

PART I

**A PAIR
OF ROOKIES**

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Chapter 1

A NEW TEACHER'S FIRST DAY



The dream she'd postponed since her teacher education classes at Monroe College was finally coming true. She could feel the warmth of the smile on her face as she stepped from her new Prius. Not the best wheels, but hers, a token of four years working in a brokerage firm. She had finished college the wrong year—a time of severe cutbacks in education. . . . She'd tried but couldn't land a teaching position and finally took the best job she could find, in a brokerage firm. . . . The pay was good, and she'd learned a few things about herself, working with others, and corporate life. She felt more confident now. She'd survived in a demanding and stressful adult environment. Surely that ought to help in managing a classroom of kids.

She was thrilled get a teaching assignment at Pico School. Pretty good reviews from people she respected. The school came into full view as she pulled into the parking lot. It looked like a friendly place from the outside. The surrounding neighborhood showed years of decline and abuse, but Pico itself boasted green lawns, well-trimmed shrubbery, and large, lattice-paned windows. Built in the early 1940s, it had the architectural charm that she remembered from the schools of her childhood. As she walked through the arched entryway, she noticed the vaguely familiar intertwined smells of new wax and summer mustiness. She was somewhat caught off guard to see a uniformed man stationed in front of the library. He didn't seem to belong in an elementary school. Unless . . . Then she remembered the opening of school was two weeks away. "Maybe investigating a break-in or something," she thought with some relief. As she turned down the corridor leading to the principal's office, she ran into a tall, broad-shouldered man with hands on hips, scrutinizing the newly polished sheen on the floor. This had to be the custodian, admiring his work before hundreds of students' feet turned it into a mosaic of scuff marks.

As she moved toward him, he looked up and smiled as if he had expected her.

"I'll bet you're Joan Hilliard. Welcome to Pico. I'm Bill Hill, chief custodian. Everyone calls me Bill. Let me know if I can help you get settled. I'll stop by occasionally to see how you're doing and let you know what's going on."

"Is this the way to the principal's office?" asked Joan, slightly puzzled about what the custodian might have to offer.

"Straight ahead, second door on the left," Hill replied. "You were a stockbroker, huh? Not as fancy here. You'll have to buy most of your own supplies. Of course, our kids are a lot different from the adults you've been working with. They are a kick, but need a lot of discipline, and even more caring. My own philosophy is that—"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Hill. I'm sorry I can't chat longer, but I don't want to be late for my meeting with Mr. Rodriguez."

"Oh, don't worry; he's wet behind the ears too. I just hope he's as good as our old principal, Mr. Bailey. He and I worked together for years. Wonderful man. Not the same without him. Anyway, you run along. We'll have plenty of time to talk later. It's good to have a new player on our team. Remember just call me Bill."

Joan continued down the hall, all the while trying to make sense out of her encounter with Bill Hill. "You'd think he ran the place. He'll probably snoop around my classroom when he cleans. At my old job, the custodians never gave market advice or even knew what we were doing. . . ."

As she opened the glass door labeled Principal's Office, Joan's reverie was interrupted by a cheerful voice.

"Hello, Ms. Hilliard. Welcome to Pico! We have been expecting you."

The voice belonged to a smiling, gray-haired woman wearing a "Pico Pride" T-shirt over a pair of faded blue jeans.

"I'm Phyllis. Phyllis Gleason, the school secretary. Mr. Rodriguez was called to the superintendent's office unexpectedly. He'll fill you in on our school and your assignment when he gets back. In the meantime, he asked me to show you around. Would you like a cup of coffee before we start?"

"Sure, why not?"

As Phyllis went off in search of coffee, the door to an office marked Assistant Principal opened abruptly, and a short, square-shouldered, graying man walked out. He strained, looked at Joan, frowned, and asked gruffly, "Who are you?"

His tone and crew cut reminded Joan of a grizzled marine drill sergeant. She was surprised at how nervous she felt. "Oh, uh, I'm sorry. I'm Joan Hilliard, and I . . ."

"Oh, yeah!" the man interrupted, with the commanding tone of someone who expected to be listened to. "I heard about you. No teaching experience. Just what we need. You sure as hell didn't learn anything about classroom control from a bunch of stockbrokers. Most of them don't really know anything about the market, much less about handling kids."

With that, he stormed forcefully out of the office, slamming the door behind, just as Phyllis was returning with the coffee.

Joan must have looked as crestfallen as she felt because Phyllis seemed to understand immediately what had happened.

