

# SEEAPP

James Van Pelt

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The application answered “Two.” The question was, “How many guns are in the high school?” Handy would have never asked—he’d been thinking about mountain lions. Liz provoked the gun query.

Before he encountered Liz, Handy Reed leaned the dust mop against the lockers. He’d finished the freshman hallway; the unswept sophomore wing waited before him. No other task satisfied as much as a long floor that needed cleaning. The school laid out like a hedge maze of straight halls and right angles. For thirty-seven years, he’d steered a mop through the school until every movement had become a litany. He could navigate the building with eyes closed.

He checked his work list for the afternoon. Beside the regular responsibilities, Mrs. Hudson wanted her dry erase boards cleaned twice a week, not just on Mondays. Mr. McGary asked for his posters to be pulled off the walls—he said he wanted to give them away, and Counselor Thiu needed a drawer fixed on her desk. Pretty easy evening, Handy thought.

Somewhere a conversation rose and fell: a couple of teachers hanging out in a classroom probably. He smiled. Handy liked students when they filled the halls with chatter and motion, and he liked when the students left and he could work his own pace. It gave time for the mind to wander. Janitorial resembled driving a car or mowing a lawn: he couldn’t sleep while doing it, but his body knew the motions, leaving him time to meditate on life’s mysteries.

He pulled a smartphone from his overalls and opened the SeeApp, revealing its familiar query screen. Considering mysteries, he typed, “HOW CLOSE HAVE I BEEN TO A MOUNTAIN LION WHILE ON A RUN?” Handy often left work in the late afternoon to jog the trail system in the desert behind the school. There might be thirty cars in the parking lot, most with racks for dirt bikes hanging from them, but he hardly ever saw anyone as he wended between twisted mesquite and sandstone boulders. At the trail entrance, a weathered sign from last season warned that mountain lions had been seen in the area. Handy had never spotted one, nor did he know anyone who had.

The answer screen popped up. "EIGHT FEET, FOUR INCHES."

Handy's mouth went dry. "HOW LONG AGO?" he typed.

"YESTERDAY."

He'd gone just three miles on a narrow loop, no more than a couple of hundred yards from the houses on the town's edge.

"GIVE ME MY TOP TEN CLOSEST ENCOUNTERS WITH MOUNTAIN LIONS IN THE LAST YEAR."

The app flashed times and dates in a column. The longest distance on the list was five hundred and sixty yards, from four months earlier. It didn't make him feel better to read that mountain lions are not considered aggressive, and the greater risk came from rattlesnakes, lightning strikes, or fatal bee stings. He worried about them, too. Still, a two-hundred-pound mountain lion, all claws, teeth, and furry velocity crouched by the trail, watching Handy as he jogged past, deciding in his lion-mind whether Handy looked edible or not, chilled him. He shivered as he put the phone away.

Thoughtfully, he pushed the dust mop over the tile, picking up paper scraps, a pen, and a crushed coffee cup. He always ran those trails. Beautiful, dry, stark, and peaceful. And, according to SeeApp, crowded with mountain lions.

He shuddered. What other dangers didn't he know? He stopped to type:

"HOW FAR AM I FROM THE CLOSEST BLACK WIDOW SPIDER?"

"FOUR FEET, SEVEN INCHES."

He imagined a globe around him. The spider lived in a locker, the ceiling, or the access tunnel below.

"HOW MANY BLACK WIDOWS IN THE BUILDING?"

"ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN." He shuddered. Sometimes he worked in the boiler room, an original part of the building, built in 1948. The old steam pipes corroded behind the newer pipes from when they'd renovated the system, making the walls a mineral encrusted landscape with crevices and gaps, and oozing mold. Spiders lived behind them. When he squeezed between the old boilers and the pipes to get to the new controls, his skin itched for hours, and he brushed his hair over and over, convinced he felt a creepy, crawling, leggy bug walking across him.

"HOW MANY DEADLY CREATURES IN THE BUILDING?"

"INDETERMINATE."

Handy sighed. Vague question. "Deadly" might be the problem. The app wouldn't know if he meant deadly to him or deadly to other animals.

Liz, a wiry woman in her forties, maneuvered her cart from a biology classroom, another thirty desks disinfected. A whiff of Clorox cleanser followed. She waved. "On your phone again?"

He put it into his pocket. "Sorry. Facts are addictive. Do you realize how many high school janitors died on the job last year?"

She shook her head. "I don't think a smartphone can know so much. I can't find your app anywhere, anyway. Hope you didn't pay big bucks for it."

"I followed a link. Didn't cost a dime."

"If it answers all your questions, ask important ones: when will we make six-figure salaries, like those New York janitors I read about?"

"Nobody knows the future."

"Your future is sweeping for a half mile, and then the upstairs bathrooms."

"Gotcha, boss." Handy guided the mop down the hall. What were the important questions? He used a hand brush that dangled from his belt to pile the sweepings, then dumped them into a trashcan. What vital facts did he need to know?

