



In Loco Parentis

Caitie Cotton

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Setting	
Mountain Academy, a secondary boarding school (ages 14-18) in the United States	
Primary Characters	
<p>Zoey Amberton - Grade 11 student</p> <p>Mr. Sam Logan - Science teacher; dorm parent; Mountain Academy’s Disciplinary Committee (MADC) member</p> <p>Trevor Jones - Grade 11 student; Head Prefect; MADC student representative</p> <p>Ms. Coughlin - Zoey’s advisor</p>	<p>Mr. Roland Brooks - Dean of Students, and Chair of Mountain Academy’s Disciplinary Committee</p> <p>Mr. Stewart Smith - English teacher; MADC member</p> <p>Peyton Tansey - Grade 10 student; MADC student representative</p> <p>Mr. Amberton - Zoey’s father</p>

“Thank you all for joining me this evening as we consider junior Zoey Amberton’s case,” Dean of Students Roland Brooks greeted his fellow members of Mountain Academy’s Disciplinary Committee (MADC). It was a warm May evening and the boarding school campus felt strangely quiet, with seniors already graduated and younger students busily studying for finals. Arrayed around the table were two additional teachers: Sam Logan, a third-year science teacher and dorm parent, and Stewart Smith, a Mountain Academy institution who had taught English literature for 38 years. The MADC also included two student representatives. Junior Trevor Jones served in his capacity as newly elected Head Prefect; he was the first full-scholarship student ever to earn that coveted distinction. The final representative was sophomore Peyton Tansey, a star soccer player chosen by her classmates to serve on the MADC.

Although the Head of School would ultimately decide Zoey’s fate, the MADC was responsible for adjudicating almost all disciplinary infractions, and their recommendations would carry significant weight. A relatively small but prestigious independent boarding school, Mountain Academy organized itself around its mission to promote excellence in academics, community engagement, and character among its student body. Every student—and family—was required to sign Mountain Academy’s strict Honor Code upon initial enrollment and at the beginning of every subsequent school year. The MADC was known to take the Honor Code very seriously.

“OK, as you know, tonight’s hearing focuses on two Honor Code infractions,” Mr. Brooks began. “Zoey has admitted to lying to her dorm parent and to drinking alcohol off campus. Are there any questions before we begin?”

“This is my first case,” Peyton said with an apologetic smile. “Could you all remind me what the consequences might be for Zoey?”

“We have some discretion in what we recommend,” Mr. Logan explained, “but given the number of serious infractions here, we’ll need to consider expulsion. Both dishonesty and alcohol use are possible grounds for dismissal.”

Peyton’s eyes widened.

“In a minute we’ll be hearing from Zoey and her advisor, Ms. Coughlin,” Mr. Brooks continued. “By the meeting’s end, we’ll need a recommendation for the Head of School about whether or not Zoey should remain a part of our community. Any questions?”

Hearing none, Mr. Brooks opened the committee room’s inlaid walnut door to welcome in Zoey and Ms. Coughlin. Zoey shuffled in with her head down. Mr. Brooks motioned to two empty chairs at the far end of the table.

“Thank you both for being here. We’re going to start with your prepared comments, Zoey,” said Mr. Brooks.

Zoey nodded her head and uncrumpled a piece of printer paper she had carried into the room with her. “To the members of the Discipline Committee,” she started, voice quaking slightly:

Thank you for taking the time to consider my case. Last week after the senior graduation ceremony, me and four friends left campus, got some alcohol, and went to my family’s cabin. We got back to campus late for study hours, and my dorm parent could tell that we had been drinking. I’m sorry for this. I know it was irresponsible.

I want nothing more than to stay at school. My parents are in the middle of a divorce, and neither of their houses has felt as much like home as being here. I don’t mean to make excuses, but I just wanted to let you all know that I wasn’t thinking very clearly, and I promise I can be a better community member. Thank you.

Her eyes watering, Zoey folded her remarks into her pocket. Ms. Coughlin gently passed her a pack of tissues.

“Thanks, Zoey,” said Mr. Brooks. “Committee Members, you may now begin asking your questions.”

“I’m a little confused,” Trevor began. Though he and Zoey weren’t close friends, they were in the same physics lab and both played lacrosse. “We aren’t allowed to sign off campus without our parents’ permission. How did you get off campus without being stopped?”

