Always By Your Side

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Chapter 1

Rose hesitated before knocking loudly on the new head-teacher's door.

A booming voice answered. 'Come in!'

Rose took a deep breath and tried to quash her nerves. She knew she wasn't one of Mr Dawson's favourite teachers in the school, but she'd just taught an excellent lesson on fractions and she was sure her lesson observation feedback would be fine. True, Dawson had been looking at her a little sternly during his observation, but that didn't mean anything sinister, did it?

'Oh, Miss Hargreaves. Do come in and take a seat,' he said. Rose looked around the room and managed to perch herself on the edge of a chair covered in piles of notebooks. Dawson's office really wasn't the tidiest place in the school.

'Thank you for allowing me to sit in and observe your lesson this morning as part of your performance management review. How do *you* feel the lesson went?' As Dawson spoke, Rose saw the glimmer of a smirk appearing on his top lip. It was just visible under the grey hair of his moustache, which Rose also noticed still contained the traces of the digestive

biscuit he had clearly been enjoying before she'd entered the room. She shuddered internally.

'Oh . . . erm . . . I think it went well. The children were engaged with their learning and they all met their objectives by the end of the session.'

Dawson broke out into a beaming grin and Rose felt herself relax a little. She'd done it. She'd made it through the dreaded lesson observation, despite the warnings from her colleagues that the new headteacher was out to get her.

Dawson's grin deepened, but there was something about his smile that didn't look quite right to Rose . . .

'Unfortunately, Miss Hargreaves, I couldn't disagree with you more. I'm afraid to tell you that I've graded your lesson "unsatisfactory". I'll be placing you on capability procedures with immediate effect and informing the governors of my decision at our meeting this evening. I'm sure you're aware that your temporary contract here at Trinity Grove Primary School is up for renewal? Unfortunately, your poor performance today has left me no choice but to recommend that your contract isn't renewed. If I were you, I'd start looking for teaching positions elsewhere.'

Her jaw dropped and she found her hands trembling. She wanted to argue back, to tell Dawson that this couldn't possibly be right. There was no way her lesson had been 'unsatisfactory'. Since she'd qualified as a teacher three years ago, Rose had always received outstanding feedback on her lessons from all her tutors and the previous headteachers she'd worked for. Mrs Barton, the school's former headteacher, had

even asked Rose to act as a mentor for the trainee teacher the school currently had on placement.

But when Rose tried to tell Dawson all of this, she faltered and couldn't find her voice. Her mouth was dry, and a lump had formed in her throat.

'Well, if that's all, then, Miss Hargreaves, I've got another appointment waiting. Be sure to close the door on your way out.'

Rose found herself silently leaving Dawson's office and walking as fast as she could towards the staff toilets. She could feel tears burning the back of her eyes and she didn't want any of the parents, who were already lining up at the school office to collect their children, to see her cry.

Maya, Trinity Grove's Year 6 teacher, and Rose's best friend at the school, called after her from the staffroom.

'Hey, Rose, how'd it go? Rose? Rose, where are you off to?' Maya shouted.

Rose didn't slow down at the sound of Maya's voice. If anything, her walk was now turning into a slow run. She made it to the staff toilets, went into the ladies, found a cubicle and bolted the door firmly. As she flipped the toilet lid down to act as a seat, the tears flowed and she could taste salt at the back of her throat. *Unsatisfactory?* Her contract with the school to be terminated? *How? How could this be happening?* All she'd ever wanted was to be a teacher. And she was good at it. Really good.

Within seconds, Rose heard Maya banging on the cubicle door.

'Rose? Are you in there? How'd it go with Dawson? I'm dying to know.'

Rose didn't answer.

'Rose? Come on, I know it's you! I saw you as you ran in. Don't tell me it went badly? It couldn't have. Even Dawson's bright enough to realize you're one of the best teachers we have. Come on, talk to me.'

Rose got up slowly, wiped her tears away with the back of her hands and gingerly opened the door a crack.

'What on earth's happened? Are you crying?' Maya enveloped her friend in a big hug, and Rose felt more warm tears flowing.

'It's Dawson,' she said, 'he's graded my lesson as unsatisfactory.'

'What? I've seen you teach enough times to know that, even on your worst day, you'd never teach an unsatisfactory lesson. The man's clearly insane. Mind you, last time he taught a class, dinosaurs were probably roaming the earth, so I don't imagine he has much of a clue as to what makes a good lesson. Don't let his ignorance get you down, hun.'

'It's worse than that though. You know how I was only brought in on a temporary contract for a year?'

'Yeah . . .' said Maya, her voice faltering slightly.

'It's up for renewal at the end of term and Dawson's not going to keep me on. He's recommending to the governors that my contract's terminated at the end of term, so I'll be gone after Easter.'

'What? He can't do that!' Maya yelled, the outrage clear on

her face. 'The other teachers won't stand for it. The parents will be horrified. The kids in that class have come on in leaps and bounds since you arrived. And you know I'm not saying that just because I'm your best friend.'