"Oh-oh. You met Mr. Shepherd."

"I didn't exactly meet him," Joan replied. "He didn't bother to tell me who he is. Is he always so, um . . ." Joan paused, grasping for a discreet way to phrase her question.

"Gruff? Oh, don't take it personally. His bark is worse than his bite. It's not you. He's the same with everyone."

“He’s the assistant principal?”

“Yes. Been here ten years. Some people thought he might be the next principal. But the superintendent felt that Mr. Shepherd should do what he does best. He keeps our kids in line. . . .”

Did Phyllis intend praise or veiled criticism in her take on the assistant principal? Joan decided not to press the issue. But she began to wonder what she had gotten into. Would the principal be as abrupt as Sam Shepherd? Why was the secretary taking charge of her orientation? As Phyllis started to lead her around the building, Joan wondered if the tour would simply fill some time. But her doubts gradually turned to awe and admiration. Phyllis seemed to know all and share most in loving detail, as if she had witnessed everything firsthand. With unflagging enthusiasm, Gleason introduced Joan to everyone they encountered, and Joan was impressed with the warmth of the responses. Joan was even more amazed by Gleason’s ability to field questions about almost anything—schedules, materials, children, parents—you name it.

“They treat her like the school oracle—knows all, normally broadcasts only the good stuff. Whatever she says must be the way it is,” thought Joan to herself. “Maybe Phyllis really runs the school. That’s something I should remember.”

It was only as they neared the end of the tour that Joan realized how much she had shared of her own background and ideas about teaching.

She seems as interested in my thoughts about teaching as Bill Hill, the custodian, mused Joan.

Phyllis stopped in front of a door with a translucent window marked 208. She took Joan inside a spacious, sun-filled classroom and said, “This is your room for the year. What do you think? Maybe it’s a little plain compared to what you’re used to. But within these four walls, you’re pretty much the boss.”

“It’s great! Lots of windows and plenty of wall space and bookshelves. The walls are a little bare, but we’ll take care of that in no time.”

Joan’s mind was flooded with a thousand thoughts. She tried to imagine the empty rows of desks filled with students. Her students. Her classroom. She’d waited a long time for this. She had so many ideas for creating a classroom where students were eager to learn. She remembered the images that surfaced in her teacher education classes. She was excited about putting ideas of John Dewey, Montessori, and Harry Wong to work. In the midst of her reverie, she

also recalled the lessons about classroom control. Images of Arnold Swartznegger struggling to control a class of kindergarten kids in the film jostled her. The warning from the school's principal that a class of young students "is like the ocean, you never turn your back on it" called to question her ability to pull off her fantasies.

Phyllis paused for a few moments as Joan seemed to take it all in then moved on: "I'll leave you alone for a while to think about what else you'll need. Whatever it is—supplies, good advice, breaking news—I'll try to get it for you. Usually a sure thing."

"Thanks, Phyllis," said Joan. Then a question occurred to her. "Who had this room before me?"

"Well, him." Phyllis hesitated, looking as if she'd just eaten something that didn't agree with her. "He didn't stay long. Just one year. Nice young man. Smart as a tack. But he had trouble with discipline. The noise and the fights were the biggest problem. It was almost always entertaining to walk by his classroom. Constant chaos. Never a dull moment. Kids had a field day. But don't let that worry you. I'm sure you'll be different. Just remember not to smile before December."

Joan's stomach turned over at this last piece of advice.

"And anything you need to know, come to me."

Phyllis smiled once again and started back to the office. She turned her head only to let Joan know that the new principal had returned and wanted to see her.

All Joan knew about the new principal was his name: Jaime Rodriguez. At first glance, the sports shirt and trim moustache looked right, but he seemed shyer and more boyish than she'd expected.

Is he old enough to be a principal? She wondered. But his greeting was warm and cordial. Their conversation flowed easily, and they seemed to think a lot alike.

She didn't realize that, while they talked, Jaime was thinking back to his first day as principal only a few weeks earlier. He'd arrived eager to apply all he'd learned in his master's program at State University. But he soon realized that it was not going to be a cakewalk. He remembered how his first introduction to the place had popped his idealistic balloon. Why wasn't there a reserved parking space for the principal? And why was there one marked Reserved for School Secretary? Then as he walked up to the main entrance he ran into Bill

Hill, the custodian, who was pruning the shrubbery. After a brief greeting and learning that Hill preferred to be called Bill, Jaime asked, “Aren’t you cutting those a little short?”

Hill’s retort, “Mr. Bailey likes them that way,” seemed brusque.

