

Prologue

April 24, 1980

The helicopter engine dispersed an escalating whirr as the rotor morphed from a stationary blade to a blur of gyroscopic stability in a matter of minutes. Twenty four combat boots thudded across the deck of the aircraft carrier Nimitz. A dozen Marines moved out to the awakening helicopter in straight lines. The last one aboard the copter exhaled a nervy mixture of elation and foreboding as he hopped into the RH-53 chopper. Lance Corporal Richard Goodman. He was going to fight the bad guys; something he had joined the Marines to do. The fuselage lifted under a blur of gray steel and wind.

In the fuselage command seat, back erect against the net seat, was Lieutenant Colonel Bo Swanson. Months earlier Swanson was contacted by the Pentagon regarding a special task force to free the hostages in Iran. Swanson was the guy with the know-how, and the intestinal fortitude, to put together the mission that came directly from Jimmy Carter. Although Swanson was out to pasture as Commanding Officer of NTTC Corry Station, he was the logical choice to rescue the fifty-two Americans held in Iran. Swanson disagreed with the mission being multi-service. He wanted to keep it a Marine Corps mission. The Army lacked discipline. The Navy was good for a ride, had been for over two hundred years- but that was it. The Air Force was a bunch of arrogant college boys out for a good time. No commitment. Swanson looked out of the open door at the blue ocean. The whitecaps would swamp a small boat. He turned to the men seated on either side of him. They were on their way to make history.

It was just last month that President Carter had said there would be no future wars that would require Marines. According to this former peanut farmer turned President, the world had changed and Marines were outdated. Yet, now this same President wanted to put together a multi-service rescue mission. Swanson knew this mission could work if he was allowed to hand-pick the right men. Marines. The classic Marine tradition of wisdom and courage, a mixture of young and old, experienced and green had served the Corps and won every war up to Vietnam. That one would have resulted in victory if they let the Marines run the show. Swanson was still bitter even after having been out of Vietnam for over five years. Now he was assigned to another multi-service operation. He put together his team, and Rick Goodman, this young kid with the brass balls, was one of them.

The training had gone well and Goodman was in excellent physical shape. But the part that impressed Swanson the most was that the kid showed no fear. Goodman's military test showed that the young Lance Corporal was above average mentally, so he wasn't dumb like so many other grunts that Swanson had met in combat. Goodman just had a confidence, an awareness that he was going to succeed. Whatever it was this kid possessed, Swanson liked it. It was the "stuff" that made the Marine Corps the greatest fighting force that had ever seen the light of day on this planet.

The helicopter bounced up and down violently. Goodman was in for a rough ride. While he was sure of that, he did not know the extent of what was to come. Neither did he know the full story when he joined the Marines; he was just going to fight the bad guys. Whoever, wherever they were- it was all going to pay off. Three months of Marine Corps Boot Camp on Parris Island and over six months of communications school at Pensacola. Radios, Morse code, and the latest in satellite communications. Rick relished the thought of being the

“First to fight”. That was the Marine Corps way. Fighting for the people that could not fight for themselves.

The silence in the RH-53 was uncharacteristic of battle hardened Marines. Marines went to battle in a loud raucous manner because loud and that broke the tension. Tonight, however, was going to be different. This was a rescue mission led by the superior officers of a demoralized military. Vietnam, Watergate, and Carter’s weak world image had brought the United States to its knees. Through the red light of the helicopter bay, Goodman stole a glance at the faces of the men who only minutes before had been on the deck of the U.S.S. Nimitz. Goodman’s mind drifted back over his short career with the Marines. Rick Goodman had done well in his eighteen months with the Marine Corps. His aim was true thanks to his dad who had taught him how to shoot in his backyard. Sight alignment, sight picture, was already part of his vocabulary when he hit the rifle range on Parris Island. Boot Camp had gained him his first meritorious promotion and an odd situation earned him his second meritorious promotion to Lance Corporal, and this assignment.

Upon checking in to Corry Station Naval Technical Training Institute, Rick discovered that he had a lump in his groin that doctors diagnosed as an inguinal hernia. Easily repaired by surgery, it still required a six-week period of rest and low physical inactivity. While recuperating in the hospital Rick was visited by the base commander, Major Swanson. Marines always took care of their own and when a Marine was in the hospital the top brass always checked in on them. Marines hated going to the Navy run hospitals where all the doctors and nurses were squids, a Marine term for anyone in the Navy.

Swanson visited Goodman in the hospital and sat for a while shooting the breeze with the young Marine. He was impressed by Goodman's highly motivated attitude and his love of the Marine Corps, but most interestingly of all - Goodman's love of boot camp. Most Marines left boot camp with mixed emotions, but very few said they would do it again. Goodman would go back. He loved the challenge. Swanson could appreciate Goodman's honesty and openness, Goodman's lack of pretention. He was respectful, even tried to stand at attention when the Major walked in. This is what impressed the Major the most. Less than a day out of surgery and this young Marine is going to stand at attention. The Major decided to make this more than a perfunctory visit. This young Marine had a future with the Corps and it was the Major’s duty to promote the future of the Corps. They discussed everything from the history of the Marine Corps to the role of education in society. When the Major left he felt good about where he was in life. Three days later he saw the young Marine again. PFC Goodman was struggling to keep up with his platoon on a five-mile run. The Major was running with Goodman’s Platoon, and didn't recognize the struggling Marine who was bending over and holding his side every few seconds.

