

MIND BREACH

NOW NOWHERE
IS SAFE

J. L. W. BRESSLER



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DEDICATION

This book is for my students and my family.

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My own experiences as a teacher, searching for ways to ignite learning and control discipline, inspired this work, yet my own adventure in bringing this story from the deep recesses of my mind to actual words on a page suggests that there is more to be said.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	vii
EXPOSITION	xvii
CHAPTER 1: BELLEVIEW HIGH SCHOOL	1
CHAPTER 2: FIRE AND BLISTERS	13
CHAPTER 3: FLYING TWINKIES	17
CHAPTER 4: DAY ONE	49
THEME ONE	70
THEME TWO	74
CHAPTER 5: SILENCE	75
CHAPTER 6: KIMBALL ACADEMY	78
CHAPTER 7: GOLDEN TICKET	91
CHAPTER 8: TWINKIE THEORY	97
CHAPTER 9: BREAKING AND ENTERING	111
CHAPTER 10: ANGRY JON	127
DEVELOPMENT	133
CHAPTER 11: OPERATION: WHO DONE IT	141
CHAPTER 12: PATRICIA THE GIGGLER	156
CHAPTER 13: EDDY’S FINE FEAST	164
CHAPTER 14: PENNIES	173
CHAPTER 15: DEWEY	191
CHAPTER 16: THREE PARTS	199

CHAPTER 17: HEY MOM	210
CHAPTER 18: RICK	222
CHAPTER 19: THE ELITE	228
HE'S BACK	241
CHAPTER 20: PAINTBALL	258
CHAPTER 21: CHORES	275
CHAPTER 22: THE DANCE	286
CHAPTER 23: NOT A CAT	313
CHAPTER 24: MAD MOTHERS	328
CHAPTER 25: ESPIONAGE	339
CHAPTER 26: KEVIN	353
CHAPTER 27: TRACK TEN	363
CHAPTER 28: ALL OR NOTHING	378
CHAPTER 29: LAST MAN STANDING	386
BRIDGE	396
RECAPITULATION	409
CHAPTER 30: WHAT DID YOU DO?	413
EPILOGUE	425

PROLOGUE

“I can hear it. I swear I can hear it; a buzzing sound, a steady low hum like the buzzing of a bee. At first I thought the annoying buzz was coming from the lights or from the vents. Then I listened to the computers and speakers and intercoms trying to find the answer but its source still eluded me. The buzzing is always there, sometimes loud and sometimes soft. I am aware of it at different times and annoyed by it at others. Am I going crazy?”

Kevin took a deep breath and began to walk. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Have you ever felt like you were being watched? That question had haunted him for days, wanting to be asked to someone who felt the same way he did. Kevin felt like he had eyes on him all the time and heard a steady buzzing sound that drove him to this place and this time. He shrugged it off and took a few tentative steps toward the entrance of Kimball Academy.

Kevin knew what he was about to do was difficult if not impossible. In front of him stood a pair of polished oak doors bearing the name of Kimball Academy embossed in large, raised gold letters. Below the name he read the number 1901, the year the doors opened for the first graduating class. Kimball Academy: a private school for the gifted and talented student. The elite were Kimball’s tenants and only the best walked through these oaken doors, and Kevin was one of the best.

Standing in front of the mammoth doors he immediately got the impression that the immense size was for the purpose of making guests feel small and insignificant. Shadows bounced off the walls of the building, and trees lining the path stood as sentinels.

I feel like Jack after he climbed the beanstalk and found himself in front of the giant's castle doors, thought Kevin to himself, knowing those doors would match the height and girth of the oaken ones that stood before him.

Kevin was nervous and very few places made him feel that way. *What is it that frightens me?* he thought again. It could be the size or reputation. Strong leaders have attended this school, along with famous lawyers, doctors, and politicians—impressive alumni to try to live up to. Kimball's history causes one to fear and respect the oaken doors, so why was he here under the shroud of darkness trying to sneak in? The answer was simple. Something was whacked.

His hands bobbed up and down as he wrestled with the decision to open the doors or just turn around and go home, a soda in one hand and a fist in the other, searching for the strength he needed to break through his fear. Soda: a strange choice for courage, but Kevin swore he could hear the buzz stronger when hyped up on sugar, and what better place to get a sugar rush than a sweet, gooey can of soda, the fourth one in about an hour. He took a large gulp, emptied the can, and then crushed it against his forehead. After one large burp, he tucked the can into his pocket, gave himself a slight adjustment, and then reached again for the door handle.

