer by the time it reached the mascot name. Margaret smiled as more of her old friend was revealed. Preacher's boy, she thought fondly.

Steven turned a little toward her as if he had heard her thought and gave her a smile. "Here's one of the new faces now. Margaret O'Halloran has joined the English department, bringing 18 years experience to our students."

Margaret stepped forward and dipped her head at several "Welcome" greetings and the light clapping from the throng. She watched Ronnie wedge herself through the teachers and finally take a seat, sliding onto the bleacher bench next to a cocoa-skinned woman with refined features and equally refined clothes. She talked behind her hand to Ronnie, who suddenly turned to meet Margaret's gaze watching her.

Letting her gaze drop easily, Margaret took a seat opposite Steven at the podium, listening as he moved on to the other new faculty. Margaret found out her "deer in headlights" colleague, the woman sitting next to her, was Libby Buckner, who would be teaching biology.

Margaret wasn't so sure the kids didn't know more about sexual reproduction than this young thing. Kids swamped with hormones would probably tear her apart, Margaret thought. She sincerely hoped Libby had a solid mentor up to the task.

Steven moved from the new teachers to their student demographics. Enrollment had risen four percent, with the incoming freshman class their largest ever. She looked over her shoulder to gauge the reactions of her new colleagues.

Ronnie and her friend had covered their mouths. Lipschulz and a few others were shaking their heads, resignation clear on their faces. However, Steven's news that he had been able to hire more teachers, meant that student-teacher ratios would be down for the third year in a row, from 25-1 to 24-1.

"We'll do more class load leveling during attendance checks for the first week, so don't forget to get those headcounts to the front office when we ask for them."

\* \* \*

Margaret could not, by any stretch, be considered a novice teacher. However, as she paused with relief at the lunch dismissal bell, she admitted how off balance she felt in the middle of her first day with students. Taking roll, passing out textbooks, and going through her rubric of expectations were all familiar tasks.

But these students were unfamiliar to her. She had identified a few pranksters likely to give her the odd trouble. However, the sheer amount of out-and-out testing of her limits of patience was draining.

She realized it was her reputation. Or in this case, her lack of one, which made the difference when she overheard two students on their way out debating if she was more like Ms. Sudor or Mr. Kincaid, and finally decided the latter though, "she's not fat."

Chuckling, Margaret shouldered her purse and grabbed her lunchbag. She had not had time that morning to search out the teacher's lounge to tuck her food in a refrigerator before classes started.

Winslow's student population was nearly twice Alexandria's, despite both being in a major metropolis. Shouldering through the throng, with many students of similar height, Margaret made it finally to the lounge, falling inward and shutting the door behind her with deep relief.

The cacophony of student noise cut to silence and Margaret looked up to see all eyes on her. She recognized only Marilyn Sudor, who was the English department chairperson, and through whom Margaret had learned she replaced the last one. They had only talked however while she accepted and double-checked her book and supplies count. Otherwise, Marilyn had left her alone to set up her room.

Margaret nodded now toward the pencil-thin woman and recalled that she had been Ronnie's companion at the gym. Taking her aplomb in both hands, grasping her lunch bag, she scanned the other faces, expecting to see the blonde.

She had taken two steps away from the door when it burst inward again, admitting another teacher. Or, in this case, two.

The leader had her back to the room, turned around talking animatedly with her hands. She backed into

Margaret, oversetting her. Turning as she stumbled to regain her balance, Margaret identified Ronnie Cook and the teacher she conversed with, Libby Buckner.

"They do that specifically to rattle you. Don't give them the satisfaction," Ronnie was saying, obviously in conclusion.

With cat-like reflexes, Ronnie turned and caught Margaret and steadied her with long fingers wrapping around her upper right arm. "Sorry."

Margaret inhaled. "It's all right. Thanks."

"How's your first day going?" Ronnie followed up, holding the seat beside Marilyn for Margaret and gesturing Libby next to Margaret.

"About the same as yours, I think," Margaret said to Libby with an easy smile as the rattled teacher pulled out a pink soft-side lunch sack. "I've been compared to both Marilyn and Ralph Kincaid so far."

"Ooh," Ronnie chuckled as she lifted her lunch out of the refrigerator and took a seat across from Marilyn at the community table. "Ralph's not here. Gives lunch detentions. The kids call him Killer Kincaid."

Rolling her eyes, Margaret winced. "Great."

That apparently hit Ronnie's funny bone because out of the blue she started laughing. Watching her laugh didn't feel like an affront to Margaret, just absolute pleasure and it washed over her, catching her off-guard. She smiled as her gaze traced the fine muscles of Ronnie's animated face. She's beautiful, Margaret thought then ducked her head quickly pushing those thoughts away forcefully; her smile disappearing with the firm set of her jaw.

"Oh, mmm, I'm sorry," Ronnie stifled herself. "It's just the way you..."

"No. No, I'm not bothered."

"Honestly, I wasn't laughing at you."

Unable to look up at Ronnie, Margaret just shrugged. "I know you weren't."

When there was no further response, Margaret finally looked up, finding her lunch and sorting out the contents. Out of the corner of her eye, she found Ronnie stealing glances at her, as she too ate her lunch.

Ronnie Cook seemed to have come a long way from the just-finished first year teacher Margaret had met two months earlier. Sureptitiously, she studied the woman's profiled features, immersed in Ronnie's easy manner, neatly popping open a side container of croutons and another with salad dressing for a home made salad. Before she poured the dressing, she flipped a tiny crouton through her fingers and into her mouth, biting down with a crunch followed by a briefly self-satisfied smile.

