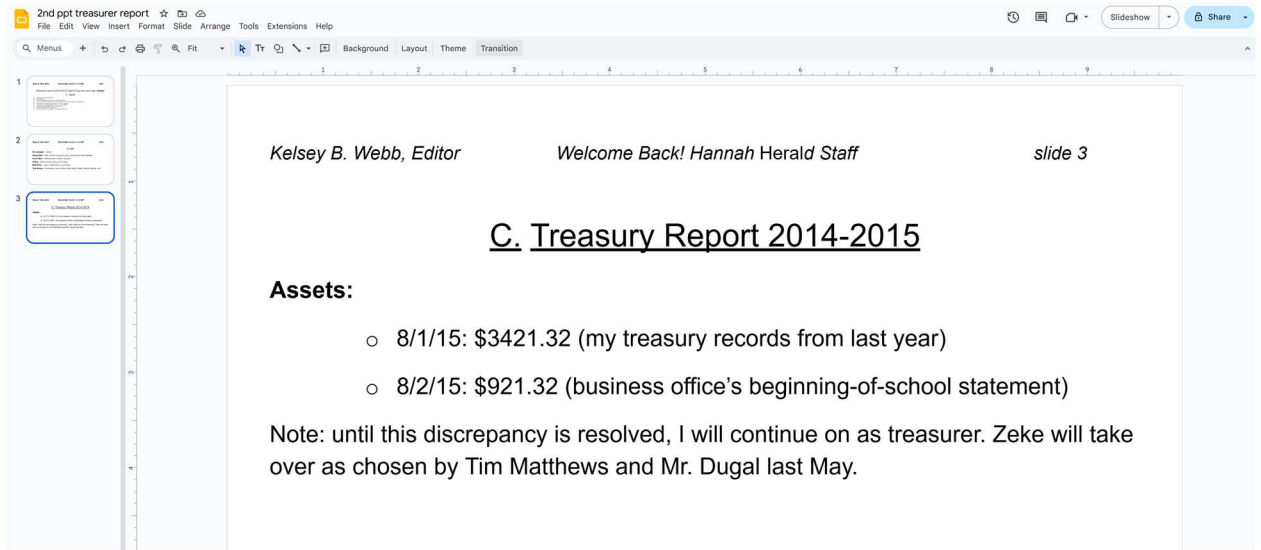


Chapter 1

Tomorrow, as incoming editor of the Hannah High *Herald*, I'll be expected to explain to adviser Dugal and our four reporters why over the summer twenty-five hundred dollars disappeared from our J-Club account.

And? I got nothing. Damn. I shake my head.



"Kelsey. Get down here right now." Mom's voice trembles, like five years ago when she told me Dad was moving out.

I grab my phone and tear down the stairs to the living room. Mom's crying in the middle of the floor.

"Oh my God in Heaven. Jesus, save us," Mom says to me.

*

She's in her overall cutoffs and faded sleeveless Philadelphia Eagles t-shirt. Her hands reach out to me. I want to hug her. The electricity between us signals that a disaster has occurred. But we can't move. Her eyes are too wide, like she's trying not to fall apart. Tears wet her cheeks, and her lips vibrate as her breath catches.

She staggers over to her rocking chair and slumps down into it. Her face falls into her palms and she weeps.

My body wants to smooth things over and make everything okay. But frustration grips me like a big tight fist and holds me still.

Rocking forward, her one hand leaning on her knee, she raises her other hand to point at the television. Then she sits back, her hands in her lap. Anticipation tingles throughout my body. The Mohegan PA Casino Resort ad ends, and a stately anchorwoman appears. Sitting behind a wide wooden desk, she's in a white blouse with a puffy tie and a summery baby-blue blazer. Her eyes look steely-grave.

“We’re back. I’m Cate Coblentz, here with your WNEP Evening News for Sunday, August sixteenth, 2015. Our top story: the body of a man found yesterday by park rangers in state game lands north of Scranton has been identified. Lackawanna County coroner James Heisel told WNEP reporters the body of sixty-three-year-old Eugene Dugal of Rivers Bend was discovered next to a non-active campfire ring. Police confiscated a rifle and camping equipment. Cause of Dugal’s death is undetermined, pending further investigation ...”

My living room tilts up and spins.