Kevin dreamed for a week of being alone in the school at this silent hour with just Jennifer, his girlfriend, to help him figure out the mysterious buzz. The dream was now reality, but where was Jennifer? He took a step closer toward the door. "Just push it open," he said out loud to absolutely no one. "This is stupid, it's just a door," he said even louder, scolding his own chicken-ness. Then goose bumps ran up his arm and he quickly turned, looking around again. "Someone is watching me."

SQUEAK!!!!

You thought you were going to sneak in without a sound, Kevin's subconscious asked him. Kevin laughed under his

breath at the obvious situation he was in. *A hundred-year-old door is bound to creak or squeak. What was I thinking?* He picked the lock with his student ID then stepped through the doorway and stopped. The darkness was a shock to his eyes and it took a few minutes to adjust. When the darkness lifted he bravely stepped in further.

A school at night could be frightening. The long dark hallways stretched out in front of you and disappeared into nothingness. Above you in the ceilings, little red eyes stared down at you from a white dome, eyes questioning your every move, and asking, *Why are you here?* Eyes watching you everywhere from the walls and the ceiling to the exit signs straight in front of you. The little red eyes were motion detectors for the alarm system. Kevin believed that almost everything scary had an explanation. The red eyes were only frightening until you saw that they were motion detectors. The fear was gone. When the buzzing is explained that fear will also be gone.

I don't have to worry about the alarm system tonight, remembered Kevin, who looked down the dark hall vacant of the red eyes. Every teacher was attending the monthly district meeting at town hall from 7:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. Two hours for the meeting gave Kevin two hours to find the buzzing and his girlfriend. *Where is Jennifer?* he thought again while setting his watch alarm to go off at 9:00.

"I'm over here," Jennifer twittered.

Kevin jumped out of his skin, hearing a voice shatter the silence he was immersed in. He had asked Jennifer to meet him at the side gate of the school an hour ago. Jen could never follow instructions; couldn't or wouldn't was a question that plagued Kevin.

Quickly he looked around and there was a flash of red somewhere off to his right. He walked toward the illusion he hoped would be Jennifer's red boots. A guy can be so brave when following a pair of sassy legs in red boots. Amazing.

“And you won’t believe what I’ve found.”

“You found the teachers’ secret jacuzzi?” Kevin responded.

“Maybe yes, maybe no,” teased Jennifer. She just loved to get his fur up.

He approached her, growing more accustomed to the dark surroundings; in another minute or two he might actually see her long legs attached to those silly red boots. *Why do I like those boots?*

He could see Jennifer standing in front of a vending machine with an OUT OF ORDER sign on the front. The machine looked old, like it hadn’t sold a fresh sandwich or apple since the early 1900s when the school first opened. Wait, did they have electricity in the 1900s? Sorry, I segued, back to the machine at hand. The machine was covered in cobwebs and had dust and cobwebs inside the individual slots for food. Paint peeling in places, faded and covered in student signatures, added to its uniqueness. Below the change return Kevin read something that made him laugh: “Joanie puts out just like this machine.”

“You know, Jen, I have walked past this spot maybe a hundred times. I never noticed this machine before.”

“Me neither, but it looks like it has been here a long time. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t get it.”

He took his finger and rubbed off some of the dust that had accumulated on the top. Rubbing his fingers together to get rid of the soil gave him a moment to ponder why the machine was here.

“Everything here is top-of-the-line, proving only the best for Kimball Academy. Why leave this antique?”

“It looks like it was forgotten.” Jennifer read the signatures on the side and started laughing when she came across a funny name. “Could you imagine being named Crystal Clear? Her parents must have hated her to name her that.”

“That’s sad. Wait, look here, what about John Smith? Can you get any more generic?”

They laughed and read for a few minutes more but the activity did not clear their minds of the question: Why was it here?

“Look,” she said, “I can see inside.”

Kevin moved up beside her and took hold of the sides of the machine. *She was right*, he thought, as he looked into the individual compartments for the food; it looked like a false back to the vending machine. Actually, it looked like there was a glass window instead of a metal back as you would expect. Kevin had seen the vending guy come to his school a hundred times and from experience knew that the back was metal and opened up with a weird key. Kevin noticed something else: green lights. The lights made the interior walls sparkle like a million tiny diamonds caught in the cobwebs, weird but freakishly pretty.

“Look, I think it can move,” said Jennifer, slipping forward under the overhang of the machine and grabbing the back to push the entire ancient fridge forward.

“Stop, this is a bad idea,” Kevin warned. Like his warnings would do any good. Jennifer did what she wanted when she wanted.

Jennifer moved the box about two feet with a single pull.

“Ooh, its spooky back here,” she said, her voice echoing hollowly off the glass wall. “And strangely—clean?”

