

# CALL NUMBERS

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SYNTELL SMITH





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*For Opal, Irene, Tiffany, and Krista*



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER ONE



“I TELL YA, FRANK,” ROBIN WALKER SAID, “THE WORLD'S GOING TO hell in a handbasket.”

Frank's Pizza, located east of 23rd Street and Lexington, was the favorite place for the students attending Baruch College to spend a dollar twenty-five for a slice. The place was small and only occasionally crowded. It was the Tuesday after President's Day, and there was a clock overhead that said eleven in the morning. Robin was reading a copy of the *Daily News* while nibbling on a slice of plain cheese pizza.

He hated pizza toppings. *Why mess with perfection by putting something on top of something?* was his favorite explanation for his preference. He had finished his morning classes and was not due at the 58th Street Branch Library for another three hours. Frank noticed the student was feeling very opinionated this morning.

“I mean, it's 1994. We got 6 more years till the new millennium and God only knows if we're ready! We got terrorists trying to blow up the World Trade Center, shootings on the train out in Long Island, and the first and only Black mayor of New York City getting the boot after one term.” Robin looked up and nodded toward the flour-faced Italian

behind the register. “You voted for Giuliani, didn't you, Frank?” he asked.

“That's none of your business!” Frank grunted.

Robin took that as a confirmation that his observations had not been appreciated.

“Hey, man, you've been reading that paper more than eating your slice!”

Since Frank was done discussing politics, Robin ignored his remark and continued reading the day's “Jump Start” comic strip.

“This isn't a library, I hope you know!” Frank continued, trying to catch the young man's attention. Robin finished reading and chuckled at the joke from the last panel, or it could have been from the sense of irony. “I know!” he bellowed. “It ain't a library because I work for one, chump!” The obese, balding man blinked hard while scratching his head, unsure what to make of the response. Robin knew a cue to leave when he saw one.

The stocky eighteen-year-old sighed, then reached down and lifted his book bag over his shoulder as he stood up to leave. The newspaper he had been reading remained where he had been sitting as he made his way out to the sidewalk. Frank called out behind him “Hey! Hey! You left your paper!” Robin turned back at the door, a mischievous smirk growing across his face. “It's not mine,” he replied. “Recycle it! Save the planet! We only got one Earth, Frank!”

At five-foot-ten, Robin's long strides on the Manhattan sidewalk maneuvered him through the vast crowd as he headed from Lexington to Park Avenue South and the subway station for the number 6-train. He wore a solid black wool parka over a gray pullover short-sleeved polo shirt along with blue acid-wash jeans.

The temperature was in the mid-thirties, yet the cold didn't bother him. He even wore his signature generic red baseball cap that exposed his ears, which were just as red. He also never wore winter gloves, but a conspicuous looking leather bicycle glove on his left hand was another of Robin's distinctive fashion choices.

Producing headphones from his lining pocket, Robin pressed play on his Walkman, which had his current favorite album *Midnight*

*Marauders* by A Tribe Called Quest in it, and rested the speakers to his ears as the track “Steve Biko” played. After arriving at 23rd and Park Avenue, he descended the steps underground, deposited a token in the turnstile and boarded the departing uptown train just as the doors were closing.

There were only a handful of stops from 23rd to 59th street. The song “Midnight” was playing while Robin scanned the train car for a moment between stops, bobbing his head to the beat. He made eye contact with a young Japanese girl who he caught glancing back at him. He flashed a flirtatious smile and she blushed while looking down.

A few minutes went by as subway riders got on and off. Robin waited another minute in the hopes of exchanging glances again. The shy young lady kept to herself for a minute, then looked up at him and waved, smiling back. They looked at each other for several more minutes. Robin waited, then decided it was time to make his move. He advanced deeper into the car, hoping to get a vacant seat near her when the door opened at the end of the train and a Chinese vendor emerged holding various trinkets in his hand—Double-A and Triple-A batteries, crazy glue, keychains, and whistles.

“Bataree, bataree, bataree. One dollah, one dollah!” the man exclaimed. He then showed a yo-yo that had lights on it when extended to the floor. “Yo-yo! Yo-yo! Yo-yo!” He made a straight line down the middle of the train, being ignored by everyone with no desire to purchase cheap, short-lasting batteries for their Walkmans or keychains that would break once they’re tucked in a pocket.

Robin stepped aside as the man moved to the door leading to the next car and turned around just in time to see an empty seat where the girl was once sitting. She must have left at the previous stop during the distraction. Disappointed, he sat down and waited for his stop to get off. With eight million people in New York City, there was always the chance he’d see her again.



THE 58TH STREET Branch Library was a two-story facility embedded in the lobby of a ten-floor office tower. Opened in 1969, it serviced the midtown Manhattan area with patrons ranging from business-types stopping by during their lunch break to college students from neighboring universities.

Head librarian Augustus Chavez was having his daily briefing with information assistant Heywood Learner. For the pair, the meeting was as ritualistic as the ancient gladiator matches of Rome. Augustus wore tan slacks with a crisp white dress shirt, his matching tan suit jacket draped over the back of his office chair.

The dim office light bouncing off his shaved head, Augustus stroked his squared jaw while Heywood scanned a list of proposed films for an upcoming tribute festival. Heywood's lean frame sported an unshaven beard and long, brown unkempt hair. Wearing solid black jeans, brown work boots, and a blue cotton long-sleeved shirt, his sleeves were rolled up with grit and determination. He finished reading and extended the clipboard.

"Well, I see no problems with these selections for the Mel Brooks tribute in March."

A quiet sigh overcame Augustus as he accepted it back, relieved that there would be no arguments this morning.

"Except one,"

He rolled his eyes. *Why should this morning be any different?* the librarian thought.

"Please reconsider *Blazing Saddles*, it's just too offensive."

"It fits with all the others, Learner, as parody satire of 50s and 60s style westerns."

"Yes, complete with fart jokes and racism. It's unacceptable to show this to the public." Heywood replied tilting his head.

"It airs on cable TV every once in a while. Just the other night I saw it on HBO."

"People pay for HBO because they want filth. We should not be showing it for free here."

"Look, we need five films. We have *Young Frankenstein*, *Spaceballs*, which are horror and sci-fi parodies, plus we're lucky

enough to have *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* on 35mm, a film that just came out last year.”

“What about that film *Life Stinks*?” Heywood interjected. “Or even *The Producers*?”

Augustus slammed his fist on his dilapidated desk for emphasis as he barked, “Those aren’t spoofs, dammit!”

Heywood turned and exited the office, slamming the door closed behind him. Augustus sighed and collapsed his shoulders at the meaningless argument. He rubbed his temples as he heard another familiar voice in the room. “He’s so predictable, you know that, don’t you?”

With her back facing his desk, minding her own business, Zelda Clein sat in front of the small wire desk in front of the right wall of the room, typing on her antique typewriter. At seventy-two, Zelda was well beyond the retirement age for New York Public Library standards but opted to remain as Augustus’ assistant librarian. While offering sage advice from years and years of life experiences, she was also known for keeping the peace from time to time.

She wore tortoiseshell glasses with a navy blue knitted sweater over a gray blouse and matching palazzo pants. After finishing her memorandum, she pulled it out of the machine and looked it over.

“Yes, I know, I know, Zee. Tell me again why I let that pain in the ass irritate me?”

“He’s just as passionate as you were when you arrived here 5 years ago.”

A smile came across his face. Had it been five years? The controversial coup that resulted in the sudden retirement of his predecessor felt like a lifetime ago. Time had been swift. The silence between the pair made Zelda sense that her good friend was feeling nostalgic, so she changed the subject.

“So, I hear the new clerical hire transfers here today.”

The head librarian snapped back to business, as a sneer of contempt replaced the smile. “A new piece of kindling for the *Dragon Lady* to torch. Their matters are no concern of mine. The only piece of

information I gathered was a name. Robin Walker. What have you heard about her?"

"For starters, how do you know it's a woman?" Zelda scoffed. "Robin is a common unisex name."

"The memo from HR read 'Ms. Robin Walker,' coming from Fort Washington," he said, producing a sheet of paper from his desk.

"Fort Washington, hmm... The Battle Axe is still in charge up there. I believe their senior clerk was named... Barnes? No. Burns, Theresa Burns. Why, she'd be just as old as I am by now, maybe even older, I remember when..."

"So," he interrupted. "What about Walker? Why down here? How did she get this position? Yi's been keeping it vacant for her page Simms to fill once she graduates."

"From what I gather, Walker declined various other openings due to the proximity to the school she's attending."

"Which is?" he asked.

After taking a moment to study the memo again, she replied, "Baruch College of the CUNY system. Down on 14th Street and Lexington."

Augustus furrowed his brow. "A business school? Where the stockbrokers and accountants come out of?"

"That, and Baruch has an advanced curriculum for computer operations. Perhaps she likes programming?"

The librarian reached for his blazer and stood up from his desk. "Interesting. Working part-time while attending school. She could be influenced to become a valuable asset to me." A lusty look grew across his face. He looked over and saw a surprised glance from his long-time confidant. He blushed and stammered, "Um, provided she's not corrupted by Yi, of course." He chuckled.

As he finished resting the jacket on his broad shoulders and dusted his sleeves, Zelda rose from her desk and moved to open the door. "Oh, I'm sure the young lady won't be able to resist your dashing good looks and irresistible charm!" She exclaimed while stepping out the office.

"Touché," he replied, thinking to himself that for someone in her



early seventies, the gray fox may be sharper than she portrayed herself to be.



SONYAI YI, 58th Street's senior clerk, stood at a petite five-foot-two and weighed one hundred and sixty pounds. Despite her small frame, the woman commandeered respect from her fellow library clerical staff and pages.

Tommy Carmichael was Sonyai's latest apprentice in a line of protégés who had moved on, with her wisdom, to become senior clerks themselves in neighboring branches among the Midtown cluster.

A giant with an athletic build, the Irish behemoth towered over his mentor as they stood in the clerical office behind the circulation desk. Sonyai wore a white tunic with a high banded collar and black nylon slacks. Her short fiery auburn hair was tied back in a small bun.

"As I was saying, Thomas..." The supervisor was the only person Tommy allowed to call him *Thomas*. "Every library reflects the senior clerk who runs it. The librarian serves as a figurehead, the politician of the branch. They concern themselves with finances and their public image. A true senior clerk knows how to run an efficient staff and train others. We are always invested in the future of the branch, even when it comes to our pages. Encouraging their studies, monitoring their schoolwork, even recruiting them through direct contacts with teachers and counselors, we take care of our own here."

