

OLD SCHOOL



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DEXTER FOREMAN

“G . . . forty-seven.”

The community room buzzes as the players rush to cover the number on their Bingo cards. I’m practically vibrating in my sneakers. I’m an I-19 away from Bingo!

I glance up to the caller’s table, where the prize jar is well over half full of quarters. This is going to be the biggest payout we’ve had in months! If I win it, that’ll be the cat’s pyjamas—which is what they say around here about something really, really great. I’ll be playing for free until I’m thirty.

Cool your jets, I say to myself. Bingo is serious business at The Pines Retirement Village. Archie calls it a

blood sport—kind of like our Hunger Games. Not that many people here read *The Hunger Games* or even watch the movies. The Pines is a seniors' community. You have to be fifty-five just to live here, and most of the residents are a lot older than that. Like Archie, who just turned eighty. Or my grandma: seventy-six. Or my best friend, Leo. He'll be a hundred next year.

I'm only twelve, but I'm a special case.

"N . . . forty-four."

Flurries of movement all around me—discs being placed over squares. Please don't let me lose now—now when I'm so close!

"Bingo!" calls a shrill voice.

Sudden panic followed by relief. It's just Miss Wefers. Miss Wefers declares Bingo all the time, but she doesn't even have a card. She just likes to be a part of things. It doesn't bother me, but some of the real hard-core players like Archie want her banned from the community room. Grandma would never let that happen. She always says the Bingo players need to get a life. I'm not sure I agree with her on that one. Here at The Pines, Bingo *is* life.

A few more numbers are called and you can tell by the rising tension in the room that a lot of people are

getting really close. I'm still stuck on I-19 and sweating bullets.

"Bingo!"

It's a double call from opposite sides of the room. There's a mad dash in two different directions as players rush to verify the winning numbers and make sure there's no funny business. During the hustle and bustle, a wayward elbow jostles the quarter jar off the table and it smashes on the tile floor. The noise level jumps to eleven. Old ladies have a lot to say about what to do when there's broken glass on the floor. This gets a rise out of Archie, who doesn't appreciate being bossed around.

"We never called B-fourteen! It was B-fifteen!"

"Stay away from the glass with those sandals. You want to get the lockjaw?"

"It was B-fourteen! You need to take that hearing aid back to the Dollar Store!"

"Drop those quarters, Barney!"

"Hey—no fighting in front of the kid!"

The kid—that's me. People at The Pines don't agree on much—especially where Bingo is concerned—but they're on the same page when it comes to me. In a way, they're all my parents—although grandparents and great-grandparents would be more like it. Along

with Grandma Adele, they're raising me together, even though a retirement community isn't the average place for a kid to grow up.

It's a real brouhaha when, all at once, total silence falls over the noisy crowd. Every eye turns to the door where my grandmother stands next to the *second*-youngest person in the community room: a uniformed police officer. Everybody's pretty cowed. Like, are our Bingo games so rowdy that they have to send the cops to shut us down?

The officer is wide-eyed too, as if he didn't bring a big enough prison bus to fit forty-seven unruly senior citizens.

Then his eyes fall on me and I realize I'm the one he was looking for the whole time.

"Dexter Foreman?"

"Who wants to know?" Archie asks defiantly.

I'm confused. I've lived the past six years with my grandmother in her condo at a retirement community. I've never broken a law in my life. What could the police possibly want with a kid like me?

Grandma doesn't see so well anymore, but she still has the most expressive eyes of anyone I know. Right now, they radiate deep concern.

Something's up. Something bad.

* * *

In the foyer outside the community room, the cop introduces himself as Sergeant Kurtz, truancy officer for the county.

“Where are Dexter’s parents?” he asks Grandma.

“Belgium,” she replies. “Working with the European Union. But I think they’re going to Singapore soon. My daughter-in-law is with the diplomatic corps, so they move around a lot. Dexter has been with me here since he was small.”

I’ve heard the story so many times that I know it by heart. When I was six, Mom was offered a temporary post in Europe, so my folks left me with Grandma for a few months. But Mom wound up a rising star at the State Department and Dad became a big shot in international finance. Oh, we talked about me joining them over there, but they were always so busy that we kept putting it off. I was fitting in great at The Pines, almost the unofficial mascot of the place. And when Grandma’s vision started going downhill, it kind of became my job to help her out. Before we knew it, I’d lived half my life here. I understand that sounds pretty wonky, but for us, it’s just the way things worked out.