Jennifer stood up and looked at Kevin with her head cocked sideways. The machine was so old and filthy the back should have reflected the front. Jennifer looked behind the machine again and came up with the same questioning look.

“It is polished and well tended, definitely not forgotten.”

“Clean?” How could a glass wall, window, whatever, be clean if it has been hidden behind this old monstrosity

for eons? Most of that conversation occurred in his head, but Jennifer got the idea.

Well, what could he do but follow her? Their questions weren't going to be answered by standing around looking stupid. He grabbed onto the box and gave it one great pull to free it from the wall. Now when I say a great pull you must visualize in your head the moment. This machine stood against this wall for a very long time. It definitely would take his incredible manly strength to get it to lift up out of the dents it had created in the floor and then pull it forward. Luckily he was a brute and could put all his shoulders and back into it.

Hindsight is what he needed. If he had just looked down and noticed that the dents were tracks he might not have tugged so hard and landed on his backside when it slid out with the greatest of ease like it was on wheels.

Jennifer laughed in hysterics while Kevin picked his manhood up off the floor and tried to stand with his dignity intact. He ducked his head and walked behind the machine with Jennifer following him. The moment they passed behind the machine a strange breeze, like an air conditioner, rushed into their faces. Jennifer's hair blew behind her, showing off her eyes that for the most part were full of mischief, but now were intense and focused.

Jennifer, a few inches away from Kevin, was standing on something, her hand braced against the side of the glass wall. She ran her fingers up and down the frame and then stopped.

"There's a handle here," she said, "so watch out, I'm opening her up."

She slid the glass wall open like elevator doors. Kevin put his foot gingerly forward onto a smooth, shiny slate; it felt like a step leading into something but it was too dark to see. Something, cobwebs he assumed, brushed around his ankles.

"What if we're the first two people ever to discover this place?" Jennifer whispered.

Kevin shrugged. "I suppose it's possible."

In the dim flickering light, it certainly seemed as if no one had ever intruded here before.

"What was that?" she said, staring over his shoulder.

The look on her face told Kevin she was serious. He whipped his head around and saw it, barely.

Embedded in the dark room, struggling to break free, he could make out eyes, sharp and intense and green. They were connecting to the two of them. He bent to look closer and took a step further into the room but there was something obstructing his feet. It was definitely not cobwebs.

"Let's get out of here?" Jennifer whimpered, with an uneasy note in her voice Kevin had never heard before. Jennifer wasn't exactly the vulnerable type.

"I agree. There is something that's not right." Kevin also didn't want to give her any more of a scare than she was already having. "You go first, but, just in case there is something in there, I need to take a quick peek at what is staring at us."

"No!" Jennifer cried. "Don't do anything. Don't even touch it."

"I'm kidding," Kevin reassured her. "The truth is my feet are stuck on something."

Kevin couldn't take one step in either direction. The tone in Jennifer's voice told him to tread lightly and that this was not a time for jokes. He would simply clear his feet from whatever they were tangled in and then follow her out. "Let's go back the way we came in. You go out first and then I *WILL* follow you."

Jennifer slipped past him into the hallway and he turned to watch her go. A shadow swept in front of him and pushed him back down onto the metal step. Jennifer began to splutter and take a couple of hurried breaths as if the shadow had just affected her, too. Kevin heard enough to know the sounds she was making were turning into panic.

“Take it easy, Jen,” he said. “Go out the same way you came in. I just fell down trying to clear my feet.”

“I’m trying,” cried Jennifer, frustrated and angry.

Kevin couldn’t help but notice that the opening behind the machine looked smaller and the lights from behind him appeared closer.

I’ll just stand up and wiggle my feet clear then walk out, he thought to himself as calmly as he could. Jennifer’s arms flew up over the machine and her head dipped down. *She must have slipped, he thought. The old machines do sometimes leak water.*

Kevin looked up to where the handle was that Jennifer used to slide the door open, and instead of a silver bar he thought he saw—fingers?

Another shadow, bigger than the first one, pushed up against him and Kevin lost his balance for the second time. His feet tried to grip the door frame but the glass and the slate were too slick. Something brushed against his calf. He fell backward onto the floor with his shins banging against the bottom of the vending machine.

Jennifer’s head just cleared the back of the box and Kevin could see from the bottom of the machine her red boots kicking up and propelling her forward out into the hall. *Thank goodness for that.* Kevin took a breath of relief knowing Jennifer would finally calm down.