Tommy was wearing acid-wash blue jeans and a white long-sleeved turtleneck and had long brown shoulder-length hair folded behind the ears. His clean-shaven face registered undivided attention to Sonyai as his right index-finger traced around a paper-thin mustache. "But, ma'am, don't clerks become librarians themselves?"

The elder stopped cold in her tracks and turned to face her student with a strong look of disdain. "No! Those who attend colleges and receive their MLS Degree from accredited ALA schools become librarians. It falls to the clerks to serve the branch for the good of the

branch no matter what! All those librarians are interested in is serving the public. Remember, Thomas, for the good of the branch.”

Tommy nodded in silent agreement. Walking to the circulation area, they approached two computer terminals for the checkout and returns stations of the L-shaped clerical desk. The monochrome screens clicked on to life with a low hum and the limited telnet operating system started up the boot process.

“We have a new part-timer starting today, Thomas,” Sonyai remarked.

“What? But I thought Nellie was supposed to—”

“Yes, I promised the next clerical position to Janelle,” she interrupted. “But this Miss Walker has friends in high places. She specifically asked for this location for some reason.”

“That could be a problem considering...” Tommy trailed off with a look of concern.

Sonyai glanced across the entire floor looking for eavesdroppers. Gerrald Coltraine and Ethel Jenkins were reading periodicals at the far right in the back while Heywood Learner sat alone muttering to himself at the information desk in the middle of the library floor. No one was in earshot, so she drew close to Tommy with a low whisper. “She’ll be showing soon, and if Chavez finds out...”

“So what do we do?” he whispered back.

“I dug up some info on Walker. I believe with a certain amount of resistance, she shouldn’t stay too long.”

With a questionable glance, Tommy asked, “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Sonyai returned from hushed volumes to speaking out loud. “Now you are aware, Mr. Carmichael, that the NYPL does not condone acts of intimidation among staff members. We take care of our own in this branch, so extend a friendly and warm welcome to Miss Walker when she arrives,” the supervisor said with a sly wink.

“They’re scheming something again, Jenkins,” Gerry Coltraine said under his breath.

Ethel Jenkins rolled her eyes as she read the latest issue of *Ebony Magazine* the library had available. The two resident African-

American clerks at 58th Street couldn't be more opposites if they were brother and sister, which they weren't.

Ethel kept to herself, barely conversing with anyone brave enough to annoy the stout, fierce forty-six-year-old. Her temper was known to all and her opinion unquestioned.

Meanwhile, the confrontational thirty-two-year-old Gerry Coltraine was tall with a thick full afro and handle-bar mustache. He had made his resentment toward Sonyai's leadership public several times and the two had a war of words on various occasions. Today would be no different.

"Coltraine, you think Yi's always scheming something when she's talking to Carmichael." Ethel sighed with exasperation. "You think she's scheming something when she's not talking to him, or when she's meeting with Chavez, or—"

"It has something to do with that new part-timer that's starting today," he interrupted her. He looked back at his newspaper he was pretending to read while observing Sonyai and Tommy at the circulation desk. "You know anything about that?"

"I still have my friends in human resources, and from what I've heard, the branch is about to be thrown for a loop."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gerry turned to look at her when she didn't reply.

Ethel saw eye to eye with Sonyai, being five-foot-two while wearing two-inch heels. A solid two hundred and eighty-five pounds, she always wore various New York sports team headscarves on her head.

This morning she was wearing green cotton slacks with a matching green blouse. Her headscarf supported the New York Jets today. "For starters, Robin is a unisex name. *He's* identified as a woman on file, but he's actually a guy. Some sorta typo they can't fix."

"So," he mused, "She's expecting another woman. Makes sense, I guess, since every hire she's made has been a woman. Look at the pages. I guess she'd thought she'd tip the scales, outnumbering the men three-to-two on the clerical staff,"

"Coincidence," snapped Ethel. "I'm sure of it!"

“It’ll sure be fun to see her reaction. Please tell me he’s also a brother,” he pleaded. “Walker could be a slave name.”

Ethel grimaced, hoping Gerry wouldn’t turn this incident into another of his infamous race conflicts. “He is,” she said. “Our staff is very diverse. We are a melting pot, reflective of the city as a whole.”

“Well, think about it,” Gerry began and drew closer, maintaining a low whisper. Ethel tensed up at the violation of her personal space. “Three proud, intelligent black people, working together under one roof. We can manipulate the system to our advantage.”

Ethel had enough of Gerry’s ramblings. She lowered the magazine and stared at him. “Yi is in charge here, not you!”

Gerry sensed he struck a nerve, which he always seems to do. He smiled a wide, mischievous grin, “For now she is, Jenkins...for now.” He raised his finger to magnify his thought. “But mark my words, *sister*. There’s gonna be a time where you have to ask yourself, ‘Which side am I on?’”

Gerry’s eyes were wide as saucers. He looked crazed. “Don’t forget where you came from.” He rose to his lanky seven-foot-two frame, counting his afro, adjusted his blue suede sports jacket, and walked back to the circulation desk. Ethel questioned her co-worker’s sanity often. She prayed whatever the instigator was planning wouldn’t blow up in his face.



AT THE 59TH STREET & Lexington Subway station, the uptown 6-train arrived and screeched to a grinding stop. Passengers then exited and entered the train from the platform. An anxious Robin frantically checked his surroundings for the mysterious Japanese girl who caught his eye.

Canvassing everywhere, he didn’t notice a hand grab his shoulder. “Hey!” Robin yelled, taking a defensive stance. He turned to see his classmate Walter.

“Robin, I’ve been hollering at you since I saw you get off. You zoning out, man?”

Robin sighed, “Dude, did you see an Asian girl around when you got off the train? We locked eyes and I could have sworn we had a connection thing going.”

Walter looked at Robin as if he was delirious. “No, I didn’t see anybody. It could have been Kim, Gillian Bascomb’s friend. I hear she works at Alexander’s around here on Third.”

Robin shook his head. “No, no, no. Kim looks like a sumo wrestler. This one was...was...”

“Look, I’m glad I caught you. I need your notes from the 1929 Stock Market Crash for my paper in Basic Writing class. It’s due tomorrow and I need some info.”

“Look up *The Great Depression* by R. Conrad Stein, call number 973.916. We just got it on the shelves in our young adult section at Fort Washington. It’s thirty-two pages, but there’s at least ten about the crash. It’ll give you all you need.”

Robin walked toward the escalator leading upstairs, Walter following behind.

“Wha-what? What was that? R. Conrad who? 970-what? Hold on! Just give me your notes!”

“I’m not giving you my notes.”

“Why not?”

“Why the hell didn’t you take any notes in class?”

“I be asleep, man! It’s an 8:40 in the morning class, Robin. I need this paper just to get a C. Please, man, I’m begging you!”

“Just find the book, Walt! It’s not that hard,” Robin yelled back to him from the escalator.

The two emerged out into the street. Robin took a turn around the corner and walked down Lexington toward 58th Street, Walter still following.

“Wait up, Robin! What if I can find this girl for you?”

Robin stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk as Walter caught up. “Okay. You got yourself a deal.”

Walter smiled. “Whew! Thanks, you’re a lifesaver,”

Robin turned his head, talking over his shoulder. “You find out who she is, you get my notes.”

He resumed walking. “But...but...the paper’s due,” Walter called out. “Robin! Robin! C’mon, mannnn!”

Robin kept on walking but still couldn’t get the mystery woman out of his head.



THE LIBRARY’S staff room was on the second floor with a small auditorium for video and film presentations. Two rooms separated by a single wall, solid concrete on all sides and special soundproofing, it was an ideal location for Sonyai and Augustus to hold their private meetings.

At one o’clock, the two sat on opposite sides of a six-foot-long dining table. The tension was thick, and neither made a sound. The low motor of the refrigerator in the kitchenette was all that could be heard between them.

Then, without hesitation, Augustus got the conversation started. “Human resources reports that a Miss Robin Walker starts part-time on the clerical staff today.”

“Yes, I am expecting her within the hour,” Sonyai replied sharply.

“Swing her by my office while doing the formal introductions. I’d like to meet her *as soon as possible*.”

The tone of his voice at the end of that sentence made her skin crawl. “I’ll see to it.”

That brought a smile to the otherwise stoic face of her adversary. *He’s planning something*, she thought.

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence, so she tried to rattle him a little. “Any word on the schedule for next month’s film tribute? I hear Mel Brooks is the honoree and there’s a little *problem* with the movie selections.”

Augustus nearly sneered in disgust at the implied jab at his leadership. How could she have known of the conversation between him and Heywood this morning? If he didn’t know better, he’d almost suspect Zelda of betraying his trust, but he dismissed the notion and kept his poker face on.

“I’m still working out some of the details with Lerner, but the situation is well in hand.”

“Ah, I see,” Sonyai smirked to herself. “The situation is well in hand,” was his favorite way of saying, “None of your Business, Yi.”

“And how are the pages doing? Any problems to be addressed, hmm?”

Now it was Sonyai’s turn to feel distressed as a flash of concern made her eyes widen and twitch for a moment. “*Could he know about Janelle?*” she asked herself. “*No! Impossible. He’s fishing.*”

The senior clerk stammered, “N...no, um, no...nothing, not at all!” Then she blurted out, “Everything’s fine,” as she cleared her throat.

The smile returned as Augustus acknowledged the small victory of getting under his opponent's skin.

“Well, that’s nice. It’s good to know everything’s under control.”

Sonyai took a moment to sip water from a glass and gather her composure. *Asshole*, she thought.

The librarian produced a red manila folder. “I received a memorandum,” he began. “My petition to raise the limit of allowable checked video media here at 58th Street is under consideration. It has allowed us to conduct a 60-day preliminary trial for gauging circulation trends.”

He pushed the folder across to Sonyai, who opened it to examine the single piece of laminated paper, her eyebrows scrunched together. “In the event of positive results, the policy will become permanent and they will reward the branch with three thousand dollars over the next two fiscal periods for more requisitions,” he concluded.

An annoyed look came across her face. She lowered the document and continued to listen.