“Um,” Zoey began, taking a shaky breath, “I had my dad call and say that we were leaving with him. He told my dorm parent that he was coming to take us to the cabin at 1 pm. So we were able to just sign out, and then we left in Jane’s car.”

Indeed, Zoey’s father had played an important role in helping the girls get off campus. Mr. Brooks had actually spoken to him on the phone that morning. Mr. Amberton insisted that it was his business to discipline Zoey for what took place at the family cabin, which he characterized as “kids being kids.” And he not-so-casually mentioned that the Ambertons always made substantial contributions to the Annual Fund on top of paying full tuition—revenue he was *sure* the school wouldn’t want to lose.

At the same time, Zoey did seem to be the plan’s mastermind. Not only did she provide the alcohol and the cabin, but text messages the school reviewed had also revealed that she had worked out the details – from asking her father to lie for them to how to avoid getting caught being drunk once they were back on campus.

“Zoey, you’ve broken quite a few rules here,” Mr. Logan said solemnly. “Which are you most sorry for?”

Zoey replied quickly. “Oh, the drinking, definitely. It’s illegal—we could have gotten in trouble with the police.”

Peyton asked the next question with a gentle smile. The two girls lived in the same dorm, Brinley, and played soccer together. “What are your favorite parts about being at this school?”

Zoey's face lit up. "I really love living in Brinley with all of my friends—you know it's the best dorm, Peyton! I'm an only child, so being here with everyone is such a nice change. I also really love playing hockey and lacrosse. I guess that has to do with being with a group of people, too."

Mr. Brooks shot Ms. Coughlin a look. Of all the adults present, they understood Zoey's situation the best. Since their separation, Zoey's parents seemed more eager to score points in their custody battle than to take care of her. Both had moved out of Zoey's childhood home, and during school breaks she flew back and forth between parents who now lived on opposite coasts and badmouthed each other constantly. After the drinking incident, it had taken the administration days just to track down and notify Mrs. Amberton, who was staying at an exclusive retreat in the Caribbean. And neither teacher had much faith in the supervision that Mr. Amberton was providing Zoey at home, even when he wasn't traveling for business. Mr. Brooks had little doubt that Zoey was getting far more care and attention at Mountain Academy than she did in either of her homes; he was concerned about the social-emotional ramifications of dismissing a student whose home life was so challenging

The next questioner was Mr. Smith. "Zoey, can you tell me about the thing you've done at school that you're the most proud of and the thing you're least proud of? Other than these events, of course."

"Well," Zoey started, "I'm probably most proud of my grades. I haven't always been a great student, but I've definitely been working harder lately. Oh! And winning New Englands with the hockey team. That was great."

"That was a game for the ages," Mr. Smith enthused.

"For what I'm least proud of," Zoey continued, "well...I guess I regret that in the past I have kind of taken this place for granted. I like it here way more than my last school and sometimes I forget how great we have it here."

"Zoey," Mr. Logan asked, "I have a question as a dorm parent, thinking about the students under my care. How do you think you've hurt the larger school community? If we keep you here, what would it say to the other students about the school's values?"

Zoey paused. "Well, I'll be a senior in a few days. Breaking rules now isn't the same. I guess me and my friends really didn't set a good example for the younger kids. But what would it say about the school? Maybe that you take the time to consider all the things that kids are dealing with...like family stuff. And that you give kids second chances."

The committee thanked Zoey, who left the room. Next, the committee would hear from Ms. Coughlin, who was given the chance to speak as Zoey's advisor.

"Thanks for being here, everyone. I won't try to sugarcoat what Zoey's done. She's broken numerous school rules – big ones. And I also want to acknowledge that Zoey isn't really her own best advocate. When you asked her about what rule she broke, Sam"—speaking to Mr. Logan—"I wished she had stopped for a moment to consider what her lying says about how she views her community responsibilities. But Zoey sees things as black and white; because drinking is illegal, it's the worst offense."

Ms. Coughlin took a deep breath and continued. "I think the Committee *must* take into account the role Zoey's father played in these events. I find it really difficult to think of kicking Zoey out of school for actions that her father facilitated and even encouraged. Those girls never could have left campus without his help."

“That’s true,” Mr. Brooks conceded. “But this isn’t Zoey’s first major offense. She was in my office in September, after her Snapchat post mocking her classmate went viral here. Her father didn’t play a role in that.”

“But to be fair,” Ms. Coughlin clarified, “she had just learned about the divorce. And she confessed to that offense right away.”

