

CHAPTER SAMPLER

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FOR
NEWS



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THE LEAD

Welcome to *Good Good Morning*. I'm Izzy Wong, reporting from Forest Lawn Elementary. Today we'll find out how everyone did on the sixth-grade social test and who brought what for lunch. Oh, there's Maya Stepkowski.

IZZY: Hi, Maya. How do you think you did on the social test?

MAYA: I ran out of time before I could get to the last question. It was too hard.

IZZY: Thanks. And you, Jonah Ritchie. What did you think of the test?

JONAH: Easy. I got all the questions, and I had time to spare. I guess I'm just that good.

MAYA: Show-off.

JONAH: Jealous?

Buzz!

IZZY: The morning bell. I think I can catch just a few more students before they get to class. Hannah! Got a minute?

HANNAH: No comment.

IZZY: Julie. Over here.

JULIE: Out of my way.

IZZY: Aziz! Aziz, how did you do on the social test?

AZIZ: We're going to be late.

IZZY: I think there's one more school bus to arrive. I might be able to catch—

“Izzy Wong!” Mrs. Saunders yelled. “Turn that thing off and get inside.”

My sixth-grade teacher stood at the doorway to the school, her crossed arms connecting the Möbius strip tattooed across her forearms. She tapped her watch. Everyone else had gone inside.

“Sorry,” I called back. “I lost track of time.” I turned off my Zoom H4n recorder and headed into the building.

“Izzy, I do love your commitment to journalism,” Mrs. Saunders said. “But I don’t want to read a headline about the reporter who gets detention for always being late.”

“Yes, Mrs. Saunders.”

“I’d hate for you to become your own story.”

I laughed. “Maybe I’ll do a podcast from detention. I’ll call it *Life on the Inside*. What do you think of the title?”

“Not bad, Izzy, but the inside of what?” She squinted at me.

“Okay, I’ll work on it. Titles are the toughest. Hey, you could be my first interview, Mrs. Saunders.”

She wrapped an arm around me and led me inside. “As long as you’re on time for my class, I’ll be on time for your interview.”

I smiled at her. “Okay.”

“Good,” she said as we headed down the hallway.

Mr. Lincoln nearly bowled us over as he pushed a rolling bucket and mop toward the stairwell. “Uuuuggghhh. What a way to start a Monday.”

My reporter’s instinct started to kick in. I wanted to follow him, but Mrs. Saunders guided me toward the classroom.

“You can investigate at recess, Izzy. And just to be sure, let’s have your digital recorder.”

I covered the crisscrossed silver mic heads at the top of the recorder. “This cost me a year’s allowance and two years of birthday money.”

“All the more reason for it to sit in my desk where it won’t break and where you won’t be tempted,” she said. “Izzy, hand it over.”

Giving up my Zoom H4n was like cutting off my right hand. All my recordings and notes for the week were stored on it. So much work went into the recordings. If even one was damaged, I’d have to redo my interviews, and it was hard enough to get people to talk to me once. Twice would be impossible.

You see, I wasn’t the most popular kid in school. Not that I wanted to be. Making friends was something other people cared about. Me? I cared about reporting the news. I’d rather break a news story than go to a friend’s house for a sleepover. My nose for news sometimes pushed the other kids away. Whenever I

came near, they'd turn their backs or walk the other way because they were afraid I'd pull out my recorder and pepper them with questions. It made my job as a reporter harder, but it made finding a table to myself at lunchtime super easy.

"Now, Izzy," Mrs. Saunders said.

I slowly turned over the recorder to my teacher. Without it, I didn't know what to do with my hands. I sat down at my desk and ran my fingers along my pencil case.

Behind me, Julie Meyers whispered to the girls in the next row, "Did you hear what happened?"

I perked up and leaned back to eavesdrop.

"The girls' bathroom flooded over the weekend," she continued.

So that was why Mr. Lincoln had been in a rush.

"How do you know?" Maya Stepkowski asked.

"I went up there to check my hair, and there was water everywhere. All over the hallway and even into the library. The third floor is a total wreck."

"Do you know what caused the flood?" Maya asked.

"No idea."

For the rest of the class, I tried to concentrate as Mrs. Saunders talked about fractions and variables, but I couldn't stop thinking about the flooded girls' bathroom and how it might lead my next news podcast. On the third floor of our old school, the bathroom was the perfect place to hide from teachers. It was also the place where some of the fifth-grade girls hung out and swapped rumors about everyone. Where would the gossip gang go now? Why did they meet in

the bathroom? What was it about that stinky place that made them feel like they could talk badly about others? Ooh, I'd just thought of the perfect title for the podcast—*Something Stinks*.

I wished I had my recorder with me to interview the fifth-grade girls and get their thoughts about losing their gossip room.

