

RISA NYMAN

SWALLOWED
BY
A SECRET

CHAPTER 1



I glance at my yellow schedule card, already moist from first-day palm sweat, and trudge up the stairs to my third-floor homeroom. This is officially the second-worst day of my life.

I shouldn't have to be here today. I belong in my old school with my friends. Why Mom couldn't see that is something I'll never understand.

The teacher's desk is at the back of the room. I make my way there. For the longest time, she doesn't notice me. *Hey, look up, teacher, new kid here.* I give up and subtly wave my yellow card in her face. It works. She looks up with eyelids stuck between awake and asleep—and it's only 8:05 in the morning—and checks me off her list.

"Welcome to Tucker Middle, Ronald."

Ronald. Ugh. Changing schools is a nightmare. You have to

create your life all over again. You have to explain everything, including not to call me Ronald.

I guess no one here at Tucker will know my name has been Rocky since the first grade when I complained to my dad about being Ronald Owen Casson, Jr. and not having my own name. He made up the nickname Rocky for me by using my initials R.O.C. and ever since that's who I am.

But today, I'm not correcting anyone. My plan is to fly under the radar and try to blend in. I don't need any attention on me.

The teacher hands me a piece of paper with a name and room number and says, "You're scheduled to meet with the school counselor after homeroom."

"Already?" I ask, shocked they can't even wait a week before they haul me in for "the talk." The counselor probably reviewed my recent less-than-stellar record, but despite what Mom may think, I'm not on a slippery slope to repeating seventh grade. It was only a temporary lapse and a few too many "sick" days after Dad died. Mom shouldn't give up on me yet.

"Yes, today," the teacher says. "Take a seat." She points to a desk in the last row near the windows.

I stuff my backpack under the desk and look around. The room is noisy with loud laughing coming from a group of boys in the corner. Two of them are shoving each other but not hard enough to catch the teacher's tired eyes. The girls next to me are yakking non-stop and from time-to-time looking in my direction. I'm sure they're talking about me—the new flavor in Tucker Middle.

The teacher begins the morning announcements about a spirit rally and school dance, which float through my ears like meaningless vapor. Then she makes me stand up and introduces me to the class. I cringe from the friggin' attention and stuff my hands into my pockets to hide their twitching. All eyes examine the alien who dropped into their midst.

Being the new kid sucks big time, and it's way worse when you change schools in the middle of the year. Mom couldn't even wait

until summer as if some big emergency was forcing us to get out of Whitman without delay. She made us move in March. The “For Sale” sign was stuck in the front lawn right after the funeral.

I asked her if we had to move because of a money thing.

“No,” she said.

“Are we moving in with Grandpa because he’s sick?”

“No.”

I argued. I pleaded. I cried. I lost.

The end-of-homeroom bell jolts that awful memory out of my brain. I join the hordes going to the first floor and plaster on a smile in preparation for my meeting with the counselor so she’ll know I’m okay, and doesn’t put me on permanent appointment status.

I walk up and down the hallway but can’t find the counselor’s office. I’m getting suspicious that the school hid her office so the “troubled” kids wouldn’t be seen going in and out. Luckily, I spot a guy nearby mopping up a puddle of gunk.

As I approach, the usual odor of school disinfectant slams into my nostrils. The Tucker custodian must buy his foul-smelling potions to clean whatever horrors are inflicted on the walls and floors of the school from the same catalog as the Whitman guy. I ask him where Ms. Malone’s office is. He lifts up his mop and aims the handle at a door diagonally across the hall.

I knock. A short, pudgy woman with mostly gray hair pulled tight into a bunch sitting on the top of her head opens the door and sticks out her hand, so I do too. She pumps it as if she expects to fill a bucket with my blood. Ms. Malone’s dark eyes remind me of Shawny’s grandma’s even though Ms. Malone’s skin isn’t as dark.

“I thought you might’ve gotten lost. Are you having difficulty finding your way around the school?”

“No.” I use my specialty—one-word answers. This is a technique I perfected when people said dumb stuff like “Your dad was a great guy, but I’m sure you know that” or “Now you’ll have to take care of your mother and be the man of the house.” Did people really imagine a twelve-year-old is going to be in charge of anything? I’d answer,

“Yeah,” and clam up until extreme awkwardness filled the quiet space, and they’d move on to try their luck elsewhere.

I’m not into sharing what’s on my mind. When Mom asked if I wanted to say something at Dad’s funeral, my answer was a firm, loud “no.”

Ms. Malone doesn’t seem bothered by my short response. She continues, “Rocky, I’m delighted to meet you today. I want you to be comfortable coming here any time, for any reason.” She smiles at me, all cheery, as if the mere sight of me makes her supremely happy.

“Okay,” I reply, grateful that at least she knows my *real* name.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Rocky,” she says, not hesitating to dive right into the main subject. “Losing a parent is always difficult, but when it’s so sudden, it must be harder.”

“Yeah,” I say. What else can a person say? Difficult, oh sure.

“And he was so young,” Ms. Malone says.

Sudden. Young. Maybe she’s suspicious too like I was when Mom told me the “his heart just stopped” story. On the morning of the funeral, I looked for Mom to ask if my tie was okay and overheard Shawny’s mom telling Mom she was in control of what to tell me and when. Ms. R. said, “Marybeth, no regrets. People die from heart problems all the time. It’s a totally believable story.”

From then on, I’ve been convinced Mom’s covering up something; maybe it’s a secret too horrible for a kid to know. Most likely, she is overdoing the overprotecting. Either way, she has tossed trust in the garbage. This secret is keeping Mom and me separated as if a massive elephant has plunked itself down between us and refuses to move.

Ms. Malone must have noticed my brain was roaming, because she asks, “Are you okay, Rocky?”

“Young,” I repeat. Even if I wanted to say more, I’ve nothing to add and lower my eyes, rubbing the tops of my thighs to smooth out imaginary wrinkles in my jeans.

Ms. Malone clears her throat. “Will you come see me if you have any problems?”

I doubt she means helping me find out the truth. All my other counselors stuck with Mom's story. Maybe that's all they knew too. Dad dies, Mom makes us move, and poof, my whole life changes. Maybe I could enlist Ms. Malone to persuade Mom to at least let me go back to Whitman for the summer soccer clinic.

I lift my head up, and there's a meltiness in Ms. Malone's face that makes her eyes and mouth go all soft. She probably got an A++ in the kindness course in counselor school. She's different than the last guy I saw who bored me with endless descriptions of a beach in Saint something where he was going on his upcoming vacation.

Ms. Malone slips on her glasses, which were hanging around her neck, and reads one of the papers in my folder. I wish I had Superman vision and could bore my eyes into that file. I bet there's stuff written in the folder I should know. I stretch my neck until it almost snaps off in an attempt to read upside down. It doesn't work.

"Rocky, we hope your schoolwork will improve here, and you'll be on track for success. A good start is important, don't you agree?"

"Yeah." Now she's gonna think I have the vocabulary of a three-year-old.

Ms. Malone replaces the paper, closes the folder and stands—the universal sign the meeting has ended. "Everyone at Tucker is ready to help you."

She asks if I need directions to Social Studies. I shake my head and scoot out.

In the hallway, I remove my smile, happy that went—

WELL.

THAT VOICE. I never thought I'd hear it again. My eyes dart in all directions. I pivot 180 degrees to check behind me. What do I expect to see? Ice slides down my spine and into my legs, which are frozen.

Dead people don't talk.