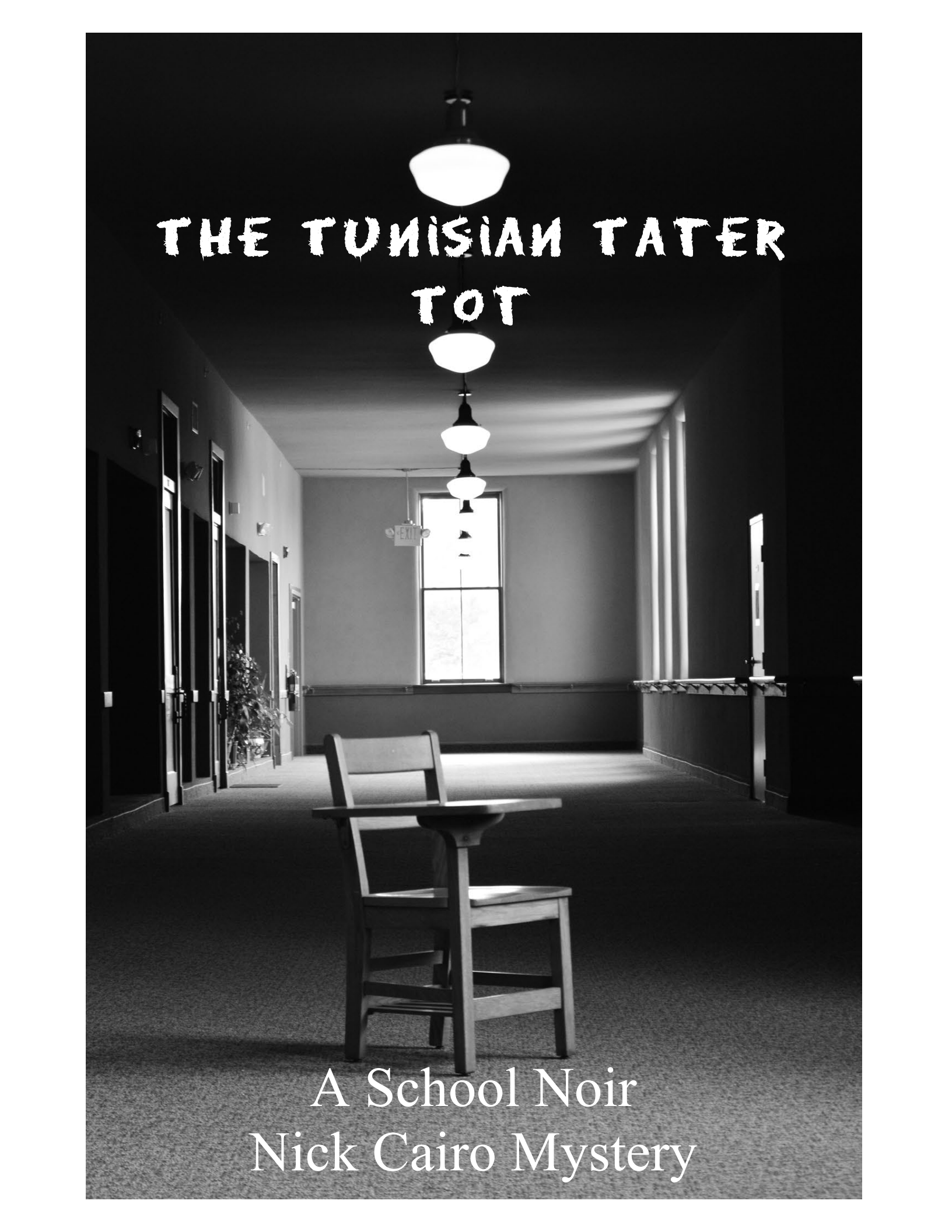


A black and white photograph of a school hallway. In the foreground, a wooden chair with a desk attached is positioned on the left. The hallway extends into the distance, with a series of lights hanging from the ceiling. On the left side of the hallway, there are several doors and a potted plant. On the right side, there is a counter or partition. At the end of the hallway, there is a large window and an "EXIT" sign hanging from the ceiling.

THE TUNISIAN TATER TOT

A School Noir
Nick Cairo Mystery

It was a day, like any other day. The sun was grueling and hot. August hot. It was the kind of hot that made you wish today was Otter Pop Wednesday, and the flavor of the day was blue raspberry. But today was Tuesday. And the freezer was on the fritz.

My name is Nick Cairo. I'm a middle-school gumshoe, a sleuth, a private detective. This is my beat. Chandler Hammett Middle School. It's not a bad school, just a little rough around the edges.

Horace "Bull" Nickerson runs the place. He's a by-the-book principal; a former drill sergeant from "the war." But, he's a good guy. We have an understanding, he and I. And it works.

It was the beginning of a new year. After last year's debacle with the "Lunch Lady from Alcatraz," I was hoping to settle down, have a smooth, easy eighth-grade year, and move on to Sallis Spillane High School. But you know what they say... hope is a fickle mistress who'd sooner set your lunch bag on fire than trade you Pringles for a PB&J.

I was at my office, the lunch bench next to my locker, 221B. I was imbibing my beverage of choice: a juice box, sour apple, when she walked into my office.

The new student.

One look at her and you could tell she was Juicy Couture from head to toe; but her backpack was all Hello Kitty.

At that moment, the way she squished her cinnamon gum behind her ear, I knew she was trouble. She was like a bad penny that wasn't worth a plugged nickel.

"Are you Nick Cairo?" she asked, her lip gloss glowed pink in a radioactive pout.

"I am."

"I'm Holly Demure."

"Yeah?"

"Nick, I'm in trouble. I need your help."

She sat down across from me. To a regular joe, her Mona Lisa smile might be enigmatic and puzzling, but my gut feeling told me she was more adversary than innocent.