All I'd ever wanted to be was a reporter, just like my mom. I couldn't do television news like she did, but I'd tried the next best thing—my podcasts. I wanted to have a news podcast as great as *Serial*. This was Sarah Koenig's breakthrough series. She covered a story about a guy convicted of murder who claimed he was innocent. Yeah, I knew convicts were always going to say that. However, several clues suggested that the court might have convicted the wrong man. Sarah not only reported what she learned, but she also added her personal thoughts as she investigated.

My problem was that, in addition to having trouble coming up with a podcast title, I couldn't find the right story. There was no shortage of rumors at Forest Lawn Elementary, but most of the tidbits landed in what Mom called "the silly season." Around Christmas—when breaking news was scarce—her TV station ran puff pieces. Top of the list was the radar-tracking station updating Santa's progress from the North Pole. Mom said the producers cobbled together the segment with stock footage of a radar screen and shots of kids looking out windows.

I didn't want fluff. I wanted substance. My first attempts at reporting weren't the kind of news that would earn me

a Pulitzer Prize. *Homework Hassles*, my first podcast, was about whether or not homework created too much stress on students at home. But all the interviews were with sixth graders complaining about losing *Fortnite* time. I thought I had hit the news jackpot with *Deadly Screams*, a report about a mysterious bloodcurdling scream that had made some of the kindergarten kids cry and others hide under their desks. It turned out to be Mr. Lincoln, who thought he'd found a dead mouse. The creature turned out to be a toy that one of the kids had smuggled into the classroom.

What I needed was something Mom called “news that’s fit to print.” She said she picked up that phrase in her newspaper days, when her editor would print only the stories that people needed to hear. The *important* stuff. Was a flooded bathroom newsworthy? Sure, there might be some human-interest value in where the gossip gang was going to set up now. But was it real news? I needed a different angle. Maybe the pipes had burst because the school didn’t have the money to do renovations. Maybe this was one job that should have been put at the top of the list. Maybe this was the beginning of many breakdowns at the school because of the lack of funding.

Whatever the angle, I had to find out what had happened in the bathroom.



A NEW ANGLE

When the recess bell finally rang, I made a beeline for Mrs. Saunders's desk. "Please, may I get my recorder back?"

She opened her drawer to reveal my recorder, among other things she'd taken away from kids—comic books, fidget spinners and a stash of chocolate bars. "Izzy, I know this is your passion, but maybe steer clear of this story."

"Why?" I asked. My nose for news sniffed something interesting.

Mrs. Saunders eyed the doorway for a second, then lowered her voice. "Not all stories need to be covered."

"What do you mean by that?"

She wouldn't answer right away. Instead she pulled the recorder out. "Just a fair warning."

"Okay," I said, taking the recorder. Something was up with her, but she waved me off and turned her attention to her computer before I could dig deeper. Was there more to the flooded bathroom than met the eye?

Everyone else had left the classroom, so I wasn't going to be able to grab any streeter interviews. That's what Mom called the flyby interviews reporters did on the street. *Hey, what do you think about the helicopter landing at Dairy Queen? Do you have an opinion about the politician who was caught stealing from his mother?*

No problem if I couldn't get the students to talk. I had to figure out the story behind the flooding first. So I headed up to the top floor, hoping Mr. Lincoln was still there. He'd have the answers. I flicked on my recorder, checked the audio levels and climbed the stairs two at a time. Mrs. Saunders's warning made me think I'd better move fast if I wanted to break the story. Time to get to work.

I pressed *record*.

I never took myself as a person who cared much about the school building. Sure, I worried about studying for a math pop quiz or hounded my parents to sign the consent form for a field trip. But the building itself, well, that didn't seem very important...until today. I'm Izzy Wong, and welcome to my new podcast, *Fit to Print*.

I can smell the damage even before I see it. A combo platter of wet wood and raw sewage—I almost want to gag. The hallway is a lake, threatening to soak my shoes along with everything else on the third floor. Mr. Lincoln, the school custodian, is mopping the hallway near the bathroom. His gray coveralls remind me of a soldier's uniform—his battle is against the brownish water pooling all around him. I look for dry patches of floor as I make my way closer to him.

IZZY: Mr. Lincoln, can you tell me what happened here?

MR. LINCOLN: See for yourself. The water is everywhere.

Poor plumbing in an old building. This was bound to happen. The toilets in the bathroom clogged the works.

Water had to go somewhere. It's a complete mess.

IZZY: Why didn't you spot the flooding on Friday?

MR. LINCOLN: I was out with the flu. Had no idea I was going to come back to this mess. The water made it to the library. Now I have to rip out the carpet. And look, these tiles are starting to warp.

