



The Right Thing

by

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THE RIGHT THING

Working for the assistant principal during my free block had its perks. For one thing, I wasn't stuck in the smelly cafeteria for study hall. The food in our caf was pretty decent, but the place smelled like all that food mingled with cleaning stuff. Not cool.

For another thing, I got to walk around the school. Supposedly I was passing out detention slips and office summonses to students who'd earned them. I'd learned the first week of the job to take the long way around so I wouldn't have to go back to the office and count names on the attendance sheet or whatever exciting task they had in store for me.

I didn't get paid, of course, but it counted toward the community service hours I hadn't managed to fulfill, and it kept me away from the obnoxious kids in my study hall who liked to put me down when the teacher wasn't paying attention. Which unfortunately was most of the time.

It was just my luck that today, I had to take a detention slip to Bryce Harriman. One of my former study hall-mates. Which meant walking into the cafeteria and standing beside the table where Bryce and his buddies, smelling like cigarettes and something I was better off not identifying, sat. A few tables away from the teacher, Mr. Turow, who was as usual doing something on his laptop.

"Hey, Kynlee." Bryce gave me a smile that made my knees wobble a little. He might have been one of the burn-outs, but he was cute. And we were friends, where friends meant we sometimes hung around outside of school and he made sure no one hassled me too much.

"Hi." I took a deep breath and set the detention slip in front of him. "Sorry."

"Not your fault." He gave me a grin that was pulled a little crooked by the scar at the corner of his mouth. "I guess the sheriff just has a hard-on for me."

"She's a woman. She doesn't get hard-ons." As soon as I said it, I knew how lame I sounded. Dumb comments, my specialty.

Bryce's buddies rolled their eyes. They all considered me the biggest goody-two-shoes in the school, so much that they even called me "Shoes." And they all considered me pretty much the most awkward person in school.

Bryce knew better about the goody-two-shoes thing, though he agreed I was pretty damn awkward. He chuckled. "Yeah, well, I don't know about her being a woman. I'll take your word for it."

"Miss O'Brien," Mr. Turow called. "May I help you?"

"I'm just dropping off a detention slip for Ms. Charette." I stepped away from Bryce, whose grin had disappeared.

"I suggest you watch out around those boys," Mr. Turow said. "Bunch of druggies. Their smell might get on you. So might their stupid. Him especially. Bryce wouldn't know how to turn on a light without directions."

For a second I just blinked. I couldn't believe I'd just heard him right. As it sank in, I clenched my fists against sheer fury and opened my mouth with no clue what I was going to say. Bryce had a learning disability. He'd dealt with being called stupid all his life, and no one put my friends down when I was around. I didn't care what anyone said about me, but my friends mattered.

But Turow was a teacher. Anything I said would probably earn me a detention too.

"Let it go," Bryce murmured. "He says shit like that all the time."

"Yeah," his friend Pete said. "Don't get in trouble, Shoes." I couldn't tell if he was being serious or sarcastic, just like I'd never figured out if Pete actually liked me or just pretended to tolerate me so Bryce wouldn't beat the crap out of him.

"Miss O'Brien?" Turow stood, looking at me expectantly.

I bit my lip and turned to face Turow. "Getting detention doesn't make someone stupid," I snapped. "And you shouldn't say stuff like that to students."

His shaggy eyebrows drooped and he looked like a thunderstorm was blowing across his face. "Watch how you talk to me, Miss O'Brien. Get back to the office. Now."

"Go," Bryce said quietly behind me. "I'll catch up with you later."

That meant he had something to tell me. And, as usual, he was trying to protect me. Before I could say something else that might actually get me in trouble, I started away.

As I walked out of the caf, I was pretty sure I heard Turow say something about, "Weird little brats who wear the stupidest clothes."

Anger rushed through me like a wildfire, and I clenched my fists. I couldn't lose my temper at a teacher. I couldn't lose my temper anywhere; anger was bad, according to dear, darling Mummy. But I especially had to keep cool at school.

