

Polarity in Motion

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A Red Adept Publishing Book

Red Adept Publishing, LLC

104 Bugenfield Court

Garner, NC 27529

<http://RedAdeptPublishing.com/>

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Dedication

For Jane Swann Nethercut

(January 1, 1950 - March 15, 2013)

You taught us so much about making the playing field even for all kids.

Chapter 1

I was the last student in the freshman class to know. Well, almost the last—Ethan found out from me.

It all came out during sixth period, when the teacher left the classroom unsupervised. Danny, the big bad guy of Star Ninth Grade Center, leaned back in his chair and scratched his belly. “Yuck! Hill’s got dog breath—ruff, ruff!—today.”

Kids snickered, and immature silliness broke out all over the room. The computer lab desks were arranged in a big square, with everyone facing inward, and so even while studying my screen, I couldn’t help witnessing some of the nonsense.

Across the room, Danny stood and stretched with a loud-groaning yawn. “Damn, Coach ran our butts hard this morning.” He leaned forward and rubbed his hands on the front of his thighs.

Cynthia, the super-crimped blonde sitting next to him, pulled makeup out of her purse. “You know, you’re just the water boy.” She added another coat of mascara to her already loaded lashes.

Danny’s grin drooped. His skin, usually the same straw color as his short spiky hair, gained a pink glow. “I’m in the relays. I’m running every day.”

Drawing on fluorescent blue eyeliner, Cynthia crooned, “Ooooo, relays. Yippee.”

“Yeah, Cyn, come watch me this afternoon. We can have a little sin after practice. Heh, heh, heh.” He checked around the room, as if to see who got his joke.

I slumped lower to use my computer screen as a barrier. In the chair next to me, Ethan, the one black guy in the class, remained totally focused on his research. Not only did he act older

than the other boys, but he looked older—more muscular and taller than my dad’s six-foot-two. Ethan’s strong jaw, straight nose, and deep, dark eyes conveyed an air of confidence.

I envied him because he automatically fit into a group—small in this school, but still a group. The group of black students. It was my fourth week at Star, and since there were only two weeks left until summer break, I had settled into the role of trailer-park outcast. I didn’t see the point in trying to schmooze into a clique. I figured Mom would want to move again before school started, anyway.

Danny sat down, but unfortunately, his voice boomed over the drone of the rest of the class. “Hey, Aiden, Sean—did you hear that Hill has dog breath today? Ruff, ruff!”

Coincidentally, I had just Googled “how to tell if you have bad breath.” I hated never knowing for sure whether I had it. I surfed for some way to give Mr. Hill a hint, so maybe he could find a remedy. I hoped before I reached the making-out phase of my life, someone would invent a bad breath detector, so I could know how my own breath smelled.

Arvey, one of the few girls in the school who seemed as unpopular as I was, tapped my shoulder. My breath thoughts halted. With her trademark glum expression, she angled her head toward Danny, where every other student except Ethan had clustered. They were whispering about something on Danny’s screen.

This school district had pathetic filters compared to Houston and all the other schools I had attended—students could cruise any site they wanted. I figured whatever he pulled up kicked because even the good students crowded around his computer with their mouths dropped open. I glanced at Ethan, who was still absorbed in his work. No way would I get up and go over to the other side. Like Ethan, I didn’t care to hang with Danny’s group.

Arvey stood next to me with a small, thin-lipped smile, as if waiting for my reaction. She lived in a trailer near mine. Hers, a big rusting, double-wide, seemed to be falling apart, and so many children and visitors drifted in and out all the time, I couldn't tell who actually lived there.

"What is it?" I asked her.

She tilted her head downward so that her curtain of long dark hair covered her eyes. She shrugged and started walking toward Danny. She usually didn't hang with a clique, but whatever Danny displayed clearly grabbed her interest because she drifted right back to the enthralled crowd.

In spite of my effort to keep my eyes on my halitosis article, Cynthia's gasp caught my attention. She smirked at me while coating on a layer of hot pink gloss. "Ooooo." She smacked her lips. "Hardcore."

I figured Cynthia targeted me with her grooming display because my super-diligent, opinionated parents didn't allow me to wear makeup.

A girl standing behind Danny gaped over his shoulder. "I can't believe it."

Though everyone's eyes were drawn to Danny's screen, they kept sneaking peeks toward the side of the room where Ethan and I sat. Ethan, with his strong, detached demeanor, scanned his article and jotted notes.