Looking away from Ronnie's lips, reminding herself that she was supposed to be behaving straight, Margaret bit down firmly on her pocket sandwich.

The thin bread burst along the opposite edge, spilling much of the meat filling onto the tabletop. Margaret closed her eyes and sternly told herself not to be embarrassed.

As she cleaned it up, accepting a napkin from Ronnie without a word, Margaret acknowledged that she had not felt this "green" since she was 20. She quirked a smile at Ronnie's raised eyebrow. "I guess it's time for a fork," she laughed self-deprecatingly.

Ronnie's smile widened. Marilyn Sudor fished through her bag and passed Margaret a clear plastic fork. "Here you go."

Margaret spared a glance for Marilyn. "Thanks."

Marilyn then asked Libby where she had gone to college.

And just like that, the entire last ten minutes were wiped like chalk from a chalkboard. Libby's schooling had apparently been in elementary education until she began to focus enjoyment in the sciences. Her interests became biology and human genetics by junior year. "I switched to secondary education Biology," she explained.

Turning to Margaret she asked, "How about you?"

Margaret shrugged. "I've been an English teacher for 18 years."

"Never thought of anything else?" Marilyn asked.

"Did you?" Margaret replied in kind.

"Choral singer, chamber choir," Marilyn replied easily, to Margaret's surprise. "Only my mother didn't think I could make it a living."

"So she leads the choral group here," Ronnie explained. "Quite well," she complimented Marilyn with a nod of her head. Margaret looked between Ronnie and Marilyn. The latter blushed. Ronnie's gaze leveled with Margaret's. "And you know I used to be a lawyer."

"So fair's fair, hmm?" Margaret parlayed.

"Yep," said Ronnie with a grin.

"Well," Margaret put down her fork. "Originally I went to college and majored in social history."

"For what job?"

"I hoped to travel overseas as a diplomat."

"From history to English?"

Margaret nodded. "My agenda changed. I decided not to save the whole world, as my sister put it. Just my little piece of it. I figured making teenagers literate was a good start."

She could see the thoughts forming and reforming behind Ronnie's sky blue eyes and wondered what

judgment about her the blonde woman was reaching.

Her story hadn't been the whole picture, but about the level of Libby's explanation that her switch to concentrate in biology had "just happened," but it was more than enough for lunch time conversation.

The bell sounded then, ending the lunch period and preventing more questions. As Margaret cleared her waste into the trash can, she heard Marilyn and Ronnie making after school plans in low voices.

Ronnie declined listening to choral practice before joining Marilyn for dinner, saying instead that she had a meeting.

Watching the two women together, Margaret was chewing on quite a few meaty thoughts about her new colleague as she headed into the last three periods of the day.

## Chapter 2

"Ms. O'Halloran?"

Margaret looked up from the process of gathering her books and papers together. It was Friday, end of her first week.

The speaker was a student, a bookish looking girl, with small wire rim glasses, soft brown hair, bangs pulled back in a barette. Still putting faces to names, Margaret fished her memory quickly for at least the period when the student had her class. Second period. That led to placing the young woman in the third row. She mentally scanned her seating chart. "Alicia? What can I do for you?"

"I was reading through chapter 2 and was wondering if I could talk to you about the... gerund forms?"

"Getting a little ahead of yourself, aren't you?" Margaret shouldered her folio bag and gestured Alicia back toward the door. "I'll be happy to enlighten you next Tuesday, when we start Chapter 2. For now, any questions for Monday's Chapter 1 test, I'll be happy to field."

Alicia frowned. "Well, I don't have any questions."

"Good." Margaret smiled warily at the girl who was of similar height. "I'll see you Monday then."

"Will you be holding study sessions like Ms. Davis?"

"If the topic seems to need it, certainly."

"You mean like lots of kids don't 'get it'?" Margaret nodded. "Oh. Okay."

The girl was still standing there as Margaret turned back from locking her classroom door.

"Where'd you teach before?"

"Alexandria, Virginia."

"Oh." Alicia nodded. "Where's that?"

"It's near DC," Margaret explained.

Alicia nodded. "The capital?"

"Mmm hmm." Alicia continued to follow Margaret through the corridors toward the front office. "Are your parents picking you up?" Margaret asked.

"No."

"You walk home?"

"Sometimes."

Margaret reached for the office door. Alicia hung back. "Uh. Well, have a good weekend."

"You too." Margaret smiled, opening the door. Stepping inside the door, she watched through the clouded glass as Alicia took off running for the exit.

She was still shaking her head at the weirdness that is teenagers when she knocked on Steven Harper's open door.

"Hey, Maggie." She grinned at the familiar name and watched him snatch his coat off a hook behind the door. "So did you finally learn your momma's cooking?" he asked.

"I did." She patted his arm. "Tonight we're having Potato Dumplings and Steamed Turnips."

Harper's face lit up almost comically happy. "Lead the way." Arms linked Margaret and Steven walked down the hall and out the school's front entrance.

Ronnie had paused in the hallway when she heard voices. Her companion and she both noted the teacher and principal walking out arm in arm. Ronnie's gaze drifted lazily down the slim womanly body next to the burly man. She sighed.

"Oh, don't. You don't want to pine for someone playing for the other side, Ronnie."

"What?"

"That look on your face. I've seen it a million times."

"What?"

"You're thinking Margaret O'Halloran is someone special."

"She looks like someone I... know."

Ronnie's expression went unfocused as she drifted back nearly a year. So much had happened to her in the intervening time but her memory remained as vivid as if it was all yesterday.

"You mean someone at one of the clubs?"