“As you know, such a drastic change to branch policy has to be approved by NYPL upper management and can only be implemented if both supervisors acknowledge the receipt of the memorandum—”

“Which cannot be reproduced or forged,” Sonyai finished. “Yes, yes, I know the procedure. May I speak for a moment?”

The interruption annoyed him but he did not show it. “Go ahead.”

She chose her words carefully. “We are lending out two videos at a time already. Increasing the limit may encourage theft.”

“I see.”

“And if we’re the only branch allowed to change the limit, neighboring regional branches may see it as a tactic to draw circulation and file a grievance. To put the branch at risk for extra funding does not seem worth it.”

Augustus knew Sonyai would object; the two of them could never agree on anything. “Those are all valid points,” he began, “which I included in my proposal, and yet they approved it. We’re not in competition with our fellow branches.” He waved his hand in a fake chuckle. “They have only given us the chance to exercise a pending change first before its routine policy for the rest of the branches in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island.”

“But—”

“We’re the guinea pigs!” he exclaimed half-heartedly. Before she could protest further, he rose to leave. “They’ve authorized it, Yi. So sign off on it, make a copy, and circulate it to the clerical staff.”

The librarian was around the table, making his way to the door. “The temporary change will go into effect next week,” he continued. “I trust you’ll instruct the clerks to keep this to themselves until then, and once it starts, not to mention anything when clustering to other branches on weekends.”

And with that, he was gone, while Sonyai still sat at the table being dismissed like one of his subordinates. She crumbled the folder in anger and ground her teeth. The door opened again. “Oh and, Yi?” Augustus called back poking his shiny bald head back in the room.

She released the folder and gathered her composure. “Yes?” she replied.

“Return that original back to my office so it can be filed away, will you?”

She gritted her teeth again. “I’ll give it back to you as soon as I’m done with it...*sir*.”

The door clicked shut again, and she muttered to herself, “You sonovabitch!”





CENTERED in the middle of the branch on the main floor was the information desk. An executive in a three-piece business suit was waiting near the vacant chair when a young Native-American woman emerged from behind and approached the gentleman.

“May I help you, sir?” she asked.

Startled, the man took one look up and down at her. “Oh! Um, no thanks, just waiting for the librarian to return and help me find a book.” He then turned away from her.

The young lady adjusted her gold wire glasses, then walked a lap around several bookshelves, and then took the seat behind the information desk. She looked up as the man registered a puzzled look.

“May I help you *now*, sir?” Angie Trueblood asked sarcastically with a smile.

“Yo...you...um, work here?” he asked flabbergasted.

“Yes, I’m an information assistant,” she informed him. “I’m earning my masters so in two years I’ll be a librarian, sir. We’ve come a long way from the reservation, you know!”

Angie was five-foot-five with long black hair and could easily pass for twenty but was in her early thirties. She wore a fringe waistcoat over a gray blouse and jeans. She had one beaded necklace around her neck and a beaded headband in the colors of the Oneida. The library had a business casual dress code and Augustus overlooked Angie applying cultural touches in her appearance.

He straightened up after being checked and cleared his throat. “I was wondering if you had a copy of *Time of War* by Michael Peterson.”

Rather than antagonize the patron further, Angie typed the title in the digital catalog on the desk’s computer terminal. She examined several titles while searching and the gentleman remarked, “In, um, my defense...you don’t really look like a librarian.”

Angie’s fingers paused on the keyboard. “Were you expecting some old biddy with wire eyeglasses wearing a blue knitted sweater and her hair in a bun, hmm?”

The man blinked hard in surprise by the question. “Uh, yeah, I guess.”

She then turned from the monitor stood up to look at him, face to face, studied him for a moment. “If I may ask, sir. What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a CEO for an advertising firm,” he replied smugly.

A smile crept across Angie’s face as she prepared to put the executive in his place. “Has anyone ever mistook you for a stockbroker, an FBI agent, or President of the United States, Mr. White-Man-in-a-Suit-and-Tie?”

“No! Of course not,” he stammered.

“Well, why not? They all wear nice designer suits like the one you’re wearing. You should get mistaken for one of those types of people all the time!”

The patron was beyond embarrassed and turned pale.

“But you know why that doesn’t happen, sir?”

The man shook his head to answer her question.

“Because intelligent people don’t make judgments based on appearances anymore. I may not look like the poster child for ‘Reading is Fundamental,’ but I can quote William Shakespeare and tell the difference between Richard North Patterson and James Patterson like the rest of them! I would think someone dressed like yourself would be *smart* enough to see beyond appearances, but I guess that would be my misjudgment.”

She let the man take that profound statement all in for a moment, then sat down and returned her gaze back to the computer screen. “With that said, I’m afraid we do not have that book in stock at the moment. There are copies available in several other branches nearby. If you’d like, we can reserve the book and have it sent here...”

“Um,” the man interrupted. “Tha-that’s all right. I apologize for my disbelief, my presumptions, and other things I can’t think of right now!” He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and dried the sweat from his brow. “I’ll...find the book, elsewhere. Thank you very much for your help.”

With a quick turn on his heels, the man made his way through the exit turnstile and left the branch.

Angie grinned to herself for a few moments feeling a sense of satisfaction, then rose to fix some of the periodicals in the reference corner. A tall woman wearing a winter coat over a gray blouse and matching skirt walked over to the vacant desk and Angie greeted her. “May I help you?”

The woman waved her away with a slight glance and replied, “No, just waiting for the librarian.”



“HE’S FORGING THESE MEMOS, I know it!” Sonyai hissed as she paced back and forth at the circulation desk. Tommy checked in a few returns at his terminal while she furiously waved the laminated memorandum in the air as if swatting imaginary flies. *Flies with Augustus’ face on them.*

“But how?” Tommy asked. “It’s impossible to fake an NYPL memo.”

The pair were working the tail end of the lunch hour rush as it was diminishing. Tommy approached Sonyai and pointed to the logo on the corner of the document. “He would need access to our letterhead paper.”

“Which can be purchased from our office supplier,” she remarked.

“But then it would need the seal of authenticity.” He noted the gold sticker the document also had.

She began to reply again but he cut her off. “*And* it would have to be signed by President Dalton. That’s something Chavez can’t forge. It’s the real deal, ma’am.”

She knew it was a sign of respect, but she hated when Tommy called her ma’am, just as he wasn’t fond of her using his full name. She snatched the memo from his hands as he recoiled with a quiet yelp.

“I *said* I know he’s fabricating them. I didn’t say I knew how!” Sonyai realized that her temper was getting the best of her. She sighed

and put the troubling memo on the nearby file cabinet, then attended to some patrons checking out books.

“The other branches will have a field day if they discover we’re letting patrons borrow more videos, Thomas.”

He nodded in agreement. “I know. The limit is two at a time for a reason. I mean, we’re not in competition with Blockbuster Video,” he said with a chuckle.

Sonyai paced again. “Apparently he believes we are. That obnoxious, arrogant bastard always acquires all the box office favorites rather than educational or self-help videos.” She clenched her fist in frustration. “We are supposed to be a learning resource for the public, dammit!” Her emotions were betraying her again. She took a breath and regained her composure.

“Maybe his little experiment will backfire, like the time he tried to do the same thing with the CD collection? All those thefts and claims of unreturned media really embarrassed him.”

“Music has more constraints on acquisitions,” she responded. “Unless you’re one of the six influential branches like Donnell or Mid-Manhattan, you have to stay a year behind the curve.”

“Well, just like with the CDs, we let the public borrow more videos, we won’t be able to keep up with the supply and demand of things.”

“Along with more thefts.” They both nodded, knowing what to do.

“We have to make sure Chavez’s little experiment produces mediocre results,” she concluded.

“So upper-management can cancel the policy change,” Tommy replied.

This was not the first time the clerical staff disagreed with the librarians regarding policy changes and it would not be the last.

“We’ll let several of his favorable patrons borrow an extra movie here and there, but uphold the original rule and keep word of mouth to a minimum. Chavez will be too busy to advertise the change himself. He’s got Learner getting on his nerves too, so he’ll stay neutral in case it backfires.”

“And it *will*,” Tommy added with a grin. “This will be another failed attempt to get his way.”

She smiled at the thought of thwarting her nemesis. “Yes,” she agreed. “Let’s hope Miss Walker doesn’t fall head over heels for Chavez in the meantime!”

“Uh, I wouldn’t worry too much about that, ma’am,” an unknown voice said behind her.

Startled by the thought of someone overhearing and joining their private conversation, the senior clerk and her associate looked across the circulation desk to see a young man with a book bag slung over one shoulder smiling at them.

“He’s really *not* my type.” The newcomer took a moment as Sonyai and Tommy blinked with confused gazes. “Hi, I’m Robin Walker from Fort Washington,” he introduced himself. “I’ll be starting here today.”



## CHAPTER TWO



“I BELIEVE THERE MUST BE SOME MISTAKE,” SONYAI SAID CALMLY.

Robin tilted his head and observed the two questionably. “Ouch, is that any way to greet a new employee?”

The short woman exhibited signs of a no-nonsense type. *Reminds me of The Battle Axe*, he thought. The giant behind her was all too familiar. He *appeared* to be trying to look menacing toward him. *Big, dumb and gullible. He’s gonna be a problem...*

Sonyai reached over to a shelf above a huge three drawer file cabinet to her left. Robin took the opportunity to engage in a staring contest with Tommy. She finally produced a piece of paper and held it up for him to see. “This letter from Human Resources clearly says ‘Ms. Robin Walker’ from Fort Washington Library, not Mister.”

Robin knew where this was going, but he played along. After leaning in to skim the letter, he smiled. “It’s a typo. Happens all the time.”

The senior clerk could not help to notice that the newcomer was still smiling, not taking the situation seriously, and it annoyed her. “Let me see some ID!” she commanded.

Robin slipped his hand into his pants pocket and produced a plastic card with his picture on it. The words Baruch College on the top.

“This is a college ID. I need something more official...like a birth certificate.”

Robin’s smile disappeared. “No offense, ma’am, but who goes around carrying their birth certificate on them in this day and age?”

Without a moment of hesitation, both Sonyai and Tommy produced their birth certificates out of their separate pockets in unison. This made Robin register a very astonished look.

Sonyai noticed the newcomer was staring in awe. “Okay, okay, just verify a few personal attributes and I will take your word for it.” She tucked her birth certificate back in her pocket and looked at a second page in the folder that held his employee file.

“Your social security number, please...*Mr*: Walker.”