Before class, Danny had griped out in the hall about this civil rights assignment—except dumb, disgusting, dirtbag Danny used the N-word in place of civil rights. He had also barked like a dog to all of his friends. So I assumed Danny had pulled up some site that joked about civil rights or dogs, and as soon as Hill came back in, everyone would chill.

Cynthia giggled and repeated, "Hardcore." A heartbeat later, she added, "Polarity!"

Sara, whose crimped blond hair and fluorescent blue eyeliner mirrored Cynthia's, edged closer to Danny's screen. "What'd you expect?" she asked in a not-soft-enough whisper. "She's just trailer trash. Doesn't even have a double-wide."

Since no other single-wide trailer person on the planet has my stupid name, Polarity—bestowed in a classic borderline moment by my ever-unraveling mother—I gave up hoping they weren't talking about me.

Danny, now pinker and happier than ever, imitated Cynthia's giggle and pointed at his screen. "Whoa. Poetic Polarity."

I scooted my chair back, but before I could get up to see what Danny ogled, a crash jolted the room.

Ethan, with clenched fists, had stood so fast his chair landed sideways.

His furious scowl deflated all the smirks. Instead of gawking at me or the computer, everyone tracked Ethan as he started toward them.

Danny, eyes popping, paled and melted back into his chair. No smirks or giggles now.

The classroom door opened, and Mr. Hill stepped in. Slight in build, probably about five feet four, he wore a white shirt and dark necktie. Ethan, halfway around the room, froze with his fists still clenched. Everyone else scrambled back to their places. For the briefest moment, Mr. Hill and Ethan made eye contact.

"What's going on? Arvey and the rest of you, get back to your seats," Mr. Hill said needlessly, since everyone except Ethan already scurried in rapid retreat. Mr. Hill headed toward Danny. "Danny, what have you got?"

"Sorry, sir. I don't know how it happened—just popped up from the history." Danny had plenty of time to switch his screen. He wanted Mr. Hill to see.

Mr. Hill saw the screen. His eyes widened, and he went pale. “Oh no! Polarity, oh no!”

It seemed like an eternity. Mr. Hill standing with his mouth dangling open. Everyone looking at me.

I glanced down at myself to make sure I didn’t have something spilled or buttons undone on my pale turquoise shirt, even though the room’s reaction must have resulted from something on the computer screen. Heat crawled up to my face. I couldn’t stand the silence. “Yes, sir?”

His bulging eyes boomeranged from the screen to me and back again. “Go to the office. Now.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me.” His voice shook. “Pack up and go to the office.” His eyes stayed on the screen, as if glued to something terrifying. “Wait for me there.”

I started shutting down and picking up my stuff, relieved to be getting out of that room but a little queasy with fear about why he was sending me to the office. I assured myself that I’d never been in trouble before. All my visits to the office had been about routine things—schedules, paperwork, even a poetry award once. So whatever Danny displayed on his computer would get straightened out.

“Get up!” Mr. Hill ordered Danny. “All you kids in this row—go stand by the back wall.” Mr. Hill moved everyone able to view the screen. He ripped a sheet of paper out of Danny’s notebook and started writing something, probably the web address.

When I reached the door, he was still writing, and everyone else except Ethan was frozen and gawking at me. Ethan returned to his seat, picked up his chair, and set it down with a loud thump. For a second, his concerned, kind gaze locked with mine. I didn’t want him to worry, so I shrugged and smiled at him before I left.

I shut the door on the classroom and leaned against it. *What just happened?* Fortunately, it was near the end of the period, so the halls were deserted. I took a few deep breaths before heading to the office. The waiting area was empty except for a secretary typing, and I slipped in, trying not to be noticed. A large aquarium covered the side wall, so I faced away from the secretary and pretended to study the fish. The aquarium had a clear divider in the middle, with a single red and blue betta on one side and a few dozen black mollies on the other.

The secretary sighed, lifted her dull eyes from her computer screen, and smoothed back the light brown hair that had strayed from her ponytail. She could have passed for a student herself. The nameplate in front of her computer was labeled Miss Regina Smart, Administrative Assistant. “Where’s your hall pass?”

“I don’t have one, Miss Smart.”

She cast her eyes back to her screen. “You cannot be in here without a hall pass.” She didn’t look up again. “Go back and get one.”

“But Mr. Hill told me—”

“Out.”

I went back into the still-empty hall and stood by the door.

