Book Title

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# **Chapter 1**

Back then, I was attending a public high school in New Jersey, right by the beautiful beach. The school was practically a stone's throw away from the shore, with the boardwalk passing through its far end. At that time, I had a group of friends, and things were just okay.

I got involved in some ventures, and one of them was selling cigarettes. My mom used to buy cartons of cigarettes from Delaware, and I would take one from her closet each week, selling packs to students at school for a few bucks each. Alongside, I had a close friend who dealt drugs and wanted me to join in since he saw I had buyers for cigarettes.

He handed me a bag of something I thought was what he claimed, but it turned out to be a deceitful trick. People started returning with complaints that it wasn't what they expected. Being inexperienced, I had no idea what I was dealing with, and when I confronted my friend, he revealed he knew and had played me. It was a bag of alfalfa hay sprayed with some marijuana-scented cologne. I was furious and wanted my money back, but he simply laughed it off.

As my relationship with my friends turned hostile, I found out that the person I got it from had a connection with the school, so I threatened to reveal the truth to his mom. This led to a bunch of enemies, but I acted quickly to keep some people out of the situation.

Things took a dark turn, and during one first-period class, I ended up in a physical altercation with him, during which I stabbed him in the stomach. We were close to the office where the cops were, and I was swiftly apprehended and put in front of a judge at just fourteen years old.

The judge gave me two options: juvenile detention or completing the school year before enrolling in a military school. I chose the latter and ended up attending a military academy, which I think it's okay to mention.

When I first visited the academy, I was struck by the sight of a thousand cadets marching with precision. It left a deep impression, and during the application interview, I honestly shared the story of the incident that led me there, which surprisingly earned the approval of the admiral.

On my first day at the academy, things got intense immediately. We were instructed to change into a uniform and met by a sergeant who demanded we go by our last names. The initial experience of being a "plebe" meant losing most of our rights for the first six weeks of training.

The journey at the military school was challenging, but I won some personal battles, including joining the Field Music company, referred to as FM. The uniformed sergeant took me under his wing, and despite not remembering his name, his appearance and demeanor were unforgettable. It was the beginning of a transformative experience, where I learned the true meaning of discipline and commitment.

After marching around for a few hours, there were about fifty of us now. We were all led to a building, which housed a barbershop. Once inside, we sat down in a room, and they began telling us what we were getting ourselves into, even quizzing us to some extent. Frankly, I had no idea what they were talking about with all these different things.

So, we were all inside this building at that time, and I wondered about the building's name, if it had one. While waiting for our haircuts, we chatted with the sergeant, learning about the company we were now a part of. I came to understand that I was assigned to a field music company that led the entire corps musically. Our buglers were responsible for giving orders, and we were in charge of all the calls. I was absorbing this new world of ranks and responsibilities, but I had no prior experience whatsoever.

After getting our haircuts, we went to the mess hall for lunch, where we were instructed to sit on just three inches of the chair. They measured it with salt and pepper shakers, ensuring we adhered to the rule. The chairs were uncomfortable, but by the end of it all, I realized the purpose behind this practice – teaching us good posture. Additionally, we weren't allowed to touch the table directly. Instead, we used our fists or the salt and pepper shakers to measure the distance between the table and us. Furthermore, we couldn't look at our food; we had to maintain eye contact with the person sitting across from us while eating. Condiments were off-limits; whatever was on the burger was what we could eat – often just a bun with a meat patty. Many times, we squared our food, keeping our hands at our sides, taking a bite, then returning it in front of our face before resuming the position of attention with our hands at our side. It was a struggle, and hunger was often our companion, but this was the way life went for six weeks.

The most critical aspect of the system was mastering the Caps Book – a small brass badge that went into our hats. To earn it, we had to memorize the entire capsule book and face a board test. For some, it only took a couple of weeks, but it took me five weeks. Memorization wasn't my strong suit, but I pushed through.

During the first six weeks of the system, my ability to continue came into question when they discovered I had some heart problems. Normally, during this time, communication with family was restricted to writing letters since we didn't have cell phones or computers, and there were no pay phones or booths nearby either. But once we got our shields, the family members supervising our barracks allowed us a single phone call to inform our parents.

Due to my condition, the school couldn't take me for testing, so my parents had to come and get me after just two weeks. They could only take me to the appointment and back to the school, nothing else. I was put on a heart monitor with clips on my chest and the monitor itself clipped to my belt. Despite this, I managed to keep up with the daily running, obstacle courses, and rifle exercises. Over time, I shed weight, gaining muscle, but my heart condition improved, pleasing the doctors.

One thing I wanted during my time at the school was some kind of recognition, like a medal, to make it all worth it. I didn't enroll just to escape juvenile detention, but to seize the opportunity before me. I went to Colonel Davis, an old man with gray hair, and shared my desire, although he warned that new cadets don't get ranked or earn medals. I refused to accept such limitations – that's a theme that will echo through this story.

So, we had this book, the Guiel, which was basically a rule book for the school. It contained everything one needed to know about the medals and awards, how to put them on the uniform, and which ones were more prestigious than others. It also explained what they were for, but my focus wasn't on how to earn them at first. I glanced through it, and nothing seemed to be within my reach – my tax officer was spot on.

But then, I began pondering the possibilities, searching for loopholes. I came across the Science Medal, awarded to the winner of the end-of-year Military Science Fair. The first place seemed like a distant dream, but I thought I could still strive for it. It was around the end of September, and the school year didn't last beyond the beginning of June. Time was tight.

I dug into researching the event and found out that the judges were military personnel with backgrounds in science. There was Colonel Raymond, the chemist, Colonel Hendrix, the physicist, and Colonel Workman, the weapons engineer. I figured Colonel Workman was the crucial factor, the one who could make or break my chances. To impress these military folks, I knew I had to create a weapon, something that they would appreciate, not some elementary science experiment like a volcano.