He typed, "HOW MANY GUNS ARE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL?"

Last week the school practiced their second lockdown drill for the year. The principal clicked the intercom to announce, "We are in lockdown, lockdown, lockdown."

Kids rushed toward open rooms where teachers beckoned, and as the hallway cleared, closed their doors behind them. Within a minute, the building felt abandoned. Even though it was a drill, Handy's heart raced as he stood in the empty hall. In a real lockdown, he would be the last person at risk. In a real lockdown, a shooter could come around the corner at either end, and there'd be no place to run.

He checked the girls' bathrooms. "Man at the door. Anyone in here?" he announced twice before looking in the room, opening each stall. They didn't have a lockdown procedure at Columbine in 1999. Handy meditated on that often. He'd visited Columbine in 2003 for a conference on building maintenance. He and forty building supervisors from other schools toured their furnace system, and watched slide presentations on work-shift scheduling and responsibilities. As they walked through the remodeled cafeteria below where the library used to be he smelled the air. Did acrid gunpowder linger? Could time erase pipe bomb stench and haunting tragedy at Columbine?

The janitors partied in the evening at a local brewpub. Beer pitchers rested next to bowls overflowing with peanuts. While Handy nursed a second pint, he thought about Rick Thorne's photograph he'd pinned to the bulletin board in the custodian closet, his sole personal item in the space. Rick Thorne had been the head custodian at Sandy Hook when Adam Lanza blasted through the security system at the school's entrance. Thorne ran down the hallway in front of the shooter, locking classroom doors. Who knew how many lives he saved?

Handy rolled the cold glass between his palms, swirling the beer, and wondered if he could be as brave. Hallways looked like shooting galleries, like square gun barrels. How could a shooter miss? As far as Handy knew, Thorne never did an interview. He didn't try to cash in. The man did his job on that day, on that extreme day, and he could be doing the job still.

A napkin lay on the floor beside the trashcan next to Handy's table. He looked at it for a while before getting up and throwing it away. The head custodian at Lincoln High bought the next round. The janitors laughed at the chair and table arrangement in the bar, and how hard it would be to clean after closing. The idea that they were encouraged to throw their peanut shells on the floor slightly horrified them. Handy noticed several janitors piled the shells to be swept off later and dropped in the trash.

Handy typed, "WHERE ARE THE GUNS NOW?"

"CALCULATING."

He held the phone, puzzling over the answer. If there were guns in the building, they had to be in an identifiable place, unless they were on the move, or maybe Liz was right. The app might be a scam or a joke, like the Magic Eight Ball he played with when he was a kid. You asked it a question, shook it up, then turned it over. The answer would float up in a glass window at the bottom. There were no guns in the school, and there weren't mountain lions on the trails either.

He climbed the second floor stairs, keys rattling from his belt. A ceiling to floor window looked out on the deserty landscape stretching to the low hills on the horizon. The school's front faced suburban streets and shopping centers, but the back butted on open land where the trails waited. He liked the quiet breeze rustling the mesquite, and the rhythmic slap his feet made as he jogged away time in the evening. Afternoon shadows striped the sandy landscape. A half-mile away, a dot crested a hill: someone on a trail bike. The sun caught the handlebars, tossing a bright flicker into Handy's eyes. How many hidden mountain lions crouched in the rocks?

As Handy worked through the bathrooms, restocking toilet paper, wiping down porcelain, and scrubbing graffiti, he decided he didn't need to run tonight.

It wasn't mountain lions, of course not.

He needed a rest day. His legs hurt. That was it.

But when he lay in bed near midnight, he couldn't sleep. The phone waited on the

headboard, a foot away. He could reach it without effort, but the questions he might ask scared him. Did he want to know how many black widow spiders were in the house? Did he want to know if burglars skulked in the neighborhood? Did he want to know about a killer asteroid headed toward Earth?

Handy set his alarm clock to wake him two hours earlier than normal.

At school, well before sunrise, carrying a folder with all the locker assignments, Handy moved from one locker to the next, opening each with the master key. They were half lockers. Kids liked the ones on top because they didn't have to stoop to get into them. Handy looked behind books, patted down jackets, opened backpacks. Locker after locker, high and low.

In the first floor lockers Handy found a six-pack of beer (four bottles were uncapped and empty—did the kid drink them while standing in the hall?), a coffee can with rolling papers and a lighter, a numb chuck, a plastic cat's skeleton dangling from a coat hook, and a baseball bat with nails driven into its head. In a locker belonging to a ninth-grade girl, he found a shoebox with four bras, two pairs of panties, and eight cigarette packages. He wrote down the locker numbers and who used them while wondering how he could tell the principal about the illegal searches.

He also found a family portrait taped inside one door, a bouquet with a romantic greeting card in another, a picture of a gold medal-wearing Olympian grinning at the camera with "Dream it, believe it" written in permanent ink at the bottom, and text books, notebooks, gym bags, folders, pens, pencils, and highlighters. Kids stuck athletes and swimsuit models and musician photographs in their lockers. More than one had posted personal goals: "Make straight A's this year," "Practice random acts of kindness," "Sweets are for the weak," "Be a positive person."