I force my body towards the sofa, but I fall to my knees. I cannot breathe. I scrunch up in a ball on the shag rug. My tears soak my hands.

Cate’s voice vanishes. Mom must have clicked the remote. The rocker creaks, then I feel Mom hovering over me. Her tears wet the back of my neck. Am I going to throw up? I take deep breaths to calm myself, but it doesn’t work. I feel all frazzled inside. The TV broadcast clangs in my head repeatedly like an ancient bell. Part of me wants to drop to the carpet and just give up, but my brain tells me, “If you can’t stand, at least kneel ...”

My ringtone, “This One’s for the Girls,” cuts through the quiet. I pat my pockets. Nothing. I wipe my eyes and see the phone on the carpet in front of me.

It’s Shania.

“Kelsey. He’s dead. So horrible. How can it be? I can’t believe he’s gone. What’s going to happen to the newspaper? My God, Kelsey. He’s dead ...”

I do not think I can stand. I hands-and-knees it over to the couch, and lie down. I feel sick and ache all over. My body wants to turn inside out. Sobs bubble out my mouth into the phone.

“ ... What will we do, Kelse? Who’ll be our adviser? What happened to him? How can he be gone? Just like that? ...”

Our screen door slams.

“Jolene. Meatloaf done yet?” Dad strides into the living room, then, seeing us, he jolts to a stop. “Holy Mary, mother of Jesus. What the hell’s going on in here?”

“Gene Dugal’s dead, Elmer.” Mom coughs.

“Gene Dugal? He can’t be dead. Gene *Dugal*?” Dad smacks his lips. “Jesus H. Christ. Why, we had him over for dinner in May. What the hell are you telling me? Kelsey’s English teacher you’re talking about? Dugal? Dead?”

“Elmer.” Mom yells from her rocker. “They announced it on tonight’s news two minutes ago. The rangers found him in the state game lands right next to his campfire.”

Dad finger-and thumbs his salt-and-pepper beard. “Some bastard must a shot him. Right in the back, s’pose. Those drunken assholes out there.” Dad’s arms go everywhere. “Hopped up on drugs and booze and everything else. If it moves, they’ll shoot it. Gene *Dugal*? Dead? Son of a bitch.”

The bookkeeper, they called him. Teachers laughed at him. He couldn't keep his grades straight, messed up department orders, forgot students' names the moment they finished class with him, and immediately lost whatever you gave him. But he had a big heart. He never put following the rules ahead of what you needed. Looking for a ride home after school? He'd drive you. He attended student's graduation parties, and damn straight he was going to be at mine. When his students married each other, he came to the service. He always sent me and the rest of the J-Club staff birthday cards. When we screwed up, he cut us slack, and when we did well, he cheered us on. He wasn't a famous man like Dr. Rivers. But he was a good man. A damn good man. He did right and we loved him for it.

Shania moans, "He was my role model ... my mentor ... We all called him "Grandpa" ... I wanted to show him this year ... how much the last three years meant to me ... I wanted to make the *Herald* the best paper ever ..."

I can't speak.

Dad sweeps the sweat off his face with the back of his hand. His tongue pushes around a wad of tobacco. I feel like an empty water glass.

The front door smacks against the wall as my brothers, Goober and Buck, burst in. They eye us and freeze like burglars caught in a flashlight beam.

Mom and I sob on.

Dad won't face the boys. He stares down at his worn yellow work boots.

"I'll text you later," I mumble into the phone.

"I love you, Kelsey Webb." She snorts, then bawls "I'll love you forever."

"I love you too, BFF."

Storm, our fourteen-year-old salt-and-pepper deep-brown-eyed mutt, trudges from the kitchen into our living room. She stops at the couch, sniffs my face, pants, then leaps up. She snuggles between my legs and puts her muzzle on my thigh. Her warmth comforts me.

Mom's phone plays her ringtone, that Faith Hill song that's called "Unstoppable" or some such. The Slides presentation? The twenty-five hundred? They rocket into space.

She pokes her head into the living room. "It's Dr. Rivers." Then she disappears.

I stare at the white fan blades as they scramble after their own tails.

Chapter 2

The next morning at the Hannah High Mentor-Mentee Transfer Student meeting, I look like a red-eyed vampire (sorry, I don't wear make-up). But I'm here.

