

1 Homeroom

Steven sat in his usual spot, the last desk in the second row from the door. There were still a few minutes before the start of homeroom and none of his friends had arrived yet. Actually, no one was there yet except for himself, the teacher Mrs. Matthews, and Kimberly Smith and Joanne Valence, who were two cheerleaders, sitting on the other side of the room, gossiping about the boys they met at a party last weekend. Steven knew this because even though Kimberly was talking to Joanne in a whispering voice, she was so loud, he could hear every word. In an attempt to block her out, he tried to let his mind wander as he stared across the room and out the window.

Steven attended Islip Bay High School in the town of West Islip, New York, which is on the south shore of Long Island. He was of average weight and height, with short, dirty blond hair, brown eyes, and a demeanor that made him seem older than he actually was. The window he was staring out of overlooked the Great South Bay. He tried to fixate on a sailboat he could see in the distance. He imagined he was on it. Away from school. Away from everything, with only the sounds of the sea to be heard. It seemed so free. He wouldn't know where he was going. He wouldn't know when he'd be coming back, and most importantly, he would have had no idea that Kimberly would have hooked up with Bryon Keaton if it wasn't for the fact that he ended practically every sentence with "aight". Okay, this isn't working, he thought to himself. It was only the second week of school and he foresaw a very long year ahead.

Thankfully, Kimberly's voice began to drown out as more kids entered the room. But unfortunately, three of those kids happened to be Bret

Walker and his two sidekicks, Tim and Alex. They were all on the hockey team with Steven. Bret was the coach's son. He was tall and burly, with messy brown hair and undoubtedly the star of the team. Steven couldn't stand him. Not because he was jealous, but because Bret was that classic loud and obnoxious kid that for some reason everyone seemed to adore. You know the type. There's at least one in every school. They always have an entourage of two or three kids hanging around them who agree with everything they have to say and over laugh at every little joke. To Steven, that was a little annoying. But what he really couldn't stand was for some reason that was completely unbeknownst to him, this kid always went out with the best looking girl in school. And Bret was no exception. In walked Jessica Tighen. Like always, Steven couldn't take his eyes off her. She had long dark hair, brown eyes, a beautiful face, and a body that, well let's just say made all the boys take notice. She seemed to walk in slow motion. Slow motion through the door. Slow motion down the middle aisle. And slow motion right into Bret's arms. She then began to make out with him right in the middle of the classroom. Okay, maybe he was a little jealous.

"Assholes, people love 'em," Steven's best friend, Jim, said to him, noticing him staring. Jim came in through the back door and sat next to Steven in his usual spot, the last desk in the first row. He was a little shorter and thinner than Steven and had short jet-black hair and brown eyes.

"Yeah, why is that?" Steven asked.

"Don't know. But it raises the age-old question. Are popular people assholes because they're popular? Or are they popular because they're assholes?"

Steven laughed. "Who is that, Confucius?"

"Socrates, I think," Jim replied, straight faced.

"Ah, I see."

As they laughed, they saw Kyle Whalen walk in the front door. Kyle was a three hundred pound kid with brown hair and a strong loud voice.

"Mrs. Matthews, how are you!" Kyle bellowed.

"Fine, Kyle, and you?"

"Fine. And how is Rusty? Still peeing on the mailman?"

Everyone laughed. Kyle always made stupid jokes that nobody really got, but the way he said them made everyone laugh anyway.

"What's up, Steve," he asked, as he squeezed into the desk in front of him.

"Hey, what's going on?" Steven responded.

"Not much," Looking over at Jim, Kyle continued, "Jimmy Slick, how are you?"

Jim's last name was Slictini, which inevitably led to the nickname Jimmy Slick.

"Not bad, Ky, and you?"

"Not bad. We're still on for iPad shopping after school today?"

"Definitely," Steven replied. "As long as you can still drive us."

"Not a problem," Kyle responded. "Where is it again, somewhere in Queens?"

"Yeah, I don't remember exactly, but I'll get the address before we go."

"Half off MSRP?" Jim questioned, referring back to the last time they talked about this.

"That's what they say online," Steven responded.