The sky lightened as he opened lockers on the second floor. He didn't have enough time to search them all. The first buses would be arriving soon. Teachers who liked to start early would see him violating several privacy rules.

Frustrated, he typed into his phone again, "WHERE ARE THE GUNS IN THE SCHOOL?"

Again, the screen answered, "CALCULATING," but before he turned it off in disgust, the screen changed to "ONE IS IN A LOCKER. ONE IS IN A DESK."

"WHICH LOCKER? WHICH DESK?"

"INDETERMINATE."

"Damn it!" The hall echoed. A hundred more lockers were left to search. What was ambiguous in his question the SeeApp couldn't answer?

But in the next locker, the rifle stood on its stock, barrel almost touching the top. Handy stepped back, checked the hallway in both directions. Still empty.

He gingerly removed the gun. It weighed in his hands, pulling at the wrists. Military-style: a vertical pistol grip, a curving magazine hanging from the barrel. Black stock. Dull, aluminum gray metal. He thought about terrorists and loud action movies. Handy didn't know guns well—he'd never hunted or gone to a range—but it looked like what he imagined if someone said "AR 15."

A foot-tall, clear plastic jar sat on the locker's floor filled with what appeared to be multi-colored grapes. Handy turned it so he could read the label: "Paintball Ammo." He looked at the gun again. A warning on the stock in tiny print said, "Always wear eye protection and play safe."

Handy let a pent up breath out in a shaky gasp. A paintball gun! That would teach him not to be more specific when he asked the SeeApp questions. Not that a kid should have a paintball gun in the school, but his school shooting vision fled from thought. As for the other gun the SeeApp said was in a desk, it could be a glue gun or a marshmallow gun or a squirt gun.

He checked his assignment folder. The locker belonged to Paisley Benton, a tenth-grader.

He returned the gun to the locker and shut it just as two boys wearing hoodies and carrying backpacks over one shoulder like hunchbacks stepped into the hall. Handy nodded as they passed. The students had arrived.

By lunch, Handy fixed a broken podium in the music room, cleaned the tables in the cafeteria after the breakfast crowd left, ordered cleaning supplies for second quarter, moved six rock sample boxes from the geology classroom to the loading dock, and wet mopped in the gymnasium where a senior basketball player had dropped a one-gallon glass orange juice bottle. He comforted a crying boy who believed his girlfriend didn't like him, and he helped a substitute teacher whose car battery died. There's always something, he thought, but the relief he'd felt in the morning drained away. He asked the SeeApp what *kind* of gun hid in a desk in the school, and it said unambiguously a 9mm Glock, not a play gun or staple gun at all, but the app still flashed "calculating" when he asked where it was.

It couldn't be a student desk. They were one-inch laminate tops on four metal legs. No place to hide a gun. It would have to be in an employee's desk. Somewhere in the building, a teacher, principal, nurse, counselor, coach, or janitor had brought a gun to school.

Handy waited at the cafeteria door for the second lunch wave to clear out so he could sweep and wipe down the tables for the third time today. As far as school shootings went, the cafeteria and library were the two most dangerous locations in the building. Across the room, two outside doors opened to the parking lot and closed as students went outside. Anybody with bad intent, anybody from anywhere could walk into those two unguarded doors at any moment and open fire. Twenty-four classes had outside doors. The main building had six entrances. Three other separate buildings, including the art building and the shop, had their own doors, unguarded and unlocked. At Columbine, the shooters began their carnage before they walked into the school, but the kids in the cafeteria didn't know they were in danger until too late.

"CAN I STOP SOMEONE WITH A GUN?" he typed. He knew the answer.

"INDETERMINATE."

"WHO HAS THE GUN IN THE SCHOOL?"

"INDETERMINATE."

He thought hard about how to phrase the next question. "IS ANYONE IN THE SCHOOL IN DANGER?"

"YES."

Surely the app would say "indeterminate," but it stared him in the face, "Yes." He'd been telling himself that maybe a teacher brought a gun to school to protect himself. It would be illegal, even though some states were talking about arming teachers, an idea Handy didn't know what he thought of. Here, though, the district had been very clear about guns. Handy remembered a note from the school board to all the district employees, addressing the issue. It read, "We place the safety of our students above all other concerns. We are working with local law enforcement to complete threat assessments on each building and discussing strategies to improve security. To assure students' well being, the schools must be gun-free zones. District employees cannot carry guns or bring them to school in their cars. Without extensive training, an employee with a gun is more likely to be a liability in an emergency situation than an aid."

Students walked by him at the door. They ignored him. No one is more invisible in a school than a janitor. The room smelled of spaghetti sauce and buttered rolls. Instead of moving to the closet to get cleaning supplies, he watched the last students enter their classrooms. Everyone was somebody's kid. He remembered watching graduation last year, students who'd he witnessed growing up during their four-year stay (a handful were on their fifth year). They smiled to their parents in the stands when they took their diplomas. They laughed. They clapped each other on the back and swore they'd be friends forever.

