Ann Roberts

Cedar Hill Elementary School

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

Office / Visitor Parking
KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

Ann Roberts

Spinsters Ink 2010
About the Author

Ann Roberts’s career as a teacher and administrator spans kindergarten to college. She lives in Phoenix with her partner, her son and their two large Rhodesian Ridgebacks, Sadie and Duke, aka “Dukalicious.”

She is the author of Furthest from the Gate and several Bella Books titles: Brilliant, Beach Town, Root of Passion, Beacon of Love, as well as the Ari Adams’ mystery series that includes Paid in Full and White Offerings. She can be reached at her Web site www.annroberts.net.
Author’s Note or My Little Rant

Although gay rights have certainly progressed, there’s no faster way to start a fight in middle school than to call a boy a “fag” or a “queer.” Classroom discussions that evolve into questions about homosexuality are quickly terminated and most gay educators recognize that they are held to a higher standard and even the most liberal communities appreciate a civilian version of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Homophobia is truly the last form of accepted prejudice in public education and while the consequences are very clear for racial and religious intolerance, a hazy double standard (okay, it’s not so hazy in some parts of the country) is often applied when an issue involving homophobia surfaces. I give a huge shout-out to GLSEN and the thousands of teachers, counselors, parents and administrators who soldier along quietly each day working to change the school culture for our gay students. They are the heroes.
Acknowledgments

Teachers are made, not born. I was inspired by so many of the marvelous men and women I met during my years in school, including my mother, a sixth grade teacher who always knew how to explain everything just right.

Over the last twenty-three years I’ve been incredibly fortunate to work with some very fine professionals—counselors, special education directors, school psychologists, regular education teachers and special education teachers.

And to the wonderful people around me from whom I learn every day: my partner, Amy, a second-grade teacher; my friend Patricia, a fellow principal and sounding board—who eventually found her “right seat on the bus” (but is not depicted in this story); and of course, my son, who shows me every day how much more there is to learn. I’m hoping that he’ll believe the same once he’s no longer a teenager...love ya son!

I am grateful for the help I received in the creation of this new work. Katherine V. Forrest supported me tremendously through a difficult rewrite and the editing process. My friend and high school buddy Suemereee kept the “school language” readable, and of course, Linda Hill and Spinsters Ink who continue to make a home for my writing.
“Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.”
—Rules for Teachers (1872)

“An employee is not wrongfully terminated if he is fired for being a homosexual.”
—Arizona Superior Court Judge in Blaine v. Golden State Container
(upheld by Arizona Court of Appeals, 1994)
Chapter One

2004

If she was fired, Faye Burton knew she could always get a job at that new place that had just opened, Starbuck’s. She’d spent her college years mixing coffee drinks long before employees were called baristas and soy lattés were fashionable.

She gazed out the expansive windows that surrounded her office at Cedar Hills Elementary School, watching the seventh and eighth graders change classes. As the principal she shouldered the responsibility of educating over one thousand students, supervising ninety-eight employees, coddling seven hundred different sets of parents—many of whom were involved in messy divorces—and managing a sixteen million dollar facility. And the rumor at the district office was that the new superintendent wanted her gone because she was gay.

She let out a deep breath and watched the students cross
the courtyard area. A few engaged in playful shoving, unable to keep their hands to themselves, and some boy-girl couples hugged before heading to class. It was only the fourth week of school and halos still hung over most of them. Although a few of the girls were questionably dressed for the one-hundred-and-five degree Phoenix heat, Faye found no reason to jump from her chair and run outside to impose discipline on any of the pre-teenagers.

They entered the buildings and she realized it was nearly ten o’clock—time for her first monthly meeting with the new superintendent, Dr. Bill Gleeson. She’d only met him twice, once at a meet-and-greet before the school year began and at their first administrative meeting.

She remembered the look on his face when she’d offered her hand after the assistant superintendent initially introduced them. His smile cracked slightly as if it was painful to touch her.

“Ms. Burton, I’m pleased to meet you,” he’d said woodenly. “Cedar Hills is a school capable of greatness. My secretary will schedule a meeting with you so that we can discuss my vision.”

She’d nodded and he’d walked away without another word. She knew what he wanted—higher test results. In the year she’d been there, she’d raised the test scores significantly but it wasn’t enough. The school’s lackluster performance had forced her predecessor’s resignation and she’d inherited a talented but unruly staff that made ridiculous demands and accusations, like the bizarre first-grade teacher who claimed the fax machine was racist. The road of change would take time but she wasn’t sure Bill Gleeson would wait. Cedar Hills was a school filled with the sons and daughters of lawyers and doctors, all of whom believed their children were geniuses bound for college.

