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It was night.

I had everything unpacked finally. Empty moving boxes piled in a heap—the cardboard symbols of starting over. (Harrison Beckworth-McCoy's line, not mine.)

My room: light yellow walls, blue rug, bed at an angle between the two windows; tangerine quilt with yellow piping.

Everything seemed like it belonged there.

Except me.

When does the magic hit in a new place and you suddenly fit in?

In Brooklyn it hit when I met Miriam. In Pensacola it hit when I got to be a waitress. In Atlanta it happened when I stopped fighting.

I studied the black leather boxing gloves hanging behind my bedroom door.

Not every girl can say that boxing saved her.

I learned to box when I was eleven. I thought it was just to do something physical, but Addie knew different. She had a

policeman friend, Mickey Kazdan, who boxed. He'd take me to the ring and show me the moves—how to dance lightly around an opponent, how to protect my face, how to do quick jabs. I never fought anyone; I just punched the bag, swinging away until I was exhausted.

One day I went to the gym and was punching the big bag when a chord deep down in me connected to fury. I hit the bag harder, harder, tears streaming down my face. I was punching with jabs and rights and left hooks. I'm told I was saying, "You shouldn't have done it! You shouldn't have!" Mickey Kazdan stood by me telling people to back off.

"Punch it out, slugger, until it's all gone."

I hit and punched and cried at the injustice of being left by my mother with tubes in my nose and monitors on my chest. After I had no more punch in me, I fell in a heap on the floor.

The rage was out.

I took off my gloves that day and hung them on the back of my bedroom door. I keep them there to remind me that my fighting days are over.

I almost put them back on after what Gleason Beal did. I was dying to hit something.

I looked out the window at the dark street below. Opened my scrapbook and wrote:

Transitional teen seeks whereabouts of true father. No questions asked. No leads too small.

I turned to the back section of the scrapbook where I keep The Dads. Over the years I've cut out pictures of men from magazines that I thought looked like father material. Not guys

with rock-star hair or strange clothes—businessmen mostly, all with great smiles. Some of them I got from life insurance ads; they were holding their kids and looking like they'd never leave them. Steadfastness is the best trait for a father, in my opinion, and believe me, I've studied the species. When you're in food service, you see the best and worst of parenting on any given weekend.

I smoothed back my hair, sat Edgar, my stuffed pelican, on the pillow.

Enter fantasy.

Music swells.

"Dad, I need to talk to you about something important."

I picture him instantly putting down the significant stack of papers he's working on. He turns around in his green leather chair. He has a deep, kind voice. "Well, of course, Hope. I always have time for you."

"I know, Dad, that you've been all over the world and you've managed to make those transitions easily because you're the kind of person who doesn't let change throw you, but I'm having some problems doing that here. I'm doing stuff with people, I'm involved and all, but deep down I don't feel like I fit in Wisconsin. I'm more of a big-city person, like you."

I picked up Edgar, hugged him. "I can't seem to get over the fact that you aren't here, Dad. I'm trying to be hopeful, but it's hard. Sometimes I wonder if I should change my name to something that doesn't lug so much responsibility with it. Susan, maybe. Lucy.

"If you could give me some advice right now about my life

and how long it's going to take you to find me, I'd sure appreciate it."

I waited, listening to the soft ticks of my alarm clock.
Sometimes this game works and sometimes it doesn't.

3:14 A.M.

Still awake and emoting.

I took out my Roget's thesaurus, which lists words that have the same meaning. If you're a word person like me, you can't live without one. Say you're trying to get an idea across, like *Gleason Beal is a thief*. You can look up the word "thief" in the thesaurus and come up with a slew of even better slams to help you work out your intense feelings.

Gleason Beal is a . . .

. . . robber.

. . . stealer.

. . . purloiner (I like that one).

. . . larcenist.

. . . pilferer.

. . . poacher.

. . . swindler.

I flipped to the H section.

Hope is . . .

. . . belief.

. . . credence.

. . . faith.

. . . trust.

. . . confidence.

. . . assurance.

I lay on the bed, holding the thesaurus, trying to live up to my name.

I lurched toward dawn. Got to work at 5:00 A.M., a half-hour early (points for me), to set up for the breakfast crowd. Addie had been baking bread since four. I learned years ago not to try to outwork that woman. Braverman wasn't due in until later that morning. No tall presence overshadowing the grill. I kind of missed him.

There's something about diner setup that soothes the soul. Something about making good coffee in a huge urn glistening in fluorescent light, something sweet about filling syrup pitchers and lining them on the back counter like soldiers ready to advance. It gives you courage to face another day.

The doors opened at 6:00 A.M. By seven, we were packed.

In minutes, I got every kind of sitter at the counter. I love watching people sit down. There are ploppers, slammers, sliders, swivelers, and my personal favorite, flutterers, who poise suspended above the seat and move up and down over it before finally lighting.

At the galley window I heard Lou Ellen snarl to someone: "*I had to drive forty miles with a baby to get this job. That Hope just waltzes in here—no interview—like she owns the place.*"

Like *I* had a choice in any of this.

I rammed into high gear to show her up.

Stepped over the legs of a burly construction worker that were stretched out in the aisle. Some people do not know how to behave in public. Daphne Kroll, night waitress at the

Humdinger Diner, would just stop dead in front of someone with loose legs and say, "Honey, are you charging a toll, or is passage free today?" Daphne could get away with that because she was middle-aged and built like a walk-in cooler. When you're sixteen, trust me, step over the legs.

At the counter listening to Adam Pulver tell G.T. about his uncle Sid, who is a spin doctor and had helped two congressmen win seats in the last two elections.

"Spin doctor . . ." Flo was clearing plates, listening in like a good waitress should. "You mean one of those fellas who takes what people say and turns it around to mean something else? They give me a headache."

Adam rose defensively. "My uncle is a genius. The last guy he worked for was behind thirty-five points in the polls. Uncle Sid found the button of the district and his candidate *won*."

G.T. sipped his coffee. "What was the button?"

Adam's face got reverent. "Waste disposal. Uncle Sid is coming to visit tomorrow. He says you have one of the most interesting campaigns he's ever heard of, G.T., and he'd like to meet you."

G.T. smiled, but didn't say anything.

Adam lowered his voice. "He's going to be staying with us while his ulcer heals."

Flo piped in, "I don't think G.T. needs a spin doctor."

Adam bolted up. "*Everyone* needs a spin doctor."

Sid Vole, spin doctor supreme, is eating a farmer's breakfast special not exactly for the ulcer sufferer: three eggs scrambled

with onions, peppers, and sausage; Addie's life-changing hash browns; a side of buckwheat pancakes with real maple syrup; melon chunks; black coffee. He has a round baby face like Adam and styled, shellacked hair.

He's sitting at the big eight-top surrounded by Adam, G.T., Brice, Jillian, and G.T.'s barber, Slick Bixby, who just said that after thirty-five years of cutting hair, he knows Mulhoney, Wisconsin, like only a man who wields his scissors on the great and the below average can. I'm the waitress—a direct challenge because people keep pulling up chairs to the table and wanting coffee. I'd bring it; then it would dawn on them that they wanted an English muffin; then some orange juice; maybe a fat stack of Addie's brown sugar pecan pancakes that were beginning to catch fire in town. I'm doing my best to make life nice for everyone, but it's not like this is the only table I've got.

Pastor Al B. Hall comes into the diner like a bolt of lightning. That man knows how to make an entrance. G.T. waves him over. I bring his coffee as Sid Vole takes a pill and leans back, arms behind his head.

"It takes a clear vision to win in politics. You clarify that—ram that baby home whenever someone asks you a question—doesn't matter what the question is; doesn't matter who's asking—just find a way to jump into the vision thing and you'll sting like a bee."

G.T. and Slick look at each other. Pastor Hall orders huevos rancheros (Mexican eggs and tortillas with hot sauce)—people with guts order that. I pour more coffee for everyone.

