

Chapter One

“There are many causes for which I am prepared to die, but none for which I am prepared to kill,” Mr. Roberts said. “Does anybody know who said that?”

“You, Mr. Roberts,” Oswald said.

Some of the class laughed. Mr. Roberts silenced them with a look.

“I told you I pay more attention in class than you realize,” Oswald said. “Even when my eyes are closed my mind is—”

Mr. Roberts aimed his look at Oswald and turned it up a half notch. That silenced Oswald midsentence.

Julia raised her hand. “It was Gandhi,” she said, “political activist and the man who gained independence for India.”

“Very good, Julia,” he said. “But I expect nothing less from you.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Julia and Mr. Roberts had a very “polite” relationship. Considering how it all started between them, this was a major step forward.

Mr. Roberts had taken over as the new principal last semester. He wanted to make a whole lot of changes—changes that Julia, as the student president, thought it was her role to oppose. She

tried to organize a school-wide walkout in protest and posted some rude comments about him online. He suspended her for five days.

Even though they were polite—really polite—I got the feeling that Julia was waiting for an excuse to attack. Julia was like an elephant—she never forgot, especially something like a suspension. Before Mr. Roberts, she’d never even had a detention.

“Does anybody else wish to contribute something about Mahatma Gandhi?” Mr. Roberts asked.

I raised my hand, and Mr. Roberts nodded in my direction.

“Ian,” he said.

“Gandhi defeated the English, who ruled India, by using passive resistance.”

“What’s that?” Oswald asked.

“He told people not to fight back against violence. He told his followers to absorb the blows but not strike out against those who were hitting them.”

“A very hard thing to do,” Mr. Roberts said. “Many people think it takes bravery to fight back, but it takes even more bravery to not fight back.”

Oswald waved his hand in the air.

“Yes, Oswald?”

“I’m a little confused,” said Oswald.

“A little?” Mr. Roberts asked and everybody, including Oswald, laughed. Oswald and Mr. Roberts had a strange relationship. It wasn’t particularly polite, but they both seemed to enjoy it.

“My apologies for the cheap shot,” Mr. Roberts said. “No offence.”

“Hey, no problem. I’m confused because you’re talking about there being no cause worth killing for, but you were in the Marines...Didn’t they sort of train you to fight back and try to kill people?”

Mr. Roberts chuckled. “They trained us to defend our country.”

“And if that meant killing somebody?” Oswald asked.

“I would have done my duty.”

I could imagine Mr. Roberts killing somebody. He probably wouldn’t even need a weapon. He was an ex-Marine, but he still looked like a Marine. He was tall and stocky and had a crew cut. I wouldn’t want to cross him—well, not again.

We’d had a clash in the beginning, but it’s strange—I think he admired me for taking a stand against one of his policies.

“I greatly admire Gandhi,” Mr. Roberts continued, “but I think there are some things for which we must be prepared to fight against, die for, and yes, kill.”

“What sort of things?” Oswald asked.

“We need to fight oppression, terrorism and threats to our way of life, to protect democracy—”

“Didn’t Gandhi create the largest democracy in the world by not fighting?” I asked, cutting him off.

“Yes, he did. You seem to know a great deal about Gandhi,” Mr. Roberts said.

“I’ve been keeping up with the reading,” I said.

Mr. Roberts’s social justice class had caused me to read a whole lot of things that hadn’t been assigned.

“Some people believe we should fight for what is right—even if that means breaking the law,” Mr. Roberts said.

“It’s the moral duty of somebody to disobey a law he doesn’t agree with,” I answered.

“Aaaah, now you’re speaking the words of Dr. Martin Luther King,” Mr. Roberts said. “It could be argued that Dr. King adopted Gandhi’s principles and practices.”

That opened up a whole discussion. Other students added opinions and quotes and arguments. This class often went way off the assigned topics, but that made it even better.

Besides, Mr. Roberts was the principal. He wasn’t going to get in trouble for not following

the course outline. In fact, he created this course and insisted on teaching it. He said he thought every principal should teach at least one course to “stay in touch” with his students.

Mr. Roberts was in constant touch with the students. He was always in the hallways, in the cafeteria, in the yard, at all the games and even at the school dances. He seemed to be everywhere. He didn’t miss much. He seemed to know everything and everybody in the school.

Of course whether he knew you or not didn’t matter if you were breaking any of the rules. And there were lots of rules to break. Mr. Roberts had added quite a few since he had become our principal. We weren’t allowed to wear hats or use our cell phones. There was to be no misbehavior, with no exceptions. He didn’t like it when people broke rules or...I had an idea.

I raised my hand.

“Ian?”

“I was just wondering, if Gandhi didn’t agree with your no-hat position, and he wore a hat to school would—”

“Gandhi did not wear a hat!” Julia said, cutting me off.

“I’m not saying he did, but suppose he wore a hat for, say, religious reasons, like Sikhs wear turbans or some Jewish people wear a yarmulke. What then?”

“That wouldn’t be against the rules,” Mr. Roberts said, “because it’s part of their religion.”

“Then I should be able to wear my Yankees cap,” Oswald said. “They are a religion to me.”

“The Yankees are not a religion,” Mr. Roberts said firmly. He paused, and a slight smile came to his face. “Now if you’d said the Boston Red Sox, you could have made an argument.”

“Boston? You gotta be joking!” Oswald exclaimed. “I wouldn’t wear a Red Sox cap on a—”

“Fine, fine, fine,” I said, cutting him off. “Okay, so what if Gandhi wore a Red Sox cap?” I asked.

“Then his hat would be taken away,” Mr. Roberts said.

“And if he refused to give up his hat?” I asked.

“Then he would be suspended,” Mr. Roberts said.

“But Gandhi would only wear a hat because he thought it was right,” I said.

“Regardless of his belief, I would have to follow my rules and suspend him.”

“I can’t believe that you’d suspend Gandhi,” Oswald gasped.

“If he didn’t follow the rules, it would be my unfortunate position to suspend him.”

“And Gandhi would walk right up to you wearing that hat and dare you to suspend him,” I said. “Defying the rule to raise awareness of its unjust nature.”

“Yes, he would—”

The bell rang to end class, drowning out his last few words.

“That bell could wake the dead,” Mr. Roberts said as it faded. “Please make sure you all attend the assembly,” he said. “It is mandatory, and as you know I would give Gandhi a detention if he didn’t show up!”

We had a school assembly once a week, and it was the same as any other class. If you didn’t attend you were given a detention.

I joined Oswald and Julia. We started to leave with the rest of the class.

“Oswald!” Mr. Roberts called out. “Can you please stay after class? I want to discuss something with you.”

Oswald nodded solemnly. This wasn’t going to be good. Oswald hadn’t handed in today’s assignment. He was hoping that Mr. Roberts wouldn’t notice. Fat chance. Mr. Roberts noticed everything.

I gave Oswald a tap on the shoulder. “Hang in there,” I whispered.

“Do you think he’s ever going to learn to keep his mouth shut?” Julia asked as we walked out of the class.

“How long have you known Oswald?” I asked.

“Fair enough. But he was just joking around in there. Mr. Roberts has to be a little understanding.”

I laughed. “Remember, this is a guy who would suspend Gandhi. What chance does Oswald have? Besides, this isn’t about what Oswald said, it’s about him not handing in today’s assignment.”

“Did he really think he could get away with that?” Julia asked.

“He thought Mr. Roberts wouldn’t notice, and he’d hand it in tomorrow.”

“Not smart,” Julia said. “But that’s Oswald.”