What's more precious than a child's life?

He squeezed the phone so hard he thought the screen might crack.

"WHERE IS THE DESK WITH A GUN?"

"INDETERMINATE."

Then a weird thing happened. A movement ten classrooms away in the hall beside the cafeteria caught his eye: a low, tan shape padded across the hallway intersection. Long tail, black at the tip. He glimpsed it as the specter vanished into the crossing hall.

Handy raced toward it, keys clattering. When he reached the intersection, though, he saw a short boy with a bad haircut and a bathroom pass in hand, walking toward him. An outside door between Handy and the boy was propped open. Bright sunlight washed the desert hill beyond the parking lot. No movement. No animal.

"Hi, Handy." The boy waved.

The janitor swallowed, trying to control his breathing. "Sure," he said, not sure what shocked him more: a student knew him, or he hallucinated a mountain lion.

He could have sworn, he could have sworn, when he closed his eyes and played back what he saw, he could have sworn he'd just seen a mountain lion.

After school he could search the desks. He tried to recall who on the staff sounded like the kind who would bring a gun. Mr. King who taught orchestra often talked about his military service, and Mrs. Rickert was a vet, too. Both varsity football coaches and an assistant missed days during hunting season.

He knew a lot about the teachers. Trashcans were revealing. Some paid their bills at their desks and left the remains in the trash. He knew Mrs. Carew was refinancing her house. Mr. Basel's wife was divorcing him. The band director wanted to adopt a child from South America, while the volleyball coach and the attendance secretary cheated on their spouses with each other. Handy had never seen a gun, though. Of course, he'd never searched the desks.

But he couldn't check them until after the teachers left for the day. He went to the custodian closet to look up Paisley Benton.

Her records told him she'd been home-schooled through her freshman year. No grades and no teacher's notes. She was a sophomore now. It looked like her parents were married. At least they had the same home phone number. Different last name from Paisley, though. Maybe a foster child? Had the mom remarried and taken her new husband's name? No discipline referrals for Paisley. No medical alerts. He brought up her student picture. The long, black hair looked familiar, but he didn't recognize the wary eyes and smile. The red-and-brown flannel jacket gave her away. He'd seen Paisley before. She came to school early for help in math, waiting outside Mr. McGary's room until he opened it. Her hair hid her face. He could look in on her right now; her first afternoon class was Comparative Religions.

Handy looked at Rick Thorne's picture before he left his closet. Thorne would have heard the shooting as he ran down the hall, locking doors, shouting warnings. There would have been screaming.

Handy closed Paisley's records and headed for the social studies building. Classroom doors in social studies featured long, narrow windows, which some teachers called "gun slits." The district sent contradictory e-mails on the gun slits in the last year. The first one asked teachers to cover them so the kids couldn't be seen from the hallway during lockdown. But the gun slit windows were put in the doors so someone opening the door from the inside could see if someone stood at the door on the outside. The design prevented the heavy door from clocking a person trying to get into the room. After a second student suffered a concussion from a door hitting him, the district instructed teachers to take the window covering down. Teachers argued over which directive was operative, so half the doors in the social studies building had blocked windows, and the other half were uncovered.

Paisley's room had no paper over the window, but tape remnants remained from what had been there. Handy leaned against the door. Paisley sat in the back, her black hair touching the notebook she wrote in. She rested her feet on her backpack on the floor.

He slipped the phone from his pocket. "WHAT IS THE THREAT LEVEL IN THE SCHOOL RIGHT NOW?" The SeeApp showed him a bar, 4/5th filled to the top with pulsing red. "WHAT IS THE AVERAGE THREAT LEVEL IN THE SCHOOL?" The bar dropped to 1/5th, and pulsed a calming blue.

Handy knew too much about school shooters. Almost all were current or former students. Almost all had long, troubled histories. The Columbine shooters expressed their rage in papers they turned in to their English teachers. Shooters often wrote in journals about their plans. Both Harris and Klebold had encounters with law enforcement. Handy couldn't remember a school mass shooting where there weren't clear signs the shooters were headed toward their monstrous deeds.

Paisley, though, had no record. Home-schooling for her previous years hid how she'd done, but her first quarter grades were strong enough—her lowest grade was in McGary's Math I, where she'd earned a B-. She didn't miss classes. No one had even marked her tardy. The puzzler was no office referrals for discipline problems. A kid who'd bring a paint-gun rifle to school would surely have broken rules earlier.

Handy's walkie-talkie clicked. "Miss Ryan to Mr. Reed."

When he answered, Miss Ryan, the no-nonsense principal, said, "We have a parent advisory meeting in the cafeteria in thirty minutes. It's still a mess."

"On my way." He still hadn't figured out how to let her know what he'd found in the lockers without getting himself fired for having looked without permission in the first place.