"I hear you can find things," she said, her eyelashes fluttering like spastic butterflies. Her fragrance was an intoxicating mixture of *always getting my way*, and jasmine.

"I've been known to procure the occasional item. Why?"

"I need something found." She reached into her backpack and produced a bound stack of hundred-dollar bills. A thousand dollars. That kind of moola could buy a lot of sour apple juice boxes.

"That's a lot of dough," I said, staring down at the wad of Benjamins as their green, papery voices whispered, *Take the money*. "You must really want something found."

"Don't worry," she said, "I can get more, if you need. My father is the inventor of the MoMoMango Jazz Pants. He's rolling in money. He makes them cheap overseas and sells them for an arm and a leg in America. Money is not an object."

“Really? So, let’s say, for the moment, I got an interest in your little problem. What would I be looking for?”

“Not what... who,” she said with an icy tone cool enough to make a penguin look for a trench coat.

“Okay, who, then?”

“Boyd Thursday. I’m frightened, Nick. I think he transferred to this campus. And I think he wants to hurt me.”

With a sound like a racoon having a seizure in a trash can, the first period bell rang. Without a word, Holly stood up from the bench and, with a practiced finger, wiped the lipstick from both corners of her mouth. Then, she swaggered away toward her first class. But she left the money.

Drat! Was I really that transparent? With momentary misgivings, I took the money. I guess I was now on the job. I stashed \$500 for my expenses. I would need the other \$500 to grease a few palms for information.

I knew who I had to see, first. The Notatious B-i-g-g.

#

His name was Hiram Bigg, but he went by The Notatious B-i-g-g. At 320 pounds, he was a walking boulder of a person. He loved old-school rap: Sugar Hill Gang, Grandmaster Flash, Kurtis Blow. He also was the most observant and clandestine person I knew. Despite his weight, he had the remarkable ability to eavesdrop on anyone. And he took notes. Lots of notes. We had math class first period.

Walking into Mr. Winteregg’s math class was like walking into the fifth level of hell in Dante’s Inferno, the level meant for improper fractions and football players trying to divide by zero.

Hiram was sitting in the back of the class, his eyeballs flickering back and forth, looking; his head tilting side to side, listening; his fingers moving across his notebook, writing. I sat down next to him. He paused for a moment and passed me a folded note between the fingers of his left hand. I took it as he resumed noting everything.

Unfolding the note, it read:

She’s originally from Sweetwater, Texas. But, her dad moved the family to Tunisia in North Africa when she was three, where he made millions off of cheap, child labor making his MoMoMango Jazz Pants with third-world produced Nylon. She lived there until last year. Something happened and they had to leave the country, quick. Don’t know. I’ll find out.

“Hiram, I’ve got a job for you,” I said.

He nodded knowingly and continued taking notes.

Walking with Hiram was like walking with a human tsunami. People simply parted the way as we surged down the hallway to our next classes.

“So, what’s the job?” he asked, as he slid an entire bag of Peanut M&Ms into his mouth, all at once.

"I need you to keep tabs on someone, follow him. I need to know who he is, what he's doing here, and why?"

"Transfer student?" he asked, with chips of M&Ms painted across his teeth.

"Yeah, I think so." We stopped at the end of the hallway, next to the vending machine. Hiram fished down deep into his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill. He smoothed it on the glass window of the machine and then aimed the bill into the dollar slot. The vending machine slurped up the dollar with an asthmatic whine. Hiram stood staring at the selection for a moment, then he poked the buttons: D9. A spiral food holder contorted endlessly around with occasional jerks as it pushed a cellophane package of *Raspberry Zingers*—the holy grail of snack cakes--toward Hiram. Just before they got to their destination and were about to fall down into the bin at the bottom of the vending machine, the spiral jerked and the *Zingers* fell half-way and rested, leaning on the glass. They were stuck in gastronomical limbo.

"That's too bad," I said. "I hate it when that happens."

Giving me a cunning look, Hiram deftly grabbed both top corners of the machine, took one bracing set back, and pulled the machine toward him. He then let it drop backward, causing not only the *Zingers* to drop, but also a bag of *Salsa Verde Doritos*, three packs of *Juicy Fruit* gum, a *Snickers* bar, and a package of those off-brand vanilla cookies that no one really likes and that Hiram would pawn off on some seventh-grader, later.

"That's quite the value for a dollar," I said, impressed.

Unwrapping the *Snickers* bar, he said, "Lemme get down to brass tacks. The job's gonna cost you, Nick."

"Name it," I said.

"*Electric Kingdom*, by Twilight 22, the vocal version, cassette." I knew Hiram well. I reached into my backpack and pulled out the music he wanted. In addition, I pulled out the movie, *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, in genuine VHS, just to sweeten the deal.

"Gimme a day. I'll let you know." The bell rang for second period.

Finally lunch...my favorite time of the day. Just me, sitting in my office, a juice box freshly aerating, and watching students as they blindly saunter through their so-called lives. Like flies to flypaper, this school seems to attract all kinds of students. By the snack bar The Back Benchers hang out, the jocks who couldn't make it on any sports team. They prided themselves on being the opposite of athletic. Near the quad sat The Silent Tooters, the former concert band students who lost their instruments due to lack of funding. Now, they just whistle. On opposite sides of the cafeteria were The Uncalled Four and The Bingo Bikers, our sorry excuse for street gangs at this school. Not much of a threat really; they usually just eyeballed each other and lobbed French fries slathered in ketchup back and forth. Finally, The BFFs were twittering on the raised, grassy knoll, rotating through friends quicker than an elephant goes through peanuts.

Then, I noticed that Norman Cooper, Norman "The Noodge," was at the corndog vending machine, talking to someone I did not know. Norman got the nickname "The

Noodge” because he was persistently and perpetually a pest. He was always trying to get into everyone’s business. A regular busybody. Norman seemed very excited and conspicuous as he talked to this person. He kept looking around, as if he were expecting to see someone.