"Oh, that's right," Jim said. "If it's on the Internet, it has to be true."

Steven and Kyle both smirked at the comment as the bell rang, signifying the start of homeroom.

"Take your seats," Mrs. Matthews instructed the class.

Jessica and Bret finally stopped kissing, and while still in his arms, Jessica commented, "I hate letting go of you. I love being in your arms, with you holding me tight."

Steven gagged on the inside, overhearing the comment.

"I have to hold you tight, babe," Bret replied. "Kyle takes up most of the room."

Tim and Alex of course laughed hysterically at the comment, but Jessica just frowned and pulled away to sit down.

No one hated Bret more than Kyle. The constant teasing and bullying made him insane. "Eat me, Bret," he replied.

"You eat me, Ky!" Bret responded hastily, but then retracted. "No, wait, forget I said that." He paused for a moment as if he was in deep thought and then shivered. "I just got a vision of you pulling out a knife and a fork, and trying to decide whether to start with a leg or a thigh."

Everyone laughed at that one. Everyone but Kyle, Steven, and Jim that is.

"Just let it go," Steven whispered from behind him.

But Kyle wasn't done. "Bret, if I was a cannibal, you would be the last person I'd eat. Wouldn't want to catch any mad shithead disease."

Kyle got a laugh from everyone with that one. Bret jumped up, furiously.

"Sit down, Mr. Walker!" Mrs. Matthews firmly instructed.

Bret just stood there, glaring at Kyle with what Steven liked to call a comedic psycho stare. Of course, the stare wasn't intended to be comedic. It was intended to be intimidating. But Steven could never help but to laugh when people pretended to be psychotic for the sake of intimidation. Kyle didn't seem too concerned either. He just sat there with a grin on his face. But that probably had more to do with him being confident that Bret wouldn't do anything in the middle of class with a teacher present.

"Now!" Mrs. Matthews yelled.

Bret slowly sat back down, but didn't take his eyes off Kyle.

Mrs. Matthews continued. "If you two keep this up, you'll both be in detention. You understand?"

But before they could answer, a voice came over the intercom. "Mrs. Matthews?"

"Oh, crap," Steven mistakenly said a little too loud.

Even Mrs. Matthews heard him from the front of the classroom. She gave him a judgmental look before replying. "Yes, Mrs. Wilson."

"Can you please send Steven Stevens to Mr. Johnson's office?"

Annoyed, Steven closed his eyes and shook his head. Everyone laughed, but he wasn't trying to be funny.

"Sure thing," Mrs. Matthews replied.

"Thank you," Mrs. Wilson concluded before the intercom buzzed off.

Mrs. Matthews looked over to Steven. "Mr. Stevens."

Steven opened his eyes, and Mrs. Matthews nudged her head to the door.

Steven nodded and reluctantly stood up. "Here we go again," he muttered to his friends.

"Say hi to the principal for us," Kyle said, teasing him.

Steven gave him a half grin in acknowledgement, slipped on his backpack, and walked out the backdoor.

2 Irrational

Steven walked into the principal's office. He wasn't in trouble.

"Steven Stevens!" Mr. Johnson yelled. "What the hell did you do?"

Or, I should say, not the kind of trouble you may expect.

"What did I do about what?" Steven asked.

"You messed up my PC again. You fixed that problem yesterday, and now I can't send any email."

Steven was at the top of his class in computers and math, and whenever anyone on the faculty had a computer problem that couldn't wait for their outsourced tech support, they called him. They would also ask him to develop different helper apps to do things like sync data between their multiple systems and run custom SQL reports. He typically didn't mind. When it came to most of the faculty, he would rather be helping them out with their computer issues than be in class, but Johnson was different. Steven thought he was crazy. No matter what the problem was, in Johnson's mind, it was caused by something that Steven did while fixing the previous problem.

"That issue had to do with the Student Info DB. It had nothing to do with email," Steven tried to explain.

"Well, somehow you messed it up. I sent an important email out to the entire staff last night and no one received it."