She noticed me through the glass and came stomping out. “You cannot be in the hall without a pass. Go back to your classroom and get one. Now. No more stalling, or I’ll write you up.”

It was pointless to argue with her, but I was desperate. “Miss Smart, may I please make a phone call?” I wanted to let Mom or Dad know I’d been banished to the office, and even in this little town, I was probably the only living ninth-grader with no phone of my own. Well, I did

have a 911 phone, but my parents obsessively feared that I'd be harmed by social media. There would be no real phone or unsupervised Internet for me until at least tenth grade.

She sighed and pushed back her stray hair again. "No. Not without a pass." She folded her arms.

I started down the hall, but as soon as she went back into the office, I cut into a bathroom. I decided to wait a few minutes and peek into the office again. Maybe by then, Hill would be there.

Within three minutes, the school-wide intercom clicked on. "Attention, please. Attention. This is Mrs. Sanchez speaking. Polarity Weeks, report to the office. Polarity Weeks, report to the office immediately."

Never, in any of the many schools I attended, had the principal ever called me by name over the intercom during class. Never.

How did I get into this nightmare?

Danny must have pulled up some news blurb about my mom. She must have finally gone too far and done some unspeakable thing that made the news.

The trailer park where we rented a space was less than two blocks away. Plus, at five feet eight, I had long, skinny legs, and I was wearing jeans and sneakers, so I could get there fast.

Whatever the bad news, I didn't want to hear about it in the school office.

I dashed out the door, down the empty hall, and out of the building, heading home. I was about halfway through the parking lot before my P.E. teacher and the security guard cut me off. This all felt surreal. I couldn't believe I, Polarity Weeks, had been captured while attempting to escape from school.

The bald, chubby guard, Raymond, was red-faced from his sprint to catch up with me. He caught my arm, spun me around, and started walking me back toward the school while he yelled into his walkie-talkie, “Female youth apprehended headed southerly in the easterly parking lot. Repeat, female—”

“Polarity Weeks,” interrupted my P.E. teacher, Mrs. Moorman, grabbing my other arm.

“Acknowledge. Acknowledge,” the guard shouted even louder into his unresponsive speaker. He paused to pick up his blue cap that had slipped off his head during his run toward me.

“Officer, I think your battery is dead,” I said. Most of the students called him Raymond, but he preferred to be called officer.

He adjusted his cap, rattled his walkie-talkie, and repeated his alert, including my ID, even louder. The bell rang for the passing period. *Oh, great. Now the whole school will witness me being hauled to the office.*

Mrs. Moorman rolled her eyes at him. “Raymond, yelling won’t make a difference.”

We marched back toward the entrance.

“All right, young lady,” Mrs. Moorman continued to me. “Let’s go into the office. You must have heard the principal call you on the intercom. Where did you think you were going?”

Dozens of students gawked at our show. Instead of the usual flow of bodies migrating to seventh-period classes, a group clumped at the open double entry doors, and heads peered out the windows all along the building. The principal, Mrs. Sanchez, was shooing the mass along, and she relieved Mrs. Moorman of my right arm at the entrance into the main hallway. Raymond still held my left arm as the three of us trudged through the rubbernecking students lining our route to the office.

Mrs. Moorman, following behind us in the hallway, blasted her whistle and roared, “Move it. Anyone not hustling on my count of three gets laps after school. One... two....”

Students started trying to move, but the crowd was thick as Jell-O. As bodies oozed by us, their stares—some curious, some sneering—made my face hot.

Finally, we reached the glassed-in waiting room, and Mrs. Sanchez left the guard and me while she and Mr. Hill went into her private office and shut the door. Mrs. Moorman had successfully emptied the hall, so at least no one gawked through the office windows at me. With his walkie-talkie back in his side holster, the guard stood directly in front of me, as though he thought I might flee. Miss Smart eyed me suspiciously while she pulled out a hairbrush and redid her ponytail. Then she got very busy straightening up the waiting area.

Sweet Tilly, the Down syndrome girl, and her teacher aide came in to deliver some papers to the office. Tilly beamed and patted the polka-dot hair ribbon I had helped her tie in her fine, reddish hair at lunch.

The corners of her lips fell. “Mean girls.” She pronounced it *gulls* instead of *girls*.