I knew Turow's comment was aimed at me, though. I was wearing a concert T-shirt Bryce had given me, black with royal blue graphics, with red leggings and grey ankle boots. Over the shirt, I wore a metallic silver jacket I'd scored from the Homecoming dance dress I hadn't worn because no one had wanted to go to Homecoming with me and I'd been too chicken to go alone. And on my hands, I wore red fingerless gloves that matched the leggings.

I liked how I looked. I had to go to school every day, sit in class pretending to take notes even though I remembered everything most of the teachers said without having to write it down, walk through the halls hearing people calling me names and making fun of the way I walked. School was better than home, but not by much, and the way I dressed brightened it up for me.

I was used to other students making fun of me. This was the first time I'd heard a teacher say anything. Between that and what he'd said about Bryce and the other guys, I was not happy.

I got through the rest of the block and went to my locker to get the lunch I'd brought because my parents hadn't given me lunch money since sometime the month before. I needed to get a job, except my parents wouldn't let me work during the school year, so I

was stuck with whatever I could find in the cupboards and fridge. Today it was PB&J with stale chips and a browning banana.

As I closed my locker, Bryce walked over and leaned against the one beside me. "Turow says shit like that all the time."

"He shouldn't," I said. I looked at him and quickly looked away, my face warm.

"Yeah, well, he's a teacher. He can do what he wants." Bryce fidgeted with the combination lock on the locker he was leaning on. "Look, there's stuff going on you don't know about, okay? Don't mess with Turow. Let it roll off."

"What are you talking about?" This time I managed to look at him without being flustered. "Don't mess with him? Isn't that the same thing you told me about Pete and them?"

He hesitated. Bryce almost never hesitated. He didn't care what he said or what other people thought, which was one of the reasons he was one of my most frequent detention slip customers.

I leaned against my locker. Lunch was only half an hour, and time was ticking, but whatever Bryce had to say was more important. He wouldn't talk to me in the cafeteria; he kept his distance at school, mostly. I'd used to think it was because he was embarrassed to be seen with me, but he'd explained over the summer that it was the opposite. He didn't want people to look down on me for hanging out with him.

So to find out what he was talking about, I would have to miss part of my lunch break. Not that it mattered. My third-block teacher would give me a pass to the library, and I would sneak into the caf and eat during study hall lunch. I did that half the time anyway.

Bryce still wasn't saying anything, and now I was getting fidgety. I tried not to show it. He liked me better when I was confident and patient.

"Turow was on something this morning." He said it so quietly I barely heard.

I replayed the words in my mind to make sure I had them right. When I spoke, I lowered my voice even more than Bryce had. "Drugs?"

He gave me a short, sharp nod. "I know what he takes."

I decided to pretend I hadn't heard that one. I knew Bryce used and sold drugs. He'd told me his reasons, and they weren't something I was willing to judge him about. He didn't use anything stronger than pot around me, and mostly he didn't even use that. And he'd told everyone he knew that if anyone tried to sell me drugs, they would have to face him. Something no one really wanted to do.

I was guessing if Bryce knew what Turow took, he had something to do with Turow getting his supply. That wasn't something I wanted to know about.

One thing I knew for sure, though. Sometimes Bryce smoked on weekday mornings, but he saved the stronger stuff for weekends and occasional nights when he just couldn't handle things. He never came to school on anything strong.

Turow was a teacher, and if he was coming to school on drugs, someone had to do

something about it.

I touched my tongue to my too-dry lips. "He called you guys names."

"Because he doesn't want to admit he's one of us." He twisted his mouth into something between a smirk and a grimace. "He's getting worse. I don't know where he's getting the stuff anymore, and some days you can tell he isn't even here. Last week he grabbed Kendall's arm so hard he left bruises."

Teachers had no right putting their hands on students unless they were breaking up a fight or something, and even then, they were supposed to keep their hands off and just maneuver between the fighters or something. Bruising a kid was abuse, as far as I was concerned. As if what Turow had said to Bryce and behind my back wasn't bad enough.

"You have to tell someone," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "Seriously? Kynlee, think about it. Everyone knows who I am. I'm just the druggy dumbbell who can't read. You think anyone's going to believe me over him?"

I smacked his arm, not that he would feel it through his leather jacket. "You're not a dumbbell or a druggy, and you were reading that thousand-page Stephen King book the other day, so shut up."