As he swiped a wet washcloth across the cafeteria tables, he considered reasons Paisley would bring a paintball gun to school. She might have a speech in her English class where the rifle served as a prop. Students sometimes brought odd items into the school for speeches. He remembered the student who designed a demonstration of chainsaw juggling. Not only had he put three chainsaws in his locker, but he also brought a half-gallon of gasoline.

Maybe she had scheduled a paintball session after school and didn't have time to go home (but he'd found the gun in her locker before school, so she'd left it there overnight).

Principal Ryan stepped into the cafeteria, a laptop computer in one hand and folders in the other. She wore her hair short and combed back. No makeup. Silver wire-rimmed glasses. Skinny as a willow wand. He'd seen her jogging the running trails before, but she never stopped to talk.

"Fifteen minutes, Mr. Reed."

He nodded. It would be better not to tell her about the lockers at all.

The parent advisory committee filed into the cafeteria just as he left to go to the counselor's office. Thinking about the locker with the six-pack, Handy stopped at the counselor's door. "Do you know David St. James?"

The counselor turned in her office chair. Three large computer screens dominated her desk, filled with scheduling spreadsheets. "Yep, he's been in here a couple times. Falls asleep a lot in morning classes."

"I ran into him yesterday coming in from the bus loop between second and third hour. He smelled like a brewery. Looks like he's drinking on campus."

The counselor wrote a note. "I'll check in on him."

"If you can, see if he'll open his locker for you. If he's doing it during the day, that's where it would be. He's too young to drive, so he wouldn't have it in a car."

Handy walked away from the counselors, figuring he took care of one of the problems.

A visit to the campus security office put the kid with the nail-studded baseball bat on their radar. "I'm not sure," said Handy, "but I thought I saw a weapon in Keith's locker when I walked by." The security officer, a large, sweaty and humorless man, put on his hat and a determined expression. "We'll investigate this immediately."

Handy smiled. He had always thought the security officer a bit of a vigilante wannabe, but at least he was enthusiastic, and now another problem locker from the list could be checked off.

Outside the swimming pool doors, the women's PE teacher, a friendly, stocky collegiate rugby player who'd started teaching last year, said, "Sylvia's in my eighth hour Fitness class. Nice enough kid. Caught her smoking in the locker room once, but she claimed she was quitting. I think she was sincere." The air from the pool smelled moist and chlorinated.

Handy pictured the shoebox filled with bras and panties and eight packs of cigarettes. "I doubt it. Have you had a problem with theft this semester?"

The teacher put a hand on her hip. "Funny you should ask. I've had a couple reports of girls losing their underwear."

"From eighth hour?"

The teacher nodded.

"So you have Sylvia in your next class. You might keep an eye on her. I heard some kids talking."

"Nothing escapes the custodian's eyes and ears, does it?"

Handy shrugged modestly. "I help where I can."

He typed a tip into the anonymous SafeToTell website about the girl with rolling papers and the lighter. He'd smelled marijuana in several lockers, but he spotted evidence in hers.

Only the locker with the plastic cat skeleton remained. For right now, he'd put the kid on a personal watch list. Sometimes a cat skeleton is just a cat skeleton. Handy walked toward the cafeteria to see how the parent advisory meeting was going. The adults left their space as messy as the kids when they left.

Principal Ryan shook parents' hands as the meeting broke up. She motioned for him to stay. She said, "I think the experiment with ketchup packets is going to have to end. The kids stomp on them. Everywhere I look, there's ketchup splatter. It's a blood bath in here."

Handy had fought the switch from dispensers to packets for that very reason. Ryan had overruled him based on what she called "per-squirt cost."

"I can have the old dispensers up tomorrow."

Ryan snapped her folders closed. "See to it." She strode from the room, clearly with important tasks in mind. Handy almost pitied a shooter if he encountered Miss Ryan first.

He checked his watch. The bell ending the school day would ring in a minute. Handy hustled down the hallway and up the stairs. Just as the bell sounded, he leaned against a locker and waited. Soon enough, he spotted Paisley walking toward him, her books clasped in both hands, head down, hair covering her face. When she reached her locker, she looked up, seeing Handy for the first time. Her eyebrows pressed together. "That's my locker."

"Indeed."

Paisley didn't move toward it. Students streamed behind her.

Handy said, "Do you want me to open it for you?"

"Can you do that?"

Handy shook his key chain. "Every lock in the building is mine."

She glanced at her books. "I think I have what I need here. Thanks."

"Any particular reason you don't want me to see what's in your locker?"

Paisley had already turned to go. She stopped and faced him.

Once when Handy ran near sunset last summer, he almost stepped on a rattlesnake. It wasn't a big snake, nor marked with the distinctive diamonds he associated with rattlesnakes. Grey skin. Small, bulging head, and a buzzing tail, whirling around as the huge human and the tiny snake faced off. The snake raised its head, matching Handy's gaze. Time ceased moving.