Almost every time Tilly saw me, she remembered the torture of the day I first enrolled here—the jokes about my name, my skinniness, and my trailer. On that first day, at the end of last-period P.E., I had lingered in the gym, waiting for the grounds to clear, so I could walk home free from the herd of girls in my class. I was sitting on the bleachers, thinking I was alone, and I gave in to a brief bawling episode. I didn’t know that Tilly, who took longer in the locker room than the rest of us, was still there. She came and sat beside me. I acted as though everything was okay and helped her put on her pink fanny pack—somehow the expandable waist band had gotten disconnected, and she couldn’t get it back together by herself. I guess I didn’t fool her because after I helped her, she patted my shoulder and said, “Mean gulls.”

Now, sitting in the office, Tilly's sympathy broke my control over the tears, even though I never cry in public. I willed my eyes not to drip, but they filled anyway. I made my mouth keep smiling at Tilly, but she took a deep breath and held it as she peered closely at my eyes. Before I could distract her, she started gasping and crying herself.

She patted both my shoulders and rocked her head from side to side. "Mean gulls."

The teacher aide, who had been whispering with Miss Smart, and the guard jerked forward to get a close-up of Tilly.

Raymond narrowed his eyes at me. "What did you do to Tilly?" He gripped his walkie-talkie as if it were a gun.

His attitude stopped my tears. "Nothing. Tilly is talking about some other girls."

Raymond pulled out his little black pad and a pencil. "What other girls?" Before I could answer, he glanced at the aide as if to see whether she knew anything. She shrugged, and he zeroed in on me again. "Well?"

"I'm not sure. I'm new, and I didn't know their names."

He slid the pad back into his pocket. "What exactly did you see them do to Tilly?"

Tilly's gaze flitted between Raymond and me. Frantic worry lines twitched around her eyes. I laid my hand on her shoulder, to comfort her. The nosy aide was focused on me rather than on her job of distracting Tilly.

"Nothing to Tilly." I tried to figure out how to explain Tilly's sympathy for all the tricks of my first week, especially in P.E.. But I didn't want to leak embarrassing details about girls yelling stuff like, "Whoo-hoo, bean-pole Polarity... poet of the park—the trailer park!"

About this time a police officer—not a school officer—arrived, and Miss Smart instantly dropped her housekeeping chores and ushered him out of sight, into Mrs. Sanchez's office. My

stomach dropped. Some catastrophe could have happened. Mobile homes burn faster than regular houses. Even though ours is new and Dad does regular safety checks on all the alarms, I envisioned our cozy trailer in flames.

Tilly, the aide, Miss Smart, Raymond, and I froze. Mrs. Sanchez opened her door and motioned for me to come in.

I hugged Tilly. “Don’t worry about me anymore.” I looked directly in her eyes, to be sure she listened. “Everything is just fine. No more crying. Okay?”

She gave her happy, squinty-eyed smile, and she hugged me back. “Kay, Pohlee.”

I forced myself to turn away from Tilly and go into the private office. After Mrs. Sanchez closed the door behind me, she pointed to a chair next to her desk. “Please sit here.” Mr. Hill and the officer, a stocky, gray-haired man, were seated on the other side of the room, and both were studying their shoes.

“What happened to my parents?”

The officer must have known, but he kept his head down.

“Are they okay?”

Mrs. Sanchez was the only one in the room who seemed to be listening to me.

“Did my mother do something?”

Mrs. Sanchez looked more like someone’s cookie-baking grandmother than a principal. “The authorities haven’t done anything yet.” With her roundness, her curly black and gray hair, and her soft voice, it was weird to hear her talk about authorities. “That’s why we need to talk to you first. Polarity, we understand that some very bad things have been going on in your life.” She paused as if she wanted me to say something. “And I know it’s hard to tell outsiders, but I need you to tell me the truth. And I promise no one will hurt you.”

Could they know about last Christmas, when Mom disappeared for four days, or about her arguments with our neighbors in Houston? “Where are my mom and dad?”

Mrs. Sanchez patted my shoulder, just like Tilly had. “As far as we know, your parents are fine. They haven’t been informed about this yet.”

“Informed? About what?”

“The fact that we found a nude picture of you on the Internet.”

I laughed with relief. My parents were fine. “No, ma’am. That’s not true.” That must’ve been what Danny had on his computer—some porno picture that resembled me. “There’s no nude picture of me on the Internet.”

“Would you like to see a printout?” She placed her hand on a blue folder on her desk.

“Okay.”