I sought help from the Army department on campus, where they handled all the army recruiting. There were about a dozen soldiers working there. I went to each one, inquiring about the weapon systems they despised the most. My goal was to redesign and improve one of those weapons for the science fair.

The weapon they all seemed to hate was the AT-4, a rocket launcher that was notably heavy and disposable. That became my target. But being a year-old, I was clueless about how to address these problems. I found myself in another difficult position, attempting something well beyond my capabilities.

As time went by, I carried on with my daily routine of attending classes and marching around with my company. They made me go to Jewish Fellowship once a week, where I'd join other Jewish students for lunch and discussions about our shared heritage. It helped pass the time.

However, all the while, that same sergeant continued his relentless harassment, berating me without pause. I often found myself standing at parade rest for hours, enduring his taunts. It was a Saturday in mid-October, an overcast day with the sun still bearing down, and I was sitting in the barracks with three of my brothers. There's a picture of that moment, one of my brothers snapped it, and I still have it.

We were bored and just lazing around, but my mind was occupied with the science fair. The initial idea I had wasn't cutting it; I needed a better plan. Suddenly, I recalled a science experiment we did back in my old high school. We used a water bottle, filled it halfway with water, and compressed it with a bike pump to turn it into a rocket.

The revelation hit me like a lightning bolt. If soldiers could carry a hollow tube as a projectile container, they wouldn't need to bear the weight of the explosive charge. The propellant could be a simple combination of liquid and air – water, urine, anything. That was it. I started barking orders at people, instructing them to gather cardboard, poster boards, and other materials I needed.

A good friend of mine, Wren, had a bunch of those soft drinks similar to Mountain Dew. I told him to drink all of them right then, but he was puzzled. I needed one of the empty bottles for the project. Harris brought back a Gillette razor handle as the perfect component I required.

Outside, I fashioned a tube from the poster board and crafted a cone out of paper, taping it to the bottom of the bottle. I made a hole in the cap for the bike pump nozzle and taped the razor handle to the poster board tube. With everyone following me, we hurried down the three flights of stairs to the back of the barracks, where there was a parking lot.

I handed the poster board tube to one of my brothers and told him to hold it over his shoulder. Then, I asked him to pump it while I held the project. Confused but intrigued, he complied. With water from my bottle already inside, I attached the bike pump to the back and watched the pressure gauge. Slowly, I inserted the nozzle into the end cap of the bottle projectile. When the pressure was right, I released it, and it shot off like a dream. Everyone cheered, understanding what we had accomplished.

That was it – I had created the prototype.

Flashing forward, we had what was called a core weekend, where all the cadets could go out for leave on special occasions or holidays. Some went home to their families, while others stayed on campus if they lived too far away. On one such weekend, I invited my roommate, SOMG from Korea, and Matthew Kelly from California, to my home. My stepdad, Bill, a tall, bald man, was always supportive, and when I shared my project idea, he took me to Home Depot and said, "Get whatever you need."

The next morning, fueled by motivation and energy, I was up at 5 AM, already working in the garage. Everyone else woke up around 7 or 8 AM, surprised to find me already hard at work. By the end of the day, I had a finished PVC bazooka, camouflaged and all. People were in awe, and I had to show it to my officer when I checked in. We had some discussion about where to store it, and eventually, it was decided to keep it in the armory with the trade rifles, which was fine with me.

The next challenge was finding the proper projectile. I experimented with different types of water bottles, including hard, indestructible ones and rubber ones that just turned inside out. Eventually, I settled on a particular type that could withstand immense pressure, enabling us to launch projectiles up to a thousand yards.

To make the testing process easier, we sought a camera tripod from Colonel Johnson, an extremely old man who surprisingly had abundant energy. He was in charge of the school's photographers and gladly lent me a metal tripod as long as I returned it at the end of the year.

Now with the bazooka mounted on the tripod, we continued testing behind the barracks. One day, the commandant, the second-highest-ranking officer on campus, spotted us as he walked to his car. Confused and concerned, he sprinted towards us, but we showed him what we were doing. He found it pretty cool but asked that we avoid shooting near his car.

I had applied early on for the Science Fair, and Colonel Hendrix, the physicist and one of the judges, approached me. He wanted to sponsor my project. I couldn't believe it – sponsored by a judge! He guided me through the necessary paperwork and preparations. Three nights before the Science Fair, we were allowed to set up and make any final touches. There were other projects too, like a model of Six Flags' newest roller coaster, but my main competitor was a guy who built a hydrogen engine. I felt sure he was my toughest rival, and he seemed to feel the same way.

During those setup nights, I had my team, including Matt Kelly and Alex, who had helped with the prototype, guarding our project. The other guy kept trying to find ways to sabotage, but I was too focused on perfection to retaliate. The Main Day Science Fair arrived, and my whole family was there, cheering me on. When I presented my project to the judges, including Hendrix, he gave me a smile and nod, which meant a lot to me.

When the judging was done, they gave a speech, and I was elated to hear that the hydrogen engine guy got second place, even if I didn't win. But then, surprisingly, they announced that I had won first place! I was shocked. Colonel Ramon, the chemist, presented me with the medal, and I felt proud of my achievement. Colonel Davis, my tech officer, congratulated me as well, despite his serious demeanor.

After all the excitement, First Sergeant Workman, one of the judges, approached me. He shook my hand, congratulated me, and told me he made a phone call to someone at Aberdeen proving ground. They were interested in my weapon and wanted me to come for testing. There was even talk of a contract! It was hard to believe all this was happening at just 16 years old.