“Must be a cramp.” Major Swanson remarked to his executive officer as he nodded toward the bent-over Marine. As Swanson drew closer he realized there was something familiar in this hobbling young man. “Do you know this one? Has he given us any reason to know him?” Swanson asked his executive officer.

“Not to my knowledge, sir.” replied the executive officer. But for some reason this young kid looked familiar. The Major dealt with many people during his day, although he tried, he just couldn’t remember them all. From this distance he just couldn’t see the kid’s face, either.

Goodman spent most of the run bent over, hobbling like a feeble old man. The Major should have stopped the run but he did not. He wanted to see if this young Marine would finish the five-mile training run before chewing him out.

The Marines of Company K, Corry Station, Naval Technical Training Center ran in formation every morning at 5 a.m. All two hundred and forty eight of them. At the conclusion of the run the entire company would line up in formation to hear the Plan of the Day and informal news was passed on. At the conclusion of today's run Major Swanson called the Company to attention. Goodman stood at attention despite the agonizing pain of the newly opened surgery incision. Three of the twenty-four stitches were split, and blood darkened the already crimson Marine Corps running shorts. The Major ordered the company to report back in formation, in dress uniform, in fifteen minutes. That was shit, shower, and shave, standing in formation with clean crisp uniforms in fifteen minutes. The average civilian would not be able to do it. The Marines of Company K filed out of the barracks seven minutes later. These were boot Marines. Young, eager, fresh out of boot camp- and ready to kick some ass. It did not matter whose ass it was, the sworn enemy of the United States of America, or the loud mouth navy asshole in the Navarine Club. Marines just like to fight.

The last Marines were "milling around smartly" with their platoon in less than ten minutes. The Platoon Sergeants quickly inspected their men. At twelve minutes Company K was called to attention as Major Swanson took his place at the front of the platoon. Then he recognized the young Marine. He was the kid from the hospital. Was that – yesterday? Maybe two days ago? And running with the platoon today? The major stood straighter. The straightness only a Marine would understand when one of his own has made the Corps proud.

"We have with us today a Marine of exceptional determination and loyalty to the Corps", he began. As straight as they already were half the company stood up a little straighter. Each man believing he was going to be singled out for his contribution to the mission of the Marine Corps.

"Three days ago, this Marine was cut open on a table in sick bay. His fates, and his guts, were in the hands of a squid doctor. Today he is running with third platoon. Semper Fi! PFC Goodman front and center."

With all Marine Corps tradition Goodman was meritoriously promoted that day to Lance Corporal, third step on the rank ladder. His second meritorious promotion since joining the Corps.

The helicopter lurched sideways as it neared the refueling stop. Tehran was isolated with more than 700 miles of desert and mountains engulfing the historic city. The helicopters did not have the range, they could not make it all the way to Tehran without refueling. Goodman peered out of the helicopter as it descended precariously to 200 feet. The dust kicked up immediately and the pilots could hardly see ahead of them. The drop to low altitude had not been part of the briefing. The men looked to Swanson, quizzically.

"We have to fly below the radar." Swanson yelled to his band of Marines, "we're gonna surprise the bastards."

The Marines in the helicopter had no idea of the politics involved in the mission. They had no idea of the disaster that awaited them. They were "motivated" to rescue their fellow Americans and return to the United States as heroes. They were aware that they would be part of a multi-service rescue attempt to infiltrate Tehran, rescue the hostages and bring them back to freedom. They did not know that the plan involved all four services, eight helicopters (USMC RH-53's), 12 planes (four MC-130's, three EC-130's, three AC-130's, two C-141's), and numerous intelligence and ground special forces to coordinate the rescue.

They did not know that, just like in Vietnam, the politicians had doomed the mission to failure from the start.

The helicopter slowed and descended to Desert One to be refueled. The sand was blinding, stinging their eyes and making it impossible to see, even in the safety of the helicopter troop bay. The plan had called for all of the helicopters to meet at the refueling point and proceed to Tehran together. Goodman looked out at the empty desert. The quizzical expression that would come to mark the night was on the face of all the Marines.

“Where the heck is everyone?” yelled Swanson to the chopper pilot.

The pilot could not hear Swanson but could feel the flavor of his discontent.

“We have veered off course, sir.” was the deadpan reply, “We did not anticipate flying with instruments only. We trained on a visual flight path....sir”.

