

Chapter 1

Friday, October 5, 2001

It was a typical day for Jack Lack, who had autism and was misunderstood. Although this was not the typical day of many boys in the village of East Germantown, Indiana, it was for him. It had actually been like this for the eleven years that he'd been alive.

First, he woke up and was forced to eat food he hated for breakfast. It was supposed to cure him, but instead made him sick. Then he took the medicine that would stop him from acting rebellious, though it had no effect, since Jack already spent most of his life trying to be obedient but didn't know how. After that, he reluctantly walked to the Cooper School at the corner of Paine Drive and Sufferin Street, only to be tardy because he got into a fight with the school bully, Mark McMann, on the playground.

The bully could not accept the fact that Jack's first and last name rhymed, and felt that teasing him could somehow change this. But Jack wasn't the only one who was teased by Mark. Indeed, he was so mean that *everyone* shuddered when you said *his* name.

McMann also looked like a bully with his bulging muscles and angry-looking face, unlike Jack, who had arms as thin and mousy as his stringy brown hair.

When he finally got into the school building, Jack was ten more minutes late to his class because of his shoelaces. It was a school rule that everyone had to change from outdoor shoes to gym shoes at the start of each day, and it was his therapist's rule that he *had* to have lace-up shoes, even though he couldn't tie them. When everyone else was safely at their desks or standing saying the Pledge, Jack was still in the hall, tears staining the dirty, knotted shoestrings. Sometimes the hall monitor would find him sniffing, and give him a tardy slip.

But even when Jack got into class, he usually missed what his teacher taught him, because she talked too fast and always too loud.

On the other hand, Jack was put in a class of rebellious boys, so it didn't matter that he didn't understand anything. The entire class was considered hopeless. Jack didn't fit in that class because he was short and slight, while all the rebels were strong and hardy because of the exercise they got by running around the classroom during frequent revolts. Such revolts were usually started by Larry, Moe, Curly, John, Paul, George, or Pete, but Jack was generally blamed for them because he lacked the verbal skills to talk his way out of things.

This was a group of kids who wouldn't do anything you wanted them to do. But there was something different about Jack. The other kids misbehaved on purpose, but he did so because of his autism.

Fortunately, Mrs. Walter, the teacher, seemed very patient, although in truth, the school's dark secret was that she was paid a lot more than the other teachers. That was the reason she never quit.

The class riots were always destructive, like the time one of the students took a knife and stabbed the class clock, or the time that the walls of the classroom were defaced with something so obscene, I could never tell you without having to be censored. In fact, every time there was a riot, some new security procedure was implemented to prevent that type in the future. But the students always found something new, and worse, to do.

The classroom was called "THE BD AND JD CLASSROOM" because Behavior-Disordered individuals and Juvenile Delinquents usually got along well together—even though the BDs had chemical imbalances whereas the JDs were just plain evil. Jack was the first person to be there because of autism. He didn't qualify for the kinder, gentler autistic classroom down the hall because he could talk and did well on spelling tests.

All the things the teacher needed were locked up in closets, because if these kids had access to them, they would use them as weapons. Although every room had a button to call the school

office via the P.A. system, this room had five call buttons. Instead of having only one PUSH TO CALL button, the buttons said:

PUSH TO CALL OFFICE
 PUSH TO CALL in a COMPLAINT
 PUSH TO CALL for HELP
 PUSH TO CALL in case of FREE THINKING
 PUSH TO CALL for RESPITE

On this day, Friday, October 5th, there had been no riots yet. Not even a food fight at lunch. The class was doing Social Studies, and Mrs. Walter was teaching kids about the Revolutionary War, a thing that she had been trying to teach them for four weeks, but because of the weekly revolts, she had always been interrupted.

“And so, in the Battle of Yorktown, we beat the British because they did something very stupid. General Cornwallis hid out in Yorktown, a city near a river. Because of the river, there would be only three ways for him to escape in the event of an attack. What I mean is, American troops were—”

“Will you please state the date and year?” Moe demanded suddenly, and Jack got scared. This meant that a riot was starting or could start. Jack did not know why he knew; he just did. He also knew that because he never participated in these fights, he was called “the retard” by Moe and everyone else.