Ronnie shook her head. She had never told him details about Kate. Nor would she. He would counsel

her to forget about it. She had moved on, but she had discovered a profound truth about herself with the reckless affair. For that reason, whether she ever encountered that first woman again, she would never want to forget her.

She knew what she wanted from relationships and life now. Something real and lasting. Ronnie sighed again. On that score then, Brian Langton was right. Getting interested in someone who played for the "other team", would only lead to frustration.

"So, are you going out tonight?" she asked him, to change the subject.

"Yeah. You?"

"I should." She looked after where Margaret and Steven had disappeared. "But I think I'll just go soak."

"Cold shower?"

"No, hot bath."

He smiled and patted her shoulder. "Good girl."

*You have your way to cool off* , she thought, *I'll drown mine* .

They parted at the entrance to Winslow. Brian turned toward the parking lot. Ronnie headed down the street to the subway station. *September in Boston* , she thought, looking up at the clear blue sky and turning her face into the river breeze. *This has to be the best time in the best place on Earth* .

The heat of summer was fading toward sunset, and the breezes from the Charles River nearby were pungent with the fish catches of the day.

She diverted her path at the point deciding instead to take herself to dinner at one of the riverside seafood joints.

Ronnie slid into a booth at Lyle's just before six p.m. and ordered a white wine to see her through a plate of fresh crab legs. The satisfying crack of each leg mingled and finally mangled her thoughts of Kate, or the surprisingly similar Margaret O'Halloran.

After a blueberry cheesecake dessert, Ronnie drifted home through the night life after eight p.m. and fell into her bed for a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

Margaret cleared the dinner table as Steven and her father continued the conversation about a local politician's latest proposal for education reform.

"Romney won't let it fly," her father objected.

"Wish he would. We're damn hamstrung here," Steven countered.

Margaret listened. Though she didn't know the personalities in local politics anymore after 20 years away, the issues always interested her and she knew she would want to know the players before any

elections came up.

Besides listening to her father and Steven talking as equals was something that she still marveled.

"Coffee?" she asked, bringing out the tray of mugs and stainless steel coffee pot, industrial size. Her father and mother had owned a small one, but Margaret's fondness for the beverage meant bigger was better.

"Thanks Maggie." Steven helped herself. Margaret poured her father a half mug then herself a full one before setting to doctor it with sugar. "What's the reform you want, Steven?" she asked.

"The MCAS is too broad. There's a move to reduce it to smaller subject area tests. More like standardizing individual courses' final exams."

"That does sound useful."

"Romney won't do it though," her father explained. "Too much to administer. Too much money would have to go into the test development."

"Why not put teacher's councils on it?"

"I swear Romney would disband the DOE if he could get away with it. Certainly hates the unions which is where the idea originated," Steven carped.

"And replace it with what?"

"Damned if I know," Steven replied with a sigh. Margaret puzzled over where exactly she might best find out more information. Steven sipped his coffee. "You did turn into your momma, Maggie. That was a fantastic meal."

"Thanks."

"Mr. O'Halloran," started Steven.

"Call me Rory," her father said. "You aren't the scrap of kid my wife pulled off our front step."

"Yes, sir." Steven smiled.

The elderly O'Halloran patriarch stood and reached out to shake Steven's hand. "Come 'round again, Steven."

"Da, are you going to bed?"

"Not yet."

"Take a blanket to your chair."

"It's 85 outside, Margaret. I'll be fine."

"Da..."

"I'll be fine. You sit up and enjoy your company." He leaned over, wrapped his big hands around her shoulders and kissed her forehead.

Margaret squeezed his arm then kissed his cheek. "Love you, Da."

"Love you too, darling."

Silent, she watched him walk up the staircase until he was out of sight. The shuffle in his step had become pronounced over the evening she worried.

"So have you found Boston still to your liking?"

"Hmm?" Margaret processed Steven's question. "Oh. Yes. Haven't looked up all the old haunts. But the ones that are still around, I plan to make a tour." *And maybe locate a few new ones*, she thought of the bar she had passed near the school.

Steven lifted his mug to hers and the ceramic clicked together solidly. "Here's to making old times new again."

### Chapter 3

"I got two tickets. You should take one."

"I don't like the symphony, Scott. Find someone else."

Margaret walked into the front office at Winslow to find Scott Guber had literally cornered Steven Harper in his office. The smaller, thinner man waved a pair of tickets at the principal. She decided to be gallant. Stepping through the doorway, she said loudly, "Hi, Steven."

The look her old friend shot Margaret made her bite her lip to keep her calm, neutral expression from turning into laughter. He was looking at her as if she was the Second Coming, with an embarrassingly worshipful expression. "Hello, Margaret."

Scott Guber's reaction to her presence was no less comical. Abruptly he dropped his arm, straightened his tie, fumbled the tickets so that they fell to the surface of Steven's crowded desk, and swallowed hard before he could offer, "Good afternoon, Ms. O'Halloran."

"I apologize for interrupting," she said, ever polite though she was anything but sorry. "But I did wonder if I might have a word with you?" she nodded at the vice principal.

"I... why of course, Ms. O'Halloran. What is it you needed to see me about?"

"I am in need of several media supplies for upcoming units and Ms. Verranzano, at the library," she clarified, "indicated that I needed to have your approval."

"I'm sure there's no problem." He adjusted his tie again. Margaret was quite sure it was to clear the very aroused feeling which was plain on his face. She had been around long enough to know when a man was

attracted to her. "Shall we go into my office?"

She held the forms up. "I do have them."

"All right."

Margaret turned around, to find Ronnie Cooke striding purposefully directly at her. Her own arousal stood up and slapped her face red as she sidestepped at the last second.