To see the indignation Maya was showing on her behalf brought a weak smile to Rose's face. Her friend was right. Rose was a great teacher, and she wouldn't let Dawson or his twisted agenda make her doubt that.

'You do realize, don't you,' Maya continued, 'the only reason he's singling *you* out is because you've spoken up against the dreadful changes he's brought in. All he cares about is league tables and results. He treats this place like an exam factory where all we do is teach to the test. He's not bothered about the individual needs of the kids at all. You know we all think it, Rose, but you're the only one who has dared to stand up to him.'

'I know,' Rose whispered, 'but that doesn't make it any easier. I've still lost my job. Maybe I should have just kept quiet . . .'

'Ah, but then you wouldn't be the Rose that we all know and love, now, would you? Anyway, we can fight this. Get the union involved. I'm sure what he's trying to do would breach employment guidelines?'

'I doubt it,' Rose sighed. 'I'm on a temporary contract so I'm pretty sure he can do what he likes. Anyway, I don't want to fight it. As if I'd want to stay here working for that awful man any longer. And maybe I just don't have what it takes to be a teacher anyway . . .'

'What do you mean? You're the most passionate teacher I know! You really care about the kids and making a difference and, let's face it, teaching in London can be pretty tough. Don't give it all up just because of Dawson.'

'It's not just him though, is it? Our funding's always being cut, the focus is always on getting the kids through some stupid test. It's our job to help them become well-rounded adults and not just worry about performance management targets. When I decided to be a teacher, I wanted to make a difference – a *real* difference – and I'm not sure that's part of this school's priorities any more.'

'Listen, don't make any rash decisions while you're feeling so upset.' Maya wiped Rose's tears away with a paper towel she'd grabbed from the dispenser on the wall. 'Just head home, relax and chat things over with Ollie tonight.'

'Oh God. Ollie!' Rose groaned.

'What? Is he going to be annoyed about you getting the push?'

'Annoyed? Are you joking? He'll be over the moon. I don't think he sees being a teacher as a "proper" job. I swear he thinks all we do is play rounders and do arts and crafts all day. According to him, we're practically part-timers 'cos we finish at three and it's always the school holidays.' Maya rolled her eyes.

'As if being an investment banker counts as a "proper" job! They spend most of their time wining and dining clients and going on jollies. Can you remember the last time we spent the afternoon drinking Prosecco on expenses?' Rose shook

her head and stifled a giggle. 'My point exactly. Right, let's get you ready to face the world again, Miss Hargreaves.'

As Maya wiped the remainder of Rose's tears away, the door to the staff toilets banged open and Sandra, the school secretary, came rushing in.

'Rose, I've just heard the news. I can't believe it. I'm absolutely fuming with that dreadful man.'

'Argh, I can't believe it's out already. I've only been in the bathroom for five minutes,' said Rose, resting her head in her hands.

'Oh, don't worry, it's only me who knows. Dawson just had me add to the agenda for the governors' meeting. I can't believe he's not renewing your contract. I nearly choked on my coffee when I read what he'd written. You've been an absolute godsend the year you've been with us. You're going to be a huge loss to the school and the man's a fool if he can't see that.'

'Thanks, Sandra, that means a lot.'

As Rose walked the short distance from the Tube station to the flat she shared with Ollie, she could feel the butterflies rising. Ollie and Rose had been together for almost five years now and had been engaged for six months. They had met while in their final year of university at Durham and had become firm friends quickly. There was a definite spark of attraction, but as they were both seeing other people, nothing had happened between them until they found themselves living in London and newly single at the same time. Things

had been great between them in those first couple of years together. Rose had been finishing off her teacher training and Ollie had bagged himself a high-flying job in the City with an investment banking firm. It was exciting times for them both; they were dazzled by the bright lights of London and looking forward to their future together.

In the last year, though, Rose had to admit to herself that things had been slightly different between them. For one thing, they didn't see as much of each other as they used to. Ollie was often out in the evenings wining and dining clients and Rose was usually too shattered from a full day's teaching to join him at functions. When the weekends finally arrived, Rose was to be found marking and lesson planning to get herself prepared for the forthcoming week at school. This had been the source of quite a few arguments recently, as Ollie was becoming increasingly resentful of the time Rose devoted to her teaching workload. Their argument from the previous Sunday afternoon stuck particularly in Rose's mind. Ollie had wanted her to join him and his friends for a pub lunch and to watch the rugby, but Rose had had to bow out early as she had so much work.

'Oh, come on, Rose, it's not even like they pay you enough in that job to be putting all these hours in. They just don't value your hard work. I hardly ever get to see you these days.'

'Well, it's not really about you though, is it? At least I'm doing something *meaningful* and actually helping others rather than spending my days schmoozing clients at some City bar.'

'Look,' Ollie softened, 'all I'm saying is that you work too hard. You need to relax and have some fun. Just stay for the rugby and you can get your work finished off tonight.'

'I'm sorry, Ollie, I just can't. I've got too much to do to have everything finished in a couple of hours tonight. I need to be prepared for Monday. I've got an assembly to prep, a week's worth of literacy planning and it's World Book Day this week.'