Kevin pushed off after her, trying to clear his feet, but another shadow slapped him in the face. The sting felt like a sledgehammer crashing into his brain and for a moment he thought he was going to lose consciousness. *So much for my own advice.* He wiped his eyes and to his surprise another shadow, faster than the others, lifted him into the air and smashed his head into the ceiling, knocking down one of the white motion detector domes.

Play dead like a bear. Kevin thought that maybe if he was still, like when you face a bear, the shadow would think him dead and go away. He always had dreams of being chased by monsters, and the solution was always to

lie down and sleep till the scary monster left him alone. Play dead.

It wasn't over; he felt a rush of air, a high-pitched buzz, and knew as the prickly sense of fear rushed up the back of his neck and into his brain that he had better find a better plan or some way to get out. He took a deep breath and pushed as hard as he could toward the shadow and connected with something or someone. He was free for a moment but where was Jennifer? He couldn't see her anymore—then the shadow crashed down on him again and he found himself spinning and sliding out of focus.

The shadow pulled him sideways back behind the machine and into the room. Kevin pushed and pushed but it was like his other dreams where he tried to run and his limbs were heavy as lead. He couldn't move his feet and he couldn't move his arms. The buzzing grew louder and louder till he thought his brain was going to explode. *Why didn't I stop Jennifer from going behind this machine?*

“KEVIN!”

Did he hear his name?

“Where are you?”

“I'm here,” he thought, dazed. “I'm right here.”

He tried again to push his way out of the room but the buzzing swelled into a feverish pitch. He smashed his hands onto the sides of his head, the buzzing forcing his eyes to close, and then he vomited. He smashed against the wall again, knocking the breath out of his body.

Something in his legs gave way and he went limp; his arms, too. “Why can't I move?” Kevin was screaming but the sound was all inside his head. “I am going to die.”

In panic he knew he needed to run and get out of there. As soon as the word *run* hit his thoughts a black velvet curtain, thick and warm, descended upon him. Everything went black and he only caught a glimpse of the room he had been dragged into and swore it was full of computers. *What would a computer lab be doing behind a vending machine?*

WHAM!

The top of his bleeding skull ached as if he had just been hit by a hammer.

“Kevin!”

He thought he answered but there was no sound. His mouth was open, screaming, and no one heard a thing. The curtain wrapped itself tighter. Kevin fell, drifting down; it was actually sort of pleasant, and the last thing he saw in his mind’s eye—and it made him want to smile—was Jennifer’s sexy long legs in her shiny red boots.

Just before losing consciousness, he heard the worst sound ever—

A blood-curdling scream from Jennifer followed by the sound of her red boots sliding across the floor. The buzzing stopped.

EXPOSITION

All of life is a journey; which paths we take, what we look back on, and what we look forward to is up to us. We determine our destination, what kind of road we will take to get there, and how happy we are when we get there.

Dear Diary,

How did I get here and am I where I am supposed to be? I look around my bedroom, my master suite. Your bedroom should describe who you are. I look in the corner where I painted with meticulous care using muted greens and yellows and touches of earthy browns to achieve the effect of a stone wall. It sets a tranquil mood. Around the room are assorted pictures of a wedding day showcasing a happy couple kissing and smiling and other pictures of smiling children with their hair combed just right, except for the littlest one whose hair never seems to lay down flat. It has a mind of its own, as I am sure the littlest girl in the photo does, too. There are handprints and artwork made for Mom and Dad on those holidays that seem to define who they are, or set them up for what they are not living up to be. You are the best mom in the whole world. That is a pretty high standard. I see jewelry boxes, nightstands with books and lamps, exercise equipment and a TV. Are these items treasures? Was each piece bought special and put into its perfect place, or are they things that had been collected over the years because they were affordable or maybe hand-me-downs?

Am I living the life I set as a goal in front of me so many years ago, or is it the life I simply discovered along my journey? Who am I, and where am I going? Is anything in my control?

So let us begin our story.

The door to happiness opens outward.

—*Unknown*

CHAPTER 1:

BELLEVIEW HIGH SCHOOL

Whap!

A ruler hits the side of a desk, echoing in the dark classroom.

“Tony, wake up. Class, we have one more slide. Yes, Cooper, it will be on the test.”

Mr. Tom Reader, the school’s only certified scientist and behaviorist, is the school hottie: six feet tall, curly blonde hair, rippling muscles, and a five-year teaching veteran at Belleview High School. Tom loved the sciences and was shocked every year to find his students did not share his same passion.

“Ryan, I’m falling asleep. Are you?” whispered Isaac, stretching out to his full length in the tiny school chair.

“Yeah, this slide show blows.”

I can’t wait to be out of this school, Ryan thought to himself.