“Basically,” Sid Vole explains, “the whole messy game of politics is about trust. Search for leadership in the age of cynicism. The cancer could work for you, G.T. It’s a fresh angle. People sense you can feel their pain. The problem is dying. I guess that’s always the problem.” Sid Vole chuckles. “I think your best shot is to stay above the fray. Be *Mr. Clean*.” He looks at G.T.’s shiny head. “We could get you an earring like that genie on the disinfectant cleaner.”

G.T. laughs and shakes his head.

“Maybe that’s overkill, no pun intended. Millstone’s got a big problem with you because you’re going to have people’s sympathy even if they don’t vote your way. If Millstone hits too hard he could demonize himself, which is what you pray for. But you’ve got to know how to play this trust thing just right.”

My head is swimming.

I walk fast to the galley window, call in, “Huevos.” Waitresses order in shorthand—saves time. Braverman flips his spatula in the air and nods. I miss the way Morty the cabdriver talked about politics—he’d sit at the counter, pounding his knife, spearing dinner rolls, screaming that politicians were out to get the little guy.

Yuri’s cleaning tables like a machine. He looks at me, smiling. “Someday I vote American.”

“Me, too, Yuri.”

He takes a book from his pocket, *Moving Toward Citizenship*.

He opens the book, points to the word *freedom*. “Best word,” he says with feeling.

“The best.” I’m grinning as I bring two guys Blistermeyer’s Death Sauce for their eggs.

Three women plop next to the big table, saying how they’ve heard about the wonderful food here.

“Welcome, women.”

I hear Sid Vole: “Politics is war—don’t ever forget that. In the words of that great military strategist Napoleon Bonaparte, the number-one thing that is going to make this campaign succeed is ‘to keep our forces united, to be vulnerable at no point, to bear down with rapidity upon important points’—these are ‘the principles which insure victory.’ ”

Adam is glowing, writing it all down.

The three women order decaf with skim milk; herbal tea with brown sugar; iced tea with a “bendy” straw and a little honey on the side.

Labor intensive. I write the order down, trying to catch snippets.

Slick: “Here’s the problem, Sid—people know G.T. as laid-back. I’m not sure hitting so hard is what he’s about.”

No response from G.T., who is looking out the window at the black hearse that has parked in front of the diner again.

Sid: “That’s an old trick. My advice is, find out this mayor’s weakest point and send out a strong visual reminder to him and the voters.”

Adam half rises in vindication.

G.T. sniffs. “My mother wouldn’t have liked that much.”

“Mothers aren’t usually an asset in politics.”

“Mine is.”

Huevos up. Swing up to the window, swing back to Al B. Hall, who says, "Bless you," and would I get him a bottle of Satan's Red-Hot Revenge for the eggs?

Sure thing, Pastor.

G.T. gets up without a word, goes out the door, walks right to that hearse, and shakes the driver's hand. Everyone in the Welcome Stairways is standing now, looking out the windows.

Sid Vole whispers, "This is risky. Meeting the enemy."

G.T. opens the hearse's door and motions for the man to come inside. The man doesn't want to, he's all rattled—bullies usually are when you confront them—but G.T. takes him kindly by the arm and leads him up the red welcome stairways, into the diner, and right to the big table. He puts a menu in the thug's hand and says to me, "Now, Hope, you get my friend here whatever he wants for breakfast."

The man says he isn't hungry, really; he has to go, but I sense deep within his thugness that he needs a special meal. So I say, "May I recommend Addie's homemade corned beef hash and fried eggs with a big piece of maple corn bread slathered with salted butter?"

The thug gulps. I have him. He nods, hands me the menu. I doubt he will leave a tip, but this isn't about money.

"Sir, can I get you some coffee, juice?"

"Coffee," he says, warming to my power.

"Coffee it is."

I speed off to the galley, where I'm about to call in the order.

The hash and eggs are already frying.

"I heard," Addie says.

The sweet synergy of food service.

Braverman tosses a cherry tomato in the air and catches it in his mouth.

I bring the thug his coffee as G.T. is saying, "The thing I hate most about dying is how we deny its existence for as long as we can. Nobody knows how long they've got on this earth. And we all need to live our lives just a little bit like the hearse is outside ready to cart us away—make the days count. That doesn't mean living in fear, but we don't have to be dumb bunnies either and take life for granted. I thank you for that reminder, friend. You cruise by with that old thing anytime you want."

The thug looks down at his coffee, grabs the mug with two hands, as several people in the diner start applauding. Then more people start and soon everyone is clapping. I would be clapping, too, except I'm carrying four of Addie's tomato-and-leek breakfast pizzas to table twelve, so I throw back my head and shout, "Yes!" Sid Vole thumps G.T. on the back with political glee. Adam shouts that G.T.'s petition is at the register if anyone wants to sign. People stream up to sign that thing.

Addie dings the bell twice. My signal. I sweep to the galley window; take that thug's plate steaming with everything a human being could hope for in a breakfast. Place it gently in front of him and slip away.

Sometimes you hover and sometimes you let the food do the work.

8

To spin or not to spin.

That was the question.

Everyone, minus Sid Vole, was still gathered at the big table.

"This campaign," snarled Slick Bixby, "doesn't need a spin doctor."

Pastor Hall leaned forward. "I'm not so sure. How many of us understand politics?" No hands were raised. "How many of us have any idea how to get someone elected?"

"We haven't got money for this!" Slick Bixby protested.

G.T. sipped his coffee. "Sid said given what we're trying to do here, he'd lower his rate considerably." He turned to me. "What do you think, Hope?"

Well, I was shocked to be asked, but I knew enough not to shrug. Adults hate it when teenagers do that. "I think it's like working with a brilliant, difficult cook, G.T. You put up with a lot to get the magic."

G.T. slapped the table and said that was exactly right.

Al B. Hall shouted, "Are you paying this young woman enough?"

I smiled extravagantly because I can always use more cash.

"We're ready to order, dear." A woman at the front window booth waved her napkin at me, cutting short my moment in the sun.

Five days passed. Strange days. We'd gotten 227 signatures on the petition and were waiting for the official nod from the Election Board that G.T. was on the ballot. But like Sid Vole said, you never stand still in politics, you keep blazing new trails on the campaign front and looking behind you in case the opposition is trying to steal your wallet.

Politics gripped the town.

Everyone had an opinion about G.T., honesty, disease, and why suddenly the tax assessor's office was closed.

"They're doing something to the dairy's tax records," Braverman shouted.

Working the counter was like hosting one of those angry TV shows where people screamed at each other and no one ever got to finish a thought.

Emotion gripped the kitchen, but it wasn't political. Addie introduced her butterscotch cream pie and marinated flank steak to rave reviews. She was pushing perfection out of that kitchen and refining Braverman in the process.

"My boy, when you're cutting a chicken, you want a clean severing at the bone. You don't want snags or shards breaking off, now do you?"

"No," said Braverman, towering over a raw chicken.

"A chicken is a gift from God, but *only* when it is properly prepared. A badly prepared chicken is a gift to no one."

Braverman nodded grimly.

"And *meatloaf*," Addie cried, "is not to be abused. You don't shove it in a pan with tomato juice and oatmeal. You mold it with care. You mix it with onions and spices and Worcester sauce and form it into a free-standing loaf and *never* put it in a loaf pan. You slather it with barbecue sauce, which caramelizes over the loaf when it cooks."

It was clear Braverman had not spent much time thinking about meatloaf.

I left them alone. Trekked outside to take my break. Sat on a bench in the garden. The sun smiled down on the rows of trees, a stone path curled between them. Nothing overdone, just natural beauty all around. G.T. walked from behind a big tree.

"You had the tour out back?"

I shook my head.

"Well, come on over here and meet my memories."

I walked over; he pulled a few dead leaves off the biggest tree. "I planted this oak twenty-five years ago when I got married. You would have liked my wife, Hope. Gracie was tough like you."