The blonde looked up at the last second, obviously to gauge her passage through the office door, and stopped abruptly inches from Margaret's body. "Ms. O'Halloran."

"Margaret, please. Steven's all yours, Scott and I were just leaving." Margaret was extremely proud of her composed reaction.

"I... I need to see Scott," Ronnie replied.

"Oh." Margaret looked back over her shoulder at Steven. "I think Steven and I can find something to talk about." Then she looked back at Ronnie. "You seem rather in a hurry, so what Scott and I have to do can wait a few minutes."

Ronnie turned on Scott, clearly willing to take the opening. "I need you to cancel Jamal's suspension."

Scott immediately shook his head. "Mr. Jefferson earned his 5 days, Ms. Cooke."

"I'll lose every bit of ground I've made up with him if he's gone from classes for an entire week, Scott."

"He put firecrackers in the stew, Ms. Cooke!"

Margaret had heard about that incident and was surprised five days was all the student had received.

"It was pop-caps, not firecrackers."

"The intention to cause chaos was the same. We cannot support disruptive influences like Mr. Jefferson remaining on campus." Scott shook his head.

"Steven?" Ronnie turned to the principal.

Margaret turned to see Steven shake his head. "Scott's the final word on discipline."

Margaret agreed with Scott about the suspension. In D.C., anything less would have been ludicrous to consider, and special circumstances? Never. She was however surprised to see Ronnie was very upset by this verdict. Who was Jamal Jefferson that this young woman wanted the rules bent for him? She had mentioned "losing ground" with him. Margaret remembered that Ronnie taught the at-risk students.

What was Jamal at-risk for?

Ronnie looked from Steven to Scott. "I want to send a tutor to his home."

"The tutors loads are full," Scott replied.

"Then I'll go."

Margaret pondered this. Idealism was all well and good as was wanting to work with students who seemed to want nothing more than snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, but to put tutoring full time on top of her regular school duties. Would Ronnie Cooke be spreading herself too thin?

Apparently Scott and Steven were thinking the same thing. Scott seemed to shrug though, caught by the very determined gleam in Ronnie's eyes. Hard to refuse that, Margaret thought. "All right. It's only for five days. I'll arrange for him to be in-school suspension instead." Margaret blinked. Did Ronnie have any idea how easily she was wrapping this man around her finger?

Scott, Margaret could tell, was so enamored of Ronnie, that he had something of a starved puppy look when he looked away from her smile.

"Thank you," Ronnie said, to Margaret not sounding as if she were aware of the effect at all.

Margaret looked over her shoulder to Steven, who, like herself, had remained silent. Her old friend offered her a shrug and sat down.

"All settled then. Ms. O'Halloran?" Scott blinked as Ronnie's "aura" turned off with her success and she actually visibly softened. "Shall we go?"

"Good luck with your student," Margaret offered as Ronnie stepped back out of the doorway, clearing the path to the assistant principal's office.

\* \* \*

Margaret found Scott easy to work with, if you were prepared, which she always was. Once she handed over the media request forms, he read them, asked a couple of questions about their content. She quoted MCAS standards they would meet, and he signed them.

When they looked up from the last form, eyes meeting, Margaret groaned inwardly as she met an expression she had seen too many times. She braced herself for the question.

"Ms. O'Halloran, would... do you care for the symphony?"

Ah, his two tickets. "Yes, I do. I had many occasions to take in the national symphony at the Kennedy Center while I was in Alexandria."

"You spent most of your teaching years there."

"All of them."

"Have you heard the Boston Pops?"

"When I was growing up my family attended their frequent fourth of July concerts at the River."

She had caught Scott's attention. "You grew up here?"

"I did indeed."

"So you... did you know Steven well?"

"He and I attended South Boston High together for two years."

"What made you leave?"

Margaret stood. "Many things make a child leave her hometown, Mr. Guber."

"My apologies, I only meant to... make conversation."

"So your next question would be, why am I back?"

"Well..." Scott dipped his head in acquiescence.

"My sister asked me to come home."

Scott frowned, then nodded, and Margaret gathered her books.

"Ms. O'Halloran," he finally managed, catching her with his words at the door. She turned back. "Would you happen to be free... to accompany me to the Boston Pops concert on the 23rd?"

A door behind her opened, and Margaret just noticed Ronnie exiting from Steven's office. The blonde woman froze upon seeing her. The expression of surprise caught Margaret off guard. While Margaret thought Ronnie had already left, clearly Ronnie had thought the same about her. She wondered why they each thought, however absurdly, that they needn't cross paths. Margaret could not wonder about that now. "I am free on the 23rd," she acknowledged to Scott.

"I... will... discuss with you later the arrangements?"

"Of course." Margaret turned from Scott, saw Ronnie's expression falter from curious interest to disappointment at her words, and quit the office quickly with her head full of her own confusions. Confused blue eyes floated in her mind causing her to be distracted for the next hour.

## **Chapter 4**

"You denied his transfer?"

At the sharp interruption to her quiet thoughts, Margaret, in the midst of cleaning her dry-erase board,

nearly dropped the spray bottle of chemical cleaner. She fumbled for it, turning at the same time toward her classroom door. The afternoon sun through her windows illuminated Ronnie Cooke.

By this, the end of her second week at Winslow High, she had accepted and denied a large number of students both transferring into and out of her classes. She needed clarification. "Who?"

"Jamal Jefferson." Ronnie waved the form in her hand. "It took me four days just to get him to agree to submit the change form."

"You should have saved yourself the trouble. Four days for him to do it should've been a clue."

"What?"

"I looked up his records. His grades -- when he's there -- are dismal. He can't be bothered, it seems, with classwork. He's constantly tardy. His discipline records forty incidents already, and he's only a sophomore."