My fellow Hannah Hawks students give me a mini-wave, then hightail it away from me. They act like I have a virus. Teachers spy me out of the corner of their eye, drop their gaze, and scrutinize their stack of school mail.

One teacher whispers "Kelsey and Shania acted like they were his granddaughters. They hung out in his room every spare minute of the day." Thanks for that. Just what I needed to hear this morning. People are talking *about* me. But no one wants to talk *with* me.

I walk through the Multi-Purpose Room feeling like a ten-foot spear is sticking out of my heart. I make it to the back. From an orange thermos I pump out steaming coffee into a small Styrofoam cup. Three creams, one sugar. On a plate below the thermos: deep-fried donuts, bagels, and tiny cups of flavored cream cheese. On the plate next to it: citrus and melon cut into wedges. I'm sure Zook's Finer Foods donated the food. They always come through for our school.

I can't eat. I'll hurl. I'll drink some coffee and see how it sits.

I walk over to the rectangular stomach-high beige heating units under the room's row of windows. I lean my butt against the heater and sip my coffee. Circulating fans placed on the heaters by the club advisers whirr madly away, sucking in cool air from the open windows then blowing it onto us. Our school district can't afford window screens. Yellowjackets zip in and out. I hate those little wasps. In second grade one stung me on the arm, and, no matter how hard I hit it with my fly swatter, it kept coming back at me. It stung my face, arms, and hands. I hurt for a week.

I press the Styrofoam coffee cup to my lips. Whew! That's too hot to slug down. I sip at its steam.

Principal Murray blasts out of a circle of yacking teachers. He's wearing his everyday charcoal pinstriped suit. Today's *Star Wars* tie: Chewbacca. Murray steps in front of me. His arms wrap around me. I return the hug, pinching my cup of scalding coffee behind his back.

Ever been hugged by your principal in front of like a hundred people, all of whom know you since kindergarten? So awkward.

"Kelsey, Kelsey, Kelsey," he dirges. "I'm so, so, so sorry." His tears hang on my frizzed red hair like mini-Christmas ornaments. "If there's *anything* I can do, anything at all ..."

"Mr. Murray," I yell. "Look out!"

The cup squeezes past my thumb and index finger, and falls. Coffee spills down his back. Judging where he's grabbing himself, I soaked his suit coat and rear end.

We grab napkins off the food table, squat down, and wipe the MPR floor.

"Did the superintendent call you this morning?" he asks. "Is that how you heard?"

"He called last night around six-thirty. We'd already heard it on the news."

"What did Dr. Rivers say?"

I shrug my shoulders. "He told Mom the basic details. Then she handed her phone to me. He asked if I was okay, and said he looked forward to working with me as school newspaper editor. He told me he'd already lined up a long-term sub for Mr. Dugal."

"The man is quick. Did he say who?"

"No."

"It's Mrs. Gallagher."

Crossword Val. Good God in heaven. She's subbed in my classes for the last three years. We all knew as soon as we saw her that we'd have a free period, every time. It didn't matter whether the teacher left plans or not. "If you have any questions, students, I'm right up here," she'd say. Then all hell would break loose while she sat at the desk, oblivious, filling in the crossword squares. The Hannah *Herald* is officially a boat without a rudder.

Mr. Murray and I stand up.

"Hell of a guy," Murray says. "Dugal, I mean. Not Rivers. Dugal was one fabulous teacher. He returned from Cancun last Friday—no, a week ago Friday. August seventh. Dr. Rivers said Mr. Dugal and his wife were having such a good time in Mexico that they stayed extra days. Partying one minute, dead the next. So it goes. Hey. What's your thought on postponing this afternoon's J-Club Welcome Back meeting?"

There is no way I want to meet with anyone else today. I'm sorry I came to this meeting, and I want to go home asap. But how should I respond? Which answer does he want? I must respect the high school's chain of command ...

"What do *you* think we should do, Mr. Murray?"

"Postpone it. Cancel it. Forget it. A week from now we'll need to be moving forward."

Moving forward? Jeez Louise. How do we move forward from *this*? ... I don't know I don't know I don't know ...

"Probably best to go ahead with the meeting," I say. "The school should retain a sense of normalcy, and all."

His face drops.

Oh. My. God. I picked the wrong answer. Fail. I hate myself. I have a death wish.

"Gotta hand it to you, Kelsey. You're unstoppable. That's the Hannah Hawk spirit."

