

Heart of Stone
by
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Chapter Two

Today

Friday, like any Friday at Port Talbot High School, begins an hour before class with a seven o'clock faculty meeting. The major topic, to the mirth of everyone except Jake Benveniste, is to review who will M.C. the Easter talent show next week. Tradition, Jake has been reminded since September, requires that the M.C. be the most junior member of the faculty.

Port Talbot High School Principal Craig "Corky" Guinus and a number of parents have been calling Jake and leaving him notes

and updates for the past two and a half months on the subject. He's been too busy with work and other things to donate any time or thought to the talent show.

Today's meeting is the first time they've discussed anything formally, which reinforces in Jake's mind that the show is a low priority for the school. Most of the work is already done, he's informed. All Jake has to do is contact the various volunteer organizers and "interface."

"I presume you've been meeting with Mrs. Doty?" Corky asks.

Jake lies and nods his head.

In the past, "junior" always meant the youngest teacher on the faculty; the most recent graduate straight out of teacher's college. Taking charge of the program was seen as a way to introduce a new teacher to the joy of getting parents, students, PTA, faculty, and administrators to work together for the good of the community.

Since Jake is the only new teacher on staff, the job falls to him. The humor in the selection comes from Jake's age. He will be fifty years old in less than two weeks and his short grey hair and grey beard attest that he is hardly junior in anything. He doesn't mind getting old; it's being old.

There is also more humor in the widespread belief that Jake is Jewish. "You look Jewish," Jake is always told. Hence, he must be unsuited to preside over an Easter show.

The focus of the meeting shifts to chronically tardy students, kids from Cooper Creek Road and Booneville who don't come to school at all, and then the administrative minutia that all classroom teachers abhor, avoid, and must abide. Jake's thoughts turn to Janet Webster.

When he first moved up here from Los Angeles, Jake had not intended to get involved with anyone. He came to teach biology and learn for himself about the controversy between loggers and environmentalists over spotted owls and old growth forests. If he hadn't been in the bar that first Friday night, if Janet hadn't been having a fight with her boyfriend, if Jake hadn't have been so attracted to her, and if fish hadn't ever learned to swim, he liked to remind himself, he wouldn't have had this woman hanging around his neck.

Meeting Janet Webster his first week in Port Talbot put a different spin on Jake's reason for being here. Even at age thirty-five, Janet is attractive enough to turn heads wherever she goes. Her face is pleasing, with wide-set brown eyes, a small, slightly pug nose, and shiny shoulder-length auburn hair that she likes to keep tied back in a pony tail. Her figure still looks good in 50ls and the heavy, form-fitting cable-knit cotton sweaters she prefers to wear on weekends. The cold Pacific Northwest weather brings a flattering reddish bloom to Janet's chubby cheeks. Jake likes kissing her large mouth and

the slightly upturned upper lip.

Jake knows that the part about kissing is what continually troubles Janet. As enjoyable as it is, he refuses to go any further. He's explained his feelings about sex and she still won't accept it. "It isn't appropriate for two teachers, two *unmarried* teachers, at the same school to be having an affair. It sends the wrong message to the community and particularly to the students."

Jake feels a bump against his arm and realizes he's been daydreaming and that the meeting is over. The faculty and staff are milling around the room, counting down the last minutes before they have to go to work. The major topic of conversation has turned to gossip and the best gossip involves Billy Budd's truck accident two days ago. En route to a job site, Billy had failed to make a turn and had driven right off the side of a logging road and into a big Douglas-fir stump. Janet had already used the incident in her English composition class to explain the concept of irony; how ironic it was for a logger to run into the stump of a tree.

In one corner, a group of the younger female teachers are discussing what they brought to the hospital when they visited Budd last night. Despite the long list of Billy's faults: alcoholism, abusiveness, irresponsibility; most of the single women in town harbor a not-so-secret lust for him. Lots of

married women feel the same way too. Whatever the men say about him, Billy has something, and all the women know it. Just as men can be attracted to a certain kind of woman, even if they disparage her to their friends, so too can a woman be attracted to a certain type of man. Even when it's against their best judgment.

Across from the young women, two of the older teachers are telling jokes about the weather, trying to top each other.

"What does daylight savings time mean in Washington? An extra hour of rain."

"What's the definition of a Washington optimist? A guy with a sun visor on his rain hat."

From another corner of the teacher's lounge, Jake overhears, "Can you believe the stupid guy drove off the damn road?" Jake thinks it's John Tracey, one of the four P.E. teachers. Even though the entire school year has almost passed, Jake still gets confused over the jock-strap snappers; they all look alike.

Eugene Peavey, who teaches social studies, is nodding his head to Tracey's critical comments. Peavey is small, muscular, and compact; a pocket Hercules, but his skin is pasty and pale. He's one of Port Talbot's native sons who left home to learn a trade that didn't involve logging and then came running back.

"You'd think a tree cutter like Budd would end up sawing his leg off, not driving his truck off the road," Tracey continues.

Accidents can happen anytime and anywhere in the woods, but the flatter the ground is, the less likely anything out of the ordinary will occur when you're felling trees. The same holds true for cutting in old growth versus second growth since the big old trees require more skill and concentration to fell. Second growth "sticks," tall, thin, monotonous stands of Douglas-fir, western red cedar, or western hemlock, lull cutters into a complacency which can be fatal if they aren't careful.

"Don't know," answers Peavey. "I'm just glad it happened to Budd and not anyone else."

