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BY DAPHNE BENEDIS-GRAB

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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# CHAPTER 1

## NORA

“The following four students must report to the main office immediately: Nora Montgomery, Jack Tran, Henry Davis, and Maddie Fox.”

Nora nearly dropped the packet of papers she was holding when she heard her name. That would not have been good. Thanks to a struggle opening her locker, she was running late to drop it off. And if the contents of the packet spilled and anyone saw—

“Uh-oh, Nora, what did you do?” a voice asked.

Nora shrieked with surprise and spun around. Tanisha and Grace were walking into the newspaper office and laughed at her reaction. As her heart slowed, Nora joined them—her reaction *had* been extreme. Usually before the first bell, the classroom used as a newspaper office was empty. That was why Nora was here—though today she wouldn’t be able to accomplish her goal, now that she had company.

“Looks like you’re in big trouble, getting called to

the office before school even starts,” Grace said in a singsong voice, grinning.

“Like our star reporter would get in trouble for anything,” Tanisha scoffed, walking over to Ms. Holt’s desk to put an article in the paper’s in-box. Although the *Snow Valley Secondary School Sentinel* was online, Ms. Holt preferred to edit articles on paper.

Nora tried not to appear too pleased by Tanisha’s remark. She liked to project an aura of serious, cool calm at all times to fit her role as star reporter. Nora, who had been called “cute little thing” for far too long in life, much preferred labels like “star reporter.” She subtly stuffed the papers back in her old-fashioned leather satchel. (Nora felt a reporter would carry a satchel, not a backpack. Plus backpacks made her look even shorter than she actually was.)

“She’s probably getting an award,” Tanisha said as Nora headed for the door.

“Nora, yes. Maddie and Jack, sure. But Henry?” Grace said, eyes narrowing slightly. “Nora, why are you and Henry both being called to the office?”

Nora shrugged, calm and cool, though she *was* slightly unsettled by that. And by the fact that she was being called to the office at all. “Principal Montenegro

probably just needs to speak with us about separate things but called us down in a group,” she said.

Luckily Grace, who was a good writer, did not have the instincts for a story that Nora had been born with. There was definitely more to the story here—and Nora was part of it. Not something she was feeling good about as she hurried out of the newspaper office and down the hall.

People were starting to trickle into the building now that the front doors had opened to students (Nora had slipped in early, as she always did on Wednesdays), and there were about four more minutes before the first warning bell would ring.

The walls of Snow Valley Secondary were covered in posters for next week’s Starlight Gala. Nora had to take a detour past the science lab because the hallway leading to the auditorium was blocked off. That was where the displays of student art, schoolwork, and—most importantly—newspaper stories were posted for the Gala. There would be time for attendees to admire the work before sitting down in the auditorium for performances by the band, sports teams, and the crowning finale by the dance squad.

Nora’s article on the upcoming town council

election, as well as her investigative series Behind the Scenes: Snow Valley Secondary's Cafeteria Unglazed, were both featured. Like most of Nora's stories, they had not exactly gotten much readership. But Ms. Holt had praised them highly, and hopefully the families who came to the Gala would appreciate her hard-hitting, extremely well-researched news reports.

As Nora turned the corner, she was nearly plowed down by a group of boys from her class.

"Sorry, Nora," one of them said as he grabbed her arm to keep her from falling. "I didn't see you there." She looked up at him—he was a full head taller than Nora. It was a boy named Rudy who she knew was on the basketball team.

His fellow jock friends laughed and Nora gave them a sour glare. She wasn't *that* short. And they were definitely over-tall, like most of Nora's classmates.

"Watch it, she'll write an exposé on you," Miles said.

"Yeah, Rudy, she'll *expose* you!" a voice shouted from down the hall. Henry Davis.

Nora rolled her eyes as Henry came loping over. He could always be counted on to say something stupid to make everyone laugh. She ignored them, straightened her satchel, and started toward the office again.

“Nora, hey, why are we being called in?” Henry asked, jostling her as he tried to join her. He seemed totally unaware of both the fact that he’d just pushed her and that his comment had annoyed her. Henry’s other trait was being oblivious to the obvious. He had a small scratch on one cheek, pink against his white skin, and Nora would bet money he had no idea how he’d gotten it.

“I don’t know why you’re being called in,” she said shortly.

Henry ran a hand through his messy, too-long brown hair and then tugged on it for good measure. “I don’t think I did anything bad today,” he said, though he sounded unsure.

Nora sped up, hoping he’d get the hint and leave her alone, but Henry just matched his gait to hers as they headed to the office. He was like a big, sloppy, and very unwelcome puppy.

Ms. Atkins looked up from her desk as they came through the door. Then something weird happened: She didn’t smile at Nora.

Every adult in the school, from the teachers to the janitors to the administrators, always smiled at Nora. Always. Nora got amazing grades, raised her hand in

class, volunteered at every event, and was excellent at conversing with grown-ups (she was actually a lot better at speaking to adults than to her fellow seventh graders). So they were, without fail, happy to see her.

Except for right now. A cold, slithery snake began curling up in Nora's belly.

"Principal Montenegro is waiting for you in room 122," Ms. Atkins said, in a tone that could only be described as frosty. "Don't dawdle."

