

# The Cottage Park Puzzle

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## Chapter 1

It was days like this that made Karen Porter's stomach churn. She had been the principal of Cottage Park Junior - Senior High School for over a decade and still hated moments like this. She ran her hands down her gray tailored jacket, trying to smooth the wrinkles.

Lorraine Rogers sat in one of the plastic chairs on the other side of Karen's desk. Next to her was her son, Corky, one of Cottage Park's special needs ninth graders. Karen's assistant principal, Tony Smutz, had washed most of the blood from Corky's face and hands, but his shirt and pants were still covered. Unable to sit still for any length of time, Corky slid his six-foot frame back and forth on the slick plastic seat.

"Lorraine, I don't know what we're going to do." Karen shook her head. "You can see the problem." She gestured toward the splatters of blood that covered Corky's T-shirt. "I... we just can't have this kind of behavior on the school grounds."

"Lorraine's shoulders slumped and she bowed her head slightly. "What happened?"

Karen shrugged her shoulders. "Apparently something or somebody set Corky off, so he picked up a baseball bat and knocked two boys senseless during lunch. They were behind the equipment shed, out of sight of anyone else."

"So how did you find out about it?" A mixture of hope and resignation appeared in her voice.

"My son, Scott, found them. It scared him to death. He tried to help them – he got blood all over himself – then Tony arrived on the scene. I can tell you he was pretty shook up. He found the two boys unconscious, lying in a pool of blood. Corky was spinning around next to them, screaming. He had the bat in his hands and was covered with blood. Tony called 911 on his cell, and an ambulance arrived a few minutes later." Karen stared at her hands, which were open like an eagle's wings in front of her. "There was blood everywhere." She shuddered.

Corky made some unintelligible sounds and started slapping his hands on the edge of the principal's desk. Karen flinched and pushed her chair back farther. Lorraine put her hands on Corky's shoulders and massaged them. After a few minutes Corky quit stimming and sank back on his chair. His face was turned toward his mother, but he was looking out of the corner of his eyes through the window behind Karen. He bent his

head down, took the top of his T-shirt in his mouth, and began chewing. Lorraine reached over and pulled the shirt out of his mouth.

"Lorraine, I don't think we can continue to have Corky go to school here. He became a threat to the other students."

As if to cement his principal's decision, Corky suddenly stood up, spread his arms wide, and began turning in a circle while emitting a high-pitched squeal. Karen's eyes flew open in alarm as the squeal trilled to an end.

"Cork!" his mother said firmly. She turned back to face Karen. "He does this when he's under stress. It doesn't mean anything."

Karen watched as Cork spun to a halt and sank down to the floor. "I'm sorry," she said.

Lorraine's head dropped further and a tear trickled down her cheek. "Karen, there has got to be some other solution. Cork has never been a threat before." She raised her head and looked the principal in the eye. "This school has been such a salvation to our son, and Mr. Calderwood has been such a help," she said softly.

Karen nodded her head. "I'm sure that's true, Lorraine, but I hope you understand my... our situation."

"How much do you know about my son?"

Karen tented her hands in front of her. "I know who he is, of course, and that he's in our new wing."

As if in a trance, Lorraine continued, "Let me tell you a little about him. When Cork began here three years ago, he wasn't even potty trained. Can you imagine how difficult and embarrassing it is to have a twelve-year-old who has to have his mother changing his diaper?" She sniffled. "Mr. Calderwood, bless her heart, worked with Cork and solved that problem." Cork suddenly began slapping the floor with both hands.

Lorraine continued, "Not only has Mr. Calderwood been Cork's salvation, he's been our family's salvation as well. He's been able to give the consistent instruction that neither my husband nor I have managed to do."

"I understand, Lorraine, but you've got to see my position. I have nearly seven hundred kids in this school and I'm responsible for every one of them. I understand Corky's special circumstances, but if it had been any other student who'd done this, I'd have him out of here like a shot. Not to mention the legal ramifications."

"So where does he go?"