Who’s the principal, me or Bailey? Jaime wondered. Becoming the boss might take some doing. . . .

His first encounter with Phyllis Gleason reinforced his growing anxiety. On the surface, she seemed pleasant enough. But behind the warmth, Jaime sensed an undertone of resentment. He wondered why she devoted so much time to telling him more than he wanted to know about the desk. True, it stood out—a huge oak desk dominated the principal’s office. Phyllis lovingly shared every detail of how Mr. Bailey had sculpted it himself from the stump of an old oak tree outside his house once toppled by a tornado.

She wrapped up her story by saying, “He’s a wonderful man and the best boss a person could have.”

Her use of the present tense was another reminder to Jaime that, even if he had the title, he would still have to earn the principal’s job. He was delighted to see Joan as a possible ally. She was new too, and her philosophy of education seemed almost identical to his.

After her meeting with Jaime, Joan mulled over her morning’s encounters. Nothing was quite as she expected. Why did the secretary and the custodian loom so large in the school’s affairs? Just how many people would be looking over her shoulder and, without her asking, advising her on how to teach? She came close to raising her concerns with Jaime but held back. He seemed friendly and genuinely pleased that she was joining the Pico faculty, and she didn’t want to make a bad first impression. The two seemingly formed an almost instant bond realizing what they had in common: Both were new and nervous. Joan could hardly believe her luck in finding a boss who seemed so supportive and easy to work with.

The day’s thoughts were still spinning as Joan walked to her car for the drive home. As she was opening the car door, she heard someone calling her name. She turned and saw a group of people chatting in the parking lot. One of them who fit Joan’s stereotype of a slightly over-the-hill football coach came over.

“Joan Hilliard?” he said as he walked over and offered his hand. “I’m Phil Leckney. My classroom is just down the hall from yours.

Welcome to Pico. Some of us are headed over to Andy's Café. Care to join us?"

Joan felt torn. She didn't want to offend her new colleagues even before meeting them, but she'd promised to meet her boyfriend, Larry, in half an hour. After hesitating, she made a snap decision: "Well, I can stay for only a little while . . . but I'd love to."

The conversation at Andy's reinforced Joan's feeling that she had come to the right school. Her new colleagues laughed heartily when she told of her encounters with Bill Hill and Phyllis Gleason.

"To understand Bill," Margaret Juhl, obviously a seasoned veteran, chimed in, "come in some morning at 7:30 and go to the cafeteria. You'll see the free breakfast kids. And you'll see that Bill is a big brother for just about everyone in the room. He knows all the students and a lot of the parents too. Bill grew up a few blocks from here. He probably knows more people in the neighborhood than anyone else at Pico."

"Well, it might be a draw between him and Phyllis," Phil Leckney added.

"True," said Margaret. "She's sort of a combination of Dear Abby, Oprah Winfrey, and General Patton. Just remember the line from the old song, 'You can get anything you want, at Phyllis's restaurant. And I mean anything!'"

Joan joined everyone else's laughter. As the group quieted down, Joan was caught off guard by a question from Vivian Chu. Vivian, another veteran, had not said much until she turned to Joan to ask, "You met with Mr. Rodriguez today, didn't you? How did it go?"

Joan felt every eye at the table turn to her. It dawned on her that her colleagues were as curious as she about Pico's new principal.

Phil was quick to offer his opinion, "He's an unknown. Phil Bailey was a great guy. Maybe not Mr. Super Principal, but at least he was supportive. Most important, he pretty much left us alone. He never told us how to teach. New principals these days are different. They're usually into the latest fad they heard at some conference or read in a damn book. They're all stoked up to be a "leeeaaader" and want to save the world and change everything. They don't understand a simple idea, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. We have been through the musical chairs before. How much effort will it take to break this guy in?"

It was vintage Leckney. But no one offered an opposing opinion. The consensus was that they would have to wait and see. They might get some clues the next day at the opening faculty meeting.

The group sat in silence. A few took another sip of their drink. Finally Margaret shifted the conversation to Joan's experience in the business world. Her colleagues peppered her with questions about what she did, what it was like, and to her embarrassment, how much money she made. It almost felt as if they wished they had tasted another career themselves to find out if the grass was greener somewhere else. The conversation at Andy's was so engrossing that Joan was startled to look at her watch and notice that she was now a half hour late to meet Larry. Bidding her colleagues a hasty farewell, she rushed off. She knew Larry didn't like waiting. She just hoped he wouldn't be too miffed this time.

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