"He's brilliant!"

"Does he show that to you? He's showed it to no one else. Obviously you've made a connection with him. You should keep him."

"My classes are remedial, he's far beyond them."

"Don't put him in here. It'd be the equivalent of drowning him."

"The accelerated class would keep him engaged!"

"I'm telling you he'll drown."

The two women were now toe to toe, Ronnie having entered the room and Margaret having crossed to stand before her. Not exactly guarding her turf, her classroom, but put out by the younger teacher presuming to tell her what to do nonetheless.

"He needs this class -- your class. I hold him after. He writes for me." Ronnie lifted the folder in her other hand. "I want you to read these."

"I have the final say who goes in my classes, Ronnie. I don't want him."

"He's not trouble."

"Not what his record says."

"He has trouble at home, he..."

"Ronnie, if you know him, you can teach him better than anyone else." Margaret shook her head. "I can't slow down to accommodate him."

Frustration was clear on the smooth face. Ronnie closed her eyes. "He doesn't need you to slow down. He needs the faster pace."

"I've taught for 25 years. I know lazy when I see it. His whole file speaks for itself."

"Just... read these."

Margaret found the papers thrust at her. Ronnie took an abrupt step back as their eyes met. If she wasn't so upset, Margaret thought, she'd be rather drawn to the vulnerability displayed right now. Ronnie really wanted this for some reason.

*Well, time to do some reading.*

"I'll take this home tonight, and get back to you tomorrow."

"The end of add/drop is today."

"I'm not going to make a decision like this under the gun. If he's deserving, I'll get the exemption handled myself."

"Scott Guber is a stickler."

"So am I." Margaret was amazed how quickly Ronnie could find ways to unsettle her.

"I'm sorry." Ronnie blinked. "I didn't mean to say that you weren't."

Apparently Ronnie was unsettled by their argument as well. "Let's go to Scott now."

"He'll say no."

"Have you already asked him? Ronnie, I won't participate in an end-run around..."

"No. No. I haven't asked him. I... I know Scott. You have to have all your arguments lined up before you walk in. He's the school's debate team sponsor."

"I was a debater too. But this isn't a debate. This is about school policy and what is best for a student's future."

"Everything is a debate to Scott."

Margaret quirked her lips. She was starting to look forward to this. It was clear Ronnie was wary of Scott Guber. He had been nothing but kind, if a bit stuffy, particularly when she accepted his invitation to the Boston Pops symphony performance.

She still did not plan to argue for the student's move into her class, but perhaps if she listened to Ronnie trying to explain herself to Scott, she might get a clue why she was so sure Jamal would do well in Margaret's class, beyond the pleas she had just used on Margaret.

## **Chapter 5**

Margaret rubbed her brow while concentrating on the chess pieces arranged on the chessboard between the two leather and wood sea captain's chairs where she and her father had settled for their after dinner

game. She knew she was within a few moves of hopelessly losing the match, unable to see a way out of the corner her father's skillful play had trapped her.

She moved her queen's knight.

Her father stood up staring off at some distant point.

"Da?"

"Oh? Hm." He looked at the board and she watched his brow knit in thought. He moved a piece, his king's bishop, straight ahead.

"Tired?" she asked, moving the piece back for him.

"A headache I guess." He moved a different piece, correctly this time.

She moved again. "Thinking about something?"

"House is awful quiet."

"Um hmm," she concurred.

"Wonder where the dog got off to. I'd like to go for a walk."

Margaret exhaled and stood. "I'll take you out. Where would you like to go?" A small dog her parents had acquired some ten years ago had passed away just before Margaret's mother.

"Park's nice this time of year."

They went to the closet for their coats. Her father chose an older hunter's black and green checked jacket. Margaret pulled on a lined windbreaker. Lifting the house keys from the foyer's small box atop a set of shelves, she dropped them into her pocket.

"Let's go," she encouraged, sliding her arm through the crook of his.

She listened on the one mile walk through old and renewed neighborhood as her father reminisced. She had not heard all the stories before, but enough had familiar names, featured her siblings or herself so that she found herself slipping back in time mentally as well.

What she and her friends growing up had called Logan House, for crotchety old Mister Logan and his prized nut trees, was now the residence of a young Hispanic family of five -- "Father's a traffic controller." She chuckled. They could still call it Logan House, she thought privately, just in connection with the city's airport this time.

She looked at 119 North Elmsford, up to the third floor bedroom window. Now dark, in her memory it had two lights signaling "the parents are home" or one for "all clear", messages to her lusty sixteen year old self from Stacy Gray. She wondered where life had taken the blonde South Boston High track star.

"Anybody live there?" Margaret pointed out the home to her father.

"Professional couple. Simmons. He's a banker. She's an architect. No kids."

Margaret nodded. She had seen fewer children overall in these old neighborhoods. Obviously property prices were keeping the first-time families, young couples with minimum-wage jobs out of the market here in the heart of the city.

Margaret's sense of social justice quailed. Her row house in Alexandria, Virginia had netted her a substantial nest egg, and she could have bought a place up here, with almost nothing left over after her teacher's salary. And she was an advanced teacher at maximum on the pay scale. A first-year teacher would have to save for some time -- and hope not to be fired in the meanwhile, to buy into a home this close to the city center.

They walked around the park walks for a bit before turning back. As her father climbed the steps to his home, he said, "I think I'm ready for bed. Why don't you go out?"

"I have some work I need to do," she answered.

"It's Saturday night," he answered. "You haven't been out much since you got here."

"I go out with you every night," she teased.

