

From Chapter 2

Catherine Myers, who had accompanied Minerva on the trip to Texas, arrived at the Godfreys' house the next morning, ready to escort her boss to the airport and back to New York. A few minutes from the house, Minerva abruptly instructed their driver to make a detour. When Catherine asked the reason, Minerva waved her off and looked out the window, obviously agitated.

The limousine turned into the parking lot of Aegis Academy, and the driver eased up to the front entrance. Minerva, who routinely spoke to high-level personalities and powerful boards and committees and whose decisions influenced thousands of lives, sat motionless. Frozen in a fear that made no sense to her, she gazed at the front entrance to the school and wondered why she felt compelled to visit. She replayed her conversation with Henry, recalling that she had thanked him for his invitation and had committed to nothing.

Minerva knew, rationally, that this impromptu tour would be no worse than countless other visits she had endured – to museums, hospitals, and schools. Yet, she felt a knot of fear in her chest. On the verge of instructing the driver to exit the parking lot and proceed to the airport where her jet awaited, she glanced once more at the entrance. She noticed the coat of arms above the door with the name of the school inscribed below it.

Suddenly she made the connection that had eluded her the evening before, when Henry had mentioned the name of the school. Her fear subsided and a shiver of insight emerged in its place.

“Park the car.”

As she and Catherine walked through the doors, Minerva felt a strange sense of familiarity despite never having set foot on the campus. The evening before, her grand nephew had only mentioned the modern meaning of “aegis.” She had decided to look it up before going to bed and found that, in ancient Greece, the *Aegis* referred to the breastplate or shield of Athena or Zeus. She must have been too tired to see it then, but now it was clear. Minerva, her very own mythological namesake, was the Roman incarnation of Athena, goddess of wisdom, courage, law and justice. Henry’s school, then, if she were to claim a little poetic license, was a sanctuary under her protection.

Despite the surge of confidence brought about by a symbolic connection with the school, Minerva noticed her relief that the students were all in class, and that the hallways were quiet and empty. Peering ahead and seeing a sign that read *Administration*, she took a deep breath, exhaled with determination, and walked forward. Catherine flanked her silently. They entered the office and Minerva felt the quiet industriousness of an administrative staff conducting the nuts and bolts business of a school.

“Good morning. My name is Minerva Bennett. I am here to visit my grand nephew’s classroom.”

The receptionist looked up from her computer. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I’m afraid you’ve arrived one day early. Grandparents’ Day is *tomorrow*.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. My nephew is actually a math teacher ... Henry Godfrey. I’m visiting from New York City and he assured me that I would be welcome to visit today – before your rush of guests tomorrow.”

This explanation satisfied the receptionist and she typed up two visitor name tags. As the women clipped these to their lapels, a slender middle-aged man with too much energy bounded into the office and surveyed the situation. He wore grey flannel pants, a pale yellow oxford shirt, a blue blazer, and a striped tie – just what one might expect of an administrator in a prep school on the affluent side of town.

“Good morning, ladies. Welcome to Aegis Academy. I’m Gordon Hooper, the middle school principal.” He seemed to have put two and two together even before walking into the office, and he continued as if the meeting had been on the schedule for weeks. “I understand you are here to visit Henry Godfrey’s classroom, and, time permitting, to take a look around.”

“Evidently. I see my nephew has tipped you off. Does his confidence get in the way of his teaching?” she smiled wryly at the principal and then turned to Catherine. “What did I tell you?”

“Don’t be too hard on him,” said Hooper. “Henry knows I’m a huge fan of classical music. He heard me going on and on the other day about Dallas’s new music hall. He bragged about how you were the driving force behind that, and that you happened to be his great aunt.” Minerva nodded, suppressing a smile.

“Henry drew me aside just after our morning assembly and told me there was an outside chance that you might grace us with a visit before returning to New York. I’m glad you decided to take him up on his invitation.”

With that, the three of them entered the main corridor and headed toward the classrooms. Hooper explained that the students were either in class or in study hall, and that they had roughly twenty minutes before the halls would fill rapidly with middle school children. Minerva paused in front of a glass-covered presentation case in which student art work was displayed. In an adjacent case, there were athletic and academic trophies and plaques.

“How old is the school, Mr. Hooper?” Catherine Myers asked.

“In the fall, we celebrated our 20th Anniversary. In the first year, there were only three levels ... pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade.”

“How high does it go now?” asked Minerva, squinting at some of the plaques.

Donning her reading glasses, she read the names on several national mathematics awards.

“We now run from pre-K through the twelfth grade. The school grew steadily, extending one grade level each year, but after it reached the eighth grade, it stayed at that level for several years. Lobbying by the parent population eventually convinced us to continue adding one grade each year. This year will produce our fourth graduating class.”

The women followed Hooper as he took them by the Middle School Library, the computer labs, and the Commons, where they held larger assemblies. As they approached a broad stairwell, Hooper veered to offer them the elevator. Exiting into an open area on the second floor, the guests were shown more student work in display cases and grade level bulletin boards.