He recited the number from memory as Sonyai checked the file, verifying that the number given was correct, but she still wasn’t convinced.

“Your first day working for Fort Washington?” she asked.

“December 2nd, 1992, ma’am,” he replied, a look of annoyance growing across his face. He made a mental note to contact Human Resources and speak to someone about correcting his title.

“My apologies, Mr. Walker,” the senior clerk said in a lighthearted tone while closing the file, “but you were not what we were expecting here at 58th Street.”

The young clerk straightened up his stance, doing his best to remove the impatience from his tone while addressing his new supervisor. “Well, I guess *I* must apologize myself then for my deceptive given name. Now that the unpleasantness is behind us, I’ve waited 8 months for the right position to come along, ma’am, and I’d hate to get things started on the wrong foot over a gender issue.”

Surprised by his serious demeanor Sonyai nodded. “I understand where you’re coming from, Walker. It won’t happen again.” She noticed two patrons approaching the desk. With a wave of her hand, she turned to Tommy. “This is Thomas Carmichael. He will show you to the back.”

Robin walked around the circulation desk to a side opening as she picked up the phone and dialed the clerical office. “Coltraine, could



you take the desk with me while Thomas shows the new arrival around?”

The pair exchanged glances as the door to the back office opened. Robin saw a tall black man with an afro and dated clothing emerge to stand at the returns side of the desk. He looked back at Robin with a surprised glance and then turned to Sonyai to read her reaction to this sudden turn of events.

Robin could tell from everyone’s body language that his arrival was most unexpected, but he shrugged it off as he made his way inside. Once the door closed behind the pair, Sonyai turned and picked up the phone again, then dialed an outside number, clearly distressed over something...much to Gerry’s delight.



“I’M NOT WRONG, AM I?” Heywood asked. “It’s not *me* this time, is it? I mean if I’m going too far...”

“It’s not you, Heywood,” Zelda replied. “Your passionate manner has always been valuable. I’ve known Augustus for a long time. He’s known for his tunnel vision.”

The two were in the staff room upstairs, Heywood lying on the couch with his hands behind his head as if undergoing a therapy session. Zelda was finishing up her kosher meal at the table, her back to him as she continued listening.

“Then you agree with me on excluding the movie?” he asked.

With a light chuckle she replied, “Now, I didn’t say all that!”

Zelda sensed Heywood’s puzzlement when he let out a slight grunt and then sat up to look at the back of her head.

Before he could continue, Zelda asked, “Heywood, did you ever read *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury?”

“The sci-fi novel? No, but I remember there was a film based on it.”

“In the novel, structures become so resistant with the advances into the future they became fireproof, thus removing the need for firefighters.”

“An illogical reality as if I ever heard of one.”

“So, the totalitarian governments of the future assigned firefighters the task of actually starting fires.”

“Bradbury always *was* a bit backward.”

“They burned books, Heywood! 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which books deteriorate.”

“But why books?”

“They were all deemed offensive by the state. Books that would stir up repressed feelings among the public. Like *Mein Kampf*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, whatever would be inappropriate in the modern time.”

Heywood stood and walked to face the elder at the kitchen table, learning the lesson she was giving him.

“But understand, when they burned those books, they erased their history. What kind of society would we be if we didn’t acknowledge the bigotry and racism of the past?”

“I think I see where you’re going with this,” he said with a nod.

“When Steven Spielberg announced he was making a film addressing the atrocities of the Holocaust, the Jewish public thought the movie had no right to be made. Forcing us to relive such a horrible time. But in the end, *Schindler’s List* has become one of the most important motion pictures in the 20th century.”

“But where does it end, Zelda? If I relent on this issue, what’s to stop Augustus from pushing further? Buckwheat and Farina from *The Little Rascals*? *Amos and Andy*? A tribute to blackface hosted by Ted Danson?”

“A frightening thought, I’m sure, but it hasn’t come to that yet! We’re only talking about *Blazing Saddles* for Pete’s sake!” She took a breath for emphasis.

Heywood dropped his head and sighed. “So, you *do* think I’m wrong on this, right?”

She chuckled again, “No, I didn’t say that either.”

“Dammit Zelda, what *are* you trying to say then?”

*Youth*, she thought. *So impatient*. “What I’m trying to say is that Augustus knew you would object the way you did and that just made him push harder. If you had just read the list and only had a mild

argument he might have removed the film with little or no hesitation. It wasn't until you revealed how much it angered you personally that he made his decision more final!"

She let her last statement sink in as the young man sat in silence for a moment.

"I...I don't understand."

"Think about it, Heywood. Just think about what I said."

Zelda got up from the table and left the staff room. Heywood went back to lie on the couch, staring up at the ceiling in deep thought.

Back downstairs inside the clerical office, Ethel was reading an issue of *Sports Illustrated* when the door opened and Tommy entered with a young man holding a book bag behind him. The newcomer surveyed the office as she lowered her magazine for a moment, then raised it again.

"Well, Walker, as you can see we have limited desk space in here so—"

"Wait a minute," Robin interrupted. "We haven't been properly introduced. Fort Washington was always reminding us of the procedures for representing yourself correctly."

Ethel lowered her magazine again. *This* was going to be interesting.

"Robin Walker, from the way of Fort Washington." He extended his hand toward Tommy, who returned a skeptical look.

"So you'll be sharing a desk here with Mr. Coltraine," he continued.

Robin narrowed his eyes at the insult. *Definitely going to be a problem*, he thought.

"Over here is Miss Ethel Jenkins." Tommy gestured to his coworker.

Robin gave her a slight nod for a greeting and turned back to his new *friend*. "So, Carmichael...you've been in the system long?"

"What system is that?"

"The NYPL, the network of branch libraries we all work in. I'd assumed every clerk was once a page someplace else...and would have known of the procedures of conduct that are thrust upon us." *Like how to greet each other properly, goofball!* he thought.

“‘Procedures of Conduct,’ eh?” He chuckled. “That’s pretty good there, Walker. Except I wasn’t hired as a page.”

“Oh?” Robin replied with a genuine look of surprise.

“Yeah, so you keep your little library lingo like ‘the system’ and ‘Procedures of Conduct’ to yourself till someone asks you what the names are of the 2 lion statues or what the fear of the number 13 is, okay, Mr. Holier-Than-Thou?”

He turned to leave. “Carmichael?” Robin called back at him.

“Yes?” he replied.

“Triskaidekaphobia. And the lions are named Patience and Fortitude,” Robin said with a smirk.

Disgusted, Tommy walked out of the office and closed the door behind him. Robin then turned back to Ethel and gave her a wink. “I’m going against my better judgment and just going to greet you with a smile. Instinct tells me *you* are not one to be messed with.”

She smiled back. “Stay on my good side Mr. Walker and you’ll live longer. Welcome to 58th Street.”

Tommy emerged from the clerical office back out to the circulation desk, only to find Gerry alone in the center sitting on a shelving cart.

“What happened to Yi?” he asked.

“She went out for a smoke...after having a very *intense* phone call with HR.”

Tommy couldn’t help noticing Gerry was smiling from ear to ear. He chose not to pry, plus he was still agitated from interacting with Robin.

“The new kid’s a regular robot like from *Star Trek: The Next Generation!*”

“Hmm, the ol’ ‘Procedures of Conduct’ type, eh? I’m not surprised. You put him in his place, didn’t you?” Gerry asked.

“Is this going to be a problem with you? Me busting his balls?”

“Long as I don’t hear you call him ‘boy’ or ‘colored’ or you know what else.”

“What if he goes there with me?”

Gerry shook his head in a silent reply. He and Tommy shared a

mutual respect for each other, but they both knew racial tensions could reduce the most civilized people into the deadliest of enemies.

“He’s not supposed to be here, Gerry. Simms was next in line, you know that, right?”

“Best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.”

Tommy tilted his head. “Malcolm X say that?”

“Burns, Scottish poet. I’m not *all* about Malcolm and Martin, Tommy.”

“Sorry. You’re definitely well read, but Yi’s making a move to *persuade* Mr. Walker into transferring someplace else. He’s not a good fit. I just want to know if it will come between us when I roll out the welcome wagon.”

The two exchanged glances for a moment, each wondering what to say next. Gerry stepped forward to check out books for a patron. With his back to Tommy, he said, “I’ll let you know when you step over the line. Until then, I’ll be laying in the cut watching where the chips may fall.”

*A neutral response if I ever heard one*, thought Tommy with a pout.



OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY, Sonyai stood near the entrance smoking a Newport cigarette. She had the misfortune of developing the habit back in Japan while in her mid-20s at college. At a pack a day now, she often lit up when highly stressed.

Someone approaching caught her eye and she flicked the cigarette out into the street while waving away the lingering smoke. “Janelle!” she called out. “How’s everything going today?”

A young African-American girl wearing an oversized leather Yankee’s jacket with a pink scarf and black jeans walked up toward her. Janelle Simms was the oldest of 58th Street’s four pages. At seventeen, she was scheduled to graduate from Julia Richman High School in June but would have gained all forty credits by the end of the winter term. She greeted Sonyai with a spirited embrace.

“A bit queasy this morning, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“You get the results from your calculus final yet?”

She fished out a stapled pair of papers from her school bag “Got a 95%! Only missed one!”

“That’s my girl!” Sonyai beamed with a seldom seen smile of approval.

Janelle sensed something was bothering her. “What’s wrong, Miss Yi? You seem mad about something.”

The elder sighed. It would best if she heard it from her. “We...have a new part-timer starting here today.”

“What?” Janelle gasped.

“I tried my best to fight this, but we had no choice. Some hotshot who's been waiting for a clerical position downtown. He goes to college—”

“I finish school in two weeks!” Janelle interrupted. “I don’t even have to take a spring term!”

“Shhhh...” Sonyai hushed her. Janelle was on the verge of tears and trembling in fear. “I know I promised you the next position. I’m sorry.”

“What am I going to do?”

“Don’t worry. I did my research. He *will not* last long. Thomas and I will see to it.”

With a reassured sigh, she smiled. “Thank you, Miss Yi. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“We will get through this. Head on in. I need another minute to compose myself before introducing the newcomer to Chavez.”

She turned and made her way inside. Sonyai produced another cigarette and with the flick of her lighter, resumed smoking nervously.

Back inside the library, Gerry was working the returns side, accepting back three borrowed books from a middle-aged Caucasian woman. She was wearing a mink stole fur jacket accessorized with expensive jewelry.