Ryan had secrets only Isaac, his best friend, knew about. These secrets pushed Ryan into seclusion from all his friends over the summer and left Isaac alone with all the ladies. Ryan and Isaac’s friendship shared a special dynamic; Ryan the leader, and Isaac the wingman. Isaac located and corralled the women and Ryan lassoed and closed the deal. The women loved Ryan and secretly put up with Isaac just to get a chance with the football hero. Isaac, the lone wolf all summer, crashed and burned. The wingman continued to locate the women but couldn’t close the deal. This absence of his best friend really strained their relationship and showed Isaac that Ryan thought very little of their friendship, to dismiss him for

three months without so much as “I’ll be back.” Ryan just went away.

“Andrea, next slide,” instructed Mr. Reader. “John, will you read this one?”

John stood up and, using the least amount of energy or breath, began to read.

“Does your mouth water when you hear the sound of the ice-cream man coming down the street? If so, then you have been conditioned to salivate at the sound. In the early 1900s Ivan Pavlov studied this conditioned response when he trained dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell. Pavlov knew that dogs naturally salivated when meat was fed to them. To condition this salivation, Pavlov rang a bell each time he presented the food to the dogs. After the ringing bell was paired many times with the presentation of the meat, the dogs salivated when they heard the bell, but before they saw the food. In other words, the dogs had become conditioned because they expected that the meat reward would follow the sound of the bell.”

“Class, stay with me now,” interjected Mr. Reader. “This is the last slide. Notice how in this slide, Pavlov rings the bell but there is no food and yet the dogs still salivate.” Mr. Reader was getting excited over the experiment. Pavlov’s theory of conditioning was the reason he studied behavior and science in the first place.

“Come on, Mr. Reader. So what! A bunch of dogs trained to salivate. Really? My dog drools all the time, does that mean bells are ringing all the time? This is stupid. Let’s do experiments with, I don’t know, Twinkies and fire?”

“Steve! That would be awesome!” responded Cooper. “I love Twinkies and, really, fire? Awesome. Could we have a test on doing various things to Twinkies, Mr. Reader? That would rock!” Steve gave Cooper a high five before turning around to face Mr. Reader again. The high five was their secret code for “Masters of the Universe.”

“You boys are morons. Don’t you get it? It’s called brainwashing, right Mr. Reader?” said Savannah smugly. Savannah felt and acted mature beyond her years. High-school boys were sludge on her shoe and dating high-school boys, out of the question. Her latest tryst was with a college boy from the local community college, Sean Brewer. One step above dating livestock, but to Savannah a very important step. She was heard bragging about her college boyfriend to all her high-school friends.

“You are both right,” answered Mr. Reader, who waited a few moments for that earth-shaking statement to sink in. In Savannah’s world, a guy like Cooper is never right. “Savannah, it is called conditioning, not brainwashing.”

“Whatever.” Savannah was ticked to be sharing the limelight with, swallow hard, Cooper.

Tom took a trick right out of the Tom Reader Bag-O-Tricks for Teaching. Trick number one: use competition, especially girls against guys, to motivate a lively discussion. It worked every time and as a bonus, Tom knew pinning Savannah against Cooper would encourage the guys and would really bug Savannah. “Sometimes, as a teacher, I feel like I have to pull every trick out of my bag to get you guys to listen,” Mr. Reader said under his breath, then continued to think about what Steve said. Firing up a Twinkie may not be a bad idea. He mentally put the Twinkie thought into his Bag-O-Tricks and then continued to set up the visual imagery.

“Dogs salivating aren’t a big deal, right Cooper?”

“Right.” Cooper sat up tall and smug then turned around and stuck his tongue out at Savannah.

“That’s enough Cooper, turn and face forward. Now as I was saying, dogs salivate all the time, so what? What is Pavlov trying to prove? Let’s do a couple of experiments and find out.

Experiment number one: the bell rings and the dogs eat. Bell rings and the dogs eat. Bell rings and the dogs eat. Bell rings and the dogs eat . . .”

“Mr. Reader,” begged Savannah and a few of the other girls.

“Sorry. This goes on, without fail, for several months. The constant repetition is conditioning the dogs to eat when the bell rings. Now we can have some fun. Boys, come up and pretend you are the dogs.” Isaac, Cooper, and Steve went up to the front of the room and crouched down on all fours, barking like dogs. “Linda will ring the bell, please, and Dylan, can you pretend to pour the food?”

The five actors displayed the experiment several times. Linda rang the bell, Dylan poured the food, and realistically the three dogs drooled and then ate the food. Gross. Tom walked up to Linda and Dylan and whispered something in their ears, then sat back down at his desk.