Swanson was enraged. He bellowed at the pilot to get outside. The pilot looked at his equipment that had him strapped to the helicopter with a look designed to ask “What do I do with all this stuff?” Swanson read the look and deeply, hoarsely, and shouted with the depth and conviction that could not be argued.

“Outside, now!”

The pilot jumped at the command and disconnected the variety of clips and communication devices that had him bound to the pilot’s seat. He followed Swanson out through the aisle between him and his copilot. The copilot gave him a look of sympathy, lips straightened and drawn thin across his face. As soon as they were out of earshot the major unloaded on him. The troops on board could not hear a word because of the overwhelming roar of the huge engines. But they got the message. Somewhere it is written that seventy percent of what we communicate is body language. From where the Marines were sitting, Major Swanson was communicating one hundred percent of what he was saying without being heard as he postured threateningly towards the pilot.

“Are you telling me that you don’t know where we are? Let me put it this way Marine, are we are lost?”

The Marine pilot stood at attention reflexively. He did not flinch as he stood there in the dark blue light of the desert, deafened by the rotors of his familiar craft, and hearing every word the Major was saying.

“Yes sir, we are not in a position to find our way to the refueling stop.”

“This aircraft was just fitted with the latest navigational equipment. Young man, were you trained to use this equipment or not?”

The pilot remained silent. The training on the new equipment had been “quick and perfunctory”. That was military code for something being done to appease some politician. He did not have a good working knowledge of how to use the equipment. The major stepped toward the pilot, staring into his eyes. He raised his hand as if to slap the Marine across the face, then lowered his hand. The pilot held fast. He leaned his face close to the side of the Marine pilot’s head. The pilot leaned subtly toward the Major. The Major moved his mouth close enough to the pilot’s ear so that his lips brushed the top of the pilot’s ear. He whispered loudly, clearly, and enunciated every word for extreme emphasis.

“You...get...back...in...that...damned chopper...and... you find...Desert One. Ya got it, Marine?”

“Yes sir!”

With that exchange the major and the pilot walked together under the whirring blades and boarded the helicopter. Goodman looked at the Major. In every other service the men

would have questioned the Major. Not the Corps. The look on the Major's face spoke volumes. *We are lost, but we're going to find our way, regardless of what it takes.*

The major spoke to the group. "Are you Marines ready to save American lives?" The group resounded a loud "Ewrah!" and stiffened their spines.

The helicopter lifted off amid a cloud of dust, causing the Marines to squint their eyes at the unseen night ahead of them. One hour later they approached the refueling site. Swanson's squad was the last to arrive at Desert One. It was a dimly lit cloud of dust with apparitions in fatigues walking in and out of view. When Swanson stepped into the command area he could tell by the looks on the faces of the other commanders that something was terribly wrong.

"What's the word, sir?" Swanson asked his immediate commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Seiffert, a veteran H-53 pilot who had flown search-and-rescue-missions in Vietnam. Seiffert was a no-nonsense officer who said it straight, the way it was.

Goodman had disembarked the craft with the rest of the Marines. They were in a loose group, keeping their distance from Delta force, the Army's special unit. Goodman could make out Swanson throwing up his hands in despair. Swanson's shoulders slumped forward as he shook his head in disbelief. Seiffert addressed Swanson loudly and Swanson snapped to attention, saluted, took a step back and walked briskly in the direction of his helicopter.

"Get back in the chopper, men. It's over. The mission has been aborted."

He had no sooner finished talking when a loud, metallic crash was followed by a huge fireball bathing the desert sky in orange light. One of the Marine helicopters had slid sideways into a C-130. The rotors sliced through the skin of the C-130 like aluminum foil and ignited both fuel tanks. Flaming pieces of molten metal flew through the air as the ammunition ignited. Men came running to help the injured men. Mayhem had taken over the little meeting of planes and helicopters in the Iranian desert.

When all had settled, eight brave men were dead. Rick Goodman was on his way home. The bad guys had won.

Chapter One

Of all the plans that men make, the ones that succeed become legend in direct proportion to the consequence of failure. Middle-of-the-road plans neither succeed nor fail, because mediocrity does not allow for either. Mediocrity allows for mediocrity. No one cares if the plan to mow the lawn is terminated due to rain. Washington crossing the Delaware in the middle of a sleet storm—now that's a legend. This school year would fall into one of those categories: legend or failure.

Newly hired assistant principal Rick Goodman had been at this juncture before. *Build some trust, get to know the teachers, forge some community alliances.* Since the tragedy in West Palm Beach Rick just wanted to move on with his life; and this was a fresh start away from the stares and whispers. He knew how to handle the gang members and thugs in West Palm Beach. *What were these forest kids like? If only things...* He had to stop thinking about what he could not undo. What he could not undo had been an unfortunate accident in another city four hours away. Goodman had spent his summer vacation driving the degenerating streets of Ocala and talking with principals from various schools. His evenings were spent reading surveys, statistics, opinions, and anything else on school administration Rick could put his hands on. He even met one principal for breakfast at the Hitching Post, a

grimy restaurant run by the principal's mother, a fourth generation Ocalan with greasy hair and leathery skin. The principal was stoically quiet, the conversation stifled, and the meager information imparted useless—but the hash browns were great. This was a different group of people. Rural people tend to be suspicious of outsiders and here Rick Goodman was definitely an outsider.