He's attempting to make me feel better. Good luck with that! Damn. Stupid Kelsey B. Webb.

A yellowjacket lands on Murray's shoulder. Do not dare come near me, vile insect. God above! What else can happen this morning? If that bug zips over and stings me ... Murray casually brushes his fingers against it. It doesn't move. He leaves it there. How can he not care?

Murray walks three steps away from me, and then he walks back. People in Rivers Bend do this all day. No conversation in this town ever really ends.

"Shall my secretary call everyone in J-Club? Tell them we're on this afternoon?"

"No. They're all here. There's only four of them besides me: M Moss, Shania Bean, Zeke Rivers. Is my mentee here?"

"Tyne Montour?" He points to a cluster of students. "She's the super-petite one sitting with the seven other transfer students. Black wedge cut."

Funny how he couldn't bring himself to say "Asian." He doesn't want to be heard labeling anyone. How would he label me? Farm girl? Strawberry-blonde? Poor as dirt?

"I'm on," Murray says. He walks briskly to the podium. He smooths his suit jacket. "Alright. Everyone. Eyes up here, please and thank you. Now then. One hundred and fifty years ago students and teachers met in a one-room schoolhouse on the very land you're sitting on today. No, I was not one of those students. Nor was I the teacher. Do I look *that* old?"

Good old Mr. Murray. He could put an insomniac to sleep. I reach into my overalls' front bib pocket and take out my phone. Shania is sitting three rows in front of me.

Kelsey Webb 8:20 am

We're going ahead with the meeting this afternoon.

Crossword Val's taking the long-term sub for Dugal.

Text the others. I'll tell the newbie

Shania Bean 8:22 a.m.

Valerie Gallagher? Our new adviser???

If she even looks at the newspaper during

Welcome Back I will seriously punch her

in her throat

Kelsey Webb 8:22 a.m.

I'm not tolerating any foolishness today.

We need to focus on what Mr. Dugal

would want done

Shania Bean 8:23 a.m.

IMHO we should have cancelled

the afternoon meeting. The one we're in now

too. The whole room's sitting here scrolling

While Murray's a tower of babble

Shania Bean 8:24 a.m.

And good luck reining in Zeke.

I'm sure he'll run his mouth

Murray's tone of voice changes. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's up to you. You can improve our little borough. Or you can do very little for our community and just enjoy life here. Or, you can cause the town great harm. Whatever you decide to do, you can make it happen in Rivers Bend."

That was a dark statement. Our NEPA Voldemort. Like anything ever happens here. Dugal's passing must be weighing on him.

“Anyway,” Murray says, “Transfer students, one and all, I officially adopt you into our Hannah Hawks family. Everyone, let’s give our new Hawks a hand.”

The room looks up from their phones. Tepid applause.

“It’s time for our mentors and mentees to meet. Tyne Montour?” He wags his finger at her. “Come on up, Tyne, and shake hands with Hannah senior Kelsey Webb. Kelsey, please join us at the podium.”

I navigate around people’s knees, and up I go.

Murray slips on his glasses and reads from his yellow tablet. “Tyne Montour is transferring to us from—homeschool. She’s a lifelong Bender. Born and raised right here in our borough.”

Tyne and I shake hands. She’s petite alright. She has the body of a twelve-year-old. Where does she even *find* mittens?

We stand shoulder to shoulder, sort of. I want to like Tyne. I want us to work productively. Especially since I plan on sticking her with some of the worst newspaper jobs: Teacher Features, layout, and overseeing the newspaper ads. I shouldn’t dump on the newbie. But in the last three years I did every job on the paper there is, and that’s how I learned. Tyne will need to learn everything too this year, since she’ll be next year’s editor by default. Everyone else on staff graduates in June.

A yearbook lackey snaps a picture of Tyne, me, and Mr. Murray hunched down behind us.

“Okay, ladies,” he says, putting his hands on our shoulders. He turns us towards the classroom door. “Wait out in the hallway until all our mentors and mentees have met their matches.”

Out we go.

Chapter 3

School doesn't officially start until next week, so the hallway lights aren't on yet. Big school district savings, I'm sure. Tyne and I stand in the dark hallway. We speak simultaneously, then, in harmony, say: "What?"