I smiled—a tough one.

He walked over to a smaller tree that had lost most of its pink flowers. "Planted this dogwood four years ago when she died."

I gulped. "I'm sorry . . ."

He picked up a pink flower from the ground. "She managed the diner from bed and the couch upstairs. Did the books,

thought up the menus. Gracie'd been sick with rheumatoid arthritis for years, but it didn't stop her." He kept walking. "Those white birches are for the three grocery stores my parents owned. My folks were always half broke from giving food away to people who needed it. This Japanese maple went in the ground eight years ago when Al opened his church."

It had beautiful red leaves. "You must be good friends."

He slapped the bark. "He doesn't walk out on me when I overcook a steak and I don't walk out on him when his sermons get too long."

He knelt down chuckling, scooped up dirt from the ground, let it run through his fingers.

I stood there wondering if he could beat the cancer or if it would beat him.

"Know why I plant trees?"

"No."

"I like thinking they'll be here long after I'm gone. All those fine memories pushing up to the sky."

I thought about all the times I'd written HOPE WAS HERE above dessert cases, bedroom doors, and on boarded-up windows.

A sweet breeze blew, rustling the tree leaves.

"I hope you're here for the longest time possible, G.T."

He smiled so full. He had the kind of smile that took over his face.

Right then the back door creaked open and Adam Pulver slumped toward us in all-out grief.

G.T. stood up. "What is it?"

Adam shook his head like he was lost.

"The Election Board said fifty-five of our names had wrong information." He lowered his head. "G.T., they say you're off the ballot."

"*What?*" I stormed forward.

Adam was close to tears. "I don't know how it happened. We checked every name *three times*."

G.T. sat quietly at the counter, staring into his full coffee cup.

Adam kept saying he hadn't meant to mess up.

Addie was pained, peering out from the kitchen.

Yuri looked miserably into a bus pan of dirty dishes. "We are all together sad."

Braverman threw his Milwaukee Brewers hat on the floor. "Millstone got to someone at the Election Board!"

Sid Vole ate a toasted pecan roll, hearing everyone out, which surprised me. He popped an ulcer pill, downed it with black coffee. "First lesson in politics. Don't let a locked door stop you. I'd advise a showdown at the Election Board tomorrow morning. It's the only way."

Braverman and I had to work that night and I wasn't in the mood for hassle. Lou Ellen was working, too. Skating on the edge was more like it. She looked like she hadn't slept in a week. Her pale face was drawn. Her hands were shaking. She guzzled her fourth Coke of the evening.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Her eyes seem almost soft. "No," she says, and starts crying.

"You want to take a break?"

"No." She's crying harder.

"I think it might be a good idea."

The waitress bell. "Flank steaks up," Braverman says.

"That's me, Lou Ellen. I'll be right back."

"My baby's sick, Hope."

I stop. "I'm sorry."

"She's not eating right and the doctor says she's not gaining weight like she should. She's fourteen months old, old enough to be sitting up herself, and she's not doing that either."

"Ob..."

The bell again.

Give me a break, Braverman.

"My mom said I must have done something wrong when I was pregnant, but I did everything the doctor said. I swear to God!"

"I believe you."

Two angry dings from the kitchen.

I lead her to the counter to sit down. Run to the galley window. Grab the flank steaks. Braverman barks, "You got something better to do than pick up your order?"

I say nothing. I'm a professional. I remind myself that cooks work all day in hot enclosed places and this alters their brains. Deliver the flank steaks as Lou Ellen breaks down crying by the dessert case. I never thought of her having such a trial.

That's when the front door opens and into my life pours an army of laughing, boisterous men who announce they're all from the Elks Lodge and boy are they hungry.

They fill the eight window booths.

In seconds, I'm in the weeds.

I ram into fourth gear.

Run past Lou Ellen, who's a basket case. Tell her I'll be with her in a minute. Give everyone menus. Calmly tell the Elks that I'm going to get to them one at a time, I swear.

"This herd's not going anywhere, little lady," an old Elk says, which breaks the others up. I laugh, too, although inside I'm dying.

I break free, rush to Lou Ellen, who says, "I'm too upset to work, Hope. I don't mean to leave you flat. I just don't think . . ." She's crying again.

I grab her hand. "Go home."

My head's spinning with sick babies and election boards. Six more Elks take the corner booth. The herd is growing.

I run to the kitchen, raise my finger to Braverman. "I've got four dozen hungry Elks out there that could start a stampede at any minute. Don't push my buttons, Braverman."

"Do they all have antlers?"

"They all have menus. *Get ready.*"

He swings into action.

I shout, "*Yuri, I'm in the weeds!*"

Yuri rushes out from the supply closet, confused.

"Explain, please . . . weeds."

"*Lines like Russia!*"

"*I help for you!*"

I burst from the kitchen, Warrior Waitress, stand by those booths, yucking it up at bad jokes.

How many elks does it take to change a lightbulb?

None. They can see in the dark.

Flash my pearly whites at them and they grin back.

To make it in the food biz you'd better know about feeding animals.

"Welcome, men." Yuri's running with water and setups. "You come . . . from afar?"

"Just down the street," the head Elk says.

I've faced hungry herds before. If a lot of them order the same thing, it'll be easier on me and Braverman.

"Just to let you know we've got a delicious pork-chop sandwich and a meatloaf special that is famous up and down the East Coast."

That gets them. Meat men order fast.

Fourteen pork chops; twenty-one meatloaves. Six burger specials. Seven bowls of chili.

But there's always a turkey.

He was big with an attitude. "I need *my* order fast," he informs me, checking his watch. No eye contact.

"What did you order, sir?"

"I just told you."

I take a deep breath. I've just taken dozens of orders. "You're going to have to give me a little hint . . ."

"Begins with P," he says.

Pig, I think, pushing down anger. "Could that be *pork*, sir?"

I don't wait for his answer. That's what he's getting.

I race to the galley. Call in the orders. "And fire me one pork pronto for a bozo."

"It's going to get crazy in here now!" Braverman shouts, moving like a machine.

Serving salads, tossing rolls in baskets. Keep focused, keep

the smile. Everyone's talking between booths, so I play the room like my mom taught me.

"How many want coffee?"

A sea of hands.

"I'm going to make an extra pot. Would the most caffeine needy raise your hands higher?"

Good laughs.

I pour, grinning. Deliver Bozo Man's pork-chop sandwich. He doesn't say thank you.

Ding. Ding.

Six plates layered on my left arm. I make the trip again and again from the kitchen.

"Is everybody having a good time?" I shout.

Oh yeah, we sure are!

"More coffee?"

Oh yeah.

And I move through it.

I always do.

Braverman doesn't mess up once either. Yuri gets Bus Man of the Year.

Finally, the herd leaves. I pick up my excellent tips and wave good-bye like a frontier woman in an old Western.

I give Yuri a big tip. Waitresses always tip bus people at the end of the shift.

I clean the tables and the counter; fill ketchups, mustards. Wipe down the coffee urns. Walk back into the kitchen.

Braverman is chopping onions. He has a lighted candle that casts a weird shadow by the chopping block. His big hands

move slow compared with Addie's. He doesn't say anything; I don't either. I wonder where he lives and how he feels about not going to college.

Braverman looks at his onion. "You did a good job tonight, Hope."

"So did you."

Chop, chop. "Look, I'm sorry I yelled at you about the flank steaks."

I never once had a cook apologize. "It's okay, Braverman. It's been a hard day."

"You look tired. I'll lock up."

I can hardly keep my eyes open. "I'll let you."

9

Election Board desk, 9:00 A.M.

Present: G.T., Braverman, Adam, Sid Vole, Brice, Jillian, Pastor Hall, and me. We were all wearing red-and-blue campaign buttons—STOOP FOR MAYOR was a little off-center. Adam had stayed up late making them with the button machine he had gotten for his birthday. He *knew* they were off-center and he didn't want to hear any comments because we were a campaign *without* T-shirts, bumper stickers, or decent giveaways of any kind. This was it, and we'd better be grateful.

