

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF LEADER

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**C**an someone cry this hard? I mean really, it's been like ten minutes of crying nonstop. We are all scared but come on.

"It's going to be fine, Ashley." I said to my sobbing friend.

"No, it's not! How can you say that! Just because you get in trouble all the time, doesn't mean I do. I never..." her lip quivers as she breaks down into even louder wailing. Okay, whatever, I was just trying to be nice, and she attacked me. The door to the principal's office opens, and Lacy comes out also sobbing, her whole body shaking. The principal hands her off to the front desk lady and calls Ashley in next.

The door muffles Ashley's cries as Lacy's are fading down the hallway. Silence fills the space, and my brain can finally breathe. I understand what I did was wrong...and I am sorry, but this feels so overly dramatic. It's just Mrs. Lingtree, she isn't that scary. Ashley came out faster than Lacy did. Her eyes are puffy and red and won't look my way. She too is sent off with the front desk lady—who's already back. Lingtree turns to me.

"Come Alice." She doesn't wait for me, as she turns around and goes back into her office. I follow into the familiar square room. It is simple, a desk with miscellaneous papers and a closed laptop. My favorite lollipops are sitting in a jar by my beanbag in the corner. I grab one from the jar and sit down.

"No, not the beanbag today. Come sit over here." Mrs. Lingtree says before the bean bag can finish puffing out. I have never sat in the grownup chair. My heart for the first time starts pounding. My head feels light and

my arms are heavy. I put back my still wrapped lollipop and slowly walk to the chair...but I can't bring myself to sit down. It is too scary.

"Alice, I am very disappointed in you."

*No, no, no, no, no. Please no.*

"You vandalized school property," she continues,

"No, I..." she holds up a hand to stop my whiny protest.

"You tore the fence apart. You left the school property; you put more work on Mr. Jones, and worst of all, you dragged Lacy and Ashley into the whole mess." She sighs finally, putting her hands on her forehead. Then she seems to change her mind and straightens her spine.

"I have let Lacy and Ashley's parents know and their parents will decide what to do from there. You on the other hand will be helping Mr. Jones with his work for the next month."

"What! That's not fair." I say louder than I intended too. My whole body is shaking, and my tummy is hurting.

"He will need an extra hand to help him with his day-to-day tasks, so he has extra time to mend the fence—which is your fault."

"But... I didn't do it alone." I can feel my face going hot as tears threaten to fall. Mrs. Lingtree sighs once more. She comes around from her desk and sits in the matching chair to the one I am still hovering over.

"Do you know what a leader is?"

"Yes."

"Did you know that you, Alice Green, are a leader?"

"No, I am not." I finally sit, curling my legs up around me, trying to protect myself in any way.

"Yes, you are. You just don't understand how to lead correctly yet. But someday you will. I want you to try to understand that."

“How?”

“You will figure it out.”

She hands me a wrapped lollipop and sends me on my way. That night as I am lying in bed, I still can't wrap my head around what possibly she could mean. I am not a leader. No one follows me. I am never the one in charge of games or group stuff.

The next day I start my work with Mr. Jones. I scrub the floors, toilets, and walls, while getting a closer look at the ignored janitor. He is very tall with a pepper of white throughout his beard. I have never seen him without a baseball hat and today is no exception.

“Why do we have to clean the walls?” I finally ask Mr. Jones. We are in one of the first-grade classrooms. I am scrubbing the wall with a rag while he cleans the floor before vacuuming.

“Because it needs to be done.”

What does that even mean? Cleaning the wall is pointless. I bet he just has me scrubbing the wall because he doesn't need my help. I bet Mrs. Lingtree made up a random punishment. When I finish, I head back to class. Ashley and Lacy don't even look at me.

The next day and the day after went exactly the same. I would ask Mr. Jones why I had to clean something, and he would say the exact phrase, “*because it needs to be done.*” By the third week of cleaning every day, being ignored by my friends, doing my homework, my own chores, and responsibility on top of it all, I'm ready to explode.

