

Chapter One

“The homeless man claimed he had been sleeping in the school furnace room for over three months. ‘The weekends were the best,’ he said. ‘There weren’t no one in the school—not even janitors. I even took myself a shower in the boys’ change room a time or two. Slept like a top those nights.’”

Tara popped a grape into her mouth and continued reading.

“The man had used a ground-level vent to get into the building. Every night after dark, he removed the covering, lowered himself into the school basement and then pulled the vent back into place behind him. His hiding spot was discovered by accident. The vent cover fell off last week, attracting a curious skunk that decided to take a stroll through the school. When students and teachers started screaming and running for cover, the skunk took off back the way it had come. It was the custodian following behind who discovered the homeless man’s makeshift bed behind the furnace. Police were called in, and the man was apprehended when he entered the building later that night. The skunk made a clean getaway.”

Tara lowered the newspaper. “Well, good for the skunk. I feel bad for the guy though. He wasn’t hurting anybody. He just wanted a place to sleep.”

I waved my fingers at the newspaper. “Keep reading.”

“The school board hasn’t pressed charges. In

fact, school trustee Norma Swanson took the story to a city council meeting. She urged members to look into the matter. ‘If there aren’t sufficient shelters and soup kitchens to address the needs of this community’s less fortunate, something needs to be done,’ she told councilors.”

“Let’s hope Ms. Swanson’s voice was heard.” Tara put down the paper, ate another grape and looked at me wide-eyed. “Good story, Laurel!”

“You seem surprised,” I said. I wasn’t ready for *The New York Times*, but I was capable of stringing a few sentences together.

“I am.”

My mouth dropped open.

“Well, not that you can write a good story,” she backtracked. “It’s just that this is way different from your usual stuff.”

I sighed. “I know. Compared to reports on school dances and who’s getting cosy with who, this story is definitely more meaningful.”

“Exactly,” Tara agreed. “It’s important. It’s news!”

“Right,” I smiled. “Thanks, Tara.”

“You’re welcome, but—” She frowned. “Where did you get it? I mean how’d you find out about it? I knew about the skunk, but not the homeless guy.”

I clucked my tongue and tried to look shocked. “Surely you don’t expect me to reveal my sources?”

“Uh, yeah,” said Tara. “I do.”

I shrugged. “It was a combination of luck and eavesdropping. The day after the skunk incident, Miss Benson sent me to the office to get paper clips. The secretary wasn’t there. While I was waiting for her to come back, I heard Mr. Wiens talking to some woman in his office. The door was wide-open, so the conversation was hard to miss.”

“What were they talking about?”

“The homeless man. Mr. Wiens was telling the woman how he felt bad about kicking the guy out, because he had nowhere else to go.”

“Who was the woman?” Tara asked.

“I’m getting there,” I said. “Just listen. The woman said she would raise the issue at the next city council meeting.”

Tara chewed on her lip.

“Ah...,” she said. “I bet she’s a trustee.”

“Right.” I nodded. “So anyway, after that I found out when the next city council meeting was, and I went. I had to sit for over an hour listening to half the city complain about streetlights and speed bumps before it was Ms. Swanson’s turn. Talk about boring.”

“Wow. You really did chase down this story. But how did you know about the guy showering in the boys’ change room?” she asked. “Laurel Quinn, you didn’t make that stuff up, did you?”

This time I was shocked for real. “Of course I didn’t! After school I just hung around for a couple of hours. I thought maybe the guy would come back.”

“And did he?”

I nodded. “He didn’t try to get in, but he did come back. At first I wasn’t sure it was him. But how many