I was working hard to be grateful as the Election Board administrator looked past the buttons and refused to smile at several key moments.

When Sid Vole told her that he knew the governor.

When Adam told her he had been an intern in this very office during spring break and being back was just like coming home.

She showed us the fifty-five names that were a problem—all had the wrong addresses.

Braverman threw his hands up. "That's impossible."

G.T. asked her how, in her opinion, this could have happened.

"Inexperience," she barked, which caused Adam and Sid Vole to turn maroon.

"I wonder," G.T. continued, "if something else happened. Was there ever a mistake on the Election Board listings? A series of mistakes?"

"No," she snapped.

"That's certainly been known to happen," Sid Vole observed.

"Not here," she said sharply.

G.T. stepped forward. "Ma'am, I don't know if you can do it, but I've come to ask the Election Board to give us a little more time. I can promise you that—"

She shuffled the papers on her desk. "I can't do that, Mr. Stoop. Rules are rules."

G.T. bowed his head sadly. "I appreciate you hearing me out."

It was over.

We stood there frozen.

That's when Pastor Hall marched up smiling at that administrator, energy pouring off him. "You know what I love about the Lord?" he asked her.

That startled woman shook her head.

Al B. Hall grinned deep. "That his mercies are new every morning. He always gives a second chance."

The woman fidgeted in her chair.

"Always," Al B. Hall continued, pointing right at her. "Even if we imperfect beings mess up again and again and do things that we'll regret for *years* to come. The Lord is there understanding our weakness, reaching out his kind, *forgiving* hand and saying, 'Let me help you change your ways. Let me give you my love for people. Let me fill you with my . . . ' " he leaned forward, " *'mercy.'* " He clapped his hands. "And isn't it a fine thing to know that right now God Almighty is looking down at us wanting to lead us in the way that is best? *Doesn't that make you want to shout hallelujah?*"

"Hallelujah," said Braverman and Adam.

The Election Board administrator grabbed her necklace.

"I . . . I suppose . . . I could . . ." She stopped short.

Pastor Hall helped her out. *"Reconsider."*

"I . . . could give you . . . well . . . until five today."

Yes!

"God bless you!" Pastor Hall shook her pudgy hand. "Doesn't it feel good to do the Lord's work?"

We decided not to wait for her answer and ran out the door tripping over each other in a great show of uncoordination, despite our buttons.

"Get as many extra names as you can," Sid Vole shouted, "and check every one against the master list. We take this hill at all costs!" He turned to Al B. Hall. "Pastor, you know how to spin."

Pastor Hall cocked his bush hat and grinned.

We spread out like detectives trying to find an escaped convict.

Farmer's Market. Bustling with people. Addie was with me, spitting mad about G.T.'s Election Board hassle; browbeating the local growers in her search for proper tomatoes and meaningful garlic.

I'd gotten one signature in an hour from Deputy Babcock, but one signature wasn't going to help much. Too many people there were from other towns and couldn't vote in our district. I walked to the parking lot to accost newcomers.

Two guys shuffled toward me. They looked old enough to vote, but they didn't look like they'd showered. They were poking each other, laughing too hard. I moved off.

Too late.

"Ohhhh," said one. "She don't like us."

One raced in front of me, the other one got behind me.

They looked me up and down. "But we like her." The tall one moved in close. "You got a boyfriend?"

I put my hand up. "Get away from me."

They were blocking my path. I tried to get past them: couldn't. There was no one else around.

"I'd like to be your boyfriend."

Their leering faces made me sick. One of them grabbed my petition, the other pointed at my STOOP button and said I was stupid to be doing what I was doing. I told him to back off; G.T. was a good man. The tall one grabbed my arm, started pulling me toward him. Fear shot through me. I bent over low like I'd learned in boxing.

"Help!" I yelled. "*Help!*"

"Now why'd you go do that?" I could smell his rancid breath.

I saw Deputy Babcock running toward me. Addie was sprinting behind her.

That's why.

"What's going on here?" Deputy Babcock shouted.

"Nuthin'," said one of the guys, dropping the petition on the ground. He had stained brown teeth.

I broke free. "They wouldn't let me pass. They took my petition." I pointed to the tall one. "He was grabbing my arm."

Deputy Babcock, hand on her gun, stared them down. "That doesn't sound like nothing to me."

"Well . . ." the taller one mumbled. "You don't come from these parts, *ma'am*." He didn't look at her when he said it. His voice showed his disrespect.

A moron and a racist. The two sure go together.

Deputy Babcock didn't flinch. "That's right. I come from a real big city where we call this *harassment*." She said to me, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." I was shaking.

"I'll get your statement later."

She took her gun from her holster, motioned those creeps toward her squad car. "You have the right to remain silent, *gentlemen*."

I'd never heard anyone say that except on television.

"*We didn't do nuthin'!*"

"Duly noted." She marched those lowlifes forward, reading them their rights.

Addie was by my side now. "You all right?"

I picked up the petition with shaking hands. "I think so."

"Good Lord," she wailed, "I thought small towns were safe."

A farmer was next to us now. "They're bad ones. The whole family of Carbingers is. Five boys, each one worse than the next. They live on the edge of town. Try to stay away from them."

I made it my life goal to do just that.

An old woman walked slowly up to me, handed me a beautiful orange flower with a long stem.

"I'm Mavis Pettibone." She had a gravelly voice. "G.T. probably knows what he's in for. I'm not sure you do. Put this daylily in water in a sunny place and watch what happens. Whatever you do to help his campaign—*whatever* happens, girl—you remember the power of the light."

I stood there gripping the flower.

I poured water in a tall, thin vase, plopped the daylily in, and placed it near our kitchen window. I didn't hold out much hope for this flower. It looked withered, closed, and utterly dead.

I ran downstairs to help Flo through the dinner rush. Addie's tamale pie with cornmeal pastry was selling like lotto tickets.

Adam strutted into the diner and gave the news.

They made it to the Election Board at 4:58.

G.T. was officially on the ballot.

I did a little dance and Flo joined me.

Braverman flipped his spatula high in the air and caught it behind his back.

When hope gets released in a place, all kinds of things are possible.

The next morning, Mrs. Pettibone's daylily stood tall in that vase, fully opened—soaking up the goodness of the light.

"We've got ourselves an official horse race now, G.T."

Eli Millstone walked to the counter to shake G.T.'s hand. He had a photographer with him who took a picture of the handshake.

Millstone held up a campaign poster of himself. "I don't suppose you'll be wanting to put this up in your front window by any chance, will you, G.T.?" He smiled so the photographer could get a shot of him being folksy.

G.T. gave him a menu and said he'd buy him breakfast.

"You're not trying to buy me off, are you, G.T.? That's taking unfair advantage." He said this loud.

"I'm glad you brought that up, Eli. Buying people off is one of the things we need to talk about in this campaign."

Flo almost dropped her coffeepot.

"Those are fighting words, G.T., especially from a man in *your* condition."

G.T. put his hands in his pockets. "Eli, has your relationship with the Real Fresh Dairy compromised the interests of this town?"

The whole place went quiet.

"That dairy," Millstone sputtered, "is the biggest thing that ever happened to this town!"

"It's blocks long. I'll give you that."

A loud whistle from the kitchen.

The photographer was clicking away. Millstone screamed, "*Stop that!*"

Down went the Nikon.

Up came the bull.

Millstone straightened his shoulders; found the old smile; looked into the eyes of all those registered voters.

"Good people of Mulhoney, I can assure you that I have always worked to protect your interests. I have dedicated myself to bringing a better life to every man, woman, and child in this town."

He adjusted his expensive gold watch; the photographer clicked off a few shots.