Twenty years ago, the Marine Corps had taught Rick Goodman to be prepared for every possibility; to always have a contingency plan. Rick felt resigned as his mind tried to find some avenue he did not go down; some aspect that he had overlooked. He spoke aloud to himself as he edged down the driveway toward the street.

"It's show time. The rest will have to..."

He hit the brakes suddenly, wiggled the gearshift into reverse and followed the bright white lights back up his driveway.

"Of course, I have to eat."

He had forgotten his lunch. Silently sliding through the house Rick gingerly opened the refrigerator. The light from inside the refrigerator fell across the beige linoleum floor illuminating a pair of bare feet. Startled, pushed the door closed and slapped his free hand against his chest.

"Who the...what the..."

"Good morning, my love. Did you forget something?"

His wife stood in front of him, dressed in Rick's old gray USMC t-shirt, holding his lunch bag. She snapped on the kitchen light switch and leaned back against the edge of the. Rick reached for the lunch bag, crunching the folded brown paper. He turned to leave, shuffling his feet.

"Uh, not without a kiss first." She smiled with a slightly mocking grin. Rick stepped forward and kissed her on the lips. Her breath belied the mint odor of fresh toothpaste.

"Good luck today."

"Thanks, babe. But..."

"...luck has nothing to do with it, I know. Give 'em hell, Marine!"

Before she could say anything more, Rick was out the door and climbing into his truck. Glancing at the uneven plywood over the windows of the garage, Rick vowed he would put the new windows in this weekend. The red truck bumped down the grass and dirt driveway, leaving his wife alone in the kitchen of their modest three-bedroom "fixer-upper". They had purchased the house in May, and moved in after school got out.

Turning onto the road, a black hole appeared in the road ahead. Rick swerved to avoid the pothole, his back tire skirting the rim, and leaving the hazard to lay in wait for the next car. His mind drifted from the work to be done on his house to the discipline plan that he had worked up this summer. Until he had implemented his discipline plan things would be tough. After that everything would run smoothly. He wanted to be firm, fair and consistent, but the uneasiness in his stomach confronted him again. *Things don't always go the way they are supposed to - do they? You should know that.* He spoke out loud to his fear.

"Not this time. This time I'm the one who planned it. My plan this time..." Rick clenched his jaw and pressed the gas pedal. "...and this one will work."

The speedometer was nearing seventy-five miles an hour as he sped past mobile homes that appeared abandoned, cars that had been left in the woods, and ten miles of pristine forest. A deer grazing ten yards off the road raised its head when the red truck zipped by. At the stop sign he turned left, passing the darkened grocery store. Nestled behind the grocery store was a small building, more like a large shed. It had a hand painted sign that read,

"Jeanine's Barber Shop." Goodman was intrigued at the placement of a barber shop so far into the woods.

I will have to stop there for a haircut one day.

Minutes later the red truck pulled past a rusting sign that read "Ocklawaha Middle School". It was missing an "o" and the "M" in Middle was leaning into the "i". Peering through the window of the front office, school secretary Jean Martin watched Rick as he exited the red truck. He walked with the strident gait of an athlete as he approached the front door. Rick Goodman placed his hand on the doorknob, hesitated (drew a deep breath), and entered the building. He walked by the front office staff and nodded greetings. With shoulders back he strode to his office. With his back to the door Rick stared out of the dusty window overlooking the gum stained sidewalk at the pile of broken desks thrown next to the gym. He stifled a choking throat full of anxiety.

"Transportation just called, some of the buses are running late this morning."

Jean Martin's voice startled him as he prepared to focus his energies on the day before him. He turned and looked at her quizzically.

"Late? Did they say how late?"

"No. But that's pretty normal for the first day of school, new drivers and confused kids at the wrong stop... that kind of thing. Should be about twenty minutes or so. It usually tapers off by the end of the week."

"Great. How's everything else?"

"Everything else?" Jean flashed a quizzical look as she furrowed her brow.

"I mean," Rick stammered, "is there anything else I should know?"

"Well, like the notion that there are hundreds of hormone-crazed teenagers coming right at us? That kind of thing?"

"And no one is allowed to ride their bike or walk?"

"Correct. There's no sidewalk, it could get mighty dangerous for some young 'uns on that two lane."

"Thank God." *Does she know? Did the news get this far?*

Goodman smiled weakly.

For the last twenty seven years of her life, all of them at Ocklawaha Middle School, Jean had captained the front office on the first day of school. It was just another first day of school for her. Number twenty-eight.

"Nervous?" Jean asked Rick.

"No."

"Oh that's right, ex-Marines don't get nervous, do they?"