“What’s truancy?” I ask the sergeant.

“I’m in charge of school attendance,” he explains.

“It’s come to our attention that—well, you don’t go.”

Grandma speaks up. “Dexter is getting an excellent education right here.”

“Where?” The officer makes a show of checking his surroundings. “There’s no school at The Pines. There’d be no one to go to it except Dexter. The law in Bradford County—and every county, as a matter of fact—states that all children must be educated.”

“I *am* educated,” I insist. “I mean, not *yet*, but I’m up to seventh-grade level, which is where I’d be in real school. It’s like homeschooling, only instead of at a house, I get taught by people around here.”

With a babble of angry voices, the Bingo argument in the community room spills over into the foyer. I have to admit it doesn’t sound like a faculty meeting at Harvard, especially when Archie threatens to wring somebody’s “chicken neck.” He can be an excitable guy for an eighty-year-old.

“There are half a dozen retired educators living in the community,” Grandma argues. “Also two college professors and some true experts in their fields. Do you know who teaches Dex English? Phyllis Birdwell, that’s who.”

The officer looks blank. “Who’s Phyllis Birdwell?”

“Only a *New York Times* bestselling author,” I supply.

“And my math teacher is Leo Preminger. He was one of America’s greatest code-breakers back in World War Two.”

“Never heard of him,” Sergeant Kurtz admits.

“Well, of course not,” I say. “His work was top secret. He was part of the Bunker Boys, an elite unit of cipher experts operating in Wolf’s Eye. They helped break some of the toughest enemy codes. He’s my best friend.”

“Best friend? What is he—like, ninety?”

“Ninety-nine,” I amend proudly. “He’ll be a hundred in April.”

The officer swallows hard. “School’s going to be good for you. You’ll meet kids your own age.”

“I have friends my own age,” I defend myself. “Teagan Santoro, for one. Her grandparents live here. She visits all the time—a lot of kids do. We mingle.” I can already tell Sergeant Kurtz thinks I’m an oddball for living in a retirement community so I switch to a kid word. “We *chill*.”

Teagan’s my best kid friend, even though she lives in New York, which is a two-hour plane ride from here. And we’re pen pals. We write to each other about important things in our lives, like when Teagan told me about getting her first iPhone. She was pretty excited about that. I have Grandma’s old flip phone, which doesn’t run

the new games or apps—or any games or apps, to be honest. Come to think of it, I haven't heard from Teagan since that time. Maybe her latest letter got lost in the mail. That would make sense because the post office is run by the government. Just about everybody at The Pines says the government isn't fit to run a sewing circle, much less a whole country.

I'm the most comfortable with older people, though. They're more honest. If their back hurts, they tell you. If a new pill causes dizziness or ringing in the ears or upset stomach, they tell you. They describe exactly how it feels to have a kidney stone or when your son, the Wall Street Big Shot, hardly ever calls anymore. Kids don't really discuss their lives that way. All they care about is memes, whatever they are.

The truancy officer nods. "There's a lot more chilling in your future. Make sure you're ready Monday morning, seven forty sharp. The bus will pick you up at the main gate."

"There's no bus at The Pines," I inform him. "We just have the courtesy shuttle to take people to the mall and doctors' appointments."

"Not that bus. The *school* bus."

I'm horrified. "You mean Big Orange?" I see them around, but I've never actually been in one.

He gives me a reassuring nod. “Haven’t lost a kid yet.”

My grandmother speaks up. “Sergeant, are you sure this is really necessary? Thousands of children are homeschooled. Dex’s situation is no different.”

“I have my orders, ma’am,” the officer replies firmly. “As of Monday, your grandson is a seventh grader at Wolf’s Eye Middle School.” He turns to me. “When Big Orange pulls up, make sure you’re on it.”

In the community room, they’ve got the game back up. “I . . . nineteen!” the caller announces.

“*Bingo!*” It’s a chorus of voices.

I lose.