Handy felt the same out-of-body timelessness as he waited for Paisley to answer. When he'd thought about this confrontation, he thought she might run away. In one scenario she wept. He hadn't expected a contemplative, intense expression from a fifteen-year-old. It wouldn't surprise him now if she struck out like a snake, maybe with a poison pin. He wouldn't have time to react. Slowly, he'd collapse to the floor, a ninety-pound, black-haired waif standing over him.

Paisley said, "It's for protection."

Handy took a deep breath, glad his arms were crossed in front of him. She wouldn't see his hands trembling.

"It's a paintball gun. What would that protect you from?"

"Have you ever been shot with a paintball? Hurts like Hell. Besides, my parents don't own real firearms." She leaned against the locker one down from hers.

"Are you being bullied?" The conversation wasn't going the way Handy expected. He wished he'd figured a way to tell the campus security officer about her instead of baseball-bat boy.

She looked disgusted. "I'm not protecting just me. It's everyone. Mr. McGary has a gun. I saw it. He keeps it in the top drawer of the desk, right beside the paperclips and dry erase markers. He's been bat-shit weird for a couple weeks, too. He writes in this notebook all the time when we're doing worksheets. I thought he was crying while we worked today."

By now the hall had almost emptied. At the far end, a group of students stood together, chatting. Other than them, Paisley and Handy were alone. From where they stood, Handy could see McGary's door on the opposite side of the hallway. He hadn't left yet.

"Even if McGary wanted to use a gun in a dangerous way, and there's no chance of that—I'll bet he has it to keep him and his students safe—your paintball gun won't stop him."

"I don't need to stop him. I just need to distract him. Give people time to get away and get help."

"Wouldn't he shoot you?"

"He would be ducking. I've got a fifty-shot magazine, and I can hit a dime-sized target if the distance is the length of a classroom."

Two dots like dark grains of sand moved in the slots cut across the locker door above Paisley's head. They moved again. Not grains of sand, but the tips of a spider's legs. The whole spider emerged, a large, glistening black widow, a few inches from Paisley. Handy tensed.

"Don't move," he whispered.

She didn't. "What?"

"There's a spider above you." Handy thought if he grabbed her, he could get her away. The spider raised its two front legs as if contemplating its options.

Paisley looked up. "Oh, a black widow." She swung a hand up and slapped the spider into a wet spot on the metal. "We have them in our house sometimes."

Handy gasped. Of all the ways of dealing with a black widow, he would have never chosen that technique. He preferred killing them with wasp spray, sending a stream of killing chemicals as far as twenty feet. He never intentionally came close to one.

Handy didn't know what to say. "You smashed it!" This was the third time he'd been shocked today.

"No big deal. I outweigh it about a million times. Not a fair fight."

"They're poisonous."

"I wasn't going to eat him."

He shook his head. "What else about McGary?" Handy remembered that he'd pulled all the posters from McGary's room the day before, leaving the class looking blank and sterile. The missing posters left ghost outlines on the wall.

Paisley said, "I liked McGary at the beginning of the year. He was pretty cool, but he's scaring me now. Today he looked bad."

"Why haven't you told anyone?"

"I told my counselor, Mrs. Juanez. She said teachers have private lives."

"You told her about the gun?"

"She said I was mistaken. Teachers aren't allowed to have guns in the building."

Handy knew Mr. McGary from cleaning his class for a decade. Some teachers were talkative, and several he considered friends, but McGary acted a little bit like many of the kids, going about his business as if Handy were invisible. He seemed like a pleasant enough fellow, though, staying after to chat with kids, putting their work on the wall. A couple of years ago he'd been a finalist for teacher of the year. Always wore a tie. Hair turning grey at the edges, and he could spend more time in the gym and less at the fridge, but many people looked that way.

"How'd you get the paintball gun into the building?"

Paisley shrugged. "Under my coat. Half of it hung out. I think I could wheel in a machine gun mounted on a cart and nobody would say squat if I put a couple flowers on it and said I'd brought it for the homecoming parade."

"Okay. So here is what we're going to do. I'm going to talk to Mr. McGary and find out what's going on. You know where the custodian's closet is downstairs?" She nodded. "It's unlocked. I have a tablecloth in there we can wrap your gun up with. Go get it. When you get back, I'll walk you and the paintball gun out of the building. You won't risk getting suspended, or even worse, sending our security guard into a conniption."

"What if he's dangerous? Maybe I should get my gun ready?"

"He'll be fine. I'm just going to chat with him. Go get the tablecloth."

It was fifteen steps from Paisley's locker to McGary's door, and the first ones were done before he thought about the possibilities. The door grew large. The doorknob seemed to glow. Handy felt the same tension in his back and breathing he had when he saw the snake on the trail, when the black widow crept from the locker. Down the hallway, he heard a dull, growling purr. For a second, he thought the mountain lion stood at the top of the stairs, but it swirled into dust motes dancing in the afternoon light coming through the windows.

