

# One Body in Stone

## Nonen Titi

“Please, get me out of here, Miss Diana, or strange things will happen!”

The child’s pleading voice had frightened her and Diana had promised to do whatever it took to get her released from the cold dark attic closet.

“Solitary”, the principal called it. “To ensure that each child knows their place and how to be obedient.”

But that was not what the staff said. “To ensure the reputation of our school as the only one to produce one hundred percent perfect citizens.” Nobody who’d attended the school had any citizen points against them. “And nobody ever will, so you had better get used to it, or you’ll end up in solitary as well,” the other teachers had warned her.

Solitary lasted a day, at most, but the child in the cupboard above Diana’s classroom had been there a full day and night already. Everybody must hear her moan, but nobody showed it, not even the kids in the room. Every child and every teacher here walked in line, did their work, kept a straight face, and never even smiled, not until they were released after twelve years; not until they had been given their promised position in the aristocracy.

Diana shivered. Had she known what went on at this school, she would have never accepted the position, but they’d not told her... and she’d not asked. Even if she’d known, coming to this country, that citizen points were part of the culture, she’d somehow assumed that schools were as she remembered them. She’d ignored Dad’s concern about her accepting the job. “There are other places that need teachers.”

“I need experience to be hired anywhere, Dad, and I won’t get experience if I don’t get hired. I have no choice. It’s only for a year. I’ll manage, and I am not a citizen, only a visitor, so I won’t get points.”

“But a boarding school? Will you even get time off to get to see the country?”

“I’m sure there will be holidays and weekends,” she’d answered. She’d not told him that the contract didn’t mention those. After all, she’d trained for four years to become a teacher, and she had to get on the ladder somehow. If that meant swallowing her pride and her words for a year, she’d do it.

But it had turned out to be a lot harder than she'd thought. It wasn't just her words she needed to swallow, but the way she looked and her posture. She'd made a small drawing of the three monkeys in her diary: don't see, don't hear, don't speak... to remind her. But she'd sneaked up to the attic this morning and talked to the child, promised that she'd get her released as soon as breakfast was over.

She'd felt some sympathy from the very start for the fragile little girl with her dark blue eyes. Erica was as new to the school as Diana, and had never bothered anybody, except that she persistently used her wrong hand to put over her heart during the morning obedience pledge. Before every meal, the whole assembly stood and held hands to give thanks to their school, after which they had to make a pledge to the flag, for which they let go of the person on their right, not their left. Erica's 'wrong' hand caused confusion in the other children, and disturbed the ceremony.

The principal, a pale, prim woman in her early fifties, who'd no doubt been in this institution way longer than was needed to make somebody forget that there was a real world out there, had dragged her out of the assembly yesterday morning, and put her in solitary, after which she had lectured all of them on what happened to unteachable creatures who were a danger to society.

Diana had tried to plead for the child, last night at dinner, but the principal had replied that the moral education of the children was not her concern. "I pay you to teach arithmetic; I suggest you concern yourself with *that*," had been the icy reply.

Diana suspected it was because of that plea that Erica had been left in the attic overnight.

She'd gone to bed, told herself that she should stay in line; that it was only for a year and she'd be out of here. But she'd not been able to sleep and had sneaked up to make her promise before the morning light. She'd struggled to swallow her breakfast, too aware of Erica's empty spot. She'd only managed because of the looks the principal gave her, but those had stopped her raising the issue again. And now she could not concentrate on the lesson. Each time the child moaned she lost her train of thought, because she'd promised. – Why had she promised? The children eyed her each time she automatically glanced at the ceiling, but they said nothing. They knew better than to talk out of place. Most of them probably knew what it was like in that cupboard up there.

After class, Diana hesitated at the attic stairs, aware of the intensity of Erica's lament, but she turned around and went to lunch instead. If she interfered, the punishment would only get extended. There was nothing Diana could do to help Erica. It was out of her hands.

But at dinner, the little girl was still absent. Like before every meal, they all stood around the tables, holding hands, saying their obedience pledge, but this time, Diana did not join; instead she made a wordless apology to Erica. “I am sorry. I will; I will come.”

When she felt the pinch of the principal’s clammy hand around her own, a sure sign her dissent had been noticed, Diana quickly joined in saying the words. The principal stood on her left. Diana tried to picture the look on the woman’s face if she raised her own left hand instead of her right one. Maybe she’d get fired and extradited; maybe she didn’t care.

Trying not to show it, Diana glanced through her lashes at the staff and children engaged in pledging their obedience to the nation that kept them prisoner. Something was different in the room, a presence of something, a thin mist, resembling the fog that naturally descended over the school at sunset. The mist hung around Erica’s place; a presence to mark the child’s absence.

The bony hand of the principal tightened around Diana’s fingers again. Diana looked down and concentrated on the words, until she started feeling cold and a restlessness in the bodies around her. A murmur of voices had her glance up again, but she saw nothing; the mist had thickened and filled the room. Diana felt herself struggle to breathe; she could not see or move and it frightened her.

She tried to convince herself that she was dreaming, one of those where you know you’re in a dream and have to find something to wake you up deliberately, but the eerie silence, devoid of voices or breathing, trembled when her own voice gasped at the sight of Erica’s face, formed of the thick fog, staring down at her from the other side of the table. But it was an old face, almost transparent and wrinkled like a wad of paper, all except her eyes, which were those of the child, staring at Diana, as if to say, “I thought you promised to help me.”

“I tried,” Diana whispered, trying to convince herself.

“It’s too late,” the face said, and disappeared.

Simultaneously, Diana felt the fog lift. She started to feel warm again and took a deep breath. Relieved, she looked around, where the others still stood around the table; all still holding hands; all grey, wide-eyed, open-mouthed and stiff; all were broken, torn, damaged, as if somebody had taken a machete and hacked into them, just enough so they didn’t fall over, but they were turned to stone.

Rather soberly, Diana concluded that they were all dead. That the mist – Erica – must have killed them, all of them but her; Diana had been spared, somehow. She felt the water well up in her eyes; she could go home now, after all.

She tried to release her hand from the grip of the principal on her left, and that of one of her colleagues on her right, but the two bodies, now made of stone, didn't give. She pulled and kicked at them, but nothing happened. She started rocking them, so they'd fall over, then shoving, but they were as if bolted to the floor.

Suddenly terrified, she screamed, but the sound didn't carry, somehow reflected from the solid stone walls. The window revealed the garden of the school in bloom, the trees waving at her, a bird hopping from branch to branch, but it couldn't see her. She tried calling in a calmer voice, "Is there anybody here? Is there anybody still alive in here?"

No answer came.

She tried again, all night, and the next day, hoping that there would be somebody, somewhere who was still alive; somebody who could hear her, but it remained silent... for ever.

Weeks later, after an official was alerted that the monthly report was missing, did they find them. But nobody could understand why that one, decomposing body, was not damaged... and nobody ever found the little skeleton in the attic cupboard.