Murray's amplified voice booms, "Next up, Jacob Beinz. His former school is Bluestone High School in Mecklenburg County, Virginia. Jake's mentor will be Hawk senior Emmett Moss. Tallest boy in the school district. We all look up to M ..."

"Dr. Rivers must have been desperate," I blather. "I mean, choosing M and all. He's okay, but he doesn't talk. He's on the paper, too, so you'll see. He's in his own world 24/7. He only cares about poetry and pimping out his pickup."

"So, he has a truck," she says. "Are there any Bender boys who don't?"

Is she making fun of me? This day so needs to end.

"What day after school works for you? I want to review how we run the *Herald*. Wednesdays good?"

"Can't Wednesdays."

"Church?"

"Piano lessons. Right after school, two hours. How about Tuesdays?"

"Tuesdays are fine," I say. "We can stay in Dugal's—I mean, the J-Club room. Half-hour to an hour or so until you get the full picture." I open up Google Calendar on my Obama phone that I got it this summer from the Lifeline program. Being poor pays. Yeah. Right. "How's next Tuesday? August twenty-fifth?"

"It's all good." She doesn't put it in her phone. "Mom will pick me up when we're done. So. Anyway, Kelsey. Can you hook me up with a little *cannabis*? My St. Dismas teen group got

busted by the RB po-po in July. Officer LaRue of the Rivers Bend police force, that jerk face.

I'm jonesing bad, man."

Jonesing?

"I don't smoke weed." I consider adding that my father does, but I keep my mouth shut.

"How about a cigarette?" Tyne asks. "I need one. Is there a bathroom nearby?"

"I don't smoke. Or party. I study and text. That's my life."

"Oh. Well, whatever."

We're off to a tremendous start.

The MPR door opens. Jacob Beinz and M snub us and walk across the hallway. A huge tongue lolls on Jacob's Rolling Stones hoodie. M's in his Hozier t-shirt, which he wears every day. It's a wonder it hasn't fallen off him. I guess his family doesn't have the money for another shirt.

Tyne stands up on her tip-toes and whispers, "So my parents told me the J-Club adviser offed himself while out camping last week. That true?"

The spear in my heart twists. "They found his body in the woods. Police are investigating."

"I hear you were tight with him. Was it an overdose? Heart attack? Suicide?"

You're not the sensitive type, are you, Tyne?

"I don't know what happened. He was sixty-three. He seemed healthy. He and his wife vacationed in Cancun at the end of July. They must have been having a good time because they stayed an extra week. That's what Mr. Murray told me this morning, anyway."

"Did he have any enemies? Somebody who'd knife him in the back?"

I really don't want to talk about this. Damn!

“Tyne, I know as much as you do about it.” I sigh. “I’m still processing that he’s not going to be here today ...”

My eyes warm. She notices and looks down.

The MPR door opens again. Another mentee-mentor pair exits.

“Why don’t you come on over to my farm for lunch today?” I ask her. “We got grilled cheese sandwiches, chips, and Kool-Aid. We can watch YouTube for an hour. My Dad’s picking me up when this meeting is done.”

She makes an “Eww” face.

Grilled cheese isn’t good enough for you, you little munchkin? Her t-shirt says Versace Jeans Couture. Rich homeschooled bitch.

“You mean the J-Club Welcome Back meeting is still on? What with—everything?”

“Yeah. It’s still on,” I force out.

“I can’t do lunch. I have an appointment. But I’ll be there at the meeting. One o’clock, right?” She pauses as if to say more, then reconsiders. Her hand darts towards my phone.

“What you rocking there? That a Google Pixel?”

I hold it away from her. She does not need to know I have a Welfare phone. Jeez Louise. She doesn’t need to know my family’s socioeconomic status. Rich, nosy, homeschooled pothead. She and I couldn’t be more different. The only drug I’ve ever been on is pink amoxicillin K through fifth grade.

“Who you got on your playlist?” she asks.

“I—nobody. I don’t listen to much music these days.” An absolute lie. I’m on YouTube every night singing along with Taylor Swift. There I go again, lying. In the last year I’ve been

lying more and more. I don't like it. Mom brought me up to tell the truth. And she likes to remind me of it.

"I'm hardcore Rap." Tyne says, waving around her iPhone in its OtterBox. "Fetty Wap, Kanye, of course, and Drake. That's how I roll. Hey. Got 'Trap Queen' ready. Want to check it?"