She popped two antacid tablets and heard a knock at her door. Jonnie Clark stuck her head inside.

“Hey, is now an awful time?”

“It’s always a great time for you,” she said, instantly cheerful. “What’s up?”

Jonnie shut the door and plopped into a chair. She was an amazing school counselor and incredibly mature for thirty. Her body was lean from kickboxing and she often wore retro
Keeping Up Appearances

clothing like bell-bottom pants and knitted sweater vests. She always had a cause and she advertised them on the back of her beat-up Honda Civic.

“I need your help. It seems that an eighth-grade boy peed on a fourth grader.”

She threw up her hands. “What? Are you kidding? How did this happen? Were they messing around at the urinal?”

“Actually he was in the next stall. It’s kinda freaky…” She made an arch with her index finger and giggled. Faye joined her and they howled until they cried.

Jonnie clapped her hands. “Okay, enough. We’ve got to get serious. I need you to talk to…” She paused and snapped her fingers. “What’s his name?”

“Peeboy,” Faye said.

They laughed again. Jonnie took a stress ball from Faye’s desk and threw it at her. “C’mon, Faye. We’re serious now. This child’s been horribly violated.”

“You’re absolutely right. I’d die if someone peed on me.”

They went down the hall to Jonnie’s office and interviewed the whimpering fourth grader, determining that he could offer little as a witness. All he’d seen were large black canvas sneakers when he’d looked under the stall so he knew the kid was much older. He left and a sweet acrid scent filled the room. Jonnie thrust a paper in Faye’s direction.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a requisition for a case of air freshener and I’d better not hear any crap about it.”

Faye had just returned to her office when her radio squawked. “Office, I need a wheelchair in the gym, stat!”

“What’s going on, Coach?” she asked, bolting out the back door toward the gym.


Faye glanced over her shoulder and saw Nurse Chang hustling across the courtyard, pushing a wheelchair. Inside the gym a little girl with pigtails writhed on the floor, cradling her right arm. The rest of the class hovered nearby and her friends wailed in sympathy for their fallen classmate.

Faye said into the radio, “Front office, send Ms. Clark down
here immediately. I’ve got a room full of crying students.” She turned to Coach Fleming, a fifty-something bull-dyke with a pompadour hairstyle. “What happened?”

She shrugged with the complacency of a veteran teacher. “She was climbing the rope and lost her grip.” No other explanation was necessary.

As they wheeled the student back to the nurse’s office, Faye heard the ambulance in the distance. By the time they’d called the parent, the paramedics had arrived. Faye stepped out of the way and heard shouting.

Assistant Principal Pete Salinas burst into the lobby, followed by a screaming woman who quickly gained the attention of the other adults nearby. She waved a pink paper in her hand, which Faye knew was a disciplinary referral.

“You fucking spic! How dare you suspend my kid?”

Pete crossed his arms and stared her down. “Ma’am, this conversation is over. I will not tolerate such blatant racism.”

“I’m going to the district office, you stupid wetback! Let’s see if you have a job at four o’clock!”

The woman turned on her heel and nearly ran into Bill Gleeson, who stood like a tree. His neutral expression never changed as she huffed past him. He seemed not to notice her or the stretcher that flew out the door, surrounded by three paramedics. His gaze remained locked on Faye, who turned to Pete.

“I take it that didn’t go too well.”

Pete grinned and Faye saw the twinkle in his eye. He loved confrontation with unreasonable parents.

“I see you have company,” he said. “Have fun.”

Faye painted on her pleasant expression and greeted Gleeson. Once they were sequestered in her office she made a joke to lighten the mood.

“Well, Bill, you’ve just seen elementary school at its most interesting.”

Shit. I just called him Bill.

He withdrew his gold pen from his breast pocket and made some notes while she sat in the awkward silence, listening to the pen scratch against the paper.
“I assume this is an unusual morning, Ms. Burton.”
She chuckled. “Somewhat.”
“You seem to have more than most,” he said blandly.
She shifted in her seat. “What do you mean?”
He shuffled through some papers on the clipboard until he found one close to the bottom. “According to our records, my office has received *five* parent complaints since the beginning of the year and the union has filed an official grievance on behalf of a teacher about her evaluation from last year. Most important,” he said, withdrawing a memo, “Constance Richardson has called the state department of education to complain that Cedar Hills is prejudiced against her son Armour and trying to force him out because of his special needs. She’s demanding that his opportunities be expanded and that he be placed in a physical education class. She faxed this complaint to Andrea Loomis, our new special education director, and threatened to file it with the state and go to the media.”