Then, he saw me.

Now, he was bounding over toward me, his arms and legs flailing around like a broken windmill in a hurricane. It didn’t take long before he was in front of me, bouncing up and down in his Chuck Taylors like a human pogo stick.

“Hey, Nick. Hi. Whatcha doin’, Nick? You on a case Nick? You know, you can tell me, Nick, ‘cause I promise I won’t say anything, Nick, you can trust me, Nick, I’m like Fort Knox when it comes to information, Nick...” he paused to take a breath and snort back the little bit of snot hanging out of his nose, like a loogie icicle. He resumed. “...so, I was thinking that I’d like to help you, Nick, you know, if you were on a case and such, Nick.”

“Norman.”

“Hi,” he said, breathlessly.

“Who were you talking to, next to the corndogs, Norman?”

“Oh, him, oh, that’s Boyd...Boyd Thursday. He’s a new kid, from some place foreign. We got to talking and he knows a lot of stuff. He’s neat. So, can I help, Nick?”

“Norman,” I said, “I think you just did.” I flipped him a five-spot. “Get yourself some Pop Tarts. On me.”

“Whoa, jeez, thanks, Nick!” He grabbed the cash and pogo-ed back to the snack bar.

“Boyd Thursday,” I said, crushing the empty juice box, “I’m glad to finally meet you.”

It was already an hour after school got out, getting dark, and I had not seen hide nor hair of Hiram. This was unusual since he was normally so vigilant when on a job. I was concerned.

I’d been hanging out by the cafeteria, keeping a weathered eye on Boyd Thursday, as he meandered about the campus, like a lost puppy looking for his owner. Suddenly, he broke into a run toward the bike rack. Grabbing his ten-speed, an Enigma Exemplar Blue – a \$14,000 bike, I Googled it – he shot like a bat out of hell from the school and headed straight for the city. I waited a minute or two. I was going to use the tactic of giving him a little time to think he was on his own. I’d pick up his tail soon enough.

I mounted my 1973 Schwinn Krate – a Lemon Peeler –with 5-speed Stik-Shift and bucket seat. Got it for a steal at one of the yearly police auctions. It was as ugly as my grandmother’s brocade bingo bag; but surprisingly fast, like my grandmother’s bingo arm. Perfect for tailing a suspect. Nobody would ever steal it, thinking it out-of-date and obsolete. But boy, did she have speed.

In no time, I pick up Boyd traveling through town like Lance Armstrong, weaving and dodging cars and people as he pumped his legs like he was in the Tour de France.

I stayed behind; since most of the way was downhill, I could see him zip past buildings and I could follow his path. He practically plowed over a mother pushing a pram of three mewling babies. She flipped him a hand gesture one normally would have seen at some of the swankier Navy dances, downtown. I continued following, coasting and watching his direction.

Then, as he passed the Rexall drug store, he skidded to a stop and fishtailed his bike into the back alley. Shifting gears, my dependable bike picked up speed and we both arrived at the mouth of the alley in no time.

I slunk behind several piles of trash bags and watched; the alley cats eyeballing me like little furry gangbangers. Deep in the alley, I could see Boyd huffing and puffing and standing over his bike.

With a metal grinding *screech*, a door opened and out emerged Holly Demure, wearing pink pumps and a poisonous look. She stood six feet from Boyd. Balancing his bike on its kickstand, he walked over to her, standing close in front of her. Then, he kissed her on both cheeks. Then, she slapped him. Hard.

Gotta say, I didn't expect that. Any of that.

The next morning, the school intercom hacked and coughed like a newly sobered hobo at a Sunday Baptist pancake revival. The principal's wheezy voice blared from the wall. *"Attention all students! Report to the front of the school. Pronto!"*

The principal, Horace "Bull" Nickerson, stood at attention as we lined up on opposite sides of the long, concrete sidewalk. "Today," he said, with his hair in raised indignation, "we must acknowledge a transgression in our fair school and expunge it from our midst. Ms. Rockett, bring forth the transgressors."

Her name was Norma Rockett, and she was Nickerson's assistant. She was the kind of woman that could make you forget just what temperature it was because you just knew, with her, you would never be properly dressed for the weather. The heels of her pink, patent leather pumps *ricocheted* like .22 caliber bullets as she led two students through the student body gauntlet. And the two students: Boyd Thursday and Hiram Bigg!

Bull Nickerson continued, "Today, students, our school has been besmirched. Today, *contraband* was discovered on our campus. And as Jesus chased away the money changers, so to must we rectify a wrong and clean our campus of the filth that has soiled us." He cleared his throat for effect. "Mr. Bigg and Mr. Thursday, as of today, you are expelled. Now, walk the walk of shame!"

Ms. Rockett unhandled both of their shoulders and the two students slowly walked their perp walk toward the parking lot, where two cars awaited: Hiram's mom and dad in their station wagon and a black limousine for Boyd.

One by one, each student turned his or her back as Boyd and Hiram walked on, their heads low. Then, when Hiram approached me, he stopped. I did not turn my back.

"Nick," he said in a rapid whisper, "I was framed. D9, Nick. D9!"

Nickerson interrupted, "Keep moving, you violator of freedom and democracy. Cairo...turn your back!"

"Do it, Nick," Hiram implored. So, I turned my back, as both students approached Nickerson. He spun on his heels and turned his back on them, too.

Stepping off the curb, Hiram was greeted solemnly by his parents. They hugged and drove away. Boyd simply stood by the limo. Suddenly, a disembodied arm opened the door from the inside, then disappeared in the darkness of the interior. Boyd slipped in, and the limo *squealed* away from the school.

I noticed, with the imperious emotional depth of a black widow spider, Holly Demure dabbing at a single tear.