Linda did not ring the bell but Dylan poured the food. The three drooling dogs looked around confused but didn’t eat.

“What’s up Linda, ring the bell,” said Cooper, who enjoyed pretend eating almost as much as real eating.

“Class, what just happened?” Tom addressed the observers, who seemed a little confused as well.

“Brittany Carter, I am new here, but I would say nothing happened. The dogs . . .” Brittany eyed the three boys who were still drooling and then continued. “The dogs were conditioned to eat when they heard the bell—no bell and they didn’t eat.”

“Right you are Brittany, and welcome to our class. They didn’t eat. Give the little lady a prize.” Mr. Reader threw a brand-new pencil her way.

“Mr. Reader, you didn’t tell us to eat,” whined Steve.

“I didn’t tell you not to either.”

“Are you telling me,” interrupted Cooper. “There was perfectly good dog-like food, a Scooby Snack, and the dogs just looked at it? That’s wrong—that’s like not eating a Twinkie if it was put in front of you.”

“Dude, forget the Twinkie,” laughed Steve.

“You didn’t eat the food,” said Mr. Reader.

The boys were dumbfounded and asked to go back to their seats.

“I am preaching the gospel, class. The dogs looked at the food and DID NOT EAT IT!” Mr. Reader gave the class a big smile then turned around. “Man, I have these kids eating out of my hands, pardon the pun.”

Tom faced the class again. “Let’s crank it up a notch.”

This will get the girls boiling . . . I love teaching. Tom stared at the class and then hit them with—

“Experiment number two: let’s reverse the scenario, class. What would happen if the bell is rung but there is no food?”

The class sat silently, looking at the floor for the longest time. Mr. Reader could tell from Savannah’s crinkled-up eyebrows that she was struggling with an idea of her own. He laughed to himself, knowing that the pious Savannah would think this idea was beneath her high intellect and sensibilities. The silence continued for several minutes—and in a classroom setting that feels like an eternity—until in the back of the class a hesitant hand raised.

“They eat each other?”

Tom, super teacher, let their natural responses go on for a few more moments to let the lesson really sink in, and then he said, “Jonathan Dean, you are wiser than your years.”

The class goes wild. Retching sounds and gasps. “You’ve got to be kidding” is heard from several students.

“But Mr. Reader, that couldn’t really happen. A bell controlling, sorry, I mean conditioning you to the point of . . . ew? Only animals, right? A person, a human being, couldn’t be controlled like that?” petitioned Molly.

The look in her eyes was pleading for a safe, clear answer that didn’t shake the foundation her safe world lived on. The rest of the class waited for the answer too, but before Mr. Reader could answer, BRRRRRING, the release bell rang, and without so much as a thought to what

the students were doing, they all stood up, grabbed their bags, and left.

“I don’t know, Molly, what do you think?”

Molly didn’t hear Mr. Reader’s question. Conditioned like the rest of the class, she left when the release bell rang. The bell rings and the class exits. The bell rings and the class exits. The bell rings and the class exits.

That is the funniest thing, thought Mr. Reader, laughing so hard that he had to grab his sides to keep them from splitting. *Talk about a natural consequence, and the students have no clue. Pavlov, you are a genius. That is so funny!*

“What is so funny?” asked English teacher Martha Brown when she saw Tom making such a ruckus.

“I’ll tell you over lunch, Martha.” Continuing to laugh, Tom shut off the slide projector and laughed all the way to the cafeteria.

It was a crisp autumn day, the kind of day when the leaves sparkle, the school windows glisten, and fallen leaves litter the pavement. Excitement filled the air. It was the beginning of another school year. Every adult anticipates it and every child fears it. Students do get bored after a long summer and usually can’t wait to wear all their new clothes and start complaining about their horrible teachers, even if none of them will admit it. Gossip begins about the loss of their freedom and the beginning of homework, but most of all about who looks hot and who does not. Who is the hot new couple on campus, and who is still available? Whose boobs came in over the summer and whose did not? Charles, the boy with the man boobs, was in the category of whose boobs came in. All Ryan could think about was, *How long will I be here?*

Ryan Benet had jumped into elementary school with the same kids he dove into junior high school with, and where they all called San Francisco their home. Ryan and Cooper joined Steve Harris and Isaac Carter at the oak tree where they had all hung out since junior high. The

oak tree sat between the high school and the junior high school, and was their turf, the head guys. Football heroes and class clowns every one of them, until Ryan chose to make a dramatic change. No more clowning around and no more football. Ryan, an academic now, wanted to work hard and concentrate on his future. His new drive was difficult for the other guys to take, especially Cooper. Cooper's goal in life: to live long enough to become a menace to society.

