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Busted

“You are so busted, Wyatt,” Wyatt’s fifth-grade teacher, Mr. DeLay, said to him at our parent/teacher conference.

Wyatt’s eyes widened as he looked back and forth between his teacher and me. Not a hint of malice stained Brian DeLay’s words. They were edged with an amusement and warmth I didn’t yet understand. I was still reeling from the report card Wyatt had just slipped out of the envelope and opened in front of me. A sea of D’s and C’s swam before my eyes.

“Do you have smelling salts here in the room, Mr. DeLay?” I feigned.

“Like I said, you are so busted, dude,” a smile played on his lips. Brian DeLay is not only Wyatt’s teacher he is also my friend and former student at the Teacher Academy. He holds a Ph.D. in Music, plays in the Santa Fe Opera every medieval and contemporary instrument ever created, is a brilliant writer and thinker, and a natural teacher. In essence, I trust him and his methods with my son.

So now I waited and wondered.

Brian lifted a manila envelope from his desk and began to place sheets of paper in front of Wyatt and me, Wyatt’s MAPS scores. They spread like a fan before us. Brian knows my thoughts on the profound flaws of standardized testing. My interest piqued, I wondered what was coming next.

Wyatt wondered, too. He had visibly paled.

“What I see here, Wyatt, is you are at or above grade level in every single subject. So, I *know* you know these areas. What I’m seeing in class resembles more of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

“I receive this kind of work,” Brian held aloft a lengthy essay written in Wyatt’s gorgeous penmanship, “and I receive this kind of work.” In his other hand he lifted a paper with a few words spattered loosely across the paper.

“Now, I think I know what’s going on here, Wyatt,” he said, “But I want to hear from you what’s happening in class.”

Wyatt eyes bobbed back and forth between his teacher and his mother. We looked back at him.

“Well,” he started, “it’s just that, well, I hurry through my work so I can get back to the book I’m reading.”

He looked down at his hands clasped in his lap.

“That’s what I thought was happening, Wyatt, but I wanted to make sure. This kid inhales books, Dawn. Literally inhales them.”

Brian and my eyes met across the desk. As my student, Brian had heard all about Wyatt’s unique path to reading. He knew very well that this was a kid who hadn’t read until he was nearly eight-years-old, having spent the previous years in angry tears and outbursts whenever he was approached to read. The kid who learned how to read only after being pulled out of school where they’d started to discuss “intervention” with me and taught himself how to read later that month on Captain Underpants books. Within three months, he was reading Harry Potter books.

“Now, tell me how you take these MAPS tests, Wyatt.”

“You just click on the bubble on the computer. I finished mine in seventeen minutes, so I could get back to my book,” Wyatt said proudly.

Over the course of the next ten minutes, Brian and I both talked about the importance of his work being a true reflection of his capabilities and knowledge. We assured him he wasn’t in trouble. I told him I didn’t care about his MAPS scores or even his grades necessarily, only that he was making full use of his mind and growing and learning as much as possible in school.

“Wyatt, we feel your pain,” I said. “Believe me, Mr. DeLay and I know how hard it is to put down a good book.”

Wyatt looked doubtful.

“You spend hours every day reading after school. When you’re in school, focus on your schoolwork.”

I slapped my hand to my forehead.

“I can’t believe I’m even thinking this, but I am.” I said.

“Oh, I know exactly what you’re thinking and I can’t believe you’re thinking it either.” Brian now slapped his hand to his forehead in mock disbelief.

“But, I *am* thinking it! No, no! This goes against everything I believe! We can’t.” I held the top of my hand against my forehead in an exaggerated display of dismay.

Wyatt watched his teacher and his mother with ever-increasing interest.

“Yes, we simply must, Mr. DeLay!” I announced and slapped my hand down on the desk.

“No, no, say it isn’t so!” He shook his head back and forth, before finally, “No, you’re right. Yes, we must!”

“Wyatt, we’re taking your books hostage!”

“Hostage?” Wyatt said, sitting up straighter in his chair. “You’re going to take my books *hostage*?”

“Yes, it’s the only way,” I set my jaw to illustrate my determination. “Don’t you agree, Mr. DeLay?”

Brian looked at Wyatt with dramatic sternness and said solemnly, “Yes, the only way.”

“Wyatt, Mr. DeLay is going to hold your novels hostage at his desk. You are not allowed to keep them in your desk anymore.” This sentence alone made me throw my hand to my forehead again. “I can’t believe I’m saying this.”

When you’ve completed your work in a way that reflects your abilities,” I continued, “even if you have to do it over, only then will Mr. DeLay release the hostage over to you.”

“Are you serious?” Wyatt raised his eyebrows.

“Absolutely,” Brian and I responded in unison.

Wyatt shook his head and laughed. He looked at each of us like we were crazy, but he would go along with it.

As Brian walked me to the door, I whispered under my breath, “Now, that was the first good use of those dreadful standardized tests I’ve ever seen.

Bravo!”

He smiled and winked.

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That was a couple of weeks ago. Wyatt's books continue to be held hostage on Mr. DeLay's desk. The last I heard, his schoolwork has vastly improved, earning him the temporary release of his books to his care throughout the day. He reads several books a week in his after-school hours.

The kid who hated to read....