While Catherine was admiring clay artwork and science projects, Minerva became absorbed in some history essays written by eighth graders. She could hardly believe the maturity and the level of presentation. How could fourteen-year-olds grasp

the serious topics about which their lessons had been oriented? How could their teachers elicit such responses?

A short time later, the bell rang and students soon flooded the hallways. The plan was to wait safely out of the flow and to enter Henry's classroom before the next rush of students. Though unsettled by the untamed rambunctiousness of the students, Minerva was invigorated by their spontaneity.

She watched the drama of a crowd of sixth graders, super-charged and buoyant, enter the classroom. As they made their way to their assigned seats, the students carried out high-speed conversations via high fives, pokes, and the faintest hint of future hugs.

Minerva and Catherine, seated in the back corner, studied the room. High on the walls, just below the ceiling panels, tacked around the entire room, was the longest poster they had ever seen. It displayed a list of seemingly random digits. Placards dangled from numerous hooks embedded in the ceiling panels with long abstract words printed on them – some of which were mathematical terms, some of which were philosophical. Minerva was intrigued by the fact that there were several words she had never seen.

Meanwhile, the students appeared anxious for the grown-ups to see what they were up to, and they exuded a sense of proud ownership in the displayed work.

“Hey, everybody, get in your seats. Here comes Mr. Godfrey!” called out a girl who didn't mind showing off some responsibility to her classmates.

“Good morning!” greeted Henry Godfrey as he entered and pulled the door to. The bells rang throughout the building, and he let out a mock sigh, “Whew, made it! Just in time.”

Suddenly noticing the small gathering of familiar faces in the back, he smiled and called out, “Holy cow – we have honored guests!” The kids laughed.

Henry walked over, greeted the visitors, and turned to his students.

“Allow me, mathematical wonders of Aegis Academy, to introduce to you my great aunt, Mrs. Minerva Bennett, of New York City.” He motioned with a dramatic sweep of his hand. “And this is Ms. Catherine Myers, her colleague and partner in adventure.” Another broad sweep of his hand evoked a spontaneous smile from Myers, surprised by the attention.

Standing next to the chalkboard, Henry looked out on his students and grinned. “Let’s begin with a few pages from the sacred text.” He reached for a battered hardbound edition of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, faded post-it notes protruding from every direction to mark his favorite passages, and started to read. The kids giggled with delight, and a few of them glanced back at the adults to see what they might think of this unusual warm up.

Minerva studied the interaction of student and teacher, allowing herself not to be too concerned that she didn’t understand what an “infinite improbability drive” was, or that she didn’t really get the importance of “always knowing where your towel is.” The children were obviously entranced, and that further endeared her young nephew to Minerva.

After about five minutes, Henry closed the book and whispered, “Don’t panic!” It must have been a private joke because the students laughed.

“Okay, now that we’ve had a little metaphysical diversion, let’s wake up our calculators. Let’s do some mental math and show our visitors what we can do without

picking up pencil and paper.” Most of the kids eagerly sat up, and some of them grasped their desks for focus.

“53 ... reverse the digits ... divide by 7 ... cube it ... add the digits ... take the cube root.” Henry paused, and half the class waved their hands in the air.

“Corinna?”

“Two,” she answered confidently.

“Excellent,” he said, and then to the others, “Who else got it?” Most of the kids kept their hands up. “Way to go. Okay, let’s turn it up a bit. Ready?”

“1 ... plus 2 ... divided by 3 ... minus 4 ... times 5 ... square it ... multiply the digits ... raise it to the fourth power ... add the digits.” Fewer hands, but several squirmed with confidence.

“Bradley?”

“Seven,” he answered.

“Very good! That one was tricky.” After two more, Henry moved on to the main lesson, which involved proportions and percents.

With fifteen minutes remaining in the period, Minerva considered heading back to her limo. She was about to leave when Henry transitioned once again, inviting a couple of students to read aloud. The class had been assigned to write a two-page story about a favorite number, and to give this number a personality within a community of living numbers.

“Mimi, would you like to read yours?” The girl nodded and walked up to the front of the room, nervous but willing.

“If I were a number,” she began, “I would be One Million. One Million is a powerful and important number because it’s a power of ten, and everybody knows that our whole civilization is based on ten. The prime factorization is 2 to the 6th power times 5 to the 6th power. You can see it has strong doubling power with those 2s. It also has a heavy dose of the artistic energy and personal strength of 5.

“As One Million, I would be the head of the Pentagon or maybe the President. With one followed by six zeroes, I demonstrate leadership and strength. Zero is powerful since it can annihilate any other number, and I have a team of these right next to me. They will do what I tell them to do.”

Mimi continued to the second page. When she finished, everybody clapped. Minerva was floored. Something had shifted. She now looked at the classroom, the students, the teacher differently – as if she had just tuned into a frequency she didn’t know existed.

It was a clever lesson, and this twelve-year-old girl had knocked it out of the park. Minerva stared off in the distance as she struggled with a memory ... a myth. She looked up distractedly and realized the girl had sat down and that another student had been invited to read.