“Okay, ma’am, three books returned five days late at fifteen cents a day comes to a fine of \$2.25, please.”

The woman nodded. “Ah, well yes,” she stammered. “I wish to waive the fine.”

Gerry tilted his head, believing he misheard the woman despite her speaking clearly. “Excuse me, could you repeat that?”

“I wish the late fines to be waived,” she replied calmly.

Being a public servant and an NYPL employee for a decade, Gerry had heard many unreasonable requests from people, but he played along. “And what would be the reason, might I ask, that you cannot pay these late fines at *this* particular time?”

“I have no money at the moment.”

Gerry fought to restrain himself at the absurdity of the situation. *Remember your lessons at the last Public Relations Seminar*, he thought. “If that’s the case,” he began, “I could leave the fines unpaid on your record and you can pay them another time. You can even check out more books since the balance is less than 5 dollars.”

In a perfect world, that would be the end of the conversation. She would smile, nod, then accept that she could still take out books and deal with the penalty at a later date. When dealing with wealthy individuals, Gerry noticed consequences are viewed in a different light than normal people and that it was best to stay non-confrontational.

“No, no, no, you don’t understand. I have no money at all. I cannot pay this fine, so I wish to have it waived.”

Apparently, it was not a perfect world.

There was an awkward moment of silence. Gerry’s eyes darted in various directions as he tried to comprehend what he was hearing. Fortunately for him, there were no other returns at the moment, so he had time to make this exchange *uncomfortable*. Public Relations Seminar be damned.

“May I make an obvious observation, madam?” Gerry asked. “You are wearing a fur coat worth hundreds of dollars, you have on very extravagant jewelry, and you mean to tell me you have no money to pay the fine for these 3 books which you *deliberately* returned late now or anytime in the immediate future? Is that what you are telling me?”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at, but I am sure this is not an unreasonable request!” she exclaimed. “I demand it be honored!”

His patience had just run out. “Well I can’t *honor* that request!” he barked. “If we waive fines left and right, we would have no money to

buy more of those Danielle Steel and Mary Higgins Clark books you rich, upper-crust snobs like to read so much!”

Gerry noticed he was yelling now. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Sonyai coming back from outside at the entrance and Augustus emerging from his office in the far right corner at the back of the branch. He knew he was in trouble, but he continued his rant.

“And without money, we’ll only be open for 5 days a week instead of 6, then only 4 days. Next thing you know, common day folks like me get laid off due to budget cuts followed by other lame excuses! *So*, Miss Waive-the-Fine, are you going to pay this \$2.25 or am I going to lose my job?”

“Coltraine!”

Sonyai’s voice echoed throughout the open floor as she stood at the check-outs side on the left. All eyes turned to the desk where the two clerks and patron stood. Embarrassed, the woman pulled out a crumpled ten-dollar bill from a purse. “Keep the change.” She hurried past Sonyai on her way to the exit.

“Thank you very much for the charitable donation!” he called back to her. “Have a nice day!”

He turned back to see Augustus glaring back at him for a moment and then disappear back into his office. Sonyai walked around to stand right next to him, also glaring. “What the hell was that?” she hissed.

“A cheap-ass getting what she deserved,” he replied.

She nodded. “I see, we’ll discuss that *thoroughly* when I have a moment, but for now, why don’t you step inside and introduce yourself to Mr. Walker before there are any more outbursts.”

As if on cue, Ethel exited the clerical office to join Tommy and Sonyai while Gerry stepped past her to cool off from his encounter.

In the clerical office, Robin sensed tension from the heated exchange as he heard his new supervisor’s booming exclamation outside. He thought against saying anything to the fourth and final full-time clerk working at 58th street when he saw him come in.

“Uh, hi,” he whispered with a faint wave.

Gerry smiled. “Gerry Coltraine from Soundview Branch through



High Bridge and Woodlawn Heights before that.” He then extended his hand in friendship.

Robin chuckled and shook Gerry’s hand. “Robin Walker, from the way of Fort Washington! Nice to finally meet someone in the system!”

“10 years, 4 branches. You do the math!”

“Well, alright! What’s the deal with that other guy?” Robin asked thumbing out past the closed door.

“Different upbringing. Long story. We’ll go over it later.”

“Oh, yeah? What are the names of the lion statues?” he challenged.

“Patience and Fortitude”

“And the fear of the number 13?”

“Triskaidekaphobia...rolls of the tip of my tongue I’ve said it so many times!”

“What’s the Dewey decimal for sociology?”

“301.01”

“Nutrition and diets?”

“641.25”

“World history?”

“909.01”

“Math?”

“Too broad, be specific.”

“Geometry.”

“516.03”

“Algebra?”

“512.09”

“Shakespeare?”

“Shakespeare has his own entire call number, which is 822.”

The rapid-fire tennis match between the two went on for three minutes. Robin shook his hand again with a wide grin. Gerry was the real McCoy. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

Gerry nodded his head in a modest bow.

“I don’t know about Jenkins, but Danny Boy out there probably doesn’t know what the inside of a card catalog looks like!”

“Understand, man. Not everyone takes this job too seriously.”

“Yeah, okay, but basic page training—”

“Tommy wasn’t hired as a page like us.”

“How is that possible?” Robin asked astonished.

“To paraphrase, he’s one of the 5 Percenters.”

“How surprisingly Muslim of him.”

Gerry smiled at the joke. “He filled out an application outside the system and was on an extended waiting list before he started here directly as a clerk.”

This was unheard of to Robin. “What’d he do? Call in a favor from his Uncle Mickey in Hell’s Kitchen to pull that off?”

Gerry cringed at the youngster’s prejudgment and was about to answer when the door opened and Sonyai stepped in. She looked at Robin questionably. “Why haven’t you taken off your coat yet?” she asked and then quickly waved a dismissive hand. “It doesn’t matter. It’s time to meet our head librarian. Please follow me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Robin replied. He gave Gerry a two-fingered military salute and smiled, then followed her out of the office. Finally alone, Gerry mused over the chances of Robin being accepted with indifference here. The odds of him not disrupting the amount of chaos and anarchy that already occurred at this once simple branch were not good.

Robin took a moment while following Sonyai to examine his surroundings. The main floor was open with no walls or columns divided into two sections. The right side where he was walking was the reference and media area. Waist high tables holding the card catalog were accompanied by a wide one-piece media counter that held CDs and packages of books on tape.

Behind the card catalog was a series of tables and chairs where patrons were reading or studying. On the left side furthest from Robin were eight metal shelves six feet tall and two feet wide stretching back from the glass windows up front to the back wall.

The walls themselves housed wooden shelves that were taller than the metal ones and wrapped around in an L-shape pattern covering the back and left sides. The wall on the right had three doors, one leading up to the second floor, one that was a public bathroom, and the door he was approaching to Mr. Chavez’s office.

Robin noticed three teenage girls pretending not to stare from different vantage points among the shelves across the room. The branch pages if he had to guess. *I hope nothing's wrong with them*, he thought.

“Is that him?” Alex asked.

“I think so. Nellie didn’t say what the new guy looked like,” replied Tanya. “Only that it was a guy.”

“Leelee, you’re staring.”

“Leelee?...Leelee?...Lakeshia!”

“What?” Lakeshia whispered with a squeak.

The trio of girls met in an area obscured to anyone across the room.

“Way to be conspicuous, small fry. I think he noticed us.”

“What does conspicuous mean?” the youngest page asked.

“It means you were sticking out like my cousin Ezekiel's’ sixth toe, cuz!” Tanya answered.

“Ewww, gross!”

“Okay, knock it off you two, this is serious,” Alex ordered. “With this new guy here now, Janelle will have to transfer to Webster, if they even *have* a position.”

“Oh no! What if they find out?”

“At least Andrew will take care of her.”

Alex shook her head. “No, there’s no guarantee they won’t fire her once the cat’s out the bag. If I know Miss Yi, she’s got a plan to make this new guy regret he ever came here...and we got to see to it that he does.”



## CHAPTER THREE



“I DON’T KNOW WHY SHE HASN’T FIRED COLTRINE YET AFTER ALL these years,” Augustus said, shaking his head. With the outburst at the circulation desk fresh in his mind, he sat at his desk contemplating ways he could remove the troublesome clerk without undermining Sonyai’s authority. A phone call to his direct line interrupted his musings.

“Yes?” he spoke into the receiver.

Zelda turned from her desk as he smiled.

“Ah, Charles, how are things at the Donelle video library?” He nodded and listened, an eyebrow raised as he exclaimed, “You’re kidding! I don’t believe it!” He then sighed. “All right, I’ll see what else we can do. Goodbye.” He hung up the phone in awe.

Augustus noticed Zelda looking back at him and was about to explain an interesting development when a knock on the door followed by it opening snapped the pair back to attention. Sonyai stepped halfway into the doorway.

“Mr. Chavez, sir?” she said, containing herself in anticipation.

“Yes, Miss Yi?” he answered and noticed the smirk on her face.

“Robin Walker has arrived.”

He stepped around his desk with a flourish as a wide smile grew

across his face. He had prepared some charming pleasantries to greet the young lady with. Sonyai motioned outside the threshold and then stepped inside, followed by Robin. A wave of emotions came over the librarian's face—shock, puzzlement, concern, and then anger while the young man approached and shook his half-extended hand.

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

Augustus stammered “Ah, yes, welcome aboard, *Mr. Walker.*” He noticed Sonyai still had a smirk on her face and stared daggers back at her over this twist of events. “This is Zelda Clein. Zelda, meet Robin Walker from Fort Washington.” With a gesture, he turned the attention toward the elder and Robin turned to greet her.

“Soft! now to my mother. O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever. The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom: Let me be cruel, not unnatural,” Robin suddenly exclaimed. Sonyai and Augustus exchanged wild-eyed looks of surprise.

“I will speak daggers to her, but use none; My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites; How in my words soever she be shent, to give them seals never, my soul, consent!” Zelda finished the soliloquy.

“*Hamlet*. Act 3, Scene 2. I bring greetings and salutations from the word of The Battle Axe. She sends her warmest regards.”

“How *is* Babs doing these days?” Zelda asked.

“Okay, what was that all about?” Sonyai interrupted.

“I was ordered to relay a message. Sorry for the dramatics. Miss Clein, anyone dares to call you-know-who ‘Babs’ is either brave or a fool, but rest assured she is doing well.”