"You know what I mean. You'll not meet any eligibles sitting at home."

Eligibles. Sigh. "Are you sure?"

"I'm just going to sleep."

So it was that Margaret found herself effectively shooed out to rediscover the Saturday night life of Boston.

She struck out down the street, headed for the social spots she remembered from her youth.

\* \* \*

Margaret finally had decided to just stop in briefly at The Midway Cafe. She was unlikely to see anyone she knew, and besides, knowing she couldn't take anyone home was an effective coolant, and that might just lead to a nice no-pressure evening.

The music inside had changed over the years but the scene still had all the same components. Her gaze slid over those milling around the pool tables, watching four young butches obviously single and playing to impress the femmes that gathered round. The second pool table held a less serious bunch. Two couples obviously of long standing relationships. No one in the pool area seemed to approach her age group. She was not in the mood for a December-May match up.

She looked toward the tables by the dance floor as she accepted her hand stamp for paying the cover. Making her way to an empty one she was enjoying the gyrations of bodies when a young woman walked up in brown leather pants and matching vest with a rainbow pride short sleeved shirt between it and her skin. The server, Margaret surmised just as the woman said, "Welcome to a new face. Want something from the bar?"

"What's the house special?"

"Licker Lust," she answered with a smirk. "Grenadine, creme de menthe, lime juice, and a few other things thrown in to spice it up."

Margaret grinned back and nodded. "I'll take one."

Leaning back in her chair, Margaret returned to her crowd watching while she awaited her drink. The DJ, a beautifully bald woman in black leather biker studded wear, had just put on a techno-pop tune.

Sipping her drink when it arrived, Margaret offered her opinion. "Nice." She looked up easily into the server's eyes, and felt the familiar stirrings.

"So, you're not new to the scene, but you're new to town," deduced the server.

"Not so new to town either. This used to be a hopscotch spot when I was in school." Eyes went wide. "That was about '77."

"Yeah, I... wow."

Margaret chuckled. "What's your name?"

"Val."

"Well, Val, where does a friend of Bilitis go to get some good social information these days?"

Bilitis was a really old reference. Again, Margaret saw she had shocked the other woman as she coughed, "Bulletin board's in back by the bathrooms. The Ed Net is on Boylston."

Hiding her mirth, Margaret quickly swallowed down the rest of her drink and stood. She stopped at the aforementioned bulletin board to check the contents, taking a couple cards, then slipped into the bathroom.

\* \* \*

Ronnie Cook entered the bar, exhaling as she let go her 'straight mask' as she now called it, relishing in the very different active life she now led, but felt had to be on the sly, paid her cover and received her hand stamp. She leaned across the bar and kissed Carla, licking her lips playfully.

"I know what you want," Carla laughed. "G'wan siddown and I'll bring it over."

Ronnie settled at the far corner table by the dance floor and was soon surrounded by several of her new 'mates.

Carla arrived with her drink, the sharp and sour Licker Lust. The bartender settled in her lap as Ronnie took the first sip and remarked, "I thought you were my only Licker, but I had someone else order one tonight. When I saw it wasn't you, I didn't think you were coming out tonight."

Ronnie absorbed this. "You aren't making time with anybody else."

"Never, babe." Carla kissed her. Ronnie lifted her hips into Carla's rear, grinding a little. "You wanna dance?"

"Take Me Home Tonight," Ronnie growled into the kiss as she pulled stocky Carla up and out onto the dance floor.

Rocko, the DJ, obligingly flipped into the 80s tune.

\* \* \*

Margaret wanted to see who was dancing one last time, considering against her better judgement, a need to take a woman home for the night, to ease the ache she was feeling very acutely surrounded by all these open women so much like how she had been for years.

She froze as she stepped out to the coincidental strains of "Take Me Home Tonight," and saw the tall lean blonde woman grinding her pelvis with a small brown-haired woman. The server too was grinding away, all three clearly in the throes of their mutual lusts, lost to the music and the sensations of their bodies against each other.

A pang of memory erupted in Margaret's groin. In the dodgy lighting though she suddenly felt she recognized the blonde.

*No. It couldn't be... Ronnie Cook? Holy shit.* Margaret's fear galvanized her into flight.

## Chapter 6

Ronnie exhaled with relief as she set aside the final paper to be graded that evening. It was nearly six p.m. but she had needed to complete the work, having put it off over the weekend to go out on the party boat this past weekend again with Val, Clare and a few of the other women from Midway. With Boston's weather turning cooler, she liked being out on the water during the weekend.

She squirmed a little on her seat as she recalled the rough-n-tumble weekend activities. Closing her eyes she smiled and briefly relived in the privacy of her mind, the heady experience of her first group experience. She had been surrounded by womanly scents for hours from flowery to musk, lavishing attention on a variety of beautiful women's bodies, pressing against soft curves, both plump and muscular.

She wasn't quite into everything that had gone on, but she found very little she didn't like. The adventure of her new sexuality remained thrilling. She wanted to find a partner, but the dating -- the scene -- it wasn't uninteresting to her in the way dating men had become.

She still recalled Kate fondly, and still found herself scanning entertainment items in the newspaper for her name. But the anxiety had eased. Kate had gone on with her life, Ronnie was pretty sure it had been to return wholeheartedly to her husband, and Ronnie had gone on with hers, elementally changed in nature.

As she moved in the periphery of Boston GLBT scene, she had come to learn about the politics. She was pretty certain she would be among those 'coming out' on National Coming Out Day sometime

soon. It was hard to act as if a whole passionate part of her life didn't exist. It was harder each Monday morning to look at the students in her classes hiding themselves (when she knew them from the GSA meetings). She wanted to support them, and have the support of others knowing fully who she was.