“What did you say?” asked Mrs. Walter.

“The boy asked you to please state the day and year!” Larry shouted, sounding angry. “So answer the question!”

“Moe and Larry, why did you call out again? You should have raised your hand, as it says in your behavior goals. You are to raise your hand successfully eighty percent of the time, or during four out of five attempts to gain attention, with eighty percent accuracy, and a ninety-five percent confidence interval. This is stated in your Individualized Education Plans.”

“Answer the question,” growled Larry.

Mrs. Walter went on, “Because of that, *I* won’t make my career goals this week, and *you* just lost your teasing-tolerance

privileges. I will not protect you from any bullying for one whole week. And I won't tell you the date and year, Moe, because you already know," said Mrs. Walter.

Curly cut in. "We want to make sure that what you are teaching us will help us in the future. We don't think so, as we are learning about what happened in the late 1770s. It has already happened. We should move on. We want to learn about the present. After all, we *are* in the twenty-first century, and the third millennium, and twenty years later, when we are all grown up, we will need to worry about over-dependence on computers, ozone depletion, and global warming."

"We will never need to worry about the military mistakes made two hundred years ago," added Moe.

"So what do you think I should teach you?" asked Mrs. Walter, pretending to agree.

"If we are coming here to become working people of society, you have to teach us the right stuff, not a bunch of crap that we'll never use. Now, answer my question!" said Moe as if he had won an undeclared battle.

"YEAH!" shouted every other student except Jack.

"I do not need to answer that question. You are already getting yourself into big trouble."

"The kid asked a question, so answer it!" shouted John, the student who always stuck up for Moe.

"YEAH!" shouted every student except Jack.

"No, I won't. You're just children. I am an adult, and besides, I am the teacher. You must obey me, but *I* don't have to obey *you*," said Mrs. Walter sharply. "And because you also called out, John, you're going to lose ten points. No big surprise for you this afternoon."

"Oh, no!" cried John mockingly. Then he got up and threw a pencil toward the one small, barred window, where it bounced off the glass.

"Can you p-p-please stop it?" Jack whispered. "I-I-"

"Traitor!" said Moe. "Remember, retard, unless you shut up, we're gonna beat you up on the playground."

"That's one, Moe," warned Mrs. Walter.

“I don’t care about your ‘one-two-three’ method.”

“Why are you blaming us?” asked Moe. “You teachers tell us to answer the questions that *you* ask. So we only ask for you to practice what you preach. Remember the golden rule.”

“Yes, I do. But that is totally irrelevant to what is going on here. As it is only my job to educate you, I do not have to answer questions that are not important for your education. That’s *two*,” said Mrs. Walter.

“You did not answer our question when we asked nicely. So learn the *hard* way,” said John.

“Everyone, chant with me,” said Paul.

And everyone except Jack started chanting: “ALL WE ARE SAY-ING . . . IS ANSWER THE—”

“That’s *three*, class!” screamed Mrs. Walter. “Everyone, go to the principal’s office now!”

“We won’t,” said Paul. “We hate school, and we’re sick of your martial laws. Everyone, get up and chant.”

Then every student (except Jack) got up and marched around the classroom chanting.

“Rules are for your own good. Look at you now! You’ll never be functional members of society,” said Mrs. Walter, even though she knew she couldn’t be heard over the chanting of the boys.

Suddenly the chanting stopped.

“And that’s because of school,” George replied, “which teaches us to repress our anger and will doom us all to dying of cancer and heart attacks in our fifties. Do you think we remember *anything* we’re taught? Well, we don’t, so there’s no reason why you should teach it.”

Mrs. Walter rushed to her desk and pushed a button labeled: PUSH TO CALL in case of FREE THINKING.

Then everyone except Jack marched toward the door and left the classroom. He dropped to his knees and hid under his desk.

“Come back this instant!” Mrs. Walter screamed, forgetting that she had just ordered her students to go to the principal’s office.

The P.A. system came to life.

“Yes?” asked Mrs. Bolony, the school secretary. “Is there another riot?”