The popular girls gathered around the pavilion, showing off their latest fashion trends and seeing who had the most up-to-date cell phone.

"I have 4G with a touch screen and forty-two apps."

"I have the latest Blackberry and Mom promises to buy me a new one every year on my birthday."

"I have the iPhone." That was greeted with cheers and oohs. Same people, same routine, every single year.

Ryan saw nothing had changed from last year except that the students were taller and wore more makeup. His whole life changed over the summer; how was it possible that no one else's did? *My life is going to be different*, thought Ryan. *I am different even if they aren't. I am no longer that pudgy little boy who was nicknamed Charlie Brown. No, I am Ryan. I am a high-school student and I can bench press 150 pounds; six feet tall with muscles and a high IQ. I am a stud.* Ryan could see the silly girls with their cell phones and stiletto heels staring at him in those ridiculous flirty ways. *The women want me and I am going places.* Ryan worked hard all summer to say that. *I am a beast.*

"Ryan, what are you doing? You look kind of goofy standing there beating your chest."

Isaac, Ryan's best friend, knew Ryan better than anyone.

"Cut it out, Isaac. I was just checking out the ladies."

"Nice try, Ryan, you are such a freak." They both nodded and then turned and assumed the cool position.

Ryan Benet was a beast and all the kids knew it. He could out-lift any of the guys on the football team and outrun the fastest track star. His hair was blonde with touches of gold that lit up a room and the girls were mesmerized by his haunting blue eyes and defined cheekbones. Ryan always wore his leather jacket to complete the look. He wasn't a badass and that made him even more desirable, the kind of guy that a girl could take home to Mom and earn her brownie points for her amazing taste, and then get more brownie points from her girlfriends, who would be green with envy.

No, this year is going to be different. I am going to change my destiny and I am going to get out of here to do it, Ryan thought to himself. Ryan spent the last six months filling out lengthy applications and making sure he met all the requirements to be accepted to Kimball Academy, a private school hidden in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, whose alumni attended Boston, Princeton, and Yale. Ryan saw himself after a good private school like Kimball attending one of these Ivy League schools, if he got accepted. Kimball would help Ryan become a world-famous engineer; he just had to get in. There was also the issue of a scholarship.

Kimball Academy approached him last summer with an offer for a full-ride scholarship if he would play football for them. The picture was nice, but the packaging was all wrong. Ryan wanted to get away from the jock image and be taken seriously for his mad tech skills.

"Mr. Kilpack, I would be honored to attend your school. It is a dream come true, but not for football," responded Ryan to the incredible offer. Mr. Kilpack was taken aback and reclined into the old loveseat that the Benets had for years. He eyed Ryan, thinking there was more to this boy than he had originally thought.

"I'm curious to see where you go in life, boy," cajoled the area director. "With *coholes* like that, you are sure to go far."

“Let me try for an academic scholarship, you won’t be disappointed.” Ryan stopped breathing. He knew he was gambling on the greatest opportunity of his life, because of pride. A football scholarship would have been a sure bet and he knew it, but that wasn’t what he wanted and the idea of football just brought back all the pain and guilt he was desperately trying to get away from. Ryan watched Mr. Kilpack pull out papers from his briefcase, “Mr. Kilpack, it isn’t pride or football that drives me. I feel like I am at a crossroads and a chance to change my spots. I can do it, I know I can.”

Mr. Kilpack nodded and handed him a pile of papers. “This is what it will take for an academic scholarship. Good luck, I am rooting for you. I don’t often get surprised by applicants, but today you surprised me. Keep that up.”

The summer was spent with ACT scores, SAT scores, IQ tests, and referrals from teachers, family, and his parents’ associates. Ryan wrote essay after essay and spent hours in the library increasing his reading repertoire. The hardest part was doing the video that was supposed to portray his passions, passions he wasn’t sure he had anymore.

Present a four-to-five minute video describing your passions. What drives you? Why do you think you will be an asset to Kimball Academy? Brag about yourself, your talents, and your goals. Don’t forget to acknowledge any awards and achievements you have received.

“What talents? I throw a ball and I have mad skills at the computer. I love small engines and girls. How do you put all that down on film?” Ryan was strong at bullshitting on paper, but you can’t hide who you are when in front of a camera. Deep down he knew he was a simple kid from a poor family. What did he really have to offer? *Maybe I should blow up something to really make an impression?* Ryan knew that Cooper would think that was a brilliant idea.