Half an hour later, I was standing in front of Ms. Rockett's desk. I could smell the strawberry lip gloss emanating from her derisive lips as she buffed her nails, languidly.

"Yeah?" she said, as she popped one eyebrow at me.

I looked around before I answered. "I'm Nick Cairo. I was summoned."

"I know who you are," she said, with a voice like a mink stole. But, before she could say another word, Nickerson's voice erupted from his office like a Category 5 hurricane.

"Cairo, *get in here!*"

#

Entering his office was like entering Army central casting. The American flag stood proudly behind his desk. Brass casings of howitzer shells marched in formation on the credenza under his window. And there were pictures, lots of pictures, of he and his Army buddies from days gone past. Nickerson stood at attention in front of his desk.

"Sit down," he commanded, pointing to a chair. I sat. With precision, he moved behind his desk and sat, as well. "You on a job, Nick?"

I took my time in answering, crossing my legs, comfortably, and relaxing deeper into the chair. "I don't know, I might be."

He blew his stack. "Do not be flippant with me, Cairo! I will not stand for this." He popped back up and began pacing. "We had contraband...*contraband* in our school. This is how it always begins. First, it's contraband, then it's students dying their hair with Kool-aid and dancing their weird, gyrational dances. And, before you know it, it's the Tet Offensive all over again, and I've got helicopters landing on the roof trying to evacuate the entire math department! We need to nip it, Nick. Nip it in the bud!" He sat back down. "I know Bigg was your man, so I'm wondering, *Mr. Cairo*, if you are at the heart of all this mishigas?"

I leaned forward in the chair. "Now look Bull, you and I go way back, since sixth grade. I've been nothing by straight with you all along. Don't try to pin this one on me!

He put his hands up in supplication. "I know. I know. I'm sorry. But I want this solved, Nick, and pronto. If you don't...I will!"

I nodded in agreement and stood to leave. Suddenly, it occurred to me to ask, "How's the missus?"

He grimaced, "She's just great. She took up full-contact crochet. Her needles are in the shop being sharpened. I need to pick them up this afternoon. Thanks for asking. Now, get out of here!"

It was between second and third hour when I left Bull's office. As I walked the empty, cathedral-like halls, I could hear the murmurs of learning ooze out from under the wooden classroom doors. The mirror-slick tile floor echoed my footsteps, but I didn't care if I was heard, or if Jacob Snee – the scrawny, self-appointed hall monitor, with his cheap, plastic, green whistle trilling loudly in offense – discovered me in his proprietary domain.

I didn't care.

Like a boy scout pursuing the merit badge of truth, I had a mission...get to the vending machine before classes were over.

Standing in front of it, with a few minutes to spare before third hour, I pulled out my billfold and withdrew a dollar. The machine devoured my bill, hungrily, and then waited for my selection.

D9.

The spiral food holder jerked and sputtered and the last package of Zingers got stuck – again – against the machine's window. I anticipated this.

Grabbing the corners, I leveraged the vending machine like Atlas holding the Earth. It was amazingly heavy, but I managed to hoist it forward, then shoved it backward. Abruptly, the Zingers fell to the bottom tray, along with two bags of Corn Nuts, a Hershey's bar, and seven packs of Wrigley's Spearmint gum. I didn't care about any of the items, save one. I wrestled the Zingers from the tray and discovered a note, taped to the back.

I unfolded it:

"Nick, be careful. This job's bigger than you. Don't trust anyone, especially Holly Demure. She's not who she claims to be. To add fuel to the fire, she's going by a false name. Her real name is Gretchen Salvatori. Yes, of the Family Salvatori. And there's some connection between Holly and Boyd. And something about a tater tot, but I can't find out anything more because I'm being followed. It's not safe. Watch your back, Nick. Nefarious things are afoot!"

---Notatious

The bell rang for the next class. I knew what I needed to do next.

At lunch, I got my customary quesadilla with genuine imitation Velveeta cheese. Millie, the lunch lady, was at the register. She's just working here to get enough scratch to move to New York and become a Broadway hoofer. Every time she's at the register, she always slips me an extra salsa packet for free. She's a swell gal.

I walked into the main dining arena, balancing the Styrofoam tray on my arm and gripping my juice box in my other hand. In the corner of the cafeteria, the BFFs were fluttering and chirping around each other while Holly sat in the middle of it all. As soon as I walked up to their lunch table, they all stopped and turned to me in unison.

"Beat it, ladies," I commanded as I dropped my tray on the table, the quesadilla sliding in its own, congealed, cheesy grease. They all flew off together in a huff. I sat down across from Holly. She gave me a condescending look.

"That was rude, Nick," she said, spooning up the rubbery, yellowed yoghurt parfait as if it were a Tahitian Vanilla Bean Crème Brûlée from Sardi's.

"Can it, Holly...or should I say Gretchen Salvatori." At that moment, she looked like she swallowed a bug. The bug of shame.

"How'd you find out, Nick?" her eyes flickered downward, like an innocent lamb.

"It's my job."

"I'm sorry about your friend, Hiram."

"Save it, toots. Now, spill it."

She folded her hands like she was about to give confession. "Yes, I am Giuseppe Salvatori's daughter. But I didn't want anyone to know that. Nick, I was frightened. I changed my name because I don't want anything to do with my father's organized crime business. He's like the Don Corleone of yoga pants. It's a horrible business, Nick, and it scares me. I've seen my father and his hired goons do things with polyester that are just unmentionable. I moved from Tunisia to get away from the family and its stranglehold on the undergarment market. I just wanted to start over, Nick. It's the truth. I want you to believe me."

I took a moment to finish my juice box with a final slurp of derision. "That's a doozy of a story, lady, but I ain't buying what you're selling. Tell me how Boyd fits in all of this."

She swallowed, hard. "He was after me. The family sent him here to bring me back. I hired you hoping you'd find him, first. I needed your protection and safety, Nick. Please believe me."