She slid the folder across so that it rested directly in front of me. I glanced at Mr. Hill and the officer, who both quickly averted their eyes. Mrs. Sanchez slowly opened the folder, but she kept her eyes on me.

My first thought: *That naked, skinny, brown-haired girl has a pitiful flat chest just like mine.*

My second thought: *That has to be me. It’s my narrow face, brown eyes, wavy hair that almost reaches my boobs, the V-neck tan lines from our fishing trip to the coast, but I never posed for that picture.*

She—I—was giving a big toothy grin. I hated my big teeth and always smiled with my lips slightly parted. And she—I—was dancing and waving both hands at the camera. I never posed like that, even dressed. And if I were naked, I’d try to cover my private parts, not flash them forward.

Am I totally crazy? Was I drugged? Have I entered an alternate universe? Do I have a twin I don't know about?

Someone had used Photoshop to draw a party hat on her—me—and write all kind of graffiti stuff. A layer of pink and yellow zigzag lines completely covered the background, and on top of those lines were school mottos, written in orange and green: “Go Shooting Stars,” “Blaze to Win,” “Burn the Mustangs.” Intermixed were some phrases about me: “Bean-Pole Polarity,” “Polarity of the Park.” And right across the feet, the only covered part of the body, a textbox said:

Hi, I really need my own special hotie.

Come and get me. Poetic Polarity.

I couldn't stop staring at the picture. Every time my brain tried to rationalize that this couldn't be me, another detail screeched, “Oh yes, it is you.”

On my first day at this school, the English teacher, Mrs. Mitchell, asked me to introduce myself to the class. I made the fatal error of mentioning that I liked Emily Dickinson's poetry, and some clown dubbed me Poetic Polarity on the spot. Even if there were another girl identical to me, she couldn't also be named Polarity *and* be dubbed “Poetic.” It had to be me.

I hated that people would think I wrote such a pathetic two-line poem, with no iambs or mature rhyme scheme. And how weird that my name was spelled wrong. But the worst thing of all was that Ethan may have seen it. He seemed to be the one person who wasn't in on the picture. He'd tried to help when Danny mouthed off about me in class. What if Ethan saw it? He'd lose all respect for me.

I could barely trust my voice. “I want to call my dad.”

Mrs. Sanchez rolled her chair closer to me. “Polarity, did your father take this picture?”

“No, of course not. He would never, *never* do anything like that.” My dad, a hero in every way, was the most conscientious, protective father I’d ever heard of. I felt sick to my stomach.

This can’t be happening.

“How about your mom? Why did you ask if your mom had done something? Did she take the picture?”

“No.” I wanted to destroy the picture, but I made my trembling hands close the folder.

Mrs. Sanchez sighed and looked down at the closed folder. I expected that now she would grill me about why I ran out of the school.

She raised sad eyes back to me. “Then tell me, who took the picture?”

I guess fleeing school isn’t even worth fretting over, in light of a naked picture.

I told her the truth. “I don’t know. None of this makes sense.” I met her gaze, hoping that somehow she’d see I wasn’t lying. “I never posed for that picture.”

The police officer sent Mr. Hill out and asked me hundreds of questions, mostly about my parents. Why did we move so much? Why did we live in a trailer if we have a house in Houston? Why were we in Garcia, since my dad didn’t have a construction site here? A second officer, wearing a static-popping speakerphone on his shoulder, came, and repeated most of the same questions. His speakerphone, tuned into a dispatch operator, allowed the officer to listen to my answers and the ongoing police reports at the same time.

After the last bell of the day, Miss Smart stuck her head in the door. “Would you like for me to stay late, Mrs. Sanchez? I don’t mind if there’s anything I can help with.” She eyed me with curiosity. “Anything at all.”

Mrs. Sanchez ushered her out with clear instructions to leave. While the office door was open, the two officers left, saying they’d be in the conference room. They crossed the secretary’s

area and went into a room a few steps past Miss Smart's desk. They shut the door, and I could no longer hear what they were saying, but the electronic racket of the shoulder-mounted speaker still bleeped through the quiet office.

"May I go home now?" I asked Mrs. Sanchez when we were alone. "My mother will be worried. She's probably on her way here now or maybe outside already."

"I'm sorry, but no. You can't go home. The police still need to ask questions. They're probably talking to your parents now. Tell me what you'd like for supper?"

Supper. She thought I was staying for supper. I stared at her in silence.

She put her hand on mine. "You must eat, dear. How about something from Wendy's?"