“It’s true,” Mr. Brooks confirmed. “She was incredibly upset. She feared her mother might move her to a school on the West Coast, following her move out there, and she acted out. Given Zoey’s swift apology and her classmate’s forgiveness, we didn’t take the incident to this group at that time. But I think it must weigh into our decision now.”

“I *still* believe we should take Zoey’s extenuating circumstances into account now, despite that past mistake,” Ms. Coughlin emphasized. “She has forged strong bonds with adults here—myself included—and school is undoubtedly the best place for her right now. Yes, she has made mistakes. But given her recent progress and her home life, I think she deserves the opportunity to prove herself again.”

Mr. Brooks thanked Ms. Coughlin as she left the room, and the Committee began their deliberation. Mr. Logan jumped in immediately.

“I’d like to start by pointing out that Zoey broke multiple, major school rules. I’ve seen other students dismissed for less,” he emphasized. “We need to send a strong message to our school community that these kinds of behaviors are not tolerated here.”

“Well,” Peyton began hesitantly, “I know she lied to get off campus and they were late returning, but they didn’t drink *on* campus. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“We have clear policies about drinking *on and off* campus,” Mr. Brooks reminded her. “We do have to think about what messages we’re sending the rest of the school if we allow Zoey to stay. Our school values community and integrity. Plus, this isn’t Zoey’s first dust-up with the rulebook. The bullying incident from the fall is a big part of why we seriously need to consider dismissal.”

“But dismissal is so harsh,” Peyton insisted. “Maybe she could just take some time away, spend the fall semester out west with her mom and then come back? She’d miss the soccer season and the start of hockey—that might be punishment enough!”

“It’s *not* punishment enough, Peyton,” Mr. Logan corrected, albeit gently. “Zoey’s already gotten a second chance. I don’t think she should have another one.”

Trevor leaned forward. “I really like Zoey, but I have to agree with Mr. Logan. I’m sorry about the divorce, but Zoey’s not the only student here who has problems at home. I’m worried that if we don’t stick to the rules, other students who are dealing with their challenges without breaking school rules will feel like she’s getting special treatment because of who her family is.”

Mr. Smith sighed, and with his characteristic blunt theatricality, added, “Trevor, the thing is that ‘who Zoey’s family is’ *does* matter. The Ambertons make massive yearly donations to our scholarship fund. We lose them, we lose student scholarships, plain and simple.”

Trevor sank into his seat, taken aback. “I didn’t realize that.”

Mr. Logan shook his head. “Stewart, we always talk about ‘admitting the whole family.’ We need to think about what it means to have a parent in our school community who doesn’t respect our values—regardless of their means.”

“But it’s Zoey we’d be dismissing, not her dad,” Peyton insisted. “When I applied to come here, I remember hearing about boarding school teachers being *in loco parentis*—in place of parents. And our teachers take it seriously! Last year, I made a mistake, too. I wanted so badly to do a good job on my first English essay that I copied from a website. And my English teacher didn’t report me like other teachers might have. He worked with me every day for two weeks to help me learn how to write a good essay. It reminded me of my own dad helping me with my homework. I ran for this spot on the DC because I wanted to help other kids who weren’t as lucky as I was. I think the school needs to be Zoey’s family like my teacher was a dad for me. Dismissing her would be like giving up on her. Don’t you think MA is the best place for her right now?”

“She is making a lot of academic progress,” added Mr. Smith. “She wasn’t kidding when she said her grades have improved this year!”

“But a lot of us maintain good grades while dealing with personal problems,” Trevor argued. “Last year, my parents’ store closed and they almost lost their house! But I kept up my GPA, and I certainly didn’t go around drinking and lying about it. Why should we hold Zoey to a different standard?”

“I agree with Trevor,” Mr. Logan responded. “What message will we send to our kids who follow school rules if Zoey stays? Don’t we have responsibilities to them, too? How can they believe we take the rules seriously if we make an exception here? *Especially* for a student from substantial means, who’s had every advantage!”

“I take my responsibilities to all my students seriously, Sam,” Mr. Smith replied icily. “And sometimes that means making exceptions.”

It felt like the group was at an impasse. Mr. Brooks excused himself to order dinner for everyone; it was going to be a long deliberation. As he took his cellphone from his pocket, he wondered to himself, what would their recommendation look like at the end of the night?

To cite this case study:

Cotton, C. (2025). In Loco Parentis. *Justice in Schools*. <https://www.justiceinschools.org/in-loco-parentis>

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