"Mr. Mayor." Cecelia Culpepper rose from her seat at the counter. "When will you be releasing the names of your campaign contributors?"

His eyes flashed. "You'll have to talk to my office about that."

He gave a meaningful salute to the voters and was halfway out the door when Cecelia Culpepper shouted, "No one's returned my calls."

Millstone kept on walking.

10

Lou Ellen's baby, Anastasia, was lying in the portable playpen that had been set up in the back office that Adam had turned into Campaign Central. Red, white, and blue streamers curled across the ceiling; small American flags stood on the desk, a computer printout of Adam's first-draft campaign slogan was taped to the wall—STOOP FOR MAYOR—A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS AND ALL REASONS. It needed work.

Lou Ellen was looking at Anastasia, who wasn't playing with any of her toys.

"The doctor says she's got development problems." Lou Ellen said it defensively. "I've got to watch her for a few weeks because they can't do it right at day care and my mom can't look after her on account of her job. G.T. said I could bring her here."

"It's real good you did," Flo said reassuringly.

We were going to take turns watching Anastasia so Lou Ellen could work. She kept saying the baby would be fine, we didn't have to put ourselves out.

"Stop that, honey," Flo directed. "Let us help you through this."

Lou Ellen went stiff.

Adam was up first to the playpen. He studied the toys, lifted the busy box, held it in front of Anastasia, pushed down the little orange lever that made a clicking sound. "See, Anastasia, that's how you vote for G.T. You try." She didn't.

"She can't do much!" Lou Ellen shouted. Her face was tight with emotion. I tried to reach for her hand, but she backed out the door fast and ran off.

"Now this is how you drive to the polling place." Adam put Anastasia's tiny hands on a little wheel.

But Anastasia didn't respond.

A volunteer fireman's barbecue, two church socials, and a meeting of the Beautification Committee of Greater Mulhoney. G.T. was on fire, burning up the campaign trail. Giving speeches whenever he was asked.

Sid Vole had definite rules for writing speeches.

"Hit with two ideas, three at most. Tell them what you're going to say; say it; then tell them what you said."

But G.T. stood firm. "I don't believe in writing speeches, Sid. My Quaker roots go too deep. I'm trusting God to give me the right words when I need them."

Sid Vole's face contorted like he'd heard a violin played off-key.

His ulcer got worse when G.T. addressed the Rotary Club.

"You should know that if you elect me mayor I won't spend

any time trying to get your votes for the next election. I won't be feathering my nest for my retirement. Chances are I won't be around for any of that. I will roll up my sleeves and ask you to do the same."

Sid Vole took G.T. aside. "We need to give you an air of permanence with the voters. Like the sun who will always be in the sky."

G.T. laughed. "I think I'm more like a passing cloud, Sid."

June blended into July.

Adam came up with a new campaign slogan.

STOOP FOR MAYOR:

HE'LL DIE TRYING TO MAKE THINGS BETTER.

Sid Vole said it was the perfect spin: admit we have a problem, redefine the problem to make it a positive. He took a little plastic top out of his pocket and spun it on the table. Adam had a top, too, but when he spun his it fell to the floor.

In the midst of this, I got a seven-page letter with cheesy New York postcards from Harrison and Miriam talking about how much they missed me. I read it five times, put the pictures around the mirror in my room.

Memories crashed over me.

Harrison, Miriam, and me going to poetry readings at bookstores (key entertainment—they were free).

There was that last poet we heard before I moved—the one with the scraggly beard and the torn T-shirt.

"I am the zebra without stripes," he read, "shouting from the subways of the city." Emotional pause. "But you know me."

"What did that mean?" I asked when it was over.

Miriam munched a hazelnut biscotti. "He's on drugs."

"It *means*," Harrison explained, "he's lost his identity like a zebra losing its stripes. He's become a person without . . . without the marks of what he used to be. But deep inside the subway of his soul he knows who he is. We know . . . because he is us. He shouts for us all."

Harrison can pull meaning from a stone. Both of his parents are English teachers.

"If he shouts too loud in the subway he'll get arrested," Miriam added.

I wrote them back using calligraphy lettering for extra drama.

First, guys, The Good: I'm working on a political campaign with a man who should probably be running for governor or president for all the good he could bring to people's lives.

The Bad: There are no tall buildings—anywhere. Food-wise, except for Addie, think Dark Ages. No Thai, dim sum, jerk chicken. No museums either.

The Oblique: There's this guy I work with and I'm trying to figure him out.

I put down my pen.

I didn't know how to tell them how much I missed them. Couldn't let them know how hard it is for me to write to people I don't think I'll ever see again. Elaine in Denver. Marla in St. Louis. Josie, Jake, and Jenny in Detroit. I used to promise people that we'd be back to visit, but I stopped doing that.

We don't go back in this family, we just keep moving forward.

I am the zebra without stripes shouting from the U-Haul trailer.

Braverman's ten-year-old twin sisters, Heidi and Hannah, were in the back office playing with Anastasia, who wasn't interested in any of their games. The twins had rosy Wisconsin cheeks and dark braids. Braverman was making them laugh by juggling three new potatoes. Anastasia was not a potato person.

Braverman looped a potato under his leg and grinned at me. He had excellent teeth, healthy gums. That speaks volumes about a person.

I radiated back.

Sid Vole was at the big desk: Not amused.

It probably didn't help that his ulcer wasn't healing. It really didn't help that his doctor had taken him off caffeine, which sure slowed his spin.

Adam, Brice, and Jillian walked in for the meeting.

"Listen up," Sid Vole said. He was yawning so hard we all started yawning, too. "Every successful campaign has one thing in common. The ability to multiply. There are six of us in this room. Six of us each need to go tell ten other people why they should support G.T. Then those people need to find ten more. You get the picture." He put his head on the desk.

"We need to spread like a virus," Adam shouted.

Sid Vole looked up briefly. "Call it something else on the street."

★ ★ ★

We called it Students for Stoop and we were revved for spreading the word.

"Assume nothing!" Adam shouted. "Ask people the critical question. Will they vote for G.T.? Call your neighbors. Tell your friends. Bother your parents!"

"Can someone else bother my dad?" Brice pleaded. "He's pretty mad since I crashed his Honda into that beer truck."

"Last time it was a Federal Express truck," Jillian whispered to me.

Jillian and I were becoming good friends. She had a passionate relationship with her computer, which connected her to the outside world. She didn't expect life to be easy either, and avoided giggliness, which I really appreciated. She had one major flaw—an unshakable belief that someday Adam Pulver would be president.

"Of the United States?" I asked, aghast.

"I'm telling you, Hope, kids like Adam are born with the dream. Remember the things he does so that years from now when the media wants to talk to people who knew him when, you'll be ready."

"You're going to vote for G.T., aren't you, Addie?"

It was probably the wrong time to ask, since she had just smeared cold cream all over her face. She slapped a steaming towel on her face and shuddered. I hadn't seen her do this for ages.

"G. T. Stoop's being a stubborn fool and I can't believe that a human being with his potential is ignoring his health needs in such a fashion!"

I looked at the "Voter Reality" sheet that Adam had made up. It had four boxes to choose from after asking the CQ (critical question).

YES

NO

MAYBE

ABANDON HOPE

I didn't like my name being used like that.

"But you're going to vote for him, right, Addie?"

Addie held the towel tight across her face, breathing deeply.

"Well, of course I am."

I checked YES. Stubborn adults stick together.

"Can you help us on the campaign?"

"I've been baking extra and sending it to the back office every day."

In the space marked *How This Person Can Help the Campaign*, I wrote: *Already a major food source.*

A knock on the front door. I walked down the hall to answer it.

Jillian was standing there holding her laptop.

"I'm too humble to say I'm a genius, Hope, but you've got to see this."

Students for Stoop

It was huge across the computer screen. Jillian scrolled down. Several headings: *The Man, The Message, The Meaning, How You Can Get Involved.*

"You did this?" I asked.