“Ah, I hope to hear from her soon enough. Welcome, young Mr. Walker, we’ve been expecting you.”

“Yes, well, we better be going,” Sonyai said with a nod to the door.

Robin smiled, then turned and left, the senior clerk lingering behind for a moment as if to mock Augustus about the encounter and then closed the door behind her.

When he was sure they were out of earshot outside his smile disappeared and he turned to Zelda, “Did you know he was a guy, dammit?”

Expecting his agitation, she said, "I didn't know for certain, but I suspected as much."

Robin and Sonyai walked back to the circulation desk. "Mr. Chavez seemed...distracted," he commented.

"Well, you were not what he was expecting. You really should have HR fix that whole 'Ms.' issue, or consider going by Rob or Bobby."

"I'll have you know my mother named me after Robin Williams. That or she had a thing for birds."

Sonyai didn't pry. "Chavez was definitely expecting a woman. He's what you'd call 'hands-on' with young female professionals.

Now it was Robin's turn not to pry. "Fancies himself as a ladies man, does he? Well, he does resemble the late Telly Savalas a little. Probably polishes his head on a weekly basis."

The two shared a chuckle at the joke. "Before we step back to the office, I would like to introduce our pages," Sonyai said when they arrived at the opposite side of the circulation desk.

Four teenage girls emerged from the shelves and lined up behind the senior clerk. "Mr. Walker, meet Janelle Simms, Alex Stevens, Tanya Brown, and Lakeshia Seabrooke."

Robin nodded at each page. "Ladies."

Fifteen-year-old Alexandra Stevens wore black business slacks and an olive green blouse as she stood an even five-foot-nine in white Adidas tennis shoes. A dark complexion that could be defined as onyx, Alex could easily be mistaken for a model the likes of Naomi Campbell or Grace Jones.

Sixteen-year-old Tanya Brown was wearing jean corduroy overalls with a gray sweatshirt underneath, her short brown hair matted down in a tomboy-like bowl cut. She had an athletic physique developed from hours of playing basketball both in gym class and in streetball on asphalt courts.

Lakeshia was the youngest page at fourteen. A petite five-foot-four, she was only ninety-five pounds and was often mistaken for anorexic. Her curly hair resting at shoulder length, she had a fair skin tone similar to Robin's. She wore black stockings with a plaid skirt and a cropped cardigan sweater.

Robin sensed a tense vibe from Janelle and Alex by their cold stares, matching the feelings Tommy had been projecting. *The smugness must be infectious around here*, he thought.

When the two returned, Robin looked around the office and asked, “Where are the lockers for coats and bags?”

“Here at 58th Street,” Sonyai explained, “we leave our belongings at our desks. You may leave your coat on a chair and—”

“Whoa, hold up!” Robin interrupted. A wave of anxiety took over him. “No offense to your clerical staff, Miss Yi, but I need to make sure my things stay safe. When I was in elementary school someone stole my winter coat while I was in class. I nearly froze to death because they had the nerve to send me home just because I lived several blocks away. I’m not leaving anything in plain sight where it can just *disappear*.”

Sonyai sensed this was a sensitive subject to the young man. She sighed. “The pages lock their coats and school bags in mini-lockers upstairs. I believe there is one available, but you’ll need a combination or key lock.”

“Thank you for understanding, Sonya,” Robin replied with a relieved smile.

“It’s *Sonyai*, Mr. Walker,” she corrected. “Please pronounce it correctly or address me by my last name.”

“Yes, Miss Yi.” He looked behind her. “Since I have no lock, this being my first day, I wouldn’t mind leaving my coat and book bag on one of these elevated shelves here where I can keep my eye on them from out at the desk.”

Such a request was odd. The newcomer had no reason to fear that the staff would touch his belongings. “Very well,” the supervisor said with a slight nod.

Robin removed his book bag off his shoulder and took off his parka.

Once settled, Sonyai pointed at the bike glove on Robin’s left hand. “May I ask what is wrong with your hand, Walker?”

“Um, it’s a slight disfigurement. I know there’s a dress code, but Fort Washington...”



“This is *not* Fort Washington, Walker. I must insist you take it off.”  
He shrugged. “Okay.”

Robin grabbed the glove at the wrist and quickly pulled it off.

Sonyai looked with a start as the flesh on the clerk’s hand appeared to be eaten away, revealing exposed tendons and nerves. His fingers flexed as if someone held his hand under an x-ray with the first outer layers removed.

“How?” she gasped.

“Sodium hydroxide burn. Accident when I was 6,” he explained. “I have 30% motor function in the nerves of this hand.”

She became nauseated. “On second thought,” she said with a gag, “I believe it would be best if you kept it on.”

He slipped his hand back in the garment. “Thank you, Miss Yi,” Robin said stoically.

“Now that all the pleasantries have concluded...” Sonyai led Robin back to the circulation desk where Tommy and Ethel were working their respective checkout and returns stations. She traded places with Ethel while Tommy allowed Robin to take his spot. The relieved pair took the door upstairs for a break in the staff room.

“Let me explain your work hours.”

Robin focused as the supervisor began.

“As a part-time employee, you will work 17½ in a 5 day week. 3 days, you’ll work 3½, one day you will only work 3, and one day you will work 4 hours.”

“Okay,” Robin replied.

Sonyai continued, “Our branch is open Monday through Saturday from noon until 6 pm, with an early day on Thursday when we open at 10 am. We also have a late night on Wednesday where the branch stays open until 8 pm. You’ll work 3 Saturdays a month and one late night Wednesday every 2 months on a rotation with the other clerical staff. Do you need to write any of this down?”

“No, I have a good memory. I’ll write it down later, just in case.”

“Okay, finally, on weeks when you come in on Saturday, you’ll have a random day off during the week. While it rarely happens, there may be an instance we need you to come in on an early

Thursday, but that will only be if someone else is on vacation or calls out sick.”

“There might be an issue with that,” Robin began. “I have classes in the morning, and I also need evenings for my studies.”

“I understand, but I do not believe this schedule is unreasonable, Walker.”

“Okay, I have no issues at the moment so long as you’re flexible.”

“Be warned, there may be times where you’ll be asked to serve beyond the call of duty.”

He thought about responding to that remark but it was his first day, and he didn’t want to make things tenser than they already were.

“Until you learn how to operate the cash register, you’ll do checkouts when on duty,” she instructed. “Let’s see what Fort Washington has taught you.”

“Gladly.”

Robin picked up the lightpen used to read barcodes with a flourish and checked out several books for a line of patrons with ease. He zipped their library card and brought up their records. Zip the books and insert a date due card in the pocket on the book’s first page beneath the cover. Afterward, he’d pass the checked-out items on the other side of the security threshold to be picked up by the patron leaving the building.

He was fast, accurate, and efficient. Sonyai was impressed. A patron handed him a plastic slip for a video checkout. “Um, what are these?” he asked. Sonyai stepped to the file cabinet holding the VHS tapes and pulled a drawer open. “What number?”

“362,” he answered. She then pulled the item in question and Robin checked it out.

“We keep our movies in these cabinets,” she explained. “They bring us the slip and we find them in here. Put the slips in this shoebox until they return.”

Robin took a moment to scan all the drawers in the cabinet sizing up the movies available. “You have a copy of *E.T.*? These cost over \$130.”

“A donated copy from a patron,” Sonyai replied with a chuckle.

He looked at the rest of the collection. “Well, you certainly have a vast selection of *adult* films as well. Heeeeeeey! *Angel Heart!* Lisa Bonet’s topless in this! Wow, *9 ½ Weeks!*”

Sonyai grimaced at Robin’s lusty display of excitement. “You pride yourself on knowledge of R-rated films for someone who can barely get in to see them at 18.”

Robin scoffed. “Please! First R-rated movie I saw was *Robocop*, and I was 12!”

“Be that as is it may, Fort Washington has taught you well.”

The praise astonished Robin. “I’d like to think so.” He stood back up and looked forward. “Such a small branch, but so busy.”

He took a moment to observe the floor, a diverse mix of the upper class and average joes, executives and college students. Sophisticated women wearing extravagant wigs and brooches with high heel shoes and expensive purses. A homeless vagrant caught his eye, sitting alone at a small round table in an isolated corner. The beast of a man looked like he weighed over three hundred pounds and was wearing tattered layers of sweaters and a huge overcoat.

“It’s easy to get caught up in the crowd of patrons who frequent our branch. You might even see a celebrity on occasion,” Sonyai remarked, distracting his attention from the giant.

“Well, I don’t get star struck.”

Robin then noticed the pages working among the shelves. “You know, back at Fort Washington, we had a Russian page, an Asian page, Greek, Jewish and Hispanic pages. Washington Heights is a very diverse neighborhood.”

The senior clerk nodded, wondering where he was going with his line of thought.

“The Greek page was the only female, but things still felt...*balanced.*”

Sonyai’s eyes narrowed. Out among the shelves, Alex felt an impulse to listen.

“But I’ve noticed the pages here all have something in common. It must be murder on them, sharing the same bathroom.”

“You have a problem with me using an all-female page staff, Walker?” Sonyai asked with a challenging tone.

“No, not at all. But as a former male page myself, one feels compelled to ask.”

Sonyai paced. Robin looked at her walking back and forth in such a small area quite puzzled.

“It has been my experience that teenage boys do not last long under my supervision. They lack discipline, get bored, and then slack off.”

“Is that why there are only two male *clerks* here as well?” he asked folding his arms. “And why you were expecting another woman?”

“*I’m* not the one with ‘Ms.’ in front of my name on my HR record misleading everyone, Walker! Don’t accuse me of being sexist on your first day!” *Especially when it could also be your last!* she thought.

“It’s just an observation, Sonia, and I’ll get my name fixed in HR soon enough.”

“It’s *Son-yai*, not Sonia, Walker. I will not warn you again! What’s between their legs doesn’t mean a damn thing. My pages are loyal, efficient, and above all reliable! They give me no problems!”

Tensions were escalating, so much for keeping cool on the first day, but Robin was not convinced by her rhetoric. “Being a page requires manual labor. The 4 of us shared 2 shelving carts, so we carried stacks of books to put back. And what about tying up and carrying boxes of discards? Except for one, the rest of your Charlie’s Angels have got pipe cleaners for arms!”

Alex gritted her teeth and clenched her fist at the insult.