I could barely speak, much less eat. But I forced out an answer. "Plain baked potato."

"Okay, we'll—"

A girl called from the reception area, "Mrs. Sanchez, come quick! It's the Boy Scouts in the gym. Someone's hurt."

"Oh, my goodness. What now?" She went into the front area for a few seconds then stuck her head back in. "I'll be just over in front of the gym. I'll be within sight of the reception room door, so don't leave. I'll be watching the whole time. Is that okay? Will you be okay a few minutes?"

I nodded and laid my head on her desk. Almost as quickly as she shut the door, it opened again. I raised my head, expecting that she'd forgotten something, but Ethan stepped into the room.

I stood. "What are you doing here?"

"What's going on?" He approached me and raised his hands as if to put them on my shoulders, but he stopped and lowered them to his sides. "What did Danny have on his

computer?” His eyes showed concern, and something like anger tensed a muscle in his jaw.

“Why are you still here? Why the cops?”

I didn’t know where to begin.

He moved even closer to me. “Are you okay?”

I looked down.

He took my chin and raised my head so we were face to face. He had never touched me before. The feeling sent a buzz through my body. “Polarity, you can tell me. It’s Danny, isn’t it? Maybe I can help, but we have to hurry. Mrs. Sanchez will be back in about two minutes.”

I reached to the folder on the desk and opened the bottom edge just enough to slide the picture down, so that the lower half of my legs could be seen. He took his hand away from my chin, and I had to resist the urge to pull him back. My voice came out in a hoarse whisper. “I don’t know how this picture was taken, but it’s me with no... no clothes on.” I ripped the printout and held up the bottom half, with my legs and the textbox across the feet.

Ethan put a warm, strong hand over my trembling one and took the sheet from me. “I’ll figure it out. Don’t worry.”

Through the partially opened door came the voice of the loud-talking girl, still exclaiming about the scouts, alerting us that she and Mrs. Sanchez were coming back toward the office.

Ethan squeezed my hand and whispered, so close that I could feel his breath on my face, “Don’t worry.” He shoved the picture of my legs into his pocket, slipped out the door, left it ajar, and jerked open the cabinet below the aquarium in the waiting area.

“Ethan, you’re still here,” Mrs. Sanchez said as she entered the office.

“Yes, ma’am. Just checking the water filter.” I watched his strong back through the cracked door. “Fish food clogged it this morning—want to make sure it’s good for the night.”

“Thank you, Ethan. I appreciate your dependability. I can always count on you.”

I agreed with her. Even in my few weeks at Star, I had figured out that Ethan always defended the underdog. And no one—not even Danny—messed with him. I guessed that I was probably the most desperate underdog on the planet. A new mission for Ethan.

Mrs. Sanchez asked, “Do you have a ride home?”

“Yes, ma’am. Shanique’s mom is giving me a ride.” Shanique must have been the loud-talking girl.

While they said their good-byes, I opened the blue folder. Under the picture I had just ripped lay a duplicate, so I took the torn one out, folded it, and shoved it into my back pocket as Ethan had done with his half. I hoped Mrs. Sanchez wouldn’t miss the top picture. Maybe she’d assume a police officer took it.

Through the window behind the principal’s desk, I watched Ethan and Shanique walk quickly toward the street. I had seen Shanique on campus before even though we didn’t have any classes together. She was as tall as me, but she was all curves and toned muscle. The Star orange-and-green gym shorts and shirt she wore meant she was in track, but she moved more like a dancer than an athlete.

Mrs. Sanchez’s soft-soled shoes shuffled back into her office, but I couldn’t pull my eyes off Ethan and Shanique. He kept his face forward as they walked, and Shanique swerved closer to him, talking with her hands flying. Her skin, rich and dark as his, glowed with amber highlights compared to his chocolate tones. She briefly put her hand on his arm and faced him with a bright smile, giving me a perfect silhouette of her long, elegant neck and artfully angled haircut. *They must be a couple.* How could two people be so gorgeous? So perfect? So lucky?

Mrs. Sanchez sat behind her desk. “Sorry for that interruption—the Boy Scouts are fine. How are you holding up, dear?”

“Okay.”

Ethan and Shanique rounded a corner, and I could no longer see them.

When I turned towards Mrs. Sanchez, she started to say something else, but a third police officer, this one in plain clothes, came in, and we went through all the questions again. Finally, after he finished, yet another officer brought me a baked potato from Wendy’s. He and Mrs. Sanchez left me alone to eat while they went into the outer office.