"Every gorgeous word." Jillian clicked on *Students for Stoop* and it morphed into bouncing letters. "And the soundtrack please." She clicked again; rock music started playing.

"Jillian, that's amazing."

She was grinning and typing. "Okay, here's how they contact us. I'm going to send mail out to kids at the high school to tell everyone what we're doing." Click. Up on the screen came *What teens are saying about G. T. Stoop and why you should listen*. "I need a major quote from you, Hope. We'll put it right here. Say something instantly fabulous."

"Can I think about it?"

"Time's up. Why do you think G.T. should be mayor?"

"Because he's totally honest, completely fair, and he cares about everyone's welfare."

Jillian typed that in.

"Wait a minute—"

"No, it's good. Braverman said G.T. would bring honor and humility to the office." She looked straight at me. "Braverman's going to edit a Students for Stoop newsletter to promote G.T."

"That's nice."

She kept looking.

"*What?*" I demanded.

"Hope, I have to say it. You and Braverman would be perfect together."

My face got hot.

"I mean," Jillian gushed, "you have this *force* connecting you. It's under the surface, but it runs deep."

I looked out the window, trying to appear casual.

Anyone who's spent any time in food service knows the peril.

"I don't date people I work with, Jillian. It's disaster."

My heart was thub-dubbing as I recited my mother's Number One Cardinal Rule of Waitress Survival—DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, DATE THE COOK. Mom had been fired twice for doing this. "Cooks tend to move from thing to thing quickly," Mom explained. "A waitress who dates the cook *always* gets burned." She wrote that in her last Christmas letter.

"But if you didn't work with him, Hope—"

I didn't tell her the truth—that, just maybe, I'd like to go out with him, but I hadn't let myself go there. I'd only had one boyfriend, Bobby Ray Goshen from Pensacola, but he was part-time. He cheated on me.

"I don't live in what-ifs, Jillian. I go with what's on the menu." This wasn't entirely true.

"You're impossible."

"I try."

She ate one of Addie's serious double fudge brownies that connect people instantly and told me that Braverman needed someone stalwart like me because his last girlfriend dumped him before she went off to college.

"He's a good guy, Hope. He's staying home to help support his mom and sisters. His dad walked out on the family. His mom had an operation and didn't have health insurance, and the bills are pretty rough. That's why he hasn't gone to college yet. He was editor of the high school paper. He was going to major in journalism."

"How do you know all this?"

"In small towns everyone knows everything." Jillian closed her computer. "You *know* he cares for you."

My heart did a back flip.

I went down to the diner to observe Braverman to see if this was true.

"So, Braverman, how's it going?"

"Okay." He was in the kitchen slicing carrots, not acting like he cared for anyone in particular.

"That was a really good pork-chop sandwich you made for my customer at table three earlier. He went on and on about it." I attempted a twinkling laugh. It came out dumb.

"Good." His right eyebrow moved slightly, his jaw tightened. He walked into the supply closet leaving me there.

I reported back to Jillian.

"Like all males, Hope, he has a code that has to be deciphered."

"What's the code?"

"I have no idea. But it's probably weirder than hieroglyphics."

Every day teenagers were coming in to volunteer for G.T.'s campaign, and we knew what to do with them.

Tell ten friends why you support G. T. Stoop and ask them to join you.

Make sure that people are registered to vote for G.T.

Write a letter to the Mulhoney Messenger telling why you support G.T.'s election.

Cecelia Culpepper published the letters and an editorial of her own demanding the opening of the tax assessor's office and insisting the mayor release proof that the dairy paid its local taxes.

"We are conducting an internal investigation," said the mayor in response. "The assessor's office will be closed to the public until the investigation is completed."

"Not good enough," Braverman fumed when he read it.

Back at the diner, G.T. was driving himself too hard. Twice I'd seen him steady himself against a wall when he was walking.

Once I saw the color drain from his face when he was

cornered by an irritated representative from Friends of Wildlife who said she could personally assure him of twenty-four votes, but he was going to have to “play ball with the animals.”

Sid Vole yawned, still in his decaffeinated state, and studied G.T.’s pale face. “We need to get you in front of people looking strong. Give a thumbs-up sign whenever you can. Voters love that.”

G.T. shook his head. “Let’s show the people what they’re really getting, Sid.”

You could feel the campaign heat build. Addie said it was like turning up the flame and quick-frying zucchini that could go from perfection to mush in a matter of seconds.

People were coming into the diner every day just to see what she had on the menu. A man laughed with pure joy yesterday after he’d finished his second bowl of split pea soup brimming with fat ham chunks and garlic butter croutons. That man was dining alone. I saw a marriage proposal take place at table nine. The first thing that happy woman said was, “Harold, it’s taken you seven years to ask me. Why now?”

Harold looked at his half-eaten plate of brisket piled with caramelized onions and said he wasn’t quite sure, something had come over him.

Addie had a mandate now. She raised a whisk and pointed it at Braverman.

“Now I believe that the way to anyone’s heart is through their stomach, and, my boy, I’m here to tell you, we are in the heart business. We’re going to reach deep past the menu and into the emotional power of food because a person comes back

to a restaurant again and again for one reason only—to feed their soul.”

She chopped an onion fast, weeping as the aroma hit her eyes.

Braverman said, “If you light a candle near the chopped onion it takes away the eye sting—that’s what I do.”

Addie wiped her face and said that weeping just added more passion to the menu.

But she and G.T. were having trouble getting used to each other’s ways. Flo said it was like watching two dogs mark off their boundary lines in a field.

The worst face-off was when Addie was trying out a new recipe called Big-Hearted Stew, which had veal and sausage in a tomato-garlic sauce with peas and sautéed onions. She thought she’d used too many onions. G.T. had a bowl of it and said it was perfect, just perfect. Addie said that she was just beginning to reach perfection in this kitchen and she assured him there was a whole lot more to look forward to.

“This is the best cooking this town has seen. And, Lord, people are happy when they leave. You’re too hard on yourself, Addie.”

“I’m hard on myself because that’s the only way food is elevated.”

“Maybe you’d have more fun if you backed off a bit.”

I tried to signal G.T. that this was the wrong thing to say. Addie’s definition of having fun is worrying herself silly over a recipe. She’d reached her fun apex with this veal stew.

Addie snarled, “G.T., there’s too much onion in this dish

and I'm not going to serve it until I've got it right. I'm putting something else on the dinner menu."

G.T. said he'd already written out the specials page for the menu for tomorrow and he'd rather not do it again.

"I'll do it then," Addie half shouted, and grabbed a pen and paper and started printing.

"Addie, that's plain wasteful. We can't afford to be throwing out perfectly good food."

Addie looked away. I prayed to God she'd hold it together.

But everything was unraveling.

Four burglaries occurred in town in the same humid, rainy week. One of them was at Adam's house.

"They pulled everything out of the drawers in my room," he cried. "They took my mom's antique clock. They took the stereo and the TV and my dad's campaign button collection that went all the way back to Teddy Roosevelt!" He stared off, shaken.

My hands turned to fists.

"When they come into your house, it's like . . . it's so personal." He was fighting tears. I put my hand on his shoulder.

Deputy Babcock said it seemed like the work of the same person, maybe two people working together.

"Not real swift ones either," she commented, drinking her second cup of coffee at the counter. "They were messy jobs. Whoever it was, though, knew people's patterns—when they'd be home, gone to work. Interesting that whoever it was only burglarized the houses of people who signed G.T.'s petition—or who worked with the campaign."

She adjusted her shoulder holster with the very real pistol. Flo told me that Deputy Babcock used to be a police detective in Minneapolis and moved to Mulhoney to take care of her mother, who lived here and couldn't get around by herself anymore.

"Brenda's got connections way up the pole," Flo told me. "Sheriff Greebs isn't too happy about that."

"Better get the word out," Deputy Babcock said to me and Flo. "Batten down the hatches."