"Uh huh," I said. "Strange thing about that. I saw you two together. He didn't seem like some kind of hired muscle to me."

She looked at me with those deep, penetrating, vacant eyes. "That's because he wasn't muscle, Nick. He was my brother."

I was against the clock. Lunch was almost over and I didn't want to miss my next class. Art, with Mr. Medley. Today, we'd be exploring the use of popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners in the late Italian Renaissance Post-Impressionist period. I needed to get down to the truth. "Give me the real reason for Boyd Thursday being here?" I said.

She took an emotional bite of a carrot, "Oh, Nick...I don't know. I really don't know why he was here. I'm so alone and afraid. I've got nobody to help me. Just you, Nick. You are my Rock of Gibraltar; I need your strength and resilience, just a little while longer. Help me, Nick. I've not the right to ask you, but please help me." She sniffed and her eyes watered up, just a little, like a scorpion, feeling bad after having just stung her prey.

I laughed at her with disdain. "You're still telling stories, I see." I slammed my hand down on the table in exasperation. "I'm about to walk away. Try again."

She pushed her food tray aside, but then she faltered, as if she were about to collapse. "I don't blame you for getting angry with me. I know I've been evasive, it's just that I don't know who to trust. I thought I could trust you. Maybe not. Anyway, I

guess I have no choice. I don't know, really, why Boyd was here, except that he threatened me. That's why I slapped him."

"Who framed him? Was it you?"

"No!" she exclaimed and sat up straight. "I may not like him, but he's my brother. He's...family."

"I dunno, doll face," I said, wiping my hands clean on a napkin, and about to wipe my hands clean of her, "Bull wants the mess fixed up. And, I'm thinking I have the prime suspect."

She hung her head lower and silently began to cry. "I guess I'll have to take my chances."

I swear, there are two things that will melt my heart quicker than anything else: when the Misfit Toys sing the song, *The Most Wonderful Day of the Year* to Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Hermey, and Yukon Cornelius. And a dame crying. "All right, all right. I promise to keep your name out of my conversation with Bull, for now."

"Will you still help me?" she pleaded.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll look into who framed Boyd and Hiram. But that's gonna be an additional expense."

She reached into her backpack and pulled out another stack of Benjamins. Sliding them on the table toward me, she packed up her things, stood up, and left without saying another word.

I guess lunch was now over.

After lunch, my thoughts were warring inside of me like a bunch of mother-in-laws at an all-you-can eat wedding buffet. I needed a moment to gather my thoughts before the next class.

Approaching my office, there was someone who should not have been there. And he was drinking from my private reserve.

"Oh, forgive me," he said, "but I – I just had to try one of these boxes of juice. They are – yes – most flavorful. My name is Joel Luxor. And – and you, of course, are Nick Cairo – yes."

"Yes." Joel Luxor was a pasty-faced kid, over-weight, short, curly hair, and wearing a pink, seersucker suit and bowtie. If you could teach a jelly-filled donut to speak like a weasel with a deviated septum, that would be Joel Luxor. I didn't like him.

"Mr. Cairo, as you can tell, I – I am a foreign exchange student to this school..."

"Yeah?" I said. "Well, we're a regular Ellis Island this year."

"Oh, Mr. Cairo, your American humor, it is so – ah -- colloquial. As I was about to say, I – I was curious to the – ah – expulsion of Boyd Thursday, you see, I – I'm trying to recover – yes – an ornament that, ah, shall we say has been mislaid...I thought you could assist me. The ornament, ah, is a statuette, small, the brown figure of an oven crunchy – ah – a tater tot. I am prepared to promise that – what is the phrase? – no questions will be asked."

"That's interesting," I said.

"Yes – yes, it is. Even more interesting, I – I am prepared to offer a lot of money for the missing tot's recovery to – to its rightful owner."

“Really? Well, bub, I wish I could help you.” I stood up and walked to my locker to get the textbook for my next class. And, as I turned back around, Luxor was pointing a rubber-band gun at me. It was a small, Alliance rubber-band gun, with a .22-caliber paper hornet, aimed at my head. The hornet was pink. A wimpy weapon.

Standing up, he said, “Now, I – I think you know more than you are letting on, Mr. Cairo. You will please clasp your hands together at the back of your neck. I intend to search your locker, Mr. Cairo. I warn you, if you attempt to prevent me, I shall certainly shoot you.”

He moved closer to me, and when he got to just the right distance...I cold-cocked him. Gave him the whole nine yards. He crumpled like a paper doll. Now I was sure I didn't like him.

I had a sneaky suspicion that Luxor and Holly Demure were allied somehow. I just didn't know how. Not yet. I had a little time before science class. I needed to see Elrod, “The Fence.”

Elrod “The Fence” Schmidt was the son of radical Jewish vegans out of Berkley. In fourth grade, in a freak dodgeball accident, he was hit in the head by a dodgeball. Left him a paraplegic; now he drives an electric wheelchair. The blow also left him with Foreign Language Syndrome. Now, he talks like he's from Philadelphia. He's an odd duck, but he's also the Encyclopedia Britannica of hot merchandise.

I figured he'd be in his usual spot about now; the handicap stall in the boys' bathroom. Last year, the toilet met a sudden demise from a suspicious incident with an M-80. The toilet was never replaced, so now Elrod uses the stall as his office. I saw the wheels of his chair under the stall, and the door was open, so I knew he was open for business instead of doing his business. I knocked.

“Yo, Nicky,” he said, “how youse doin'?”

“How's business, Elrod?”

“Ah, what can I say, business has been very busy anymore. I'm feelin' kinda salty, though, 'cause the Iggles lost the game, last night.”

“I heard,” I said. “Shame. Listen, what do you know about a tater tot?”

“They's tasty.”