After lunch the bell rang and the students began to creep into their afternoon classes. Mr. Reader had control of his giggles and stood ready for the next wave of students to come in. The entire staff at Belleview High School, except for two or three, fitted into a normal teacher's mold. They were prim, proper, and boring. That was at least Ryan's point of view. He wanted to be pushed, his mind challenged. Up to this point, getting A's was easy and he never understood Cooper, who was thrilled over his C's and D's.

Ryan liked childish Cooper, but he knew that things were different now. He looked at the day-to-day mundane stuff differently than he had six months ago, when something changed him forever. He wished he could go back to his carefree ways, but that was then and this was now. Now, today, he would make every day count and not get caught up in going through life simply by rote. Not now and not ever.

Ryan was lost in deep thought, but Cooper and Isaac weren't. They were up in the old oak tree dropping raisins into the hair of girls passing by. Later they planned to make a big stink about bugs in all the girls' hair. Those two did anything for a laugh. Last year, on the first day of school, they dropped actual spiders on the girls from the same tree. It was hilarious watching the girls dance around squealing, trying to get the spiders out, until the boys accidentally dropped a spider on Mrs. Brown. Mrs. Brown, a longtime high-school English teacher, did not find their joke funny and suspended both of them for three days. They weren't even in high school yet. Mrs. Brown had grabbed them by the ears and walked them over to the junior high and got them suspended. You did not mess with Mrs. Brown.

"Oh, no!"

The bell rang precisely at 2:00 and tradition dictated a back-to-school assembly in the gym on the first day. "I hate assemblies and back-to-school games," moaned Ryan.

“It won’t be so bad,” said Cooper. “High school assemblies have got to be cooler than the junior high ones.”

DING, DONG, DING went the bell.

“Students, please follow your fifth-period teacher into the preassigned seats in the gym. Seniors, you are on the east side, and the freshmen are all on the west. We begin promptly at 2:10.”

“We never begin PROMPTLY at 2:10,” mouthed off Steve. He liked to imitate the principal’s voice, but instead of sounding like Mr. Worthington he sounded more like Rodney Dangerfield, getting ‘no respect’.

“Steve, you are so ugly that when you were born the doctor took one look at your face, turned you over, and said your mom had twins.”

“Yeah Cooper, you are so ugly that when you play in the sandbox the cat tries to cover you up.”

“Steve you are so—”

“Stop it you two,” interrupted Ryan. He knew this one-upping each other with Rodney jokes could last for hours. “We have an assembly to get to.”

Steve was correct, at 2:10 they found the scene of students talking, standing, and dancing around while teachers pointed them to their seats and whispered, “Are you doing what you are supposed to be doing at this moment?”

“Yes,” answered almost half of the senior class, who continued with their dance moves.

SQUEEEEEEEEL. TAP. TAP. TAP. TESTING.

“Welcome, students, back to school after the long summer break. Let us begin with our class competition. Mrs. Stevens will lead you.”

The next twenty minutes reeked of cheering, silly skits, and tug-of-war. The students whooped it up like they were all high on crack. Ryan just sat and watched the ridiculous behavior.

“They are all like the geese on the greenbelt,” he whispered to no one in particular. “One goose sounds off

about a possible bread crumb in sight and all the other geese attack from miles away just for that possible crumb. Look at them.”

At that moment Mrs. Stevens threw a balloon covered in shaving cream into the center of the gym and fifteen seniors went crazy trying to catch it. Just like geese chasing after something that may not have been a piece of bread, it could have been a chip or a rock or a child sneezing. The geese don't care; the noise stirs them into action. No thought, just instinct. *I could yell out an obscene word and this crowd of geese would go wild with their own squawking.* Ryan stood up and put his hands over his mouth and shouted, “\$#%&%” as loud as he could right when the balloon popped and the room had gone silent.

The students looked around and then cheered just as Ryan predicted. “Stupid geese.” The assembly continued with Ryan sitting on the bench holding his head between his hands all hunched over. *The screaming will have to stop soon,* Ryan thought to himself. The one-hour assembly had reached the halfway mark and the kids were surely getting tired.

Finally at the end of the day Ryan dragged himself to his car, cleared the school parking lot, and got onto the road. If he was to get to the mail before his sister, Ryan would have to take some serious side streets away from the onslaught of teenage vehicles flirting with danger as they all exit the school. Ryan turned right and began the race. His head had been pounding ever since the assembly hit screaming altitude and the decibels had hit his ears with unrelenting vengeance. Loud, high-pitched screams affected him a lot. He couldn't help it. It was like an arrow straight into his heart and straight into his memories. Ryan, now the oldest child in his family, once had an older sister, Kayla. She would have graduated from high school last year, if it hadn't been for the accident six months ago.

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