"Uh, there are no Ex-Marines, just former Marines. Anyway, that was twenty years ago."

"Once a Marine, always a Marine. Right? Then why are your palms sweating so badly?"

Goodman looked at his hands.

"What?" Rick replied confused. He felt no sweat on his hands.

"Made you look though, didn't I? You'll be just fine. I have a good feeling about you. I think you're...."

The front office phone buzzed and Jean instinctively left so quickly Goodman wondered if she was ever there. He decided to get to the bus loop early to collect his thoughts. He stepped out into the humid air, the first rays of sunshine lighting the dark forest that surrounded the school. Three minutes later, at the bus loop, Rick Goodman stood alone as the sun rose over the top of the dense forest of pine and palm.

In time the first buses would be coming in like a disconnected yellow procession of acrid exhaust and gasping air brakes. Students would be obliged to act the way Ocklawaha Middle School kids had acted for generations. School in the forest was a necessary evil. It was also the mainstay of the local gossip mongers diets. Which teacher was doing what, with whom, and for how long, occupied the empty lives of the Ocklawahans.

Ocklawaha locals do not believe in authority, hence why they live so far off the beaten track. Ocklawaha has been a haven for anti-establishment types since well before what the old timers called "The War of Northern Aggression." With Orlando an hour away, and Tampa just a little farther, most people who liked to hide hid out in Ocklawaha.

Word had spread fast that there was a new Assistant Principal at Ocklawaha Middle. The scuttlebutt in town was that the new guy, some ex-Marine from West Palm Beach, meant business. As a result of the rumor mill throwing gasoline on this fire, Goodman was a marked man. He had not started work yet and they were already out to stop him. The locals had run off every administrator that tried to get the school in order and this one would be no different. It's what they did. Besides giving them the only sense of power they had, running off outsiders kind of relieved the boredom. Local agitator, and aging whore, Rita Brown summed it up.

"Every couple of years they send some 'dumb ass' up here from out of town. They always think that they can come in here and start telling folk what to do and how to raise their young'uns. But they always leave with their tail between their legs. What's the longest one ever lasted? Was it that fat, bald Mr. Johnson? From up New York way? Shee-it, he was lucky he made it to March. This one ain't no different. He's already in for a big surprise from what the teachers are saying."

Parents frightened their children with stories of the new, mean Assistant Principal. They told their kids that he would not put up with their "crap" this year. Rumors that Rick was going to paddle kids who misbehaved flourished especially well. Someone had even heard that the new Assistant Principal actually broke a kid's arm in West Palm Beach, and he was coming here to escape charges. It would only be a matter of time before they found out about the bus accident. Most people knew that none of the gossip was true. But the person who produced new gossip commanded the conversation. And that meant something in this town because very few people really commanded anything that was real. There was very little else to talk about in Ocklawaha except the school. So parents preached that this year was going to be different. Students heard the dress code was to be enforced this year and therefore went out and purposefully bought clothes that were not in compliance. This was the Ocala national Forest and battle lines have been drawn. These were forest people. No one told them what to do. Especially not some city slicker from West Palm Beach who most likely had some cloud following him.

Parents, step-parents and caretakers warned their children as they left for school. They did not want their child to be humiliated by this ogre.

"Stay away from this new Assistant Principal."

"Do not take any guff off this new guy."

"Don't start nothing, but don't let him get onto you for nothing you didn't do."

"If this guy screams at you, you just walk to that office and call me; I will be right up to kick some ass."

This was not going to be just another first day skirmish in Ocklawaha. This was going to be a battle for supremacy. This new Assistant Principal was not going to tell them—or their children—what to do. As in every conflict someone had to win, and someone had to lose.

And all of these rumors had been fed, fueled, and allowed to run wild for the entire summer—picking up more information each day. Rick Goodman had no idea about the force converging on him.

Despite the stench of decaying leaves and an omnipresent musty, wet-dog odor, Goodman enjoyed the quiet the forest provided him as he stood alone. The grinding sound of a truck's transmission downshifting alerted Rick. The first bus entered into the loop as Jean Martin's voice exploded over the radio. Goodman flinched and turned down the volume.

"Mr. Goodman."

"Yes, Ms. Martin?"

"The buses are pulling in."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm already out here. I'm going to release the students to the cafeteria."

"Are you sure that you don't want to send them back home?"

"Don't tempt me. Here they come."

Chapter Two

The buses pulled up, and the students filed off. New clothes for some, same old worn jeans and T-shirts for most. Students sensed "something" that made this first day unlike previous first days. The grass had been cut, flowers planted, rooms painted; all subtle changes that added up to "something" that felt suspiciously like care and attention. The town had buzzed all summer about this new Assistant Principal, and there he was. Some dared to stare, and some stared to dare, at this outsider from West Palm Beach. Rick heard a few of the comments that accompanied the stares.

"He don't look that mean."

"I heard he was in the Army, or something."

"I think he's kinda cute."

"Amy, you think everyone is cute."

