

Test Scores: A Kyle Shannon Mystery

Sample Chapter

There are no sound effects in *Team of Rivals*, the audio book that had my complete attention, yet I was sure I heard a siren. My concentration broken, I looked around. Stuck in traffic on Black Point Road, I was half a block from Heffner Golf Middle School.

The siren whined again, its wail like fingernails on a chalkboard. A thunderous horn blast followed. I flinched. It had come from somewhere directly behind me.

Wig-wagging red lights appeared in the rearview mirror. An ambulance. I wanted to get out of the way but there was nowhere to go. I was completely boxed in by westbound mini vans on my left, a school bus in front of me, and a dirty, rock-laden mound of melting snow on the right.

Heffner Golf Middle School and Burr Meadow Elementary were the only buildings at this end of the street. The ambulance must be headed to one of them.

Oh dear god in heaven. Please, please don't let it be...

Movement in my side mirror made me turn to get a better look. A dark green Mini Cooper stopped at an angle blocking the eastbound lane. A woman hopped out, ran to the Heffner Golf driveway, and threw up her arm. Palm extended, Geneva Walker, the sixth grade science teacher, stopped all the westbound traffic leaving Burr Meadow Elementary. Then she frantically signaled the ambulance. It maneuvered into the hole she created and eased by me on the now open lane. Slowing to turn into the Heffner Golf driveway, it narrowly missed the maple tree on the parkway as it swerved to avoid an Escalade, probably driven by someone who thought Geneva stopped traffic just for them. In a moment, siren blaring, it bounced over the lawn and out of sight behind the brick facade.

For a moment, all was silent. No more sirens, no other ambulances and no SWAT team. So it wasn't...couldn't be...a shooting. No men in black combat attire carrying assault rifles meant no need to worry.

Seconds after I put all that together, car horns sounded and drivers began shouting. Others must have reached the same conclusion I had. More horns joined in. Geneva seemed oblivious to them as she returned to her own vehicle and guided it back into line.

Turning into the circle drive in front of the school, I parked and then hurried to the building entry where the security guard stood, as usual, at the open doors. The fact that he seemed his normal, genial self was reassuring, as I still didn't know what had brought an ambulance to Heffner Golf.

The guard represented the school's tacit acknowledgement that the parents expected some level of security but he was not armed and didn't even carry a two-way radio. In the mornings, he steered parents and visitors to the school office and in the evenings he returned to do a walk-around to confirm all the doors were secure.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Not sure," he replied, waving at a couple of boys. "Lots going on out back, I hear."

Inside the Heffner Golf office, pandemonium reigned. It was always busy first thing but questions about the ambulance fell on the school office manager like hailstones and Lauren Pearce flinched with each new assertion that she was withholding information. Frantic parents didn't care one whit about privacy laws; they wanted answers. Luckily there was a counter separating Lauren from the waving fists and hurled expletives.

I quickly surveyed the enclosed office behind her. It was empty. The school principal must be out handling the situation, whatever that was.

Dodging students, I climbed the central staircase up to the District 1926 offices. There, behind

a thick wall of etched glass, the district superintendent ran her territory supported by her staff of ten. That the district felt it was completely separate from Heffner Golf couldn't have been clearer. Was the barrier bulletproof? Probably.

As a temp, I've been assigned to a lot of places, including the executive wing of a large corporation, but I had never experienced such opulence. The district finance office where I now worked was roughly the size of my townhouse living room. In addition to a solid cherry desk with a black leather executive chair and matching guest chair, a love seat and two more chairs formed a sitting area facing a wall-mounted flat screen television. I even had my own mini refrigerator. Our tax dollars at work.

Just as I turned on my computer, Eli Stein came through the door. He carried a paper bowl, steam rising from its contents and filling my office with the smell of...chocolate?

A gangly eighth grader, Eli had an upper torso that hadn't grown into the lower part of his body, his long legs and large feet an indicator of a growth spurt yet to come. Eli's brown eyes rarely looked at anyone directly. He carried his head down and slightly tilted, giving the impression that there was nothing more important in his world than his untied shoelaces. A hint of dark fuzz sprouted from his chin and he had longish sable-colored hair. Not Van Halen 1980's long. More like One Direction. Baggy jeans, oversized rugby or tee shirts, and the occasional denim vest made up his personal style. Outwardly, Eli was a bit messy. Inside, he was something else. Whenever he looked me in the eyes, which was rare, I saw intelligence, sensibility, and something that implied he knew things he wasn't supposed to know...at least not yet, not at his age.

Eli became a part of my morning routine about three weeks earlier. I had no idea why he sought refuge in my office but he often came in, sat in the guest chair, and watched me work. On rare occasions, he would be in a philosophical mood, making statements like "We can't be alone in the universe" or "Brothers were designed to help us learn patience." After a while he would get up and leave. This day he had his breakfast with him.

He was one of the kids who got dropped off early by a commuting parent and had to fend for himself until homeroom. There were enough like him that the cafeteria opened at 7:00 in the morning and offered a few breakfast items like cereals and bagels. A microwave and toaster were available just beyond the cashier. All the comforts of home.

I made a point of sniffing the air. "Chocolate?"

"Oatmeal with chocolate milk instead of white." He leaned his bowl toward me.

It didn't look particularly appetizing, the oats were gray-brown in color, but it sure smelled yummy. I said as much.

Eli shrugged. "I saw Mrs. Walker do it once. Thought I'd try it." He took another spoonful. "I'm not that into chocolate."

"Any idea what's going on this morning?"

He wordlessly signaled me aside. I rolled out of the way and he tapped the keys on my computer. A video appeared. Two boys dribbled a ball around the icy asphalt as two others rushed forward to intercept them. In the resulting tangled of feet and legs, down they all went and that was followed almost immediately by a scream of pain. Several kids ran up to the pile and then I heard a female voice yelling that Raj was injured and an ambulance was needed right away.

I leaned back and looked at Eli. He pointed at the monitor so I continued watching. A close-up of a boy's leg with a bone protruding from brown skin. A compound fracture. I wanted to be sick. The screen went dark for a few seconds and then I saw a line of cars in the distance. A siren sounded faintly in the distance. After momentary blip, I watched an ambulance caught in traffic. Finally the video showed Martin Delavan, the school principal, running forward. He pushed the kids out of the way just as the ambulance came bouncing across the snow mounds.

"Well," I said. "That certainly gives a clear picture of what happened. Is that your video?"

Eli shrugged.

“A friend of yours?”

Another shrug. I’d gotten all I was going to get on that subject. I tried another approach.

“So what’s on the schedule for today?”

He raised and lowered his shoulders slowly.

“Any tests?”

Same response.

“Ah. Did you study?”

Eli didn’t move. That meant no. Oh dear.

“Stop by after and let me know how it went?”

The bowl empty, Eli passed it to me, hitched up his sagging jeans and shuffled quickly toward the door. Guess it wouldn’t do to have his friends see him come out of the district offices. He slowed to a casual, measured gait as soon as his feet left the carpeting and reached the tile floor of Heffner Golf Middle School’s second floor.

It was a safe bet that I would not see him again today. Eli came into and out of my office entirely on his own schedule. I had just violated one of his unspoken rules and had extended an invitation of sorts, reaching across some unseen privacy line. If I ever wanted to see him again, any discussion of tests was probably off the table unless he broached the subject himself.

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