“No. Something more like a small statuette.”

“Yo, Nicky! Sheesh, youse talking about the Tunisian Tater Tot? That's a serious tot.”

“Tell me.”

“The tot was part of the Ottoman Empire, around 1873; part of the Hussein Dynasty of Beys. It was owned by Muhammad III as-Sadiq. It was a gift to his favorite chef, Ustol Nazim as-Lezzetli.”

“What's it look like?”

“It's 'bout as big as your thumb, gold, with little inlayed rubies, to accent its crunchiness. Word on the street is that it was stolen last year. Ain't nobody seen it since. It's priceless, Nicky. Be careful. People have died for it.”

“Good to know.” I reached into my backpack and pulled out a cheesesteak.

“Had Millie pop one up just before she left for the day. Thanks for the talk, Elrod.”

He reached for the sandwich. "Youse a treasure, Nicky." Then he eyeballed me.
"Wit or widdout?"
"With, of course."

The moment I left the restroom, I knew I had a tail. I really hate it when I'm followed from the bathroom. There's something unnervingly inappropriate about it. Besides, he wasn't any good at it; so, professionally, I was offended. I've seen bulls in china shops with more subtle grace than this guy had.

He was ducking and weaving between trash cans like a weasel on double espressos. Slowly, deliberately, I walked toward the Eighth-Grade building. From behind, I could hear him scramble as he knocked over a trash can. This made me smile, that is...until he took a shot at me! The paper hornet whizzed past my ear, whispering the promise of pain and wrath. It stuck to the wall just ahead of me. The kid was using hornets with thumbtacks stuck in them. That's not playing according to Hoyle.

Now I was hot. I quickly ducked behind a pillar and pulled out my rubber band. A Grifiti Band Joe. A good weapon. Strong; and it comes in many festive colors, and that is pleasing to me. I loaded a .38 caliber paper hornet, made from the old library check-out cards from a rich librarian I once knew. She was a peach. Knew the Dewey decimal system by heart. And a few other things, literarily speaking.

The schmo had reloaded and he took another shot. It went wild and plinked against a window. "Hey, pal," I said, stretching my weapon for the ready, "you want I should stand out in the open, give you a better shot?"

"I'm gonna get you, Cairo," he said, in a raspy, nasally voice that sounded like an over-the-hill party clown after blowing up one too many balloon animals. "I swear, I'm gonna get you!"

"And I'm gonna be as old as Methuselah before you do," I said, taking aim. "Tell you what, why don't you put down that weapon before you hurt yourself and tell me who you work for."

"Never!" he said, and just then, he popped his head above the trash can, ready to fire. But, I was ready first. With great aplomb, I pulled and fired and grazed his rubber band finger. He let out a yelp. A second later, using a technique only a mother could teach her shamus son, I fired a second round and smashed him right in the left eye.

Dropping his weapon, he grabbed his eye and let out a scream the likes of which only night-shift janitors at the local insane asylum would find comforting.

"You haven't seen the last of me, Cairo!" he spat, running away off campus.
"Maybe not, but it's the last time at least one of your eyes will see me."

The next day, it was cold and cloudy. Like my mood. I opened my locker and was surprised to find a fresh six-pack of sour apple juice boxes waiting for me, along with a note:

Please join me for a little conversation. I'll be in the chess club waiting for your arrival. Come alone and unarmed.

Well, I would be doing only one of those things, that's certain. The chess club was in an old, abandoned teachers' lounge. Ever since the PTO moved to organized crime, the teachers stopped using this lounge; choosing, instead, to eat in their classrooms, where they were safer. I walked in. Instantly, I saw my old friend from yesterday, now sporting a very fashionable gauze bandage over his left eye. He moved in to frisk me. "Try it, pal, and you'll be playing the fiddle with your toes."

At the center of the room was a tall, very skinny kid that I vaguely recognized, but never had crossed paths with before. He sat in front of a chessboard, the chess pieces all lined up, ready to wage an uncertain war.

"Ah, Nick Cairo," he said, "you found my note. Excellent. I hope you'll forgive my associate, Wilber. He was to give you my message, but I guess he got a bit exuberant."

"He's an idiot," I said, smiling at Wilber. Wilber, in turn, started turning scarlet with anger, his nostrils flaring like a raging marmot.

"Yes, he is an idiot. But, he's useful. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Crispin Gutmacher, but you may know me as the "Phat Man."

"You're skinny-boned thin," I said. "Why the 'Fat Man?'" Wilber was becoming apoplectic with fury, now; the muscles in his jaw were working overtime, like a jackhammer.

Gutmacher laughed a sniveling, wet laugh. "My friend, I like you. You are clever. No, not fat with an 'F,' phat with a 'PH.' It means "excellent" or "wonderful."

I sneered, "I've always found that to be an asinine pun."

Gutmacher laughed, again. "Indeed!" Pointing to the chessboard, "Do you play?"

"I've been known to partake," I said.

"Shall we, then?" Before I could say another word, he called out, "Pawn g4."

He didn't move a piece; so, this was going to be a mind game. All right then. I sat down. "Pawn d5."

"Knight h3," he said. "I understand that you have been hired by two rather unsavory individuals."

"Pawn e5," I said. "You mean Luxor and Demure? Simply a means to an end. So is the tater tot."

"Bishop h3," he said. "Ah. That's wonderful. I appreciate your directness, your honesty. So refreshing."

I recognized that he was playing The Cuisinart Lament. With my years of street chess, I decided to hit him fast with The Coney Island Dilemma. "Bishop c5. Yeah, there's a lot of hubbub about this thing. What's your hubbub?"

For a moment, he was silent, pressing his fingers to his lips like he was searching for Bobby Fischer. Finally, he said, aggressively, "Bishop f5. I want the Tunisian Tater Tot. And I will pay handsomely for it."