Steven walked around Johnson's desk. Johnson stood up and let him sit down. Microsoft Outlook was open on the desktop. Steven could see right away that there was an email stuck in his Outbox. The subject read Policy Changes. Steven opened the email and saw there was an attachment.

"How big is this file?" he asked.

“I don’t know, probably pretty big,” Johnson answered.

Steven checked the properties and saw it was close to fifty meg. “Here’s your problem,” he explained. “Your attachment’s too big.”

“Well, I have to include the attachment.”

“Okay, well you can zip it, or if all the recipients are on the local network, then you can put the file on a shared drive and reference it in your email.”

“No, not everyone is on the network. Let’s zip it.”

“Fine,” Steven said and then began the process of saving, zipping, and reattaching the file.

Johnson walked over to the water cooler in the corner of his office and pored himself a cup of water as he waited. He stood at six foot five and weighed three hundred and fifty pounds. Even without saying a word, he was a very intimidating man, but not saying a word was rarely the case. Johnson had a short fuse. People say he never got over his wife divorcing him a few years back, and he continued to take out his frustration on everyone around him. “I know I sent attachments that big before,” he commented.

“Maybe IT changed something on the server,” Steven suggested.

“No, it was something you did, Steven Stevens.” For some reason, Johnson always called the students by their first and last name.

Frustrated, Steven talked slow as if he was explaining to a child. “Listen, that was a performance issue with the Student Information Database. I just added an index to a table. It had absolutely nothing to do with email.”

Johnson responded with the same tone. “Well, it was working fine yesterday morning.”

Steven quickly took a look at Johnson’s sent items. “You didn’t send any emails with attachments yesterday morning.”

“It’s been fine all along until you messed with it yesterday!” Johnson firmly stated then began a sip of water.

Steven rolled his eyes and commented, “You’re being irrational.”

Johnson stopped sipping and lowered his cup. “What did you call me?” he asked.

Steven stopped and looked up. Johnson seemed furious.

“Did you call me irrational?”

Steven wanted to say, yeah you’re irrational, and remember I’m doing you a favor by helping you out, here. But looking at Johnson’s face, he realized that wouldn’t be a good idea. So he began to backpedal. “I didn’t say you were irrational. I just said in this particular case, you’re being a little –” Steven stopped dead in his tracks, seeing Johnson’s face get even redder than it was. Giving up, he reluctantly commented. “I didn’t say anything.”

“That’s what I thought,” Johnson smugly responded. “Are you done

yet?"

Now Steven was pissed, but he tried to keep that emotion under control. He paused for a moment and took a deep breath. He didn't want to reply before mentally regaining his composure. "Almost," he finally said and calmly focused back on to the computer. After he reattached the zipped file, he made two small changes and sent the email. "Done," he said and quickly stood up.

"Great, now get the hell out of here," Johnson said as he walked back over and sat back down. "And you better not of messed anything else up."

Steven ignored the comment, slipped back on his backpack, and headed for the door. With Steven's back to him, Johnson couldn't see the grin on his face as he walked out of the room.

3 The Factory

Later in the day, after school, the boys were driving through Queens, heading west on the Long Island Expressway. It was a beautiful day. The top was down. Kyle was driving. Jim was in the front passenger seat. And Steven was in the back, working on his laptop.

Kyle looked back at Steven through the rearview mirror. "You're so screwed when Johnson sees what you did," he told him.

Steven looked up. "I know," he simply replied.

"Why did you do it?"

"I don't know. I wasn't thinking. He just pissed me off so much. I'm there helping him, and he's treating me like crap, you know."

Kyle shook his head. "I understand, but you're still screwed."

Steven rolled his eyes. "Thanks, man, that's a big help," he sarcastically replied and went back to work.

Jim chuckled and then turned in his seat until he was practically sitting sideways. "What you doing back there, geek boy?" he asked.

"Coding," Steven replied, without looking back up this time.

"That Droid app for Kyle's dad?"

"Yep."

"How's it going?"

"Slowly but surely."

"What's taking so long?"

"Well, I never developed an app in Java before, so I'm learning as I go."

"Got ya," Jim said and looked back up front. They were just passing the Cross Island Parkway. "Will you step on it, Ky. We would like to get there sometime today."