Faye scanned the memo and shook her head. The back of her neck felt hot. “This is entirely baseless.”

He looked at her curiously. “Is it?”

“Yes,” she said, defensively. “Constance Richardson regularly makes our lives miserable, but A.J. as we call him, doesn’t even belong at Cedar Hills and certainly not in a P.E. class. He’s a danger to the campus,” she added.

Gleeson wrote down her statement on his pad but showed no reaction and eventually said, “I’ve asked our new special education director, Ms. Loomis, to visit with you about this situation. It needs to go away.”

“I wish it were that easy. Ms. Richardson is a high-powered attorney who’s never been told no.”

Gleeson didn’t respond and his gaze returned to his clipboard. “I’m confident Ms. Loomis can take care of this.”

He returned to scratching the paper and more silence ensued. She glanced around her office, suddenly wondering how many boxes she would need to pack her personal belongings. He checked a few more notes and cleared his throat.

“Do you have a response for the other complaints?”

“No. There will always be parents who don’t like the fact
that we hold their children accountable. Mr. Salinas has the unpleasant task of handling discipline and he is frequently the target of abuse.”

“Would you say Mr. Salinas is competent at his job?”

“Absolutely. He’s one of the best assistant principals that I’ve ever known.”

Gleeson checked his notes again. “Hmm. Well, he has more suspensions than any other AP and most of those complaints I mentioned before involve him. I’ve also found him to have a… how can I put this? A rather unpolished demeanor.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

He carefully set his pen down on the clipboard and faced her directly. He smoothed his silk tie, displaying his perfect manicure. “Ms. Burton, I’m going to get right to the point. I have concerns about the leadership of this school. While I do believe you and Mr. Salinas are competent educators, I’m not sure that you can effectively project the image that I feel is necessary to move Cedar Hills to the level of the other schools.”

She narrowed her eyes and held his gaze. He sat across from her in a dark blue suit that she imagined was tailor-made. There was not a lint ball visible and his tie was perfectly knotted. She didn’t dare look down at her thirty dollar cotton pants or her Sears button-down shirt. And she knew that if Pete appeared at the door, Gleeson would automatically frown at his rumpled pants, stained tie and disheveled hair that always seemed to fall in his face. Clearly she and Pete would never win best-dressed awards.

“If that’s your impression then I welcome your suggestions to improve the image of Cedar Hills. I’m sure Mr. Salinas would as well.”

He nodded once, his chin lowering just enough to make the gesture visible, and then asked to see some classrooms.

They walked in and out of the various wings, Gleeson scribbling on his pad and ignoring Faye.

As they stood in Ruby Taylor’s art class, watching the seventh-and-eighth grade students create watercolor paintings, she calculated her monthly bills, reviewing the steps to make a double-shot espresso. He was out to get her and if Constance
Richardson filed a complaint with the state, he would gladly provide the moving boxes for her.

Once they’d left the art class Gleeson turned to her, his finger pointed, as if he was about to begin a lecture. A shrill cry tore through the hallway. The door to the art room burst open and two figures poured out, a boy holding a colorful picture and a girl chasing after him. In a second Faye realized what was happening and stepped out of the child’s path, but Gleeson, the interloper, remained rooted in place. Before Faye could pull him aside, the yellows, reds and greens of the watercolor pressed against his powder-blue shirt and the boy crashed to the floor.

“Oh, my God,” the girl wailed.

Gleeson stared at the mess on his chest and looked at Faye, his expression unforgiving.

Faye turned her gaze to the girl in black jeans and a Melissa Etheridge T-shirt. She was rail-thin and her uneven spiky haircut was definitely a home job.

“Pandy, what happened?”

“He got upset because Ms. Taylor said it was time to cleanup.”

All three of them stared at the boy, who, although he was only a year younger than Pandy, was much smaller than the other seventh graders. Pandy held him in place and he stared at his ruined painting. She whispered to him and he nodded. When he looked up, he strained his neck dramatically to see Bill Gleeson’s face, which must have seemed a mile away.

“Dr. Gleeson, I’d like you to meet Pandy Webber, one of our student mentors, and this is her mentee, A.J. Richardson.”

Gleeson shot her a knowing glare but said nothing.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Burton,” Pandy said. “He ran out so fast.”

“It’s okay, Pandy. I’m sure you did your best to stop him.”

A.J. laughed and pointed at Gleeson’s shirt, the wet paint reminding Faye of a bad Picasso. He threw the picture in the air and cried, “Fasty native!”
We hope you enjoyed this Bella Appetizer.