I picked at the potato, hoping that at any moment, Mom and Dad would show up and shut this craziness down. My parents suffocated me with their protectiveness, but Dad was strong and competent. He could run major construction sites across the state, so these small-town officials would be no challenge to him. And Mom, even with her issues, would fiercely defend me. When they arrived, I’d be finished answering these questions.

The officer who brought the food left the door open a little when he went into the outer office, where Mrs. Sanchez talked on the phone. Aside from her soft voice, the office area was deadly quiet—no students, no more police radios, nothing. It was night. Everything looked strange, with darkness at the windows instead of the usual sunlight and dozens of ninth-graders.

Mrs. Sanchez dropped the office phone into its receiver with a soft click. “I can’t believe they’re picking her up tonight.”

You don’t know my parents, if you can’t believe that. I was amazed they weren’t here already. At any moment, they’d burst in and get everything cleared up, and we’d go home and laugh about this circus.

But the officer said, “Think about it. They’re living in a travel trailer. They could be in Mexico in a couple of hours. The department can’t risk it.”

Who were they talking about? Who was going to pick me up?

“But,” Mrs. Sanchez said, “I believe it’s a prank. That’s all.”

“Maybe,” the officer answered. “But why do they move so much? It doesn’t add up. The father claims he owns a construction company, but he moves every few weeks or months and lives in a little trailer.”

“But the services are usually slow. Picking her up tonight... I’m just surprised, I guess.”

“They’ve got the picture—that’s concrete evidence that someone did something. How could they let her go home and—”

I pushed the door all the way open. “Who’s picking me up?”

Mrs. Sanchez, her pained gaze burrowing into my own, started to say something but stopped as if she couldn’t find the words.

The officer looked down at the floor.

I stepped forward. “Who’s picking me up?”

No one spoke. Mrs. Sanchez moved closer to me, but the officer slinked farther back. Their silence was scarier than anything they could have said.

I took a deep breath and kept my voice steady and firm. “I want to know who, and I want to know where my parents are.”

Mrs. Sanchez put her arm around my shoulder. “I’m so sorry to have to tell you this. I know this is so hard for you. Please remember, Polarity, that in the end this will all get—”

The officer tilted his head toward the outer door. “I think she’s here now.”

Relief flooded me. *Yes. Mom.* But a young, dark-haired woman came in. She wasn't in uniform or anything—just ordinary jeans and plaid shirt.

“Where's Mom?” I asked.

Everyone shuffled around, talking at once. No one answered my question.

Mrs. Sanchez introduced me to the woman, Lacy Wright. I lost track of most of what they said, but phrases punched through my confusion and sent chills up my spine before my brain could process them. “... Child Protective Services... young people like you when they have to be taken from their families for a while.”

I stopped breathing. *This can't be happening—stuff like this happens only in movies.*

“... safe house in another town... until the police have figured out what is going on.”

Mrs. Sanchez and Miss Wright studied me, as if waiting for a reaction.

My stomach clenched. The food I'd just eaten pressed like a rock, ready to be thrust out. I tried to keep my voice firm, but it quivered, just as it had with Ethan. “But what if it's just students playing with Photoshop—someone playing a trick?”

Miss Wright shook her head. “The police are considering that, and they'll trace the IP address and send the picture to a lab for analysis.” She spoke softly, as if there were a sleeping baby in the room. “But for now, especially since you aren't giving us any explanation, we can't risk sending you home.” She stepped closer to me. “You'll be in protective custody for your own safety.”

Long moments passed before I could make myself speak. “Okay.” The hours of questions, the principal, the social worker, the police, and the picture itself had clustered, as if into a massive boulder that shut me down. I couldn't get my voice to say more. I followed Lacy Wright toward the exit.

“Wait,” the police officer said.

I froze in the doorway that led into the reception area while he whispered something to Mrs. Sanchez.

She listened to the officer, and her pained eyes shifted towards me. “Polarity, dear, I need to search your backpack before you leave.”

I handed it to her, turned my back on all of them, and listened to my belongings clatter onto her desk. Keeping my gaze on the aquarium while she shuffled through the stuff, I felt as trapped and alone as that red-and-blue betta. *This is unreal. My bag is being searched, I’m leaving the school at night with a stranger to go someplace I’ve never been, and no one believes me. Except Ethan.*