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Slick, next time you can drive. Oh, wait, that’s right, you can’t.”

Jim gave him a phony laugh, faced forward, and settled back down into his seat. He knew Kyle was right. He had his license but wasn’t even close to getting a car. Kyle, on the other hand, drove a brand new red Chrysler Convertible, a present from his dad for passing his road test. Kyle’s dad owned his own computer networking company in the city. Over the summer and on weekends he would hire Kyle, Steven, and Jim to accompany his technicians on jobs. They helped with everything from snaking cables through walls to setting up servers. The technicians were always instructed to explain each process and to answer any question. Most technicians were cool with that and appreciated the help with their more tedious tasks, but there were some that absolutely refused to share any knowledge. And a couple even quit because of it. The boys knew that Kyle’s dad didn’t really need their help but mostly did it for their own education. To Steven and Jim that’s what made him a great guy, and that’s why they liked him so much. Kyle, on the other hand, had different issues. He respected his father for the same reasons Steven and Jim did, but Steven and Jim didn’t have to live with him. Kyle’s dad was a successful entrepreneur and worked his butt off. He dreamed of Kyle taking over the company someday, so he expected the same from him. Because of that, he continually pushed Kyle beyond his limits. What made it even worse was his dad viewed Kyle’s obesity as a sign of weakness. How are you supposed to manage a business when you can’t even manage your own body, he would tell him. Kyle couldn’t wait for High School to be over. When the time came, he was only applying to colleges out of state.

“Exit to the right in point five miles,” the GPS instructed.

Having no clue where he was, Kyle just followed the digital voice’s directions for another fifteen minutes. But when it finally told him that he reached his destination, he couldn’t see the store anywhere. “Where is it?” he asked.

Steven looked up. “Over there on the other side of the street,” he said as he pointed through the traffic to one of the many storefronts.

Kyle pulled into the next open spot on the side of the road.

“That’s it,” Jim said. “It’s so small. I thought you said they had a huge selection.”

Steven looked perplexed. “I don’t know; that’s what they said online.”

Kyle shook his head. “They probably don’t even have any iPads.”

Steven closed up his laptop and slipped it into his backpack. “Well, let’s go check it out.”

“I can’t park here,” Kyle said. “You guys go. I’ll look for a garage and meet you in there.”

Steven jumped out of the backseat and put on his backpack. “Alright

man, we'll see you in a little bit."

Jim jumped out right behind him and once there was a clearing of cars, they ran across the street.

The place was as small as it looked on the outside.

"They have crap in here," Jim whispered to Steven.

"I don't understand it," Steven admitted. "Let me ask the guy."

Steven walked up to the counter.

"How may I help you?" the attendant asked.

"Hey, how's it going? Online you guys said you had half off PCs, Tablets, Phones."

The man looked Steven up and down and then looked Jim over. He then quickly glanced around the area before replying, "Yeah, there in the back. It's just the two of you?"

"No," Steven replied. "Our friend is parking the car."

"Do you want to wait for him?"

"Where are we going?"

"In the back."

"We're all going in the back?"

"Carlos over here will take you," the attendant said, referring to his coworker standing by the back wall.

Steven thought about it. "No, we'll just go now. You can tell him, we'll be right back."

The man nodded his head and looked over to Carlos.

"Right this way, guys," Carlos told them and headed through a door that they didn't even notice on the sidewall, by the back.

Steven followed him, and Jim reluctantly followed Steven. The door led into a long corridor with only one other door on the other end.

"Steven, I don't know about this," Jim said worriedly.

"Just stay close. At the first sign of a problem, we'll split."

"Why didn't we wait for Kyle?"

"We know what he wants," Steven replied.

"We still could have waited for him."

"He never would have done this, and he would have probably tried to talk us out of it."

"He wouldn't have had to try very hard," Jim remarked.

When they reached the end of the corridor, Carlos opened the door and held it for the boys to pass through.