Now, it was my turn. "That's a bold move," I said. "Queen h4. But, I'm already handsome and I don't have the tot."

"Knight c6." His laugh was slick with menace, "Oh, I know that sir, I know that. I also know that you know who has it."

He was starting to force his moves and I wanted to see how far he would go. "Pawn c6. If you know so much, why don't you have your gunsel goon over there, one-eyed-Wilber, take care of it?" At this, Wilber started pounding his fists together, like Sonny Liston. But, I just gave him a right-hook smile like Muhammad Ali after the first round.

"I wish I could," Gutmacher said, apologetically. "Knight d5. But I'm afraid my obligations prevent me from doing so. However, I have certain, shall I say...interests, in the tot, that I feel supersedes any claims that Ms. Demure or that Luxor chap might make. And since you have been most congenial with me, I will be forthright with you, sir. Get me the tot and I will give you \$10,000."

"I tell you, Gutmacher," I said, "I'm intrigued. Rook a2. Check." Clearly, he didn't expect my skills at chess. His eyes never left mine and I could tell he was working things out. Then his greasy smile slid back onto his face.

"At last," he said, "a worthy opponent! Yes, I knew that I would like you, sir. Indeed I did. Knight e5. I feel that our time has almost come to an end. I am pleased that my offer intrigues you. It is genuine. Get me the tot and it is yours. May I suggest that you have another conversation with the lovely Ms. Demure. I think you'll find there is more to her than you know."

"Rook g2. Check. Now let me tell you what think. I think all three of you are in cahoots. I don't know the angle, yet, but I got a lotta fine, upstanding people, such as yourself, giving me money to find this dingus."

"Queen b4. So, do we have a deal?"

"Rook c2. Check and mate." Gutmacher looked genuinely surprised. "Yeah, why not. I'll take your money." I stood up. "Gutmacher, it's been an interesting day. I'll be in touch."

From his seat, he smiled one more perilous, gameshow smile, "Oh, fear not, Mr. Nick Cairo, I will have Wilber keep an eye on you."

For the first time, today, I genuinely laughed.

It was time to pay another visit to Holly Demure. It was 5th period; I knew where she would be.

There was a substitute teacher for 5th period Social Studies. Mrs. Gibson. At ninety-five years old, she was a sweet old gal. Although she was legally blind, as a former Naval submarine captain, she was a nuclear powerhouse when it came to arm wrestling. And she always called everyone 'Dearie.'

I walked into class, late, and saw that no one was learning a thing; worksheets were in various states of spitballness. Mrs. Gibson was by the window, arm wrestling Butch Mathers, the school's football hero. Judging by the pile of one-dollar bills in front of her, Butch was losing badly, but Mrs. Gibson was cleaning up. Holly Demure was sitting in front of the classroom, doing her nails.

"It's a good color." I said as I sat in the desk next to her.

She held up her hand and blew. "It's called Rouge Fatale. It's my family's color."

"Fitting," I said. "Gotta say, past couple of days, I've met some interesting people: Luxor, Gutmacher, Wilber...and you don't seem to be their cup of tea." She made a contemptuous snort and looked at me with a venomous eye. Then, she bent down to fish something from her backpack. Suddenly, from behind, I heard Butch cry in pain as Mrs. Gibson won another round, and in the process, rip a tendon in his wrist. When Holly sat back up, she had another stack of Benjamins. She practically threw it at me. "What's this, hush money?"

"It's 'stay out of it' money," she said. "I no longer require your services. This is my game now. I like you, Nick. Not that much, but I like you more than the others, which is why I'm telling you this: don't get in my way. I've got plans, Nick. I'm going to take over the family business. I'm going to make the name Salvatori mean something, again. People will fear the name. Fear me. The tot is my ticket. With what I can get for it, I can push my imbecile father aside and take over. He's become a millstone around my neck. It's time to be free. Yeah, I have the tot. Always did. And you'll never find it. I just needed you to play your part in my game and root out Luxor and Gutmacher. You did that. Nice job. I'll take care of them from here; they're not long for this school." She stood up and hoisted her backpack over her shoulder. "So, now, Nick, this is where we part company. Be a good boy, take your money, and stay out of it. Unless you want me to do to you what I did to my brother and Hiram." She blew me a kiss, turned, and walked out.

With her Titanic dreams and her iceberg heart, a lot of people were going to sink by the end of this game. I just needed to make sure I wasn't one of them. So, I had to act fast.

And there was only one person fast enough. John Bolo.

Something Holly Demure said told me I still had a chance. She said I'd never find the tot. So, it wasn't on her. And, I think I knew where she was hiding it. I needed a smuggler.

As soon as school let out, I was on my bike, headed toward the school district's bus yard. I didn't have far to go, since the yard was just a mile from school. I arrived and gave my bike to the valet. "Take care of her, she's one of a kind." He knuckled his forehead, handed me a claim ticket, and smiled.

I walked up to the main office: The Blue Bird; the exclusive speakeasy joint and administrative office where only professional bus drivers frequent. I knocked on the heavy, reinforced steel door. After a moment, an eyehole slid open.

"Password."

"The wheels go 'round and 'round," I said. From behind the door, I could hear the *clank* and *shuck* and *click* of locks unlocking. The door opened and I entered. Inside was like the Cotton Club. Champagne flowed over glass fountains, musicians played hot jazz to swinging dancers jitterbugging. In the back was a hosted sushi bar. Clearly, it was good to be a professional bus driver.

Sitting in an alcove, next to the stage, was John Bolo, the only bus driver to make the Kessel Run in less than twelve bus stops. I sat down. "John," I said.

"Nick," was all he said.

In one hand, I held a slip of paper with all the information he needed. In the other hand, I held two tickets for the 'He Shot First' concert, with Greedo Tetsu. The hottest ticket in town. John instantly took both from my hands and walked out.