"I am a druggy." He clenched his teeth. "You are too good, Kyn. You see the best in everyone, and someday you are going to be disappointed."

"I see what's there." I put my hands on my hips and looked him square in the eye. We'd had this argument before, starting with the day my junior year when he'd broken up with me after a month because I was "too good for him."

We'd never officially gotten back together, but we weren't really apart, either.

"You see the best in people, and that makes some of us want to be what you see." He touched my hand. The most affection he ever showed me when anyone could see. "Off topic."

"Yeah." I had a habit of that. When we sat in his bedroom and talked, wandering topics didn't matter, but standing in the high school hall talking about a drug-addicted teacher, staying on track was important. "Sorry. You're afraid you'll get in trouble if you tell someone about Turow?"

"He'll tell them where he used to get his stuff."

I bit my lip again. Turow couldn't keep teaching if he was on drugs. Especially if he was insulting and physically hurting students. I could have gone to Ms. Charette, but then I would get Bryce in trouble. Not detention type of trouble. He could be arrested.

"Why are you telling me this?" I sounded whiny, but I couldn't help it. Bryce didn't do anything without a reason, and he knew me. If I saw someone doing something wrong, I told. Even though I'd gotten beaten up a couple of times for it.

But I couldn't tell about this. Bryce was the reason I was still around, the one person who cared enough about me to make me believe I was worth being alive, and I had to

protect him the way he always protected me.

He took a deep breath. "Tell."

I shook my head. "I can't. You just said Turow will say he got the stuff from you."

"Kynlee." He pressed his lips together and glanced away for a moment. When he looked at me again, there was so much pain in his gaze I wanted to cry. "You have to. They won't believe me, but they'll believe you. He's hurting people. Aside from not teaching and just sitting there surfing porn, he's saying all that shit, and he bruised Kendall. You are the one person I know who Charette and Powell will believe over a teacher. You don't lie."

He hesitated, and even though it was almost impossible to stay silent, I waited for him to speak.

"You're on his radar now," he said. "You shouldn't have said anything this morning. He'll probably leave you alone. All the teachers know you, and you aren't in any of his classes. But you mouthed off, and he hates that. He could hurt you, Kynlee, and I won't let that happen. You have to say something."

"I don't want you in trouble." My voice choked and I swallowed a lump in my throat.

He shrugged, and a stone wall covered the pain. That was the expression I was used to from him except when we were alone, and I hated that he was using it on me now. "I'm in trouble all the time anyway. I don't have a record. It won't be too bad. And no one will blame you, I'll make sure of it. I'm telling you to do this, Kynlee. It won't come back on you, and you and I... We're okay no matter what, all right?"

I nodded and squeezed my eyes shut. He was telling me to do the right thing. Just like I always did even when people hated me for it.

This time, I would hate myself if anything happened to Bryce. But he was right. The way Turow had acted in the caf had scared me a little, and from what Bryce said, he'd done worse. I couldn't let it keep happening if there was a way to stop it.

"I won't tell them who told me," I said.

"Your choice. I don't care if you do." He touched my hand again and smiled. "It'll be okay, Shoes."

I stuck out my tongue, because I hated it when he called me that and he knew it. He laughed.

"You should go now," he said. "He uses here at school, too. Lunch break, he goes into the teacher's bathroom on the second floor. The one that they tried to turn into a special ed room last year. Tell them that. They might be able to catch him in the act if you go right now."

"I kind of hate you for this." Even if he tried to protect me, if Bryce got in trouble, some people would blame me. They always did. And if Turow got arrested or something, it would be even worse. Some of the kids really liked him.

"I'll make it up to you." He glanced around and bent to touch his lips to my forehead.

I froze. Even when we were going out, he'd never done anything like that in school.

Partly because of the anti-PDA rules and partly because he didn't want anyone thinking I was like the girls he usually went out with.

"Go," he said, and before I could answer, he walked away.

For a few seconds, I just stood there. My stomach churned and my chest ached, and I wanted to burst into tears. Bryce knew me too well. Even though I wanted to keep anything from happening to him, I couldn't hear about something like what he'd told me without wanting to do something about it.

I headed to the office.