When Steven and Jim walked in, their jaws dropped. The corridor led out into what looked like a huge abandoned factory that was buzzing with people buying all sorts of things. Looking to the right, the factory seemed to go back for miles. To the left was the front wall, which had the main entrance on the left side of the wall and in the middle was a garage door that stood about twenty feet tall, big enough for trucks to fit through. There

were a few other doors along their wall that Steven could only assume led out to other corridors that led to other stores. It was mostly all one floor, but along the sidewalls were metal grated steps that led up to a second level. That level, however, only extended out ten yards from each wall. Looking deeper into the factory, you could see about every thirty yards was a walking bridge that connected one side of the second level to the other. There were thousands of people there, shopping for all sorts of stuff, but jewelry and electronics seemed to be the hot items.

"Happy shopping boys," Carlos remarked and closed the door behind them.

"Steven, did you know it was going to be like this?" Jim asked.

Steven looked at him. "Are you kidding?"

"Let's hurry up, find the iPads, and get outta here."

"Sounds like a plan," Steven agreed. He began to walk toward the center of the factory and Jim followed.

Jim was pretty terrified, looking around at all the shady characters. He made sure he didn't make eye contact with anyone. Even though the factory was set up like a sidewalk sale with tables of merchandise lined up in rows down the factory floor, there were still remnants of when it wasn't abandoned and used for legitimate purposes. Jim saw piles of cinder blocks, loose lumber, and stacks of led pipes. After about five minutes of browsing, Steven walked up to one of the tables. Now this is what they were there for, Jim thought to himself. The table was piled with all sorts of electronic equipment. There was a large Asian gentleman in an expensive Italian suit standing behind the table.

"How's it going?" Steven asked.

The man just nodded his head.

Steven looked over the table. "How much for those iPads?"

"Four hundred," the man responded.

"Four hundred, I can get them at Best Buy for four hundred."

"These are the latest, highest gigabyte iPads, kid. They're going for seven hundred in retail."

Steven thought for a moment before responding. "I'll take three of 'em for nine hundred."

"You want three of them?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know, that's only three hundred each. I can't go lower than three seventy five."

"Come on, it's technology, if you don't get rid of 'em now, by next month, they'll be worth half that." Which was an obvious exaggeration, but Steven was hoping the man would get his point.

"Sorry, kid. Three seventy five or nothing."

Steven sighed. "Okay, thanks for your time," he said and began to walk

away.

“Three fifty,” the man suddenly countered.

Steven was going to go back with three twenty five but didn't want to push his luck. These were probably not the type of people to piss off, so he nodded his head in agreement, took out his money, and began to count it.

“What's your name, kid?” the man asked.

“Steven, and this here is Jim.”

“Nice to meet you Steven and Jim. I'm Chet.” He seemed to loosen up a little bit after the negotiating was over. “If you need anything else in the future, come back to me. I'll get you a good price.”

“You got it,” Steven replied. While still counting the money, he glanced over to the next table and noticed a kid about his age staring at him. He was wearing ripped jeans, a dark blue t-shirt, and a do-rag of the same color around his head. Steven moved his hands in between two piles of merchandise on Chet's table, out of the kid's line of sight. He quickly finished counting the money and handed it to Chet. After Chet recounted the money, he got three boxes from the table and handed them over. Jim put two in his backpack, and Steven put one in his. Steven again glanced over to the next table. The kid was still there, staring right at him and not being discreet about it at all. This is not going to be good, he thought to himself.

“Jim,” Steven whispered. “We're gonna have to bolt outta here. That punk at the next table keeps on staring at us. He watched us buy the iPads.

Chet overheard and looked over. “Oh, you don't want to mess with him,” he commented. “He's a Brooklyn King. You can tell by the tattoo.”

“Oh shit, he's in a gang,” Jim gasped.

Steven pulled out his cell phone. “Let me tell Kyle to get the car and be ready to motor. Crap, I'm not getting any reception in here.”

Jim checked his cell. “No bars for me either.”

The punk started to walk toward them.

“Let's just go!” Jim pleaded.

“Okay,” Steven agreed, and they turned to leave when all of a sudden,

“Freeze!” a man standing directly in front of them, about ten feet away, shouted as he waved a gun.