Was this why Mrs. Saunders had warned me about doing the report? Was Mr. Lincoln in trouble for not being at work?

IZZY: It looks pretty bad.

MR. LINCOLN: That's not the worst part. The bigger problem is the leak over Ms. Berenstein's classroom.

IZZY: What about her room?

MR. LINCOLN: The water leaked through. Everything down there. Kaput. Ruined. Demolished.

He waved his mop around to demonstrate, flicking water everywhere. I covered my recorder.

IZZY: How did it all happen?

MR. LINCOLN: Ack, the water is seeping into my boots.

My new boots. Excuse me, I have to empty my bucket.

Mr. Lincoln heads into the bathroom with his bucket, leaving behind a huge puddle and several questions. Could this damage have been prevented? What if he hadn't called in sick on Friday? Would it have made a difference? If the school can't afford to upgrade the plumbing, can they afford to fix the damages? And where will the money come from? This is one mess that won't be easy to flush away.

I switched off my recorder and stared at the river snaking toward the library. Even from where I was standing, I could smell the musty odor of wet carpet. It reminded me of the basement in my house two summers ago, when the sewer backed up into the family room.

I hopscotched across the dry patches toward the library. I had always loved that our school's collection of books was on the third floor. Whenever I headed up to our library, I felt like Hermione Granger walking up the maze of stairwells in Hogwarts. I don't know what I'd do if my favorite place in the school was destroyed. So many great books would be lost. Maybe this was the reason Mrs. Saunders had warned me. She didn't want the book lovers to panic. I switched on my recorder and hoped to catch a few words from our librarian.

Mr. Varaniuk has been our school librarian ever since I started first grade. His last name is too hard for us to pronounce, so he shortened it to Mr. V. I pretend the V stands for Vulcan, because Mr. V's bowl haircut reminds me of Mr. Spock from Dad's favorite TV series, *Star Trek*.

The library is my favorite hangout. The oddly shaped room is almost completely round. And the bookcases are set up in a spiral pattern. The nonfiction books sit in the middle of the room, like the eye of an information hurricane. The fiction titles spin out from the middle, and the picture books are “splattered” against the walls as if the hurricane flung them out. The open area near the back is decked out with beanbag chairs, giant teddy bears and a roll-up carpet. The area is supposed to be for storytime, but sometimes sixth graders huddle there on lunch breaks.

As soon as I step through the library’s double doors, the smell smacks me in the nose. It’s like the time my dad forgot to take out the compost bin. The library’s damp carpet squishes under my sneakers as I head to the library counter and Mr. V.

IZZY: Mr. V, Mr. V. Can I get an interview?

MR. V: I’m a bit busy right now, Izzy.

Was he avoiding me? First Mrs. Saunders’s warning, and now this. Something was definitely up.

IZZY: I promise this won’t take long, sir.

MR. V: You sure this can’t wait?

IZZY: No. It’s important. People need to know what happened.

MR. V: Oh, right. I forgot who I was talking to. I’m assuming this is for one of your news podcasts. What’s this one called?

IZZY: *Fit to Print.*

MR. V: Hmm. I like the literary angle. Okay, let's talk, but make it fast. I have to rescue the books.

IZZY: First, how bad is the damage?

MR. V: Thankfully, we only suffered a few losses. The water wasn't high enough to get to the books on the shelves. Some of the books in the return bin by the door are damaged. I've left them out to dry.

IZZY: Oh no. Which ones?

I scanned the pile of soaked books, hoping not to see my favorite book, *Chasing Vermeer*, in the wet mix. It would kill me to know it had been ruined. Thankfully, no sign of it.

MR. V: I've already used up my budget to buy books, so I think we might have to bid adieu to some of these. Ack, I just bought *Apartment 713* for my time-travel section. I'd need a time machine to salvage this one.

IZZY: I'm sorry, Mr. V. What other damage was there?

MR. V: My faith in bathroom protocols.

IZZY: Sorry?

I leaned closer, holding my mic near the librarian. I didn't want to miss a thing he said.

MR. V: I had hoped that by now the students would all know that paper towels go in the garbage can and not down the toilet.

IZZY: It wasn't an accident?

MR. V: If it was one toilet that was clogged, I'd say yes. But
all four toilets were filled with paper. Seems suspicious.

IZZY: Who did it?

Mr. V hesitated.

MR. V: You'd better get back to class. I have so many books
to save.

IZZY: Was this done on purpose?

MR. V: Izzy, the matter is being taken care of.

Buzz!

IZZY: Just a few more questions.

MR. V: No. You'd better get back to class. Recess is over.

Mr. V heads toward the middle of his bookcase hurricane
while I tiptoe across the wet hallway to the stairwell. The one
question I can't shake from our talk, and the one I have to
answer is, Who did this?