A few students nodded obligatory greetings to the new guy as he stood there; stoically watching what appeared to be an ethnically similar, yet personally diverse, student body.

Bouncing up and down like a colorful flock of sheep navigating rocky terrain, the students moved from the buses to the cafeteria, strays drifting off to regroup with old friends. Cassie Brown, last year's Queen Bee of Disruption, broke from a group of profanity-spewing teens and hugged her best friend, Stephanie Millis, screaming and laughing at the reunion.

"Girl, I missed you!" Cassie squealed throwing her arms around Stephanie's neck.

"Yeah, the whole summer at my dad's sucked. Minnesota is so boring. There were a few hot guys..." Stephanie said with as sly a smile as a fifteen-year-old could muster.

"I'm sure you screwed 'em all."

"I wish, hey I hear there is some new asshole here this year..."

"Yeah, over there, that's the new AP, Gooberman, or something."

"Oh..."

"Ya know... something feels different this year."

"You're right. I think I know what it is." Cassie and Stephanie stopped walking. "With Brittany gone you're the biggest slut in the school!"

"No, for real. The school seems, like, cleaner or something."

“Whatever.”

“And, uh, Brittany wasn’t the, um, biggest slut in the school last year.”

“Oh? And who was?”

“You!” Cassie pushed Stephanie and ran toward her class.

“Who do you have first period?”

“What? You’re having your period?”

By the time Stephanie had spoken Cassie was out of earshot. The eighth grade door had been propped open and Cassie bounded into the hall. Mary Lackendayer, Language Arts teacher in her finest first day of school teacher garb, stood aside her doorway. Mary saw the opportunity to interact; she peered over the top of her glasses at the pretty young girl running down the hall. Mary was excited about interacting with a student yet spoke morosely.

“No running.”

Cassie curled her upper lip. *Who are you talking to, you-seventies-dressed-stupid-short-pony-tailed-no make-up wearing-hag?*

“You talking to me?”

Cassie’s affront surprised Lackendayer. Mary nodded as her face betrayed her and turned crimson. *Pick your battles.* Mary responded weakly then walked a few yards to Suzie Bonner. Cassie stared as Lackendayer walked by her. Cassie made a “tch” sound and sauntered mockingly slow into class. Lackendayer kept her back to Cassie as she spoke to fellow teacher Suzie Bonner.

“Don’t tell me that was Cassie Brown.”

“No problem, I won’t. But it was.”

“Two questions. One- how did she make it to eighth grade? And two-who does her makeup?”

“Both answers are the same- her mother.”

“Socially promoted?”

“Either that or they didn’t want her to give anyone in the seventh grade an STD. After all, she’s at least fifteen years old.”

Suzie laughed and Mary pursed her lips, shook her head in disgust, and returned to her classroom. Mary peeked into her classroom from behind the door. *These kids are going to kill my test scores.* She had a full group, all desks were taken. Cassie Brown was in the back of the room, and had turned her desk ninety degrees to face the window. Cassie’s eyes met Mary Lackendayer’s as she pushed the desk against the wall. Cassie spread out her hands, with shoulders stuck in the shrug position.

“What?” Cassie said jutting out her chin in a challenge to her teacher.

“Please sit down, young lady.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Just sit, please.” *Pick your battles.*

Cassie mumbled a vague obscenity and banged the chair up and down as she sat. Cassie had been retained twice, once in second grade and again in seventh. Cassie was in her fourth year at Ocklawaha. She had become adept at exploiting the powerless routines teachers tried in an effort to control their classes. Cassie was well known to the previous administrators. “A frequent flyer” according to one former Dean of students. Most times that she was sent to the office on a discipline referral, she just waited in the girls’ bathroom for the class period to end and went to her next class. The discipline referral would disappear. Cassie averaged ten discipline referrals before she was given a consequence.

Each time she got a consequence her mom screamed all the way to school, while she was there, and all the way home. Although it did not sit well with her teachers, any suspension Cassie was given would be rescinded, or the number of days reduced, simply to placate Cassie's shrieking mother. Cassie did not care what the teachers thought of her. Actually, she knew they hated her-so why try? She was here for the boys and for the free lunch. She was here to find out where the parties were going to be next weekend. The first task however, was to find out where the best spot was to smoke a cigarette in the eighth grade hall. Last year the seventh grade girls' restroom was great. Located right across the hall from two male teachers who would not dare to enter the restroom; and although they knew what she was doing, they never said anything. Everyone smoked in that bathroom. Even if she got caught she would get out of it. But like Stephanie said- this year something felt different. Cassie could not put her finger on it; maybe it was just the new hallway or something.

After taking attendance, and mispronouncing a few names, Ms. Lackendayer gushed about how exhilarating the class was going to be this year. The smell of vanilla wafted from the potpourri can. A few students held their noses as protection against the heavy waft of vanilla from the cheap pot of potpourri steaming on Ms. Lackendayer's desk. Bored, Cassie stood up and strolled to the exit, her pocketbook tight under her arm, oblivious to the fact that Ms. Lackendayer was addressing the class.