Mrs. Mary Albright, who has taught history since 1954, jumps into the conversation with, "That's a mean and nasty thing to say Eugene Peavey. I don't imagine your parents would want to hear you talking that way." Peavey's parents have been dead for ten years, but Mrs. Albright has forgotten. Every faculty member who grew up in Port Talbot, under the age of retirement, had Mary Albright as their teacher and she talks to them as if they were still her students.

"All I'm saying Mrs. Albright is there are lots of good men working in the woods that mean more to Port Talbot than Billy Budd."

"Peavey," a voice heavy with irritation chimes in, "you're a sanctimonious bastard." This is Walter Payne. Payne is pulling on his brillo pad hair. He's known Eugene Peavey all his life so

his contempt runs long and deep. Jake has learned since September that Peavey, Payne, Billy Budd, and Owen Owens, Janet's brother, played on the Port Talbot High School football team during the scandalous season they were disqualified from the State Championship.

Mary Albright sticks her face into Payne's and takes a strong sniff. "You haven't been drinking, have you Walter?"

"No, Mrs. Albright," Payne replies contritely.

Peavey continues trying to explain himself. "Heck, all I'm trying to say is..."

"All you're trying to say," Payne interrupts, "is that you're a dick-wad. Always were and always will be." Mary Albright still has her face stuck in front of Payne's so he has to make his comments through the old lady.

"...is that there are Christians who are more deserving of God's watchfulness than drunken hoodlums like Billy Budd," Peavey completes. "And Walter Payne, for that matter. Everybody knows about you Walter. About why people call you 'Hawk.' You haven't changed since high school."

Peavey's juvenile smugness elicits a snort of derision from Walter Payne. "That's what's so special about people like you, Peavey-brain. Your so-called Christian ethics." Payne directs his face to heaven and proclaims, "God! Save me from your followers."

Peavey takes a step toward Walter Payne. His fists are clenched and his jaw sticks out a mile. "You and your friend are losers and it's God's shame you made the rest of us the same."

"Now boys," says John Tracey in his most commanding P.E. coach's voice, "no need to come to blows over past mistakes. Water under the bridge you know. Water under the bridge."

Payne steps around the immovable Mary Albright. Even though he has become big around the middle and appears to be at the disadvantage, Payne is ready for battle. "Pea-brain doesn't have enough power to swat a fly. Hell, he couldn't even catch one the size of a football!"

This time, it's Mrs. Albright's turn; she speaks in italics when there are fights to break up. "*Mister Payne,*" she says. "And *Mister Peavey,*" she adds. "I will not listen to, let alone *condone,* this sort of adolescent behavior in my presence. If you cannot *settle* your quarrels in a civilized manner then I suggest you take your troubles *off* the school grounds."

Both men stare at the elderly teacher. Peavey starts to sputter but Payne turns on his heel and leaves, saying, "Let it go, Peavey. Twenty-five years is long enough."

The finality of Mrs. Albright's act brings a smile to Jake's lips. It's time he left for his first period biology class and he glances round the room to say goodbye to Janet. She frequently ignores faculty meetings but today she's here, talking

with Corky, the principal. Jake tries to catch Janet's eye but she is deep into her conversation with the principal. She's berating him about something or other.

A couple of the younger male teachers are telling a joke. Jake stops to listen.

"... and this guy from Seattle opens up the newspaper and sees this personal ad that he likes."

"What's it say?"

"O.K. So he reads it," the first teacher is teasing.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," the second teacher impatiently prompts. "But what does it say."

"SBF seeks male companion. I love long walks in the woods, riding in your pickup truck, hunting, camping, and fishing trips. Cosy winter nights spent lying by the fire. Candlelit dinners will have me eating out of your hand. Rub me the right way and I will respond with tender caresses. I'll be at the front door when you get home from work. Kiss me and I'm yours. I'm a svelte and good looking girl who loves to play."

"Yeah? Sounds pretty good to me. Then what?"

The first teacher grins before delivering the punch line. "Call me at home and ask for Daisy." He laughs loudly.

"O.K. Maybe I missed something," the second teacher says.

"Don't you get it? Don't you get it? Day-see," the first teacher says and then he repeats it. "Daisy. Don't you get it?"

The second teacher is looking embarrassed. A few of their colleagues, drawn by the loud laughter, are showing some signs of interest. "Daisy?" He looks helplessly at Jake.

"Yeah. Daisy," Jake says. "I bet she's a dog."

"You bet she's a dog. A black lab!" The first teacher laughs loudly again. "Get it?"

"Oh; yeah. I get it now," the second man grouses. "I get it."

Leaving the room, Jake passes the four P.E. coaches. They're discussing Billy Budd's accident. "I understand they had to amputate his leg," says the one Jake thinks is John Tracey.

"Why is that?" asks another. It might be Bob Ramdell.

"Truck flipped and the hood caved in on him," says the third; the one of the bunch who always talks as if he knows everything. That would make him Tim Phillips. "Asshole wasn't wearing a seatbelt so he got one leg pinned between the dash, the wheel, and the headliner and the other one stuck out the windshield. You know what that means, don't you?"

"No. What?" two of the other three ask in unison.

"Lost a lot of blood?" Tracey asks.

"That, and big time infection," says the know-it-all.

"That boy's lucky he didn't castrate himself," chuckles Tracey.

"I suppose," replies Phillips. "But none of his girlfriends

are gonna like him much with only one leg.”

Jake leaves the room thinking, it takes more than two legs to make a man.