“Why do I have to do this!” This time I am cleaning the gym floor with a tennis ball on a broken mop handle.

“Because...” Mr. Jones tries to say but is stopped when I sink to the floor letting the mop bounce off the floor. The sound rings across the empty gym.

“I don't understand why,” I try to stop my tears from coming, but I am losing the battle. “Why am I... what am I...” I break down into tears,

something I instantly feel humiliated about. Stop crying, what are you doing! Don't cry; this is so embarrassing.

Mr. Jones came and picked up the discarded tool and started to work. I eventually wiped away my tears and followed Mr. Jones. When I try to tell him that I can work again, he simply turns to me.

"Do you know why I clean?" He asks. I realize after a moment that he expects me to answer him.

"Oh um... because it needs to be done."

"Right, it needs to be done. I clean the walls for the next day. It's not even for me. It is for those little kids that come the next day, and the next. It's so those kids can have a safe, clean place to be."

"Okay." I have no idea how to respond. Mr. Jones turns away and continues his work as I follow him, feeling lost.

"Can I ask you something?" Mr. Jones asks.

"Yeah."

"Why are you here?"

"What?"

"Why are you here Alice Green?" He is scrubbing a spot, not even caring to look at me. Which is fine. I'm sure I look just as confused as I feel.

"Did Mrs. Lingtree not tell you? I mean you fixed the fence like the next day."

"No, she did. But why do you think you are here?"

"Because the world hates me." He tosses me a look of disappointment when I say this. I roll my eyes when he looks away. I sigh and try again, "She wants me to do... I guess to learn a lesson. Also, something about me being a bad leader."

"Not a bad leader, you just need to use your leadership in a better way."

“So, you do know!” I point at him as if I caught him in a trap.

“Yes, I do.” He smiles slightly when he hands me the tool back. “Well, I hope you learned what you needed to.”

I am still thinking of that as my siblings grab food off the table like starved wolves. I am still thinking about it as I brush my teeth behind a wall of other people, waiting for my turn to spit. I am still thinking about it as my mom comes to tuck me in.

“Mom, can I ask you something?”

“What is it Hon?”

“Am I a bad person?” I say it fast, nervous that if I don’t and I sit on it for too long I would lose my nerve and never ask.

“What makes you think that?”

“I damaged school property... and I am a terrible leader.”

“No, no, that was a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes. Even leaders.” That makes me even more confused. Why is everyone so cryptic and annoying?

The next morning, I know I will meet with Mr. Jones after recess as normal. I head into class, where I am ignored, but I have to learn to just deal with it. It’s been three weeks. I don’t get why I am still shunned. Class went on and recess came about. I am sitting on top of the monkey bars when Ashley and Lacy approach me. I am mad at them. I don’t even want to talk to them... okay yes, I do.

“What do you want?” I look down at them; they look at each other as if trying to decide what to do.

“Wait. I’m sorry.” I say before they can run off. Lacy crosses her arms as if she is waiting for more. Ugh, maybe this isn’t worth it. I turn around and flip off the monkey bars from the side and land awkwardly on the ground. I sit down on the poky bark.

“I am sorry guys. I am sorry I got you into trouble. I didn’t mean it.”

“Why did you do it?” Ashley comes and sits in front of me on the other side of the scuffed-up woodchip line.

“I don’t know.” That’s not true. “I wanted to go home. I thought if I could make a big enough hole, I could get out. I knew if I had your help, it would go faster.”

“That’s not fair to us.” Lacy sat beside Ashley, picking at the loose ground.

“I know, I’m sorry.” I feel like I have said it a thousand times. Why are they still being stupid and not accepting it?

“Do you want to play with us?” Ashley asks, while Lacy looks hurt that she asked.

“Yes.”

They both run off towards the grassy field. I follow behind when something Mr. Jones says comes back into my head. “*I clean the walls for the next day. It’s not even for me. It is for those little kids that come the next day, and the next. So those kids can have a safe, clean place to be.*” Saying sorry was how I was creating a safe place for my friends to be.

I wonder if being a leader is making people feel safe?