The regular secretary was on her lunch break, and some woman I hadn't seen before was at her desk. "May I help you?"

"I need to see Ms. Charette." The principal, Mr. Powell, probably would have been the better one to talk to, but he made me nervous. Ms. Charette liked me, and I wasn't afraid of her.

"She's busy," the woman said.

I glanced at the door to Ms. Charette's office. She was at her desk typing something on her laptop. Maybe busy. Maybe just answering emails or reading the news or something.

"It's important," I said.

"Why don't you tell me what it's about and I'll let her know?"

There was absolutely no way I was going to tell a total stranger what Bryce had told me. I gave up trying to get through to her and went around the counter and into Ms. Charette's office while the woman yelled at me.

Ms. Charette looked up. "Kynlee?"

I closed the office door right in the woman's face. I didn't even care. If I didn't say this now, I would lose my nerve.

"Mr. Turow's doing drugs." I blurted it out so fast the words slurred together. "In the caf this morning he was on his laptop and not paying attention to anyone. When I went in, he called Bryce Wilson names and made fun of what I'm wearing."

She took off her reading glasses and leaned on her elbows. "While that's certainly not acceptable behavior from a teacher, that doesn't mean he's doing drugs, Kynlee."

My brain whirled. She was right. I knew Bryce hadn't lied to me, but just the way Turow had acted that morning wasn't enough to convince Charette. I had to say something to get through to her without bringing Bryce's name into it more than I already had.

"Someone told me they saw Mr. Turow grab Kendall George. He left a bruise." I prayed she wouldn't ask who "someone" was.

Of course she did. "Who told you that?"

"I can't answer that." I took a deep breath and let the words pour out, just filtering them enough so I wouldn't say Bryce's name. "Someone told me Mr. Turow comes to school every morning high on something. They've seen him looking at porn on his laptop, and he

keeps calling students names. They said he goes into the bathroom at the end of the second floor at lunch and uses.”

“*Who*, Kynlee?” She stood. She was taller than me, and for the first time I found her intimidating as hell. “Who told you these things? These are very serious allegations.”

“I can’t tell you who.” I forced myself to look her in the eye. “It’s someone who wouldn’t lie to me. I saw the way Mr. Turow was acting this morning, and I believe what I was told, and I’m not telling you who told me.”

“Stay right here.” She stalked out the door.

I sat in the chair in front of her desk, heart pounding, and counted my fingers. Thumb to forefinger, to middle finger, to ring finger, to pinkie, and back. So many times I lost count.

Ms. Charette finally returned and sat at her desk without a word. Her mouth was a thin line, and her eyes were grey stone. She stared at me, and I just kept counting my fingers and waiting for her to say something.

“I sent Officer Roberts up to the second floor,” she said finally, naming our school resource officer.

“Thank you.” I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“I need to know where you got the information, Kynlee.”

I shook my head. My whole life, I’d always done what teachers and administrators told me, and this time I couldn’t. Not without hurting Bryce, and I just plain wouldn’t do that. I was the only person in his life he trusted not to hurt him, and I refused to lose that trust.

“I can give you detention,” she said.

“Okay.” Thumb to forefinger, to middle finger.

“Okay?” She raised an eyebrow. “You’ve never had detention.”

“I can’t tell you who told me.” I closed my eyes for a second then forced myself to look at her again. “I just can’t, so give me detention or suspend me or whatever, but please stop asking.”

She didn’t answer, and I couldn’t look at her anymore.

Outside a siren grew louder. The radio on Ms. Charette’s desk crackled. “Confirmed. Clear second floor west wing. Keep all students inside the cafeteria and classrooms.”

“It sounds like whoever told you about this was telling the truth.” She picked up the stack of blank detention slips she kept at the corner of her desk and flipped through them. My heart beat faster. If I got detention my parents would probably ground me forever, but it would be worth it to protect Bryce.

“Blue,” the woman secretary’s voiced blared over the PA system. The code for lockdown.

She set the slips down. “In light of the circumstances, I’ll let it go this time.”

“Thank you.” My voice cracked.

The siren got louder and blue lights flashed against the wall through the window behind Ms. Charette. She stood again. “I have to go. Stay here.”