I had no idea how long I was going to have to wait, so I settled in and watched the show. Some magic act where the prestidigitator was sawing a volunteer audience member in half inside school bus-shaped box. A waiter brought over a plate of sushi and wasabi. The show was good. So was the food.

Evidently, I lost track of time because, suddenly, an old, purple Crown Royal bag *thunked* in front of me. John, smiling like a Devaronian, walked around the table, sat down, and finished off my sushi. "Easy as pie, Nick," he said, popping my last California Roll into his mouth.

Scooping up the bag, I said, "Always a pleasure, John." I left to finish my plan.

The following morning, as I was in the front office, trying to sneak a cup of coffee from the secured teachers' lounge, Norma Rockett flicked a paper clip at my head.

"Hey! What gives?"

"Boss wants to see you."

I walked over to her desk, where she was buffing her nails to a high sheen of indifference. "What's he want?" I asked.

"What do I look like, Western Union?"

From his office, Nickerson's voice bellowed like a constipated Kodiak bear. "Cairo, *get in here!*"

"Guess you should go in," Norma said, inspecting her nails.

Inside Bull's office, there was a kid standing in front of Bull's desk. He was not a student from around here. There were two enormous bodyguards standing like the Himalayas behind the kid.

"Cairo, sit down," Bull commanded. We all sat down; the mountainous bodyguards struggled to wedge their bodies into the armchairs. "Nick, this is Mongi Ghannouchi. He's the son of the ambassador from Tunisia. He wants to talk to you.

"As-salāmu 'alaykum, Mr. Nick Cairo," he said. "Please allow me to – how do you say – cut to the chase. As an ambassador's son, I am privy to certain information. It has come to my attention that you have the Tater Tot of as-Sadiq."

"I might know of such an item," I said.

"This item, as you say, is of great importance to my family," he said. "Last year, it was blatantly stolen. I have come to the United States to retrieve it."

"A lot of people have offered me a lot of money for the tot," I said. "What are you offering?"

He smiled at me, diplomatically. "Mr. Cairo, I am not offering money. I am simply appealing to you as an honorable person, to return to me what rightfully belongs to my family."

There are only two things that would make me be altruistic: dog rescue commercials with Sarah McLachlan singing in the background, and people appealing to my honor. "I do have what you are looking for," I admitted, "but I can't give it to you until tomorrow, and I'll tell you why..." I explained my plan to both Bull and the kid.

In the end, the kid shook my hand and said, "Thank you, Nick. I'll see you, tomorrow. You are an honorable person."

"Don't let that get around," I said. The kid and his bodyguard left the office. I turned to Bull, "And you'll remember our deal?" I asked.

"Not my first rodeo, Nick," he said.

"Good. Until tomorrow. By the way, how's the missus?"

He grimaced. "Swell, just swell," he said. "She's taken up Hula Hoop skydiving. Costing me a fortune in Hula Hoops. Thanks for asking. Now, get out of here."

The next day, at the beginning of third hour, the intercom sniveled and moaned like a water buffalo having just swallowed a helium balloon. Bull's voice erupted: "*Attention all students! Report to the front of the school. Pronto!*"

Bull Nickerson stood at attention as we lined up, again, on opposite sides of the long, concrete sidewalk. "Today," he barked, his face scarlet red with acrimony, "we must acknowledge another transgression in our fair school. As the goddess Nemesis enacts her retribution upon those who succumb to hubris, so to must we remove the greasy stain of greed and arrogance from the surface of our reputation. Ms. Rockett, bring forth the transgressors!"

Norma Rockett emerged from inside the office with Joel Luxor and Crispin Gutmacher in tow. She held each student by the shoulder with a grip worthy of a professional wrestler. Bull Nickerson continued, "Today, our school has been defiled by contraband of the worst kind. Mr. Luxor and Mr. Gutmacher, you have been found to be lacking in character with your reprehensible behavior. Today, you are expelled! Now, walk the walk of shame."

As they walked in morose despair, the rest of the student body, one by one, turned their backs on the two as they passed.

Except for Holly Demure.

Like a hyena eyeing a tiny, baby bunny, she had a hungry smile as she watched Luxor and Gutmacher enter their respective cars and drive away.

Adjusting her nylons, Holly started to step away when Bull interrupted, "Not so fast, Ms. Demure."

Suddenly, Norma Rockett, with her own hungry smile, was behind Holly, gripping Holly's shoulder with her blood-red fingernails. Norma was a more successful hunter. Holly looked genuinely shocked.

Pulling the tater tot from his pocket, Bull continued, "You, Ms. Demure, are the most reviled of transgressors." He held up the tater tot for all to see. "This was found in your locker. You are in violation of the Public Schools Antiquities Act of 1939. You, my dear, are expelled."

Norma Rockett man-handled Holly down the sidewalk. Just before they passed me, Holly stopped and stared at me with cold, remorseless eyes. "You're a two-bit gumshoe, Nick. A dime a dozen."

"Hey, toots, two-bits, that's 25-cents. Good enough for a cup of joe." Holly was led to a waiting limo. As she stood next to the limo, a disembodied arm opened the door from the inside, then disappeared in the darkness of the interior. Holly slipped in, and the limo squealed away from the school.

With a knowing look, Bull tossed the tot to me as I walked to another limo – this one with diplomatic plates – also waiting in the parking lot. The back window slid down, framing the kid, smiling. “Nick, you are a good person. Thank you.”

I handed the kid the tot. “Shush about that good person hooey. I’ve got a reputation to uphold.” The window slid back up and the limo slowly moved off.

Immediately behind the limo, a small, dented, blue Mazda Miata pulled up. Inside, Hiram Bigg leveraged his bulk out of the car, and kissed his mom good-bye.

We both shook hands. “Good to see you, again,” I said. “C’mon, we’re late for class.”

What do you know, Bull was true to his word.

The End.