

after this year, with negative recommendations in his file. But minor sarcasm is the most he's done to advance that cause. And, besides, Tony has hardly entered the risk zone. The principal's a hockey nut who, the story goes, went into administration so that he'd have more clout in the local hockey hierarchy and more time to meddle in hockey organizations. Tony could rename his course Canadian Hockey History and have his permanent certificate gift-wrapped by the principal.

Tony straightens up in the doorway and is mid-stride toward his desk when Mona's voice lassoes him from behind.

"Mrs. Broadmore wants to meet the new teacher," the secretary says.

"Why?" Tony groans, feeling like he's been bucked off the horse he'd spent the last hour trying to mount. And then he winces at how Grasmere Valley, which still has its share of the cowboy mentality, has already infiltrated the imagery of his Vancouver-proud brain. He's already been invited by some of his students to go riding, and firmly declined.

"Mr. Brancato?" Mona has her insistent look.

"What?"

"I said, since you asked, Mrs. Broadmore makes a point of personally acquainting herself with every new teacher,"

Cleo Broadmore is Chairman of the Grasmere Valley School Board.

"Will I live to regret this?" He grins, but she doesn't grin back. In his first six weeks at the school he hasn't yet made a dent in Mona Stravich's wry and stolid governance of the main office.

"It's a formality. You shake her hand, exchange pleasantries. Most survive."

"Some haven't?"

"This isn't Vancouver."

"Really? I was wondering who took all the high-rises and martini bars away this morning."

"She's from Calgary."

"I'll remember not to insult the Stampede."

Tony notices a small dent in her cast-iron surface.

"Mrs. Broadmore has no use for cowboys, phoney or real."

He remembers that Mona and her husband used to have a small horse ranch up the valley, but they lost it, and for years now she'd been the school secretary and he looked after the irrigation on two large farms. If they'd been able to hang onto their ranch a few more years, they'd be rich now. The new owners unloaded the ranch to a consortium of developers who transformed most of it into a golf course and resort condomini-

ums. The Broadmores were-- are-- the major shareholders of that consortium.

Mona Stravich would never have told him this. Elmer Steeves, Bluenoser and principal, is an uninhibited source of information about the staff, board members, and parents. He is scrupulously discrete about their students, but no one else. There is precious little turnover in the staff, and since nearly everyone else in the staff room has heard his repertoire several times over, the principal feels revitalized when he can hire a new member of his audience, a curious and faithful listener during the newcomer's probationary year as hostage. Tony didn't have to be warned that his own life would enrich Elmer's folklore.

"You might as well tell him your scandalous habits now," said Mona. "Damage control. Feed him your dirt and avoid unpleasant surprises."

Tony quickly learned on his own, before Mona or any other teacher warned him, that Elmer's information wasn't always reliable. Especially if Elmer had been sampling his homemade wine when he went home for lunch.