'Fine,' Ollie hissed back between gritted teeth, his eyes narrowed. 'Do what you like. But don't say I don't try and make an effort, Rose.' He downed the rest of his pint and headed back to the table where his group of friends were sitting in prime position waiting for the rugby to start.

As Rose turned her key in the front door, she could hear the TV on, so she knew Ollie was home.

'Hey, babe,' he shouted, 'I'm in the bedroom. I've just got to grab a change of clothes for this client dinner tonight.'

Rose headed straight up the stairs and sat on the bed.

'How was your day?' he said, planting a kiss on her cheek.

'Eventful,' she answered quietly. 'I've got some news actually.'

'Oh?'

'Well, I'm not going to be staying on at Trinity Grove when my contract finishes at the end of term,' Rose replied.

Ollie broke into a huge grin and crossed the room to give her an unexpected hug.

'Wow, that's brilliant news, darling. You certainly kept

that quiet, didn't you? I know I've been saying for ages that you deserve to be paid more for what you do but I wasn't sure you were really listening. I'm so pleased you've finally come to your senses! This calls for a celebration. Let me grab some champers from the fridge.'

Rose's heart sank. She had known he was going to react like this. She didn't know what to say next. Should she confess that she wasn't leaving through choice and that Dawson had branded her as an 'unsatisfactory' teacher and was ousting her against her will? Before Rose had a chance to formulate her response, Ollie had reappeared in the doorway with two glasses of champagne in hand.

'To new possibilities,' he said, after handing a glass to Rose. He clinked his flute against hers and took a sip. Rose managed to let her own glass slip straight through her fingers and it smashed on the wooden bedroom floor. 'Honestly, darling, you really can be a klutz at times, but it's just one of the many things I love about you,' he said, bending down to pick up the largest shards of glass.

'I know, I know. Look, leave that for now,' she said, nodding towards the broken glass on the floor. 'Listen, I'm not sure that I'm leaving teaching *forever.* I just need a bit of time to think about what I want to do next and where my priorities lie. I'm just not sure that Trinity Grove was the right fit for me.'

'Of course it wasn't the right fit for you, darling. I mean, we were never going to be able to afford the deposit on a house in Surrey with what they were paying you.' Before

Rose could protest, he continued. 'Listen, I'll have a word with Marcus tonight. We've always got openings at the firm and they might be looking for some more recruits in the project management department. That would be a *perfect* fit for you.'

Before Rose could argue, Ollie's phone rang and he was deep in conversation about some mundane work matter. Before she knew it he was putting his shoes on and waving at her as he left to go out for the evening. Rose exhaled deeply and slumped back on the bed. Why hadn't she spoken up for herself and told Ollie the real reason she was leaving Trinity Grove? That was the second time today she'd found her voice had deserted her when she needed it the most. Why hadn't she protested when he suggested talking to Marcus at the firm? There was no way she was giving up teaching to work at an investment banking firm. Even though her teaching career seemed to be lying in tatters around her and she had no idea what the future held for her, Rose did know one thing: it certainly wasn't an investment banking firm in the City. That wasn't what she wanted at all.

Rose's final two weeks at Trinity Grove passed rapidly. Thankfully, the end of term was always busy with activities and her class had been making Easter cards and decorating eggs alongside their usual lessons. She'd been in too much of a rush most days to exchange more than a passing nod at Dawson, which had made things more bearable. Dawson himself had made an announcement in the school newsletter

to let the parents and pupils know about Miss Hargreaves' departure. Dawson being Dawson, though, he had cleverly spun things to make it look as if Rose was leaving of her own accord by saying she was departing to 'further her career' and thanking her for the huge difference she had made during her time at the school.

Dawson had a far tougher job on his hands when the rest of the teaching staff heard about what had happened. They all knew the real story behind Rose's departure and were suitably outraged. Most of them pleaded with Rose to get the union involved and fight the decision, but they understood when she explained the reason she had decided not to.

At Rose's leaving drinks on the final day of the spring term, most of the teaching staff joined her at the pub across the road from the school, The White Horse. Dawson was not invited. It was a bittersweet moment for Rose, as not only did she not want to be leaving, but she had absolutely no idea what she was going to do next.

'Why don't you sign up for some supply agencies?' Maya suggested helpfully. 'They'll absolutely bite your hand off, I'm sure. You know good supply teachers are worth their weight in gold.'

'I guess so. I have been thinking about it, but I'm just not sure.'

'Why not? It would be a great way to try out some local schools and see which ones you like and which ones have a head like Dawson that you'll want to avoid like the plague.'

Rose chuckled.

'Maybe you're right. I suppose I've got nothing to lose. I'll think about it and give some agencies a call during the holidays to test the waters.'

'That sounds sensible. I guarantee by the end of next term you'll have your perfect teaching job lined up ready for September.'

'I really hope you're right,' Rose said as she took a rather large swig from her glass of Merlot. Still, she couldn't quite shake the feeling that, if her perfect teaching job really was just around the corner, that would just be yet another hurdle for her to overcome with Ollie.