“That’s when the male clerks come in handy,” Sonyai replied with a smug grin.

“Is that so? Obviously, we have a difference of opinion over page and clerical duties. Well, my name’s not Kunta Kinte and I won’t do any task I once did as a page just because you’re too—”

“My pages can do any task I require them to do!” she interrupted. “No matter how strenuous. And I need not be lectured by you on the duties of an NYPL employee! Is *that* clear!”

Once again, the branch was silent, all attention on them, whose

conversation had evolved into a shouting match. Robin lowered his voice. “Yes...*Miss Yi*,” he growled.



“PIPE CLEANERS? Where does he get off saying we have pipe cleaners for arms!”

The pages were upstairs in the staff room around four-thirty taking a break.

“Have you *seen* Lakeshia’s arms, Alex? He wasn’t that far off,” Tanya replied.

“Hey! At least my arms don’t look like Popeye’s...Popeye!” Lakeshia taunted.

“Well if I’m Popeye you’re Olive Oyl, Olive Oyl!”

“Popeye!”

“Olive Oyl!”

“Popeye!”

“*Olive Oyl!*”

“Will you two stop! Gosh, it’s like you’re actually sisters or something!” Janelle yelled from the couch.

Lakeshia and Tanya sat on opposite sides while Alex sat at the head of the table in the middle of the room. Janelle relaxed on the couch rubbing her temples.

“Alex was right, Walker talks to Miss Yi about his pages from Fort Washington like he’s better than us!”

“He is, Nellie. He’s a clerk,” Lakeshia chimed in. Alex and Tanya gave her a look while she elaborated. “He may not be from around here, but I think he deserves the benefit of the doubt. Did you see how he checked out those books? Flipping the lightpen around his hand?”

“I was so damn close!” Janelle interrupted. “After Andy left to become senior clerk of Webster, Sonyai promised me the next position! I can’t believe they brought this jerk in. It’s not fair!” She sat up with an agitated scream.

“Easy, Nellie! Watch your blood pressure!” Alex warned.

Tanya and Lakeshia put their differences aside and moved to sit on

each end of the couch with Janelle in the middle. Alex stayed at the table.

“Have you been to the doctor yet?” Tanya whispered.

“I’m waiting until the end of the month when I finish school early, then I’ll tell my folks.”

“You haven’t told your parents?” Lakeshia gasped.

“What about the fa—” Alex began.

“I’m not discussing any more of this! I don’t need to get worked up!” Janelle stood up and exited the room to return downstairs. With the trio alone, they all exchanged looks of worry and concern.

“Well, Alex has a point. With this new guy having a chip on his shoulder, he may be a real pain in the ass.”

“I really don’t think that’ll be the case, Tee.”

“What’s with you defending him, Leelee?” Alex asked. “You’re always too trusting!”

“You don’t *like* this chunky light-brite boy, do ya’, small fry?” Tanya asked with a smile.

“No!” Lakeshia yelled as she blushed with embarrassment. “I’m just a good judge of character, that’s all!” She rolled her eyes.

“So is Miss Yi,” Alex interjected. “She’s always been there to take care of us.” Once again a worried look came across the young page. “For Nellie’s sake, I hope this new guy won’t be a problem.”



“So JENKINS, what’d ya think of the kid?” Gerry asked. Ethel and Gerry were back inside the clerical office before moving out to work the desk for the final hour of the shift. Robin, Sonyai, and Tommy were behind the closed door out of earshot.

“He’s okay in my book, so long as he leaves me alone, unlike you!” Ignoring the insult, he asked, “Do you know what a cabal is?”

Ethel sighed. “We got 10 minutes till we’re back out there to close, so—”

“A small group, usually 3 to 5 members with a secret agenda to

overthrow or undermine a corrupt authority figure. Dates back to King Charles II.” Gerry interrupted.

“What are you talking about? King Charles II?”

“I’ve been doing research. With Yi tripping over this Walker newcomer, we can make a case citing that she is not mentally sound to be in charge.”

“You really think anyone will believe—”

“You see how she mothers those pages like they’re her own children. Chavez could help with his observations. He’d be on board with any plan that will see her out.”

“Coltraine! Yi finds out you’re doing this, she will fire you!” she hissed.

“You gonna tell her?” Gerry asked. “Because that’s the only way she’ll find out.”

He let that statement hang in the air until she said, “You *are* playing with fire!” and stormed outside.

Augustus was putting on his jacket, ready to leave at the end of an exhausting day when Heywood knocked and entered the office. “You wanted to see me?” he asked, closing the door behind him. The head librarian cleared his throat while smoothing out the wrinkles of his sports jacket. “I was thinking, I...um. I overreacted this morning.”

“I see,” Heywood replied, wondering what he would say next.

“I believe the movie selection is fine the way it is, Learner. I...apologize.”

The words nearly knocked Heywood off his feet. He contained his excitement with the small victory and continued to listen.

“There was a problem with the video archive department. Donelle Library called me a few hours ago to inform me that the only available copy we had of *Blazing Saddles* was chewed up beyond any splicing repair.”

“Oh.”

“So, it appears they stuck us with 4 spoofs,” Augustus said with a nod.

“I guess we can add *The Producers* to the schedule. I’ll call the

printer so the flyers can be drawn up, sir,” Heywood said as he turned to leave.

“Uh, Learner?” Augustus called back to him.

He paused in mid-stride and answered, “Yes?”

“Thank you for your professionalism in this matter...and not rubbing it in my face.”

“Yes, sir,” he said and exited the office.

Outside, the outcome astonished Heywood. A smile crept across his face and he chuckled to himself, then a puzzled glance registered in his eyes. Something didn’t sit right with him about this unusual turn of events. He had some investigating to do.

“You have done well today, Walker. Since it is now 5 pm, you are relieved and can go home for the evening.” Sonyai said to Robin.

He had just finished some checkouts while Tommy watched from the returns side. Ethel emerged from the office, followed by Gerry moments later to take their stations.

“If it’s all right with you, ma’am, I’d like to stay to observe how things close here.”

“Suit yourself. I have matters to attend to. Report back here tomorrow at 2 pm *sharp*.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The senior clerk walked into the back office for a moment, came back out wearing her winter coat, and exited the premises. Tommy remained in the middle of the small area as Gerry stood beside him at the returns counter and Ethel stood in front of the terminal for checkouts.

Everyone stood at a corner of the tiny space.

“You got a problem, Lucky Charms?” Robin glared at Tommy. Ethel chuckled at the joke.

“How’s about I knock that mouth of yours right off your fat ugly face?”

Gerry and Ethel each let out “oooohs,”

Robin grinned. “Yeah, right. I’ve dealt with jerks like you.”

“You *know nothing* about guys like me! I’m smarter than you and better than you’ll ever be!”



“Well, you just *stay* better than me then, jerkwad, ‘cause this will be as far as you go! I’m just passing through! I’m going to breeze through school and graduate in 2 more years, then blow this popsicle stand and move on to bigger and better things! I’m going to Seattle and develop software for Microsoft! Work my way up the corporate ladder and buy out the company from Bill Gates himself! By the time I’m 30, I’ll be the richest man on this planet! And you’ll still be *here*, being the best you can be!”

The three clerks were stunned speechless by the youngster’s powerful tirade.

“Whatever,” Tommy said flatly and then left to retrieve his coat, walked around the desk, and exited the branch. He found Sonyai outside waiting for him, smoking a cigarette. The pair walked together toward Lexington Avenue, leaving 58th Street behind them.

“He’s a piece of work. This could be a serious problem,” Tommy began.

“Indeed,” Sonyai answered.

“His arrogance makes me more eager to take him out, the obnoxious punk!”

“Don’t take this personally, Thomas. Your anger can betray you, make you lose focus.”

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t intend to.”

“I have a personal errand.” She lit a cigarette and took a draw. “Give Sarah my best.”

He nodded and walked across Lexington Avenue to the Queens-bound N and R subway entrance.

Gerry, Ethel, and Robin stood at their separate corners behind the circulation desk, still quiet from the earlier outburst. It was fifteen minutes till closing.

“Zoology?” Robin quickly asked.

“591.03” Gerry answered.

“Damn! You’re good for someone who hasn’t put away a book in eight years!” Robin exclaimed. The pair shared a laugh.

“She as good as you?” Robin nodded to Ethel.

“Naw,” Ethel replied. “In my day we didn’t say call numbers. They were Dewey decimals. And I’ve long since forgotten them by now.”

“So, Microsoft, huh? You reaching for the stars there, computer genius.”

“Windows 95 will change the world, Gerry. Bill Gates is an innovator.”

“Uh-huh. What about Steve Jobs?”

“Who the hell is Steve Jobs?” Robin asked.

Gerry rolled his eyes. “Okaaaay. Next question then, computer whiz. Why the library?”

Robin shrugged. “Why not? When I was 9, my grandfather brought me to Fort Washington for the first time and I saw all those books. I was amazed by the place. I developed my reading skills early. It was my favorite subject. Schools were the only place I thought you could get books, so I told him when we left I wanted to go to the library to learn, as my new school.

“He laughed and explained it wasn’t a school. It was a special place where anybody could borrow books to read for a little while as long as they promised to bring them back. I didn’t believe in such a place until we were walking home. When we got back, I looked up and asked him, ‘What do they call the people that work in that place?’ He said, ‘They’re called librarians.’ So I said, ‘That’s what I wanna be when I grow up, a librarian.’”

Gerry and Ethel reflected on the touching story for a moment in silence.

“That’s...just a load of crap, right?” Gerry asked.

Robin smiled. “Yeeaaaah, when I was 9 I wanted to be an astronaut, but that’s what I said at the job interview so, here I am.”

That brought a gasp of laughter from Ethel while Gerry shook his head and smiled. “You know what, man? You all right.” He stepped forward and held his hand out. Robin slapped him five with his left hand.

He noticed and pointed. “About that now, how’d you get Sonyai to let you keep that glove on?”

“We really going to have a conversation about fashion while you

standing there looking like you from a junkyard in Watts living with your father?"

Gerry blinked hard while Ethel laughed again. It was her turn to slap Robin five at the quip.

Angie Trueblood walked to the center of the room and announced, "The library will be closing in 10 minutes. If you have any materials you wish to check out, please do so now."

Gerry and Ethel snapped back to attention as the patrons lined up in front of Ethel while she processed their items for borrowing.