Batten (from Webster's): *A thin narrow strip of lumber used especially to seal or reinforce a joint.*

Hatch: *An opening in the deck of a ship or in the floor or roof of a building.*

"I'd like to know what's being done to find those burglars!" G.T. shouted from the steps of Town Hall after Millstone refused to meet with him about the robberies.

"Sheriff Greebs is conducting a thorough investigation," said a spokesperson for the mayor. "We have no further comments."

"Well, I do," G.T. shot back. "Give the mayor a message for me. Tell him that lies and dirty tricks never win in the long run. Tell him that fear is no way to govern people. He can refuse to meet with me from now until Election Day, but *I will not be silent!*"

Cecelia Culpepper printed it word for word in the *Mulhoney Messenger*.

★ ★ ★

The next day the Real Fresh Dairy canceled all their advertising with that paper. A few other small businesses pulled their ads, too.

"That's going to hurt Cecelia financially," G.T. said to me. "The dairy was her biggest advertiser. She's had to run that paper on a shoestring since her husband died. My Lord, what we human beings do to each other in the name of politics."

We were out back by the flowering trees. G.T. was holding Anastasia, telling her how he'd prune back the branches so the lush leaves could grow. He told her a story about the mustard seed that was one of the smallest seeds in the tree family, but it turned into one of the mightiest. G.T. said you just never know what can happen when you start planting little seeds.

I went back in the diner to work. Lou Ellen was delivering orders and watching G.T. and Anastasia out the window. She was a pure mess of feelings—running herself ragged trying to work and take care of her child. I wanted to help.

"Lou Ellen, you want me to take table twelve so you can go out and—"

"I need the money, Hope."

"I wasn't doing it for the tip."

"I don't need charity, okay?"

"Lou Ellen, if I can do anything to help like baby-sit, whatever, just ask."

She looked down. "That's real sweet of you. Everyone here's doing so much for me. G.T. said Anastasia could stay here as long as I need." She gripped her order book. "I'm not used to people helping. Except for my mom."

I nodded. "It's good you've got her."

Her face just caved in. I grabbed her limp hand.

She was looking out the window at G.T., who was trying to get Anastasia to touch the flowers on the trees. He put her little hand on the leaves, but it just fell back to her side.

"I named her Anastasia because it was a really big name and I wanted her to do something big in the world. I don't know if she'll ever be able to do much of anything." A tear went down Lou Ellen's cheek. "She doesn't have a daddy either."

Poor kid.

"Neither do I," I said. "Some things you learn to work around."

Lou Ellen looked sympathetic. "Where's yours?"

"I don't know. Where's hers?"

"I don't know either."

I smiled. "Maybe it's some kind of virus."

"Yeah." She half laughed. "The jerk virus."

A man in her station signaled for his check. Lou Ellen steadied herself and wrote it up.

"I think you're real brave," I told her, and for a minute her whole face lit up. She was real pretty when the light went on inside.

"It is with great joy and honor that I announce my support for Eli Millstone, the only man for Mulhoney!" Cranston Broom, president of the Real Fresh Dairy, shouted this into a microphone at his factory as a sea of dairy workers applauded and cheered and several dairy workers draped a Millstone

banner across the entrance to the building. "Every dairy truck you see will proudly bear a VOTE FOR ELI poster. That's how committed we are to this mayor."

Braverman, Adam, and I were across the street watching. Braverman's face looked rigid. He sipped the last of his coffee; crushed the Styrofoam cup in his hand.

Braverman was becoming Caffeine Man. In his spare time he worked on the Students for Stoop newsletter and wrote articles for the *Mulboney Messenger* about the campaign that never got published. Cecelia Culpepper told Braverman that his articles sounded more like editorials. He needed to report the facts, be a "dispassionate observer of the political scene." Braverman said that anyone who was dispassionate about this election was brain-dead.

I was getting worried about him.

"That young man's got a deep relationship with G.T.," Flo explained to me. "It's killing him to hear the things Eli Millstone is saying."

It was killing all of us.

Now, I don't think G. T. Stoop means to be doing this town any harm, but I believe we need to let him know that running for mayor with no experience and leukemia is making a travesty out of the office and is insulting the voters. We all have to understand that this man is not only sick, he's deluded. Every one of his accusations is bosh.

But G.T. went for broke and challenged the people: "Eli's been going around telling you that everything I've said was false. Either I'm the biggest barefaced liar you've ever met or I'm not. You've got to decide."

Braverman started following Millstone's campaign everywhere after that, asking, "What about it, Mr. Mayor? Is G. T. Stoop the biggest barefaced liar we've ever met, or are you?"

The last hour on my shift and it had truly been one of those days.

Everything went wrong in the kitchen, my orders were backed up, I had hungry people glaring at me like I was personally responsible for their starvation.

At the galley window. "I ordered that tortellini sausage soup *twenty minutes ago, Braverman!*"

He slammed a pan. "It was ten minutes ago."

Oh, please!

I had a table full of gimmes ("Gimme water, gimme ketchup"). Mrs. Scarlotti was perched at the counter trying to set me up with her nephew Lewis.

"A nice, thoughtful boy," she said. "Wouldn't hurt a fly."

That means spineless in Brooklyn.

I delivered the world's best chef's salad with crumbled bacon and a large bowl of Too-Good Chili to the people on table seventeen who could see how busy I was and kept telling me not to rush.

Brenda Babcock was sitting at the counter drinking iced coffee. She was in street clothes today—white pants and a bright flowered shirt—she didn't look like she crushed bad guys under her heel in that outfit.

I placed a slice of Addie's fresh coconut layer cake in front of her. That's when we heard the bloodcurdling scream.

"Oh God! Oh God!" The pretty woman on table seventeen shrieked it, covering her face.

I ran over. The man with her looked furiously at me. "*There's half a dead mouse in my wife's salad!*"

This had to be a joke.

The restaurant went silent.

Deputy Babcock was there next to me.

I looked in the salad bowl—saw the top half of a dead, gross rodent, mouth open, covered with Roquefort dressing.

Lou Ellen screamed.

I backed away.

The man stood up. "This is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen!"

He took his soup spoon and held that thing up for everyone to see.

Wails of disgust and disbelief.

Braverman ran to help me from the kitchen. He looked in the bowl, stunned.

"I want to go!" the pretty woman cried. "I might have touched it. Oh, my God! It might be crawling with disease!"

Customers are beginning to gather around us.

"It's really a mouse."

"Don't look, Bobby."

"Inexcusable."

"Sir," I began, "there has never been anything like—"

"We'd heard this was a good, clean place," the man snarled.

"Believe me, you'll hear from our lawyer!"

Braverman took the salad bowl. "I don't know how—"

The man took it back. "I need that as evidence."

Brenda Babcock whipped out her deputy's license. "I'll be taking it as evidence. We'll keep it real safe for you and your attorney." She wrote something out on her official deputy pad. "If you'll just sign here."

Suddenly that sweet couple got nervous.

"What . . . do you want us to sign?"

"This just says you found the mouse in your salad."

The woman backed off. "I . . . I don't know if we should sign anything."

"Have you ever seen that mouse before?" Brenda Babcock asked. "Prior to it being in your salad?"

The woman looked down. "How . . . could I have seen it before?"

"Have you, sir?"

"Of course not."

"Then would you sign here, please?"

The couple looked strangely at each other.

No one spoke.

Then a nervous smile. "I think, officer," said the man, "we'd just like to forget the whole thing."

"You will not be pressing charges, then?"

"No," they said together.

"May I see some identification, please?"

"Why," asked the man, "would you want to see that?"

"Because I maintain the peace in this town."

Hard to argue with that.

They took out their driver's licenses. Deputy Babcock wrote down the information.

The woman gulped. "What are you going to do with the mouse?"

"I'm going to have the crime lab check it."

"For what?"

"How long it's been dead. Is it native to these parts. I see you're from Michigan."