He stopped, hand touching the door. Nothing forced him to go on. He could walk away right now, but nothing would happen. Statistically, schools were the safest places for him and the students to be. Children faced fewer risks in their schools than anywhere else in their lives. They were more likely to die in a car crash going to school than being shot at school. More shootings took place in homes than in public buildings. More children drowned every year or died in house fires than were killed in schools.

Schools are safe. Still, Handy didn't move. He could go back to Paisley and take her out of the building. She wouldn't even need to know why he couldn't open the door.

Handy thought, how would Rick Thorne act? Besides, what was the worst that McGary might do?

He opened the door.

Mr. McGary looked up when Handy entered. Without posters, the room felt cold and too small. The blinds over the windows had been pulled down, darkening the class. A small desk lamp showed a scattering of yellow legal pad pages crowded with handwritten text spread in front of the teacher.

Handy said, "How's it going, Mr. McGary?"

McGary leaned back. He had bags under his eyes. Paisley was right. He looked as if he'd been crying. He pulled open the top desk drawer, but didn't move to take a pencil or notebook or stapler out. Handy nearly bolted for the door.

"Do you even know my first name?" said McGary.

Handy moved cautiously, torn between approaching and fleeing. "No, I don't think I do. Do you know mine?"

McGary rubbed his palms into his eyes. "It's Happy or Hardy. There's an 'H.'"

"How could you not know? We've been working together for ten years." Handy touched his walkie-talkie, wondering if he pressed the transmit button who would hear him, now that school was over, and would they realize he needed help. "What's going on with you? You've got some kids worried."

"What do you care? You don't even know my name. I'm just Mr. McGary, like all these students who are shocked to see me at the store or wearing shorts. They think the school puts me away at night and takes me out in the morning. I have no life."

"Well, you do, don't you? They're just children. Did you think your teachers existed outside of school when you were a student?" Handy wished the man had told him his first name. He didn't want to call him "Mr." again. Too impersonal.

McGary sighed, a deep, soul-emptying sound that should have collapsed his lungs. Handy had never seen a human being who looked so sad. "They're not wrong. This is all I am. A student sent me a math joke the other day. He thought it was funny. It said, 'Quit asking me to find your X. She's gone. Get over it.' I almost did it right then. It would be terrible to do it to an entire classroom of kids, but maybe it would be meaningful. It could be their last, great lesson from me."

Handy spoke deliberately. Could he close the distance between him and McGary before the man could act? They were five student desks apart. "What would you do?"

"Why this, of course." McGary took a pistol from his desk and put it on the papers.

"Were you . . . going to hurt them?" The gun sat on the desk. McGary's fingers rested on the handle. Handy couldn't call for help. He couldn't close the distance and wrestle the weapon away. It was like those kids in the cafeteria at Columbine. Once they saw the danger, they were already doomed. Like a mountain lion on a trail, soundless, and on you before you recognized the threat.

McGary looked incredulous. "You thought I would shoot my students? No, man, God no. Just me. The gun is for me."

McGary picked up the pistol and pressed it to his temple.

A loud pop.

A splash of red flew across McGary's hand and forehead like ketchup stomped from a little packet.

McGary screeched and fell to his right. The gun kicked left and hit the floor. The desk lamp shook, but didn't fall over.

Overhead lights flicked on. Handy couldn't look to see who had thrown the switch. McGary scrambled to hands and knees and crawled for the gun (he'd shot himself in the head—how could he be moving!).

Another "pop" and a green spot appeared on McGary's shoulder. He grunted in frustration and pain.

Three more pops, staccato fast: a yellow splotch on his hip, a green one on his thigh, and a blue one on the side of his head. He curled into a ball on the floor.

"Stop it!" yelled McGary. "I quit. I quit."

Handy dove for the pistol and covered it up. Once he was sure McGary wasn't coming for it, he looked to the door.

Paisley stood with the paintball gun still pressed against her shoulder. "Are you sure you're done?" she said. "I can do this all day."

McGary sat up, back to the wall, and started crying, red paint on one side of his face and blue on the other. Sobs shuddered in his chest.

Handy keyed the walkie-talkie. "Is anyone in the office?"

"Ryan here," came the answer.

After he explained the situation, Handy sat by McGary.

Handy said, "Paisley, we'll be okay here. Why don't you get the tablecloth I told you about?"

When she left, Handy felt drained, like he'd run ten desert miles and his tank had gone dry. Flecks of paint had splashed the floor and wall. He wondered if it was water or oil based and how hard it would be to scrub clean. McGary's breathing quieted and became less shaky.

"That was kind of stupid," said Handy.

McGary didn't reply for a while. Finally he offered, "My name's Seamus."

"Nice Scottish name. I'm Handy, Handy Reed."

McGary sighed and put his hands flat on the floor, not like he was getting up, but like he wanted to steady himself.

Handy waited for the teacher to speak. He couldn't give comfort or advice. Even condolences sounded false. How would he word it? From where they sat, he saw gum stuck under a desk.

