

CHAPTER 1

Plain View, Nebraska was little more than a speed zone, a stoplight on Highway 2, the only shade in thirty miles, a place that still supported the theory that the world was flat. A place where even tumble weeds didn't stop. The town's name was nothing if not truth in advertising, a view of the plain, and a very plain view at that.

Rex Morton's mother eased her well worn whale of a sedan tight to the curb in front of the main entrance to Plain View High School. It settled on its creaky springs as it rocked to a stop and sputtered as if clinging to life after she'd switched off the ignition. She turned to Rex with a tense smile, the color pressed from her lips. Rex knew the smile well and knew all it conveyed. *Please don't mess this up.* He'd see the smile again later that evening and every evening, right after the question, "Did everything go okay at school today?" Then the smile.

She didn't really care how his day went. Maybe that was unfair. If anyone cared, it was his mother, the only person Rex knew he could trust. What she really wanted to know was did he do anything that would force them to move again, to have to find a new town, a new job, and a new school.

His mother wore her best dress, tailored, black, and sleeveless, a dress that spent months at a time on a hangar under plastic, waiting for the next special occasion. The first day at any new school qualified, and the dress was seeing daylight again for the first time in a year. His mother said the dress looked like money, and people don't mess with pushy people with money.

She fussed with Rex's collar, stuffing the tag under while he stared at the brick façade of the building, a sense of dread building inside him. It was like so many of the schools he'd attended.

Kids swarmed the sidewalks like streams of ants returning to the mound. They huddled together in groups of predetermined caste, stoners, geeks, jocks, and preps. They joined into a single torrent at the concrete steps leading to the main doors and poured inside. Girls clustered beside the entrance, out of traffic, talking and grinning, catching up. This was one of those schools where everybody knew everybody.

Because Plain View was such a small town, the same kids had probably been together since kindergarten. Rex knew he'd be branded an outsider or worse from day one. His stomach churned. Things always fell apart quickest in towns like this.

He'd spent over an hour picking out his clothes, camouflage as he referred to it, hoping if he chose wisely, he might at least start out on the right foot. He picked well-worn Levis and a pair of Sketchers right off the bat – a no-brainer really, they would blend in practically anywhere. He waffled between a plain polo and one of his tee-shirts, finally settling on Maroon 5, Local Crew. He figured it would show his tastes were mainstream and give people something to talk about other than the obvious.

Now, looking at the kids milling on the steps and the way they dressed, he wondered if Trace Adkins and cowboy boots might have been better choices - as if how people reacted to him would somehow be decided by the "right" clothes.

His mother spoke, her tone icily efficient as she instructed him. "If people are mean to you, don't react. It's their problem not yours. No fights. Let trouble slide off you like Teflon. And always do what your teachers ask. No backtalk, even if you know they're wrong. Don't give them an excuse to kick you out. It's always *yes sir*, and *no ma'am*. And whatever happens, don't allow yourself to get hungry. I packed you plenty of snacks." She jammed a lunchbox into his hands. "Am I clear?"

Rex nodded.

She stepped out of the car and waited on the sidewalk for him. When he got out, the girls on the stairs stopped their gabbing and gawked. The stream of students slowed and diverted around him as if negotiating a puddle of puke, expressions of disbelief and fear on their faces. One of the girls pointed, as if it was necessary, and said something to her friends. They nodded. He heard the staccato clop of his mother's heels approaching. She took his free hand in hers, it felt hot and dewy, and towed him up the steps toward the entrance.

Behind them at a cautious distance, a wave of humanity gathered, propelled by curiosity and spectacle. His mother guided Rex through double doors into the school office. The doors swung closed behind them staunching the tide of trailing students like a breakwater.

Two stern women sat behind a Formica counter. Secretaries, office assistants, administrators; those were the various titles women like these had in the schools Rex had attended. No matter how subservient sounding their title, they were always the ones who were really in charge, the ones who controlled day-to-day operations.

They froze for a moment when Rex came in, and then glanced at one another. One was in her mid-forties, thin with short, dark hair. The other, gray haired, thick of limb and loose of skin and at least two decades older. Their faces seemed to ask, *what do we do now?* The older woman, who wore a pair of cat-eye glasses dangling from a chain, waved them up, her mouth bent down in a frown. She turned to Rex's mother, "Can I help you?"