"We're traveling through," the man offered quietly.

She handed their licenses back to them. "Enjoy your stay."

The man put a twenty on the table and they walked quickly out the door.

Deputy Babcock turned and addressed the diners. "Go back to your meal, folks. I think we had some visitors who were trying to shut this establishment down."

A collective gasp.

And Deputy Brenda Babcock, crime-fighting ace, raised a humble hand like it was no big deal that she'd just saved the Welcome Stairways from scandal, asked me to keep her cake for later, and marched out the door holding that salad bowl that was sure to reveal major mouse tampering and God knows what else.

12

G.T. and I were in his truck heading off to a day of political campaigning. He'd asked me to come along and be his right-hand person. I couldn't have been more proud.

I checked the schedule that Adam had put together. How he expected two human beings to accomplish all this was beyond me.

"G.T., this is going to be a beast. In eight hours we're supposed to stop at a cheese factory and talk to the workers, hit the commuter train terminal and pass out literature. Meet with leaders of the Small Businessman's Association for lunch. Speak to a parents' meeting about overcrowding in the kindergarten. Go to the Tick Tock Clock Shop for a coffee in your honor. Stop by a bingo game at BVMRCC. I don't even know what that is."

He chuckled. "Blessed Virgin Mary Roman Catholic Church."

I shook my head. Some things shouldn't be abbreviated.

"And Adam made up a list, G.T., of the people who have

contributed to your campaign so far and what they gave. He said we should go over it.”

G.T. shook his head. “I never want to see that list.”

“Sorry . . .” I put the paper away.

“You can get so messed up learning who gave what and how much that it’ll change your opinion of people.”

I’d peeked at the list earlier. The biggest contributor was Slick Bixby; the cheapest was Mrs. Scarlotti of Scarlotti’s World of Cheese, who gave a measly five dollars with that thriving cheese store of hers. Some people.

“I can’t imagine you’d change your opinion of people because of a list, G.T.”

“I don’t want to take the chance. We’re running for everyone. Whoever gives, I’m grateful. Whoever doesn’t, has a right. I’ll talk to Adam.”

G.T. pulled his truck into the parking lot of the Wisconsin Cheese Company, parked by a big trash compactor, said, “I’ll be with you in a minute,” and bowed his head.

I waited.

A few minutes passed and his head was still bowed. I figured he was praying. I checked my watch. We were already fifteen minutes late.

I wasn’t sure what to do.

I coughed to remind him I was present.

Cleared my throat.

Yawned pretty loud.

Finally, he opened the truck’s door and headed toward the factory.

“My name’s G. T. Stoop, folks, and I’m running for mayor.”

The midnight shift was just getting off. G.T. was standing in the cafeteria shaking as many hands as he could get to. Men and women in white coats and white hard hats were pressing in to see him the way you’d look at a curiosity. Weird cheese posters lined the walls.

CAN’T MISS SWISS

FETA? YOU BETA

PARMESAN POWER

I was doing my best to hand out the Students for Stoop newsletter and smile with flashing intensity. This was politics up close and personal.

Down the line he went asking people how they felt about things.

When a man said he didn’t think politics could help anyone anymore, G.T. said one person can make a difference, two can lift a burden, and more than that can start a revolution.

When a woman said she hadn’t voted for years, G.T. asked her why.

“There hasn’t been anyone I trusted.”

“I know what you mean,” G.T. told her. “Trust doesn’t always come right away in life, it has to be earned.” He asked if she’d come to listen when he spoke; talk to people who know him. “If I can earn your trust in the next few months, will you vote for me?”

She was surprised at first, but met his gaze. “Yes, I will.”

A man said, “I vote because I have to, not because I want to.”

“I’ve felt that way in plenty of elections, too,” G.T. admitted.

"Once I didn't vote. I learned I always felt better voting even if I wasn't happy with the choices."

Person after person. He dealt with each one like he or she was the only one in the room. This audience, I can tell you, was moved. Faces pressed in around him, open and smiling. People who looked like they'd just had a good meal.

I walked behind him passing out newsletters.

"Thank you for coming out to see G.T. today," I said over and over. "I hope you'll give this a read. We really need your support."

A short woman muscled through the crowd, stuck her hand out at G.T. "I'm voting for you, Stoop. Go out there and kick Millstone's butt."

G.T. shook her hand, laughing. "I appreciate it."

Then a few men in the back started shouting, "Kick Millstone's butt! Kick Millstone's butt!" And soon most of the crowd was hollering it.

Kick Millstone's butt!

Kick Millstone's butt!

The cheers swept us into the parking lot.

"Kicking butt wasn't the rallying cry I was going for," G.T. said as he drove to the commuter train terminal. "I'm non-violent."

"I think they know you'll fight for them, G.T. Those cheese people need a warrior."

"Hope, why do you think people need a warrior?"

We got to the train terminal late and missed the 8:53. There was no one on the platform.

"I'm not sure, really . . . I think people are looking for someone who's strong to fight for them."

"But I'm not strong."

"You are in what you believe."

"But not in my body."

"Well . . ." I wanted to change the subject.

"We have this need, Hope, for leaders to look good, sound good, and be perfectly healthy. But life's never been more clear to me than when I got this cancer."

I looked at his face, so determined, so tired. He was fighting for strength—pushing, straining to make this day count.

I slapped away the fear I had for his health and tried to enter into the courage.

What else can you do when you're spending the whole day with one of the finest men on this planet?

We survived the irritated kindergarten parents.

Managed to down the rubbery chicken in lukewarm white gravy at the Small Businessman's luncheon.

Headed off to the Tick Tock Clock Shop.

"What's your mother like, Hope?"

I sure wasn't expecting that question.

I squirmed. "You know Addie's not my mother."

"She told me that."

What else had she told him?

"My mother's a waitress, G.T."

I let that hang there between us, but it didn't quite tell the story.

"She's a much better waitress than she is a parent. She doesn't know how to be a mom, I don't think."

G.T. stopped at a light. "That's a lot for you to deal with."

"I've gotten pretty good at it."

Driving again.

"Your mother's missing out not knowing you as a daughter."

I'd never once thought of that.

I don't know why, but I almost started crying.

"You know what I've found out about disappointments?"

G.T. asked.

I sniffed. "No."

"I think that if we face them down, they can become our strengths."

"Is that what you're doing with your cancer?"

"I'm trying, Hope. I'm sure trying."

Drinking weak coffee at the Tick Tock Clock Shop.

Six cancer survivors present, invited there by the owner, Beth Wisocki, who had breast cancer four years ago. This was her support group.

No handshaking here. Survivors hug.

"I've been clear of cancer for seven years," said a woman. "Faced death, bought my cemetery plot. They're going to have to wait awhile to bury me."

"Tell people," said a tall, thin woman with fiery eyes, "that life's being lived powerfully by many people with cancer. You tell this town that there's all kinds of things that make us sick. Disease is just one of them." She handed him a little

card with flowers on it that read LIVE THE DAY, NOT THE CANCER.

As if on cue, every bell, gong, and cuckoo went off in the shop. It was three o'clock.

"This is my favorite time of day," Beth Wisocki shouted.

"Well, I sure know where to come if I'm ever feeling discouraged," G.T. shouted over the dings and dong.

But he was doing too much.

I could see it on his face—it was drawn; gray; and stayed like that all the way to BVMRCC.

The intensity in this church basement.

Women had ten bingo cards going at once.

"We get a roomful of committed people like this behind us," G.T. whispered to me, "we could change the world."

An old woman said to him, "You don't look well enough to make it home, much less be mayor."

That cut deep.

"Do I look that bad?" he asked me.

I gave him the short-order truth. "You look like a plate of cold fried eggs. No offense."

"Lost my appeal, huh?"

"It's best the customers don't see the food in that condition."

"You don't mince words."

"Just garlic," I reminded him and led him to the truck.