“Okay.” I didn’t want to wait there. If anyone saw me in Ms. Charette’s office, they would know I’d been the one to report Mr. Turow. But in lock-down, there wasn’t much I could do. I had to stay there until they called all clear.

Ms. Charette just looked at me for a second, then hurried out of the office, closing the door behind her.

I got up and went to the window, even though we were supposed to stay hidden during lock-downs. A police car was parked in the school drive, which everyone called “the Circle,” halfway between the main door beside the office and the door which led into the caf. One police officer was standing by the car writing something on a clipboard. The blue flashing light both soothed me and sent my pulse skyrocketing until it pounded so loudly in my ears I couldn’t hear anything else.

Then Officer Roberts and another police officer burst out of the door by the caf. They were dragging Mr. Turow between them, and he was yelling something I couldn’t quite make out through the double-paned glass in the window. They pushed him into the back seat of the police car.

I sat down again and went back to my fingers. Thumb to ring finger, to pinkie. I didn’t want to see anything more.

The blue lights went away, and I heard voices outside Ms. Charette’s door. I ignored them until Mr. Powell’s voice over the speakers said, “All clear. All students and staff please report to the auditorium immediately. Lunches will resume after a brief assembly.”

Ms. Charette opened the door. “If you go now, they won’t notice you leaving my office.”

Apparently she knew me pretty well too, or at least she understood the risk I’d taken. I nodded and walked out as fast as I could. I didn’t take time to thank her. I could do that later.

Crowding nine hundred kids into the auditorium took a long time. We were supposed to sit with our homerooms, but I had permission to sit at the back during assemblies because sometimes I just couldn’t handle the noise. I dropped into my usual seat at the end of the three-seat row in the corner closest to the back door.

A couple of minutes later, Bryce climbed over the back of the seat beside me and sat down. Pete was next to him. “You did good,” Bryce whispered, his breath tickling my ear.

“I hope so.” I was still worried Turow would say he’d gotten drugs from Bryce.

He squeezed my hand, and Pete leaned around him. “He’s right, Shoes. You did the right thing.”

Hearing that from Pete let me relax. I expected Bryce to have my back. If Pete did too, I might be okay.

Mr. Powell got up on stage and everyone quieted down. "The lock-down today was because of information we received about someone using illegal substances in our building," he said. "There was no danger to any of you, and the situation has been resolved. An email has been sent to your parents and guardians, and a letter will go home at the end of the day. At this time, if you were in first lunch and have not finished eating, you may return to the cafeteria."

He went on to give adjusted times for the other three lunch periods, then paused before saying, "All students in Mr. Turow's third and fourth block classes will have their classes in Mrs. Sweeney's room."

A buzz ran through the crowd, and Bryce squeezed my hand again. "They all know," he said quietly. "Everyone who has Turow knows, and a lot of them were scared to say anything. You're the only one I knew wouldn't be too chicken to speak up, Kynlee."

I held back a smile. That was one of the nicest things he'd said to me. But I wasn't the brave one. "You could still get in trouble. You're braver than me."

"Sure." He snorted. "Don't worry about it. I'm a cockroach. I'll survive anything."

"You're a good person," I said.

He nudged me gently with his elbow. "Shut up. I don't want people to know."

Mr. Powell held up his hand, and the buzz quieted. "At this time, please report to your third block classes unless you were in first lunch. We cannot answer any questions about this situation, and we would appreciate it if you wouldn't speculate."

Of course, that pretty much guaranteed everyone would make every guess they could about what had happened. On the way out of the auditorium, I heard at least a dozen people talking about Turow.

But I didn't hear my name or Bryce's. There was no guarantee we wouldn't be brought into it somehow, but for the time being, I could breathe. And Bryce could walk beside me, close enough to touch even though he wouldn't where anyone could see.

He walked me all the way to the cafeteria and came in with me, even though he didn't have first lunch. He led me up to the lunch line, even though I had my bag lunch with me, and bought me a slice of pizza and fries without a word. And then he sat with me while I ate, even though he didn't eat anything.

He didn't have to say a word. He just sat there, guarding me the way he always did, and I knew everything would be okay.