"Excuse me young lady, where are we going?" challenged Lackendayer.

"We? I dunno know 'bout you, but I got female problems, I'm going to the restroom- you can come with if you don't believe me." Snickers peppered the room.

"Uh, ma'am, you have to sign out to use the restroom." Lackendayer began stumbling in her response. "We were told by the administration to have all students sign out before leaving the classroom. Please sign the logbook before you leave. And in the future- I would appreciate it if you would raise your hand and ask before you get up to leave."

Cassie grabbed the logbook, which sat alone on a desk by the door, and scratched her name as illegibly as she could across four lines. While disregard for authority has been a teenage trait since time immemorial, Cassie just reveled in the act a little more than others her age. Cassie looked Lackendayer in the eye, and turned to leave. *This teacher is gonna be a real bitch.* But she promised her mother that she would "lay low" this year. *I guess I'll have to wait until tomorrow to tell this one off.* She walked into the restroom and bumped into Debbie Oppender, one of Ocklawaha's few honor students, as Debbie exited the bathroom.

"Watch where you're going- you prissy bitch." Cassie barked at Debbie without turning around. Cassie didn't know that Debbie had stopped in the doorway. Debbie knew that Cassie was going to smoke. *That white trash slut is going to smoke a cigarette on the first day of school?* Debbie waited until she heard the "click-click" of the lighter. Beaming, Debbie scrambled to her classroom. Debbie Oppender had been a friend to teachers since kindergarten. Debbie rapidly took her seat and raised her hand. She was in Mr. Karpis's math class. He looked like a miserable teacher, but Debbie did not care- as long as she was teacher's pet. Karpis acknowledged her hand.

"Yes, uh, Donna, is it?"

"Debbie."

"Huh?"

"Debbie Oppender. Uh, Mr. Karpis, I think you need to know that Cassie Brown is smoking a cigarette in the girls' bathroom." Debbie beamed with pride at her good deed.

Karpis's heart launched into overdrive. His face crept into a burning red, starting at his ears and migrating across his cheeks like the incoming tide on time lapse photography. Last year bathroom smokers were routinely warned and let go. Smoking among students was rampant on campus. Every bathroom smelled like smoke. This "blind eye" policy infuriated Karpis; nothing ever "happened" to anyone that was sent to the office. If he sent too many to the office the administration talked to Karpis about "alternative methods of classroom control" and "building relationships with students". Not this year. Karpis heart was pumping full steam now. He was "taching out" as his wife would say. Then he remembered that in preschool meetings he listened to Rick Goodman shoot off his big mouth how this year the students were going to behave – or they would be put out of school. During the meeting, Karpis put Goodman on the spot by asking directly what would be done about smoking. Goodman made special mention that the smoking on campus was going to stop. Dizzy from his blood rush, Tony Karpis tottered to the classroom phone and punched in "0" with his stubby fingers. Jean Martin touched the phone, after two rings.

"This has got to be Mr. Karpis. Thirty minutes into the first day of school. Why I think that's a new record." She picked it up.

"Front office."

Karpis tauntingly spewed his rehearsed threat as soon as the connection was made.

"There's someone smoking in the girl's restroom! You'd better get an administrator off his butt to come down here and put a stop to it! Building Eight. Girl's restroom."

As he slammed down the phone, Karpis looked at the clock. During his "Big Speech" Rick Goodman had promised that he would be in your class upon request within three minutes. *Yeah, right.* He had heard all of that before. *Administrators always act like they're going to help the teachers, and then by the second week of school you never see them again. They're all the same. Even Goodman. Just another "Career Seeker".* Karpis stepped from the phone to the window. He saw no one. Then he heard noise in the hall. It sounded like a female student protesting. Karpis rushed to his classroom door, bumping two student desks and knocking their books off as he passed. Tony Karpis froze when he saw Goodman in the hallway with Lackendayer. Goodman was talking loudly to Cassie Brown.

"We have reasonable suspicion that you are in possession of cigarettes," Goodman recited calmly but firmly, "I received a report that someone was smoking in the girls' restroom, Building Eight. I asked Ms. Lackendayer to check out the girls' bathroom. Ms. Lackendayer walked in and saw you blow out a puff of smoke and discard something into the toilet. That gives me reasonable suspicion to search you for cigarettes."

Karpis was stunned. He had never seen an administrator search a student before. Especially Cassie Brown. Cassie was untouchable. Cassie's mother was renowned for... well renowned was about it. It was just, well, understood that Cassie pretty much did what she wanted here at Ocklawaha Middle School. Karpis wandered up to the scene and bellowed without provocation. Cassie reeked of cigarette smoke.

"You had better let them search. You kids aren't going to run the school this year! This is over. We're not going to take it anymore. You'll all be sorry when they're rioting in the streets! You better quit right now."