McGary took a deep breath, started to speak, then bit it back. For the moment, a rare moment in the school, Handy heard perfect silence. The air conditioner wasn't blowing. No footsteps clacked past the room. He couldn't even hear the almost subliminal buzz from the fluorescent lights. Only the subtle pop of McGary's lips as he started to speak again. "I should make lesson plans for tomorrow. Some instruction for the sub."

"Yep. I don't suppose they'll want you teaching for a while."

"I guess not."

Voices came from the hall, Paisley, Miss Ryan, and a couple of others.

"I'm sorry this happened to you, Seamus."

"Me too, Handy."

\* \* \*

Paisley Benton made the front page of the paper under the headline, "Local Teen Saves Teacher's Life," and earned a one-week suspension from school for bringing the paintball gun.

Principal Ryan met with Handy before school the next day in her office. For ten minutes she went over the proper chain of command he should have followed if he suspected a teacher was suicidal; then, as she dismissed him, she shook his hand and gave him an envelope with a fifty-dollar gift card to Red Lobster. "It's an appreciation from the booster club," she said. "Thank you."

The bell rang, sending students to their first period classes. He thought about asking Ryan to up the budget for repair and replacement. The paper-towel dispensers in the student bathrooms were in bad shape, but he decided not to push his luck.

As he walked past the cafeteria, tardy students disappeared into their classrooms. He checked the phone. What would he ask SeeApp today? Maybe he could find out which students needed a pat on the back. Sometimes his best work happened when he said the right words to the right student at the right moment.

But instead of SeeApp's familiar opening screen, the app showed him the threat bar, red to the top and blinking urgently. The phone vibrated in alarm.

He stopped. Behind him, students with first period release sat in the cafeteria, studying or chatting. The janitor supplies closet door was to his side with its clipboard and today's chores. A substitute had taken McGary's class. They checked McGary into an observation unit in the psych wing of the hospital. Even the paintball gun had left the building. Everything sat in its place. The dangers were gone!

He reached to turn off the SeeApp's inexplicable signals, when the big cat came around the corner from the back parking lot doors. Eight feet long, three feet at the shoulder. Tan face with black marking around its yellow eyes, white at the mouth, it

faced Handy from fifty feet away, staring, head down, tail swishing, padding toward him.

Handy paused.

He paused.

He paused.

He threw the phone at it, which flew a foot over its head. The cat didn't flinch.

Fortunately, the janitor's closet wasn't locked; he didn't have to scramble to find the right key.

Heavy wood or glass and steel composed every door in the building. If he closed it behind him, the mountain lion would never get through. He would be safe. Handy grabbed a dust mop from the corner. A door protected every room except the cafeteria, which had no doors at all, and teachers propped their doors open during the day.

"Lockdown, lockdown, lockdown!" he cried into the walkie-talkie, then stepped back into the hallway, the six-foot-wide dust mop brandished before him. The intercom echoed Handy's message. Mrs. Hudson popped her head from her classroom, ten feet from the cat, shrieked, and slammed her door. Other doors clapped shut. Behind him, from the cafeteria, students shouted.

Handy advanced, the dust mop hip high, like a lance and a shield. The mountain lion stopped, snarled.

"I'm bigger than you," said Handy. "You don't belong."

He slapped the mop onto the floor, sending a cloud of dust in all directions.

The cat retreated a step, its tail whipping back and forth.

Handy swung the mop to the side, clanging it against the lockers, then beat it against the floor, moving forward each time, driving the baffled lion before him. "This is my castle." He raised the mop above his head and charged.

The mountain lion slipped on the tile as it turned the corner toward the doors where it had entered. When Handy saw it again, it had sprinted halfway across the parking lot. In a few seconds, it leapt the low fence and vanished into the desert beyond.

\* \* \*

Later, Handy almost didn't believe the encounter had happened at all. The confrontation occurred so fast, but Mrs. Hudson saw the mountain lion, and so did the handful of students in the cafeteria who'd run out to find a room to hide in when administration called the lockdown. The school's security camera captured the entire face off, and the video went viral. Mrs. Hudson's class made a giant thank-you card for students to sign. Miss Ryan agreed to look over his budget requests, but didn't make any promises.

The booster club replaced the shattered phone.

When he had a quiet moment much later, Handy sat at his desk in the janitor's closet. The new phone was larger and slick and felt heavy in his hand. It powered on quicker than the old phone. The display was more vivid. For a half hour he searched for the SeeApp. How did he find it the first time? He remembered he'd been reading an article, and then he followed a link, which led to another and another, and he might have clicked on an ad at some point. But no search brought him a result. "SEEAPP" didn't bring up a single hit.

He leaned back in the chair. The closet smelled of solvents and detergents. Soon, he would walk his rounds in the building, making sure the doors were locked, the windows secure. Before he'd leave, he'd turn on the security system so it too could watch over the building while he was gone.

Handy looked up at the picture of Rick Thorne on the wall. "Good man," said Handy to the silence of the office, all the questions he'd never asked the SeeApp unanswered.

He knew what needed to be done, though. A janitor knew. He knew what had to be maintained.