"C'mon, funny guy! Lemme show you how to work the cash register," Gerry called to Robin.

"Architecture?" he asked when next to him.

"You know, it was cool at first, till you dissed my clothes."

"Aww, c'mon! Just one more..."

"720.02," he answered with a sigh.

"Damn!" Robin exclaimed.



THE UPPER EAST SIDE WOMAN'S Center was located at 63rd Street between 3rd and 2nd Avenue. Sonyai ignored the closed sign and entered the clinic. There was no receptionist, so she locked the door behind her. The lights were off except for one lit examination room where she found Janelle sitting on the medical table and an elderly European woman possibly of Russian descent.

Janelle was quiet, looking down at her bare feet, wearing a white hospital gown.

"How are we doing here?" Sonyai asked with a smile.

"She's 7 weeks. Conception dates back to about mid-January," the gynecologist said.

"Oh God," Janelle whispered.

"We do ultrasound end of April to determine sex of child," the gynecologist explained in broken English and a rough accent.

"Don't worry, Janelle. We will get through this."

"She can get dressed in next room now."

Janelle stood up and left the room. Once the two adults were alone, the doctor asked, “You sure you wish to charge *your* insurance for her care? If employer finds out, they will charge you for fraud.”

Sonyai nodded. “I understand the risks. Put all her medications in my name and file the claims.”

“She will show soon. She cannot hide this forever,” the doctor warned.

Sonyai turned to Janelle as she returned holding her backpack in front of her. She sighed heavily and said, “I will deal with it.”

Tommy entered his one-bedroom apartment at 93rd Street off Rockaway Boulevard in the middle of Ozone Park. He sighed at the thought of today’s events. The stress evaporated once he gazed upon his wife, Sarah. At an even seven feet tall, Sarah Gonzales-Carmichael was teased in school over her height. The other students called her Big Bird because she also had brown curly locks that resembled the fabled character’s fluffy hairstyle.

She was wearing a white apron on top of a blue New York Mets T-shirt and gray sweatpants in front of a busy four-burner range preparing dinner. At four and a half months pregnant, his wife looked radiant to Tommy as he wrapped his arms around her from behind and gave her a small peck on the cheek.

“Dinner will be ready in 10. Wash your hands, mister,” Sarah ordered.

He gave her a lingering bear hug and went down the hallway to the bathroom. Ten minutes later, the two were sitting at the kitchen table.

“How was work today?” she asked.

“This penne a la vodka is incredible, hon’.”

Sarah frowned. Tommy always talked about the food when he didn’t want to discuss work.

“Thank you. Anything going on at the library I should maybe know about?”

“What kinda vodka did you use to thin the sauce? Is it Stoli?”

“Smirnoff, and if you don’t tell me what’s bothering you, I’m gonna break the bottle over your head!”

Tommy knew she actually would. “We got a new part-timer, some

college student with a chip on his shoulder the size of Shea Stadium. He took Nelly's spot before she could finish school and get the promotion, so now Sonyai and I are making it our mission to make the kid transfer someplace else."

"Wow," was all Sarah could say.

"Yeah, I know," he replied.

"Y'know, it's really not fair treating him like that because he's new. Everybody has to adjust to new situations all the time."

"He's not one of us."

"But he could be in time. What if they did that to you when you started there?"

"This time it's different."

"How?"

"It just *is*! Look, we have a nice tight-knit staff, and he's a loose thread sticking out. We're not trying to get him fired, just to move along."

"But—"

"End of discussion, Sarah."

They continued to eat in silence after that, but Tommy knew the discussion was far from over.



TWENTY-ONE WAS at 21 West 52nd Street in the heart of midtown Manhattan. In the days of prohibition, it served as a speakeasy known for its celebrity clientele. Inside the restaurant, a mysterious female benefactor was sitting at her favorite table opposite Augustus, who was finishing his steak tartare.

"I can't remember the last time we had dinner together, Gussie."

He cringed at the sound of his pet name. "Well, my dear, I have so little time."

"Oh, I understand. But it seems you only woo me when my charitable donations make the newspapers."

"I'm hurt you'd think that!" he said in mock disappointment.

“I’m just kidding! You know I’d do almost anything for you!” the woman said with a chuckle.

He took a moment to sip on his glass of water.

“Tell me, though. If my family donates thousands to the library already, what difference does it make if I contribute alone to one particular branch?”

Augustus knew this was coming and had prepared his speech. “The percentage our branch receives on general contributions is very minimal. There are 82 libraries spread among the 3 boroughs we serve. Some needier than others. There are branches located so remote they see only 30 patrons a day.”

She nodded while sipping on her daiquiri as he continued.

“Ours is sophisticated, equipped to serve the public to the fullest extent possible...provided we continue to receive occasional acts of goodwill. As an influential institution in today’s society, it would honor us to reciprocate any help called upon whenever such a benefactor would require us to in *any* way, shape, or form.”

Augustus could sell ice in Alaska.

“In layman’s terms, if I scratch your back, *you’ll* scratch mine.” A coy, seductive smile grew across her glossed and bright red lips.

“Exactly,” he replied soothingly.

“And would such...*back scratching* be required of me tonight, perhaps?” Her hand caressed Augustus’ right hand to emphasize the innuendo.

The librarian wiped his brow with a napkin and smiled. “Ahem, well, let’s see where the night takes us, shall we?”



ZELDA LIVED in a co-op on the corner of 21st Street and 3rd Avenue a few blocks away from Gramercy Park. She unlocked the door and entered her living room, then took off her coat and locked the door behind her.

With a flick of a wall switch, two lamps filled the interior with some much-needed luminescence to reveal a uniquely decorated

apartment. Zelda opened a closet, hung her coat on a hanger, and tucked it inside. After walking to the kitchen to pour a glass of wine, she sat on a lazy chair in the middle of the living room. She took a long sip and let out a relaxing sigh of relief, then reached for her cordless phone and dialed a number.

“Hello, Charles? Zelda Clein here. Thank you for arranging that *accident* in the video library. I owe you one.”

There was a pause as the caller asked her a question.

“Why? I guess to teach those two a lesson. Augustus has terrible taste in movies, and Heywood will learn how to beat him at his own game if he ever learns to check his temper. And besides, I found none of his movies funny. He may be one of us Jews, but Mel Brooks’s sense of humor is warped. Thanks again, Charles.”

She hung up the phone and took another sip. “*Blazing Saddles*... hah, puah!” she said with a pretended spit on the floor in disgust.

The Pig ‘N’ Whistle was an Irish Bar not too far from 58th Street and a frequent after-hours spot for Heywood to drown his sorrows while chewing the fat with the friendly bartenders, always ready to lend a helpful ear.

“...and turns out, the only copy of the damn movie gets torn up somehow in the video library!”

Heywood and the bartender shared a long and loud bellyaching laugh. As he finished a beer, the bartender replenished his glass.

“That’s a helluva story.”

“Yeaah, it is, izzn’t?” Heywood said, his speech very slurred from the libations. “But there’s one...one thing that’s been buggin’ me.”

“What’s that?”

“This morning, I...ca-called the video library...to double check that all possible selections were available before we picked 5...and they said they were present and counted for.”

“So?” The bartender replied.

“So...don’t ya think it’s kinda weird, the exact tape in question gets sabotaged at the last minute?”

The two share a moment of silence to reflect.

“Ah! You’re thinking too much into things!” the bartender dismissed, stepping away to tend to another customer.

“Maybe!” he yelled to his back. “Or maybe I got me a guardian angel...” he murmured to himself and took another swig of his beer.

At 111 Wadsworth Avenue was a thirty-two-story high rise apartment complex, one of the four iconic “Bridge Apartments” that stood mere blocks away from the George Washington Bus Terminal and the infamous suspension bridge itself.

Robin entered apartment 16D at seven in the evening. He lowered his book bag next to the door. The living room was dark and lit only by a television playing the local Fox 5 news moments before *A Current Affair* would come on.

To the left of Robin was the kitchen and on his right was a writing desk, followed by the hallway leading to one of the two bedrooms in the apartment. At the opposite side of the living room, in front of the windows tending to a series of house plants of different sizes, an elderly gentleman wearing a house robe stood with his back to Robin. He reached over to the light switch and flicked the lights on and off twice in order to gain attention without startling his deaf grandfather and announce his arrival.

At the age of seventy-seven, Jon Walker had seen it all but had been a while since he heard any of it. A retired track worker for the MTA, Jon worked the underground tunnels of New York City’s subway system for over twenty-five years. He began losing his sense of hearing when he was forty-seven but continued working for ten more years until he retired despite becoming completely deaf at fifty-five.

When Robin was six, his mother left him to be raised by Jon in hopes a male influence would change his developing destructive behavior. She was right. The two overcame a communications gap in which Robin learned sign language, and by the time he was thirteen, he had become a disciplined teenager exhibiting multiple talents and creative hobbies.

“You are late, young man!” Jon signed to him.

“I’m sorry, I stayed an extra hour at the new job. Today was my first day,” Robin signed back.



“There’re some french fries in the oven. Heat them up for 10 minutes. You have any homework?”

“Just my paper for Basic Writing. I have a draft already done.”

“Good. I want to proofread the final copy when it’s finished before you hand it in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Robin walked into the kitchen and turned the oven to 425 degrees, then returned to the living room where Jon was sitting in a recliner under a tall floor lamp reading the latest copy of *Reader's Digest*. As he approached the TV’s cable box to change the channel, Jon protested with a grunt.

“Leave it.”

“But you’re reading...”

“I *said* leave it!”

Robin rolled his eyes and took a seat on the couch. A moment passed, and Jon closed the book.

“How’s this new library you’re at now? The staff friendly? Like up here?”

With a shrug, Robin replied, “You could say that.” But to himself he thought, *I wouldn't, though.*

There was no point having his grandfather worry about him not fitting in.

“Can I please change the channel now?”

“Oh, go ahead!” Jon signed with a wave of annoyance.

Robin stood up and changed the channel, then returned to the kitchen and poured a plateful of fries from a pan in the oven. He opened a cupboard for the salt and sat back on the couch. Jon noticed Robin failed to get a fork and was eating with his hands but let him be.

“Don’t let this job distract you from your studies. You think you can pull this off? Going to school while working part-time?”

“I think so. I have a feeling I’m going be there for a while,” Robin signed to his grandfather and smiled as he raised a fry to him in a friendly salute.