“Yes, and they’re on their way to your office. Think of something good to punish them with.”

“Hmm, let me go ask the principal. I’ll be right back.”

In a few minutes, all the rioting kids had returned with the janitor’s spray painter.

Then suddenly, Moe commanded: “STOP!”

Everyone stopped.

“Where’s Jack? He didn’t listen to his teacher and leave the room. He’s the one who should be punished.”

“There he is,” said Paul. “Let’s beat him up.” He didn’t really mean it, since in his heart he was not a violent person, only angry.

In a show of defiance, though, he hauled Jack out from under his desk and punched him lightly—for show—in the stomach, Jack’s most sensitive area due to his autism.

Jack shrieked.

Moe taunted, “You’re a traitor! And besides, your shirt’s on backwards! *You’ll* never be a productive member of society!”

It was true about the shirt, by the way. Jack *had* put it on backwards.

“Yeah, why can’t you be like us? Maybe your cerebellum’s on backwards,” said Pete.

Everyone except Jack laughed.

“QUIET!!!” screamed Mrs. Walter, who was done talking to Mrs. Bolony.

No one listened. John moved toward Jack with an outstretched fist. Jack shrieked again.

Then suddenly, there were three loud thumps, as sharp as gunshots. Jack slumped into the fetal position under his desk again. His heart was pounding so hard, he thought he would drop dead. He wondered who’d been shot. But actually, to tell the truth, the principal had arrived and had knocked on the classroom door.

Because of Jack’s sensitive ears, the knocks had sounded like gunshots.

“What has been going on here?” the principal demanded.

“There has been another riot,” said Mrs. Walter. “The students have rebelled...again...and it was impossible to teach them about the Revolutionary War.”

The principal entered the classroom, sat down in the nearest chair, and rubbed his eyes.

“Why are you all like this?” he asked wearily of no one in particular.

No one in particular heard him.

Then Dr. Drake noticed Jack underneath his desk in the fetal position.

“Which student is this?” asked Dr. Drake.

“Oh, that’s Jack, who’s probably the most rebellious. He’s the one who always has those episodes during fire drills. He complains that he has sensitive ears although no other student complains during a fire drill. He also complains of bullies when we all know it’s his own fault he’s being bullied. If only he could learn to get along with his peers. It’s in his IEP goals, but—”

“Isn’t he the boy with autism?”

Mrs. Walters harrumphed. “That’s what they say about everybody who’s weird these days. Just look at him. It’s obvious he’s just a fighter.”

Dr. Drake looked again at the trembling form hiding under the desk.

“But what can we do?” he said. “The kids in your class are naturally bad.”

Then suddenly there was a loud

RRRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNNNGGGG

and all the kids ran out of the classroom. Jack was now in total shock, so he kept hiding even though he knew he would be bullied big time for not doing what his classmates were doing.

“Wait a minute! That’s not the school bell! That’s an alarm!”

“Somebody must have set the noisy clock-radio again!” Mrs. Walter said.

Now to most people, it was just an annoying buzz, but to Jack, it was like the explosion of the bomb over Hiroshima—

right next to his ear.

“After them!” Dr. Drake cried.

“I’ll get them!” said Mrs. Walter. She ran out to the hall and screamed, “STOP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Then suddenly, all the teachers in the neighboring classrooms in that hallway rushed to their doors and shouted back, “BE QUI-I-I-I-E-T-T!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“What has happened here?” said Mrs. Hevin. “Our class is taking the Houston Aptitude Test for Education, and no one can listen because of the racket!”

“Our class is also taking that test!” said Mrs. Helton.

“Well, somebody better help me catch those kids!” cried Mrs. Walter.

But it was too late. The kids had left the school, to everyone’s secret relief.

“Well, I guess all I can do now is get back to the classroom and get ready for another day on Monday,” said Mrs. Walter with a sigh.

“Even though normally I’d send out the truant officer,” said Dr. Drake, who had followed her into the hall, “it’s already two o’clock. There’s no use getting them back now.”

So Mrs. Walker shuffled back down the hall, only to discover there was one student still in her classroom.