Only not knowing Steven Harper's reaction, and pretty assured Scott Guber's reaction would be unfavorable, she held her tongue and continued to keep her support of GLBT issues 'under the radar' at her place of employment.

She sighed and stood up at her desk. Time to go home. Packing up her bag, she picked up her keys and stepped into the hallway to lock her classroom door for the night. In the quiet she walked toward the front doors of the school, mentally considering where she wanted to swing by for take-out on the way home. She considered several locations but finally decided on Donovan's Grill, a seafood place right on the waterfront. Fresh catch every Tuesday served anyway you liked. Her mouth started to water as she considered the Atlantic halibut.

She heard footsteps and turned the corner into the main corridor, expecting to see a custodian. Instead she saw Margaret O'Halloran entering the front office area. The woman's voice called out into the interior, "Scott?"

There was an abrupt sound inside the office and Ronnie smiled as she pictured Guber tripping over something in his office to jump to the call of the enigmatic teacher.

Ronnie wondered whether to continue forward, revealing her presence, or hold back, possibly overhearing the exchange. Scott emerged into the corridor. Ronnie held back.

"I thought I was to pick you up?" he asked.

"I ended up working late," Margaret replied, sounding to Ronnie very matter of fact. "We can leave from here?"

"I..." Scott appeared to take in his attire and O'Halloran's. Ronnie knew that Scott wore a suit and tie most days, though he'd taken occasionally lately to leaving the tie at home. But the jacket usually accompanied him. Right now though he wasn't wearing it.

Margaret was dressed in a conservatively cut Irish green linen skirt (gorgeous legs!) and wore a white silk blouse with crisp lines, a brooch pinned to the left lapel. The contrast with her russet hair made her look to Ronnie like every drawing of an Irish fairy she had ever seen.

"I'll get my jacket," Scott said abruptly. "Where would you like to eat?"

"What about Donovan's Grill on the waterfront?"

"Donovan's Grill?" Scott nodded. "All right."

Ronnie closed her eyes in shock, unable to believe the coincidence. She decided she did not want to run into the couple while they were out, and briefly mourned the loss of the halibut.

Ronnie waited until the two had cleared the hallway, going outside. Going in the opposite direction, she settled for sushi, taking it home to her chilled sake for a quiet evening reading her latest acquisition from Calamus Bookstore on South Street.

\* \* \*

Margaret waited behind Scott unlocking his car door for her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the school building's front door open, the light falling out into the dusky light. Though backlighting dimmed features, she recognized Ronnie Cook immediately, aware now of the woman in a way she had finally accepted after Saturday night.

They were both gay. The 'forbidden fruit' label was off, and her libido had put Ronnie on the 'possibility' list very quickly in her dreams over the weekend. She wanted to spend a little more time getting to know the other woman before making her interest obvious. So she decided to dress up a bit, and had planned to purposefully join the young teacher over the lunch break.

That, among other reasons like not giving Scott the idea this was anything other than a collegial undertaking, was why she had dressed for the day with the idea of leaving from school for the symphony event.

However, Ronnie had not shown at lunch that day, or the day before.

She decided that tomorrow she would bring herself to Ronnie's classroom if the woman did not come to the teacher's lounge.

"Margaret?" She blinked and brought herself back to the present situation, looking at Scott holding open the car door.

"Oh. Yes. Sorry."

"Trouble?"

"No, just thinking."

He nodded and closed the door as she settled in the bucket seat. When he came around to the driver side and let himself in, she busied herself with her seat belt. As he started up the car, Scott turned off the radio, beginning conversation. "I'm rather looking forward to Keith Lockhart's new program tonight."

"A preview of the holiday season," Margaret concurred. "I've always thought the arrangements were inspired."

Scott's smile broadened and Margaret gave a smile in reply, secretly worried she end up laying the act on a little thick. She genuinely enjoyed the Boston symphony, but it was clear her enthusiasm would be willingly misread by the eager assistant principal.

At the performance hall, Scott had his car valet parked, pocketed the claim ticket and grandiosely offered his elbow for the walk to the entrance.

Margaret was polite, but declined taking his arm. She encouraged him to lead onward with an outward sweep of her left hand, and walked alongside when he did finally move.

The performance was uplifting, and reminded her of the last symphony she had attended with Morgan back in D.C. As she sat in silence now, she remembered how much more easily she had relaxed with

Morgan, even though that had also not been a date.

She wondered if she might yet be able to come out in Boston, recalling the Resource Center information card she had retrieved from the bulletin board at The Midway Cafe over the weekend. Then again, her obstacle wasn't work -- though she was uncertain of Steven's reaction she knew he would never abandon her over 'appearances'. Their history together had taught them both too much about the damage wrought by that sort of bigotry.

Her obstacle was her father, and her certainty of hurting him, fueled by years of Catholic Irish "men are men and women are women" mantra she had always received at home growing up. Despite 20 years of not seeing her with any man (nor any woman), he had not given up that she would eventually marry and produce more grandchildren.

It wasn't that she disliked children. She was not comfortable with invitro and her father would be just as appalled by single motherhood should she try that avenue just to please him. But she also knew she couldn't get married to someone on pretense like that. She admired for his working class roots, and his firm sense of self. He didn't suffer "namby-pambies" or "ne'er-do-wells". And she had resigned herself to answering anytime he directly posed the question, "You're the only man who will ever hold my heart, Da."

She smiled at the thought of telling her father that, and watching his face turn slightly red from bluster.

Beside her, thinking the smile for him, Scott Guber preened with pride.

## Chapter Seven

"I owe you an apology."