"My son is enrolled here. He needs his class schedule."

The old woman's eyes fluttered for a moment before she leaned close, as if afraid someone in the room might overhear, and in a very pleasant tone she said, "I don't think we can permit your boy to attend school here. Plain View High just isn't the right situation for him. And to be quite blunt, it would be too dangerous for the other students." Her lips curled into a pleasant little, *it's-for-the-best* smile while she waited for them to leave.

But Rex's mother would have none of it. She tried to maintain an unperturbed expression, but Rex could see the muscles in her jaw dance. "Who's in charge here, because I don't want to have this conversation twice," Rex's mother growled.

The old woman glowered, her wrinkled mouth pursed sphincter tight. She hoisted her bulk off the stool and rapped lightly on the glass of an office door with PRINCIPAL stenciled across it in gold letters.

A slender man dressed in tweed pants and a red cardigan stepped out. His hair was gray at the temples and mousy everywhere else. Blue eyes magnified behind thick lenses flitted around the room assessing the situation while his hands fussed about like nervous birds. "What seems to be the problem, Mrs. Peabody?" he asked.

He looked Rex up and down and his hands stopped. He staggered back and smacked into the wall. His Adam's apple bobbed like a cork with a fish on the line.

"Don't worry," his mother said. "He doesn't bite."

Mrs. Peabody piped up, "I was trying to explain to Mrs. ..."

"Morton," Rex's mother filled in. "Cecilia Morton." She extended her hand and the principal shook it nervously.

"Principal Williams," he offered. As Mrs. Peabody continued, Principal Williams absently wiped his hands on his pants as if Rex's mother carried something contagious.

"I was trying to explain to Mrs. Morton that Plain View High School may not be the right fit for her boy," Mrs. Peabody said.

Williams flashed a grin then raised his hand toward his office door. "Please come inside and we can discuss this."

Rex's mother gave a strained, not-a-smile smile, the one she'd given Rex in the car when they'd first pulled up.

The office was small. A large window at the back looked out onto Cedar Street where buses rumbled past delivering students. An oak desk sat facing the door with a swiveling office chair on one side, and three cushioned low-backed chairs on the other - just enough for a pair of parents and a student. Williams invited them to sit.

Rex's eyes were drawn to a bookcase standing next to the desk. It was the kind that comes in a flat box with an Allen wrench to put it together, and folded instructions no one paid attention to until things went wrong. Williams had his degrees arranged in black frames on the top shelf, three of them - a man of letters and proud of it. Books stuffed the remaining shelves. Rex read the titles while his mother spoke. There was no need to listen very closely, he'd heard what she was going to say at every high school he'd attended and it rarely varied much. The titles on Williams' shelves were academic, divided between psychology, management, education, and reference books including a dictionary and thesaurus.

Williams tilted back in his chair and steepled his fingers together under his chin as if deep in thought. He flashed a smile at Rex's mother that seemed to say, *I sympathize with your plight*. "I think Mrs. Peabody makes a perfectly valid point," he said. "I don't think we're equipped to handle your son. His needs are..." he tapped his finger tips together as he struggled for the right word, "...unique. Unfortunately, his presence presents too large a risk to our student population. I'm afraid you'll have to make other arrangements."

Williams pulled a ball back on a Newton's cradle perched on his desk and let it go. The ball, suspended on a pair of strings, clacked into a row of similar balls, shooting the ball at the opposite end arcing away. A rhythmic "clack," "clack," "clack," filled the room.

Rex's mother leaned forward, snatched the flying ball mid-flight, and eased it back into place. She fixed Williams in a withering glare. Rex watched Williams' Adam's apple bounce again and grinned in anticipation of what was coming. When angered, the pitch of his mother's voice rose and she tended to stretch her words out for effect and clarity, and she was angry now.

"Under the Civil Rights Act, and the No Child Left Behind Initiative, my son has as much right to be here as any other student. If you try to deny him an education, I'll sue you and this two-bit school district back to the stone-age. Do we understand each other?" The veins in his mother's neck bulged and her face flushed pink, something Rex envied. It wasn't as easy to detect when he was angry just by looking.