“If I were a number,” a boy named Steven began, “I would be Pi. Pi is a very special number that helps people calculate things that have to do with circles. It is the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter. My number allows scientists and engineers to build and send spacecraft to the Moon and to Outer Space. I am also helpful in measuring round objects like stadiums and towers and circular parts of engines.

“All through history, people have been trying to calculate me with more and more accuracy. The Bible says that I am roughly equal to 3, and the ancient Greeks thought that I was equal to $3 \frac{1}{8}$. But philosophers and mathematicians were surprised to find out that I can never be described exactly in decimal form. I have infinite digits after the 3 and the decimal point, but most people use a handy approximation of 3.14 or $\frac{22}{7}$.”

As Steven read, Minerva reflected on the characteristics that defined the boy’s point of view, in fact the point of view of the students in general. While children could of course be silly and foolish, in other words childish, they could also be playful, hopeful, and wondrous.

Walking the hallways, meeting a few teachers, and visiting this classroom had thrust her backward in time to the early days of her own journey of understanding. But something bothered her. Annoyance turned to anxiety, and she imagined the uncushioned chairs were to blame. It was time to go.

Nodding to Catherine, Minerva made it clear that she had had enough. Hooper helped her rise from her chair, and the three moved toward the door. Henry paused the reader, and he walked over and said goodbye to his great aunt.

Rather than backtrack to the main entrance, Gordon Hooper led them toward the Lower School building. Aware that they were taking a different route, Minerva met Hooper’s eyes in a direct and unambiguous manner. This was not her first hayride.

“Mr. Hooper, I see that my tour is being extended. I know your reasons – I’m used to it.”

“Guilty as charged, Mrs. Bennett,” he acknowledged as he came to a halt. “I shouldn’t have presumed to continue the show, so to speak. My apologies.” Extending

his hand back toward the administration offices, he invited them to reverse their direction in order to return directly to the limousine.

“Hold on,” she said. “Let’s proceed to your targets, but I must warn you. I have about twenty minutes before my attention will lapse altogether.”

“Understood,” he said, inclining his head. “My targets, as you so aptly called them, are the classrooms of two of our brightest and most gifted teachers in the Lower School. Henry and his Middle School colleagues are able to work their magic due largely to the efforts of the elementary teachers who set the kids on paths that are, by generally accepted standards, impossible.”

They walked in silence as they exited the Middle School building, along a covered walk, to an older building. Hooper explained that the Lower School children were presently at lunch and recess, which is why the third grade pod was empty and quiet.

Although the classrooms were well-furnished with smart boards and computers, Minerva wondered what outstanding results might be observed without actually seeing the teachers and students in action. Nevertheless, she browsed the desks and scanned the bulletin boards, which were covered with student work. Catherine Myers did the same.

Principal Hooper added brief bits of commentary here and there about integrated curricula and vertical development from one grade level to the next, but Minerva listened distantly. She was unconsciously edging back toward her default belief that she would find nothing extraordinary.

She stood in front of a wall decorated along the theme of *Charlotte's Web*. Assignments displayed were short stories, summaries, poems, and illustrations. Some were typed. Some were written in pencil.

One paper caught Minerva's eye. It was a book report.

"I liked Charlotte's Web," it began, "because a cuddly pig and a clever spider show how animals can live together. The setting is an old fashion American farm and it was fun to meet different barnyard animals.

"Charlotte is wise but the big animals ignore her. They think she is ugly. Wilbur is a spring pig and he is lonely for his mother. He likes Charlotte because she is nice to him. They treat each other with respect. They taught the rest of the animals lessons. Like how to be kind and how they are all lucky to be alive and how they can help each other.

"Sometimes people make fun of me. Charlotte taught me how I can ignore mean people and be friendly anyway. I want to be an author like E. B. White when I grow up."

A sudden constriction in her chest took Minerva by surprise. Her breathing stopped and her vision narrowed. Tears welled up and she shut her eyes. A face beckoned from the past.

Overcome by a confusing mix of emotions, she reached for a tissue in her purse and opened her eyes slowly. The stinging of salty tears and the quivering of her lips embarrassed her, yet she longed for the discomfort to continue. She had stumbled into an unexpected communion with her late sister, her closest and dearest friend for most of her life.

As Minerva dried her tears, her vision cleared and she stared at the student's name at the bottom of the notebook paper: Mary Catherine. Barely believing in coincidences or

miracles, she couldn't deny that this was a powerful omen. Like a spear through her heart, this had reopened a wound that she never admitted to having in the first place, and she suddenly knew it was connected to her earlier agitation. There was a message in this child's writing, beyond the classroom, beyond the moral of that particular story, something bigger and more profound than she could wrap her mind around in the moment.

Minerva turned solemnly and began walking out the door. She sought the open air in order to start breathing again, in order to allow herself time to come back to the present in which she would be expected to converse again. For a few more minutes, though, she held tightly to the treasure that had been given her: a heart connection to her sister ... and her spirit.