"Why room 122? What's even in room 122?" Henry babbled as he followed Nora, who nearly ran the short distance to room 122. It was a previously unused space that had been set up for small meetings, with a table encircled by office chairs and not much else.

Principal Montenegro stood at the front of the room, arms folded across her chest. She nodded at them as they entered but *did not smile at Nora*. The snake in Nora's belly was now nipping at her insides. She had to hold on to the table to avoid fainting. Something bad was happening. And Nora reported on bad things—she didn't take part in them.

"Please sit down," Principal Montenegro said, her voice ice.

Nora shakily sank into the closest seat. It was on



wheels and nearly slid out from under her, but she managed to land without injury.

“What’s going on?” Henry asked as he pulled out a chair and rolled backward, almost crashing into Jack, who had just walked in. “Sorry,” he said as Jack jumped back.

Principal Montenegro ignored Henry and glanced at the clock on the far wall. Across the table, Jack, who had taken his cue and sat, gave Nora a “what’s going on” look. Jack drew for the paper, so they sometimes chatted in the newspaper office. She liked that he looked to her for answers now, and hated that she didn’t have any. She shook her head, just as confused as he was.

Finally Maddie, a girl from the school dance team and the only person in seventh grade who had better math scores than Nora, stepped inside.

Principal Montenegro nodded. “Close the door, Maddie, and we’ll get started.”

Maddie looked slightly panicked as she shut the door and hurried to sit down, and who could blame her? Nora had never seen their smiley, warm principal act so remote. So angry. Even last year at the assembly when a student took over the PowerPoint presentation

in an exposé that had gotten the last principal fired (Nora felt it had been a well-researched story but did not belong in a middle school assembly), Principal Montenegro had remained even-keeled. But not now.

The snake was attacking Nora's belly now, and she pressed a hand against it.

"As one of you is well aware, a student's locker was broken into this morning and an item was stolen," Principal Montenegro began, looking carefully at each one of them. Henry shrank down in his seat when the principal's eyes rested on him, but Nora just stared because this was not what she had expected. "The victim took it upon herself to report the incident to her mother, who happens to be president of the PTA. The mother is now threatening legal action, so this incident has become top priority."

Nora looked toward the door in panic.

"Are we under arrest?" Henry asked, leaning forward, his eyes big.

Principal Montenegro shook her head. "She is giving us the morning to correct the situation before reaching out to her attorney," she said in an iron tone.

"That's a relief," Henry said, sitting back.

Principal Montenegro glared at him. "It shouldn't

be. This set of events is a clear violation of school rules,” Ms. Montenegro continued. “So whichever one of you opened Sasha Saturday’s locker without permission and stole her backpack, I suggest you confess now.” She leaned down, palms pressed against the table so that she was at their level. “The faster you tell the truth, the better this will go.”

Nora’s brain, which usually moved so quickly it sometimes gave her headaches, had stalled. Why was *she* here? Did Ms. Montenegro want her to write something for the paper?

“Um, I didn’t do it,” Maddie said. “I don’t know if Sasha said I did or—”

“Did I ask who did *not* steal the backpack?” Principal Montenegro asked sharply.

Maddie blinked a few times. “Ah, no, but I’m confused why I’m here.”

Although Nora prided herself on nerves of steel when investigating a story, getting in trouble with the principal was on a whole other level. She was impressed Maddie wasn’t backing down. And really, why *was* Maddie here? Or Nora or Jack? They would never do something like this, and Ms. Montenegro knew it. It had to be Henry.

Except, why would Henry do such a thing? Sure, he

was a class clown who annoyed people, but he wasn't the kind of person to commit a crime. Was he?

"Last night when our head custodian, Mr. Smith, left the building, nothing was amiss," Ms. Montenegro stated. "But this morning when Sasha entered the building *with permission*"—she paused to give them a sour stare—"at seven twenty, she discovered her locker had been opened and her bag taken. She immediately informed her mother, who called us."

Nora found this odd. She would have told Principal Montenegro, not called Mom. But then, Sasha and Nora were about as different as two people could be.

"As you know, after the events of last year, our school installed a video camera at every entrance that goes on automatically when the door is unlocked," Principal Montenegro said. "The front entrance is opened at seven a.m. sharp, for faculty and staff only. The other entrances open at seven forty-five. So when we received the call from Ms. Saturday and surveyed this morning's footage from the only accessible door—the front entrance—we saw that four students came into the building before hours without permission: the four of you."

Nora gulped. She had come into school early,

“without permission” as Principal Montenegro said. But not to break into anyone’s locker! Especially not the locker of Sasha Saturday, who was super popular and, when provoked, super mean.

“So if it was you, ’fess up now,” Principal Montenegro said, straightening her shoulders and staring down at each of them.

A toxic silence fogged the room, threatening to choke Nora.

“All right,” Principal Montenegro said. “If you won’t reveal yourself to me, I will give you the opportunity to reveal yourself to your peers. All four of you are here on in-school suspension”—Nora gasped—“which will only go on one person’s record: the person who committed the crime. Maybe the pressure from the three other people in the room is what you need to confess. I’ll be back before the end of first period.”

With that she strode out, leaving the four of them staring in shock at one another, the closed door trapping them inside room 122 together.