Ronnie's head snapped up, eyes darting to Margaret O'Halloran standing in the doorway to her classroom. She had been trying to concentrate on lesson planning for the next several weeks, a new unit on American twentieth century playwrights. While acting out plays always engaged the class, she had little belief they would really learn something unless they could relate to it. She was considering an in-class reading by the Winslow drama club. In her right hand she held a flyer for their next production, 'Funky Winkerbean', an adaptation of a comic strip with a high school setting.

Shifting gears from reading about the Westview High Scapegoats football team's big game with its rival, a climatic plot to the script, Ronnie frowned as she tried to figure out what O'Halloran could be sorry for. "For what?"

"About Jamal." Margaret held out a paper she held in her right hand. "I'd hoped to talk with you at lunch, but you didn't come to the lounge."

"Oh. I was..." What had she been doing? Oh yes. "I was reading..." She trailed off again. She had been reading one of Clare's new stories, an erotica piece. She lifted her chin and took the paper from Margaret's hand.

"It's Jamal's test paper from Monday."

Specifically Ronnie noted, it was an essay test, on poetry. Margaret had included a few comments in red ink, but the grade at the top made Ronnie smile. Vindicated. "83." A solid 'B' grade.

Ronnie looked back up at her. "He's rough around the edges, but he'll get there." She nodded. "I'll be able to help him."

"Thank you." Ronnie handed back the paper, but Margaret did not immediately leave. "Something else?"

"What are you doing?" Margaret asked, looking at the papers strewn on Ronnie's desk.

Ronnie passed over the play flyer. "Starting the American playwrights unit."

Margaret chuckled as she studied the flyer. "I was a devotee of 'Funky' in high school. So was Steven."

"Must be why he gave approval for the play."

"Did you ever read the strip?" Margaret asked.

"A little. I picked up an anthology of the strips at the public library this weekend." She had gone there on her way home Friday night.

"When were you thinking of starting the unit?"

"I'm finishing up one right now, so next week, for the next two weeks."

"The flyer says opening night is October 26. Maybe we can all synchronize and get the kids to attend the play for credit."

Ronnie gestured to a chair next to her desk. "I was thinking of letting the drama kids discuss or even present a rehearsal during class time."

Margaret sat down. "What period?" Ronnie found herself engaged by the thoroughly involved expression in Margaret's blue eyes and frowned. "What period does Malcolm have his drama club students?"

"Oh. It's a block. Periods one and two."

Margaret nodded. "Marilyn has her honors class period two. Mine's first."

"I have my English class second period."

Ronnie found herself smiling.

"Well, let's get down to the planning," Margaret encouraged. "Where were you going to start?"

Ronnie flipped open the textbook. Margaret leaned close to look. "Do you need your books?" Ronnie asked.

Margaret paused, but did not lean back. "It's (\_\_\_\_\_), remember?" she commented with a smile. Ronnie recalled their very first discussion, in this very room, about the author of the English textbook and Margaret's opinion of him.

"We could use a different book."

"No, it's fine."

Ronnie's stomach flipped nicely. She stuttered slightly reaching for a pad and pen more for the composure time it afforded than a need to write. It also gave her something to say. "Do...do you need anything to write with?" she asked, looking quickly at Margaret, intending to look just as quickly away.

But Margaret's eyes caught her again, darkening slightly. "Not right now," Margaret replied. "Maybe later."

Disengaging her gaze reluctantly, Ronnie inhaled slowly. With effort, she found the playwright section, and flipped quickly to the appropriate chapter page.

\* \* \*

Margaret leaned back, stretching her back. The hour they had worked had given her a great deal of insight into Ronnie's classroom approach. The young woman was a very instinctual teacher, sometimes surprisingly so given what Margaret knew about her background not being trained as an educator. But the argumentation, discerning factual style was all "attorney."

She found herself smiling, which she finally connected as the cause of Ronnie's brief bouts with stutter and hesitation, each time the discussion came around to what were the salient points to convey. Ronnie's presentation style was very "support" oriented, feeling a need to give a reason for each inclusion immediately after. She also used her hands a great deal like ticking off items in a list, or points in an argument.

The whole experience was utterly captivating, and Margaret resisted as long as she could ending the encounter, wanting at the very least, Ronnie to not forget how easy the conversation flowed between them.

But it was nearly six, and Margaret's father needed her home. "I think we have a rough outline ready to go," she concluded.

"Do you--" Ronnie cut herself off as she caught sight of the classroom clock. "Oh, God, it's nearly six."

"Something you're doing at six?" Margaret had thought she had the only pressing appointment.

"Well, no, I... I'm sure Scott's looking for you."

"What about? Something important?"

Ronnie frowned. "I... couldn't say."

"Ronnie, is something on your mind?" Margaret invited.

"Well, it's not... I thought you and he..." She trailed off uncertainly.

"We're not," Margaret said easily.

"Oh. It's none of my business. I... I overheard that you were going to the symphony."

"I took his extra ticket. But, we... he's not my type." Margaret lifted her chin, met Ronnie's eyes, willing the other woman to understand. But you certainly are.

Ronnie blinked. "I apologize for prying."

"You didn't. I know how popular scuttlebutt is on a high school campus."

"Well, um, as to that. No one... no one else has said anything... to me." Ronnie's face gradually changed to a pink hue on her cheeks.

Margaret put her hand on Ronnie's. "It's all right. I really do have to go though. Perhaps we can get together again and finish these plans?"

"I... I'd like that." Ronnie looked down at her covered fingers as Margaret slowly removed her hand.

*Next story: Story 4: No Ghosts, Goblins, or Gays*