"Not now, Tyne." I sigh. I'm exhausted. "Let's finish this meeting first."

"Sure thing, Kelsey."

Mr. Murray sticks his head out the MPR door. "Calling all Hawks. Come on back in. Old birds and those newly hatched."

*

Back inside the MPR, a two-finger whistle into the podium's microphone pierces our skulls. The clanging I experienced yesterday after the news returns. My hands shoot up to cover my ears.

Zeke Rivers.

"Kelsey Webb, Tyne Montour" he shouts into the mic. "Get on up here. *Herald* newspaper staff meeting, everybody."

We're standing five feet from him.

Zeke's T-shirt says "Hooged on fonicks warked 4 me." Girls like his piercing brown eyes and football-weight-training muscles. They're willing to overlooks his grublike personality in lieu of his toned physique. I'm not a fan. He's five pounds of ground beef wrapped up on a one-pound foam meat tray.

He moves away from the mic and makes a comment to M. I can't hear it over the fan clatter and the loud conversations. M starts to cry. His tears spot his shirt.

Oh. My. God. What now?

Zeke and M hate each other, their families hate each other, and their hatred extends back generations. They rarely show their hostility openly, though. We Benders act amiably at school, saving our spite for home.

Their repugnance goes back to the 1950s when Zeke's great-grandfather wanted to open up a mega-textile factory in Rivers Bend. Area farmers sold their land and moved into the borough, ready for manufacturing work. Truckers, coal miners, rendering plant laborers, and service help jumped at a better life. They left their jobs and homes to work for Scranton Lace Company, Rivers Bend Plant.

But the deal fell through and the plant was never built.

Sixty years later, the borough adores Zeke's father, Hannah Area School District Superintendent Dr. Drake Rivers, and hates Dr. Rivers' grandfather, Micah Rivers. And they have no idea why. They hate him the way they hate the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Boston Celtics. Welcome to our little hamlet.

"How about this one?" Zeke elbows M in the ribs. "Mr. Dugal always thought the last thing he needed was a burial plot. Guess what? He was right."

M drops his head and rubs his eyes. He's the sensitive type. In middle school, boys picked on him for it. That wasn't right. And this isn't right. I do not like to see people upset for no reason. Zeke's getting on my last nerve. I pace. I look for a chair. But I'm too agitated to sit down.

M grimaces. He puts his hand on his chest. Is he having a panic attack?

"Hey. Get this," Zeke says to all of us "After the cremation, let's put Dugal's remains in a small hourglass. Then he can be included when the J-Club staff plays Boggle."

God damn it. That's it. I walk over to Zeke, my jaw clenched. He's gonna stop this shit right now. I stick my face in his.

"What the eff, Rivers? After all the times Dugal cut you slack? This is how you repay him?"

"Hey," he replies. "You gotta laugh. Right, Webb? It's laugh or cry."

I do not understand boys.

"You worthless, self-centered, inconsiderate, callous, nasty, cruel, insensitive jerk," Shania says. "How dare you joke about the best teacher this school ever had."

"Excuse me," M says. He coughs into the crotch of his right arm twice, then takes off. A few long-legged strides across the room and he pops out the classroom door.

I chew the side of my mouth.

"Zip it, Rivers," Shania hisses. Then she turns towards Tyne and sticks out her hand. "Shania Bean." They shake. "Kelse and me have been BFFs since from before birth. We're twins from different moms. Looking forward to working with you."

Shania turns to me and puts her meaty left arm around my shoulder. "You okay, Kelster?"

I force a smile for her. Please, God, let this meeting end.

Tyne points at one of the big flowers on the front of my dress. "Bug."

I don't remember the next three minutes. They tell me I grabbed a biology book from the MPR's bookshelves and slammed it into my shoulder, somehow missing the yellowjacket. It took off, and so did I in pursuit, chasing it around the room, swiping at it. I ricocheted off students, teachers, even Mr. Murray. Finally, sticky juice on the food table fruit dish trapped the wasp. I brought the book down hard on top of it, causing a tsunami of orange-pineapple-grapefruit

medley to rise up and wash over my new dress. I hit it again and again. Once its liquified remains melded with the nectar, Shania ripped the soggy textbook from my sticky hands ...

“Meeting adjourned,” announces Mr. Murray. “Let’s get lunch.”