"There is no need for such an extreme position," Williams said. "Surely some sort of compromise can be reached. Have you considered home schooling?"

"I work and am the sole source of income for our family."

Williams' eyebrows arched, "Then perhaps Mr. Morton could take on that responsibility?"

"There is no Mr. Morton," she said. "Not anymore. My shift at the hospital starts in thirty minutes, so let's cut right to the chase. Why don't you call your Superintendent? My lawyers and I have already had this discussion with him."

Rex always liked the sound of that word - *lawyers*. Not one, but many; a passel, a herd. No, a pride - a pride of ravenous lawyers ready to strip the money right out of Williams' pockets, ready to gnaw the last copper coins from his penny loafers.

An image popped into Rex's head of a hapless Principal Williams traipsing through the tall grass of the African veldt, past a group of lounging, navy-suited lawyers. *The lawyers, noses*

raised, catch a scent on the wind - fear, detect the presence of the clumsy Williams and quickly give chase. Williams screams and runs. The lawyers close and overtake him, dropping William's in the grass. They pull his pockets inside out, empty his wallet, and take his shoes, coins and all, leaving him in the middle of nowhere in his underwear.

Rex knew what his mother said wasn't true. They had no lawyers. She only claimed they did to make stubborn schools back down. It seemed to instill fear and suck the starch right out of school administrators. In reality, all they had was Uncle Ronny, a paralegal in Philadelphia. Uncle Ronny would call ahead claiming to be from the law firm of Anderson, Richard, and Dean, a jumble of Richard Dean Anderson, the actor who played MacGyver. The name was Rex's idea. He loved MacGyver. Uncle Ronny would spout obscure statutes, threats, and intimidation until the school district finally backed down.

Williams was wilting under the pressure of his mother's threats, struggling to maintain the appearance of control. His eyes nervously flitted side to side as if he could hear the lawyers stalking closer. Williams pursed his lips, a look of reluctance on his face, perhaps hopeful that he could wait out his mother. Her gaze was uncompromising. His mother wasn't going anywhere. After delaying to the point of awkwardness, he reached for the phone. As he rested the receiver on his shoulder and punched in the numbers, his expression grew smug, as if confident he'd called her bluff and in moments this charade would be over.

"Good morning, Stu. It's Chris over at the high school. I have a Mrs. Morton here who is claiming that she and her lawyers cleared enrolling her son at my high school through you." The smile on his face evaporated. "You did? Were you aware her son is a... a zombie?" His brow furrowed as he listened to the reply. "You were. Well what are we supposed to do if he attacks our students?" He looked up at Rex's mother, his confident veneer stripped away. "Play it by ear? You're telling me our policy is *play it by ear*?"

He listened for a moment more then pushed the receiver away, held limply between his thumb and forefinger, and dropped it onto the cradle as if it was a befouled diaper being dumped in the trash. He stood and walked past Rex and his mother to the door. He leaned out and called to the secretary. "Mrs. Peabody, please find Mr. Morton's class schedule."

Williams held the door open for them and, as soon as they crossed the threshold, disappeared back into his office shutting the door behind him. Rex grinned. His mother had won again. But this was just a skirmish. Things never seemed to work out as well in the war that always followed.

Mrs. Peabody waited at the counter perched on her stool. She shoved a card across the Formica and seemed none too pleased. She refused to make eye contact and spoke to them brusquely. "Your first class is English in room 206. Take the stairs and turn right."

Rex spotted a photo of a cat on the countertop. "Is that a Himalayan?"

"No, a ragdoll." Mrs. Peabody said.

"It's beautiful," Rex replied.

Mrs. Peabody beamed with pride for a moment.

Rex took his class schedule and followed his mother into the hallway. She rose up on her toes and Rex pecked her cheek. "Be good," she said. She grinned a little and left through the front doors. Rex turned for the stairs.

"Freak," someone screamed from behind him. Rex didn't turn to see who it was. It was pointless. The word echoed down the hall. Even before he'd reached his first class, it had started again.