Rick Goodman was surprised Karpis's outburst and Mary Lackendayer flinched as Karpis spewed forth. Mary had heard about Karpis from Suzie Bonner. Karpis always went on and on about "rioting in the streets", and "you're going to get a referral" among other vague and ineffectual threats. Suzie told Mary she once saw Karpis try to bait a student into hitting him. Fortunately the student walked away. This was her first year at Ocklawaha, her second

year teaching, period (If you counted student teaching as a year). Mary backed away from Karpis.

Goodman addressed Karpis in a low tone. "Thank you Mr. Karpis, but we have the situation under control here."

As Karpis stomped to his classroom, he raved out the side of his neck, "These kids are out of control because there is no discipline at this school! Another year of"

The slamming door muffled the rest of Karpis's tirade. The muffled baritone of his voice permeated through the walls. Goodman half raised his head in Karpis' direction, then returned to Cassie.

"Ms. Brown, do you have cigarettes in your purse?"

"So what? You can't do anything anyway."

"Do you want me to take them out or will you hand them to me?"

There was a long hesitation as Cassie attempted to stare down Goodman. Looking away, she reached her hand into her purse and left it there around the pack of cigarettes.

"Wait until my mother hears about this. Here!" Cassie pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights and threw them in the air. Goodman caught the cigarettes and walked to the office as Cassie turned toward the classroom. Lackendayer stood in the middle of the hall, stunned, mouth agape. Goodman stopped.

"Where are you going?" Goodman asked Cassie with an air of authority.

"Back to class." Cassie retorted with just as much authority.

Goodman squared off to Cassie, and spoke firmly.

"No, you're not. You were found in possession of a nicotine product, which is a violation of school board policy. This is a level three offense which means that you are going to be suspended from school..."

"Suspended! On the first day! You must be fucking crazy!" Cassie walked straight at Goodman.

"I'm calling my mother. You just fucking wait. You are going to get fucking fired, you fucking asshole. You're fucking with the wrong person, you fucking dickhead. Who does your hair-Beni Hana?"

Goodman interrupted. "Young lady, please stop using profanity."

Fighting tears of frustration, Cassie bit her lip, stormed past Goodman, and kicked open the fire door, slamming it to the wall. Lackendayer flinched again. Goodman noticed.

"Good morning, Ms. Lackendayer", Goodman said, "I hope the rest of your first day goes well." He smiled and strode after Cassie.

Lackendayer stayed in the hall. She could hear Karpis' livid soliloquy about school discipline coming through his door; she could hear Cassie through the hall window screaming at Mr. Goodman. The smell of cigarette smoke drifted from the restroom. She could hear, she could see, she could smell; but for some reason she couldn't move. The rigidity she felt slowly came from behind her eyes. Mary Lackendayer had felt this way before and she knew what was coming. She began the self talk routine she used to attempt to clear her mind when the darkness was coming. Mary could feel it rising in her like a cold dark tide. It was going to drown her again. The medication was not working.

Then Cassie reappeared in the doorway and her shrill voice yanked Mary forward and blew the darkness back.

"...and fuck you too, Miss Lickmycracker, or whatever your fucking name is!"

Cassie Brown marched down the hallway. Mary Lackendayer snapped back to the present, took a deep breath and escaped into her classroom, slamming the door behind her.

Her class stared, waiting for her next move. A thought hit Mary as she stepped in front of her desk. This is the grade her daughter would be in. If only... Lackendayer turned her back on the approaching dark cloud.

“Well, that’s one way to start the day!” Polite laughter from a few kiss-ups sprinkled the air; while most just looked at each other with morose foreboding as to the long year that lay ahead.

Cassie Brown banged on Lackendayer's door while Goodman calmly explained that she was only making her situation worse. Just up the hall Christine Fletcher opened her door. She yelled to Cassie.

“Get in here, Miss Brown.” Goodman turned to Fletcher. Fletcher had politely heckled and made sarcastic comments under her breath at Goodman during his presentation of the new discipline plan during his preschool meeting. He had her pegged as a troublemaker and now she was usurping his authority in front of a student.

“Cassie is going to the office with me. Thank you, Ms. Fletcher.”

“According to *our* discipline plan, students that are caught smoking are sent to another teacher’s classroom for the rest of that period.”

“That was last year. This year, according to *my* discipline plan, students that are caught smoking will be cited and sent home.” Goodman guided Cassie out the door.

“Don’t touch me.” Cassie yanked her arm away as she banged through the door. Goodman followed closely behind the protesting student. The hall door closed behind them. When all was clear Karpis stuck his head out of the door.

“I guess he told you!”

“Shut up, Karpis. We’ll see who tells who. We have to stop this guy-before he starts. I've seen his type before.”

Karpis waved dismissively and returned to his class.

Fletcher glanced around the empty hall and returned to her classroom. *This guy is going to be a problem – and I have the solution.*

The sound of Cassie cussing and threatening faded as the pair headed toward the office.