

Sparks Fly
Upward

BOOK 1 of the SUPERSTARS TRILOGY

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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022. Toll Free (844) 2REDEEM (273-3336)

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ISBN 13: 978-1-68314-015-3 (Print)
978-1-68314-016-0 (ePub)
978-1-68314-017-7 (Mobi)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2016948740

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*To the greatest Teacher of all and
the students who follow Him*



*... man is born to trouble
as surely as sparks fly upward.*

—Job 5:7

August



1



“WHAT ARE YOU afraid of?”

J. Bradford McCauley smirked at the question but refrained from offering a sarcastic comeback. Why risk insulting one of his students by belittling his bluster on the first day of school? Half the things teenage boys said came from rampant testosterone, and this accusation wrapped in a question was no different. It sprang not from humble, sincere curiosity—which was ironic, considering McCauley’s real fears—but from basic adolescent arrogance. Teenage psychology was pretty predictable. The goal of the whole conversation leading up to the kid’s question was to confront authority, to mark territory, to test limits.

“Come on!” the kid insisted. “Tell us! What are you so afraid of?”

Entertained, the class waited. In their juvenile mindset, any refusal to answer on McCauley’s part, any hesitation, even, would be tantamount to an admission of fear.

As if on cue came the next words: “You’re just afraid.”

All its disguise now discarded, the question lay exposed in its true colors as a blatant, in-your-face challenge designed to humiliate. The atmosphere tensed with anticipation.

“No, I’m not afraid,” McCauley said. He sat down on the varnished desk before the class in a move calculated to impress them with his unflappable control. “I’m just not a gambler.”

Chuckles leaked from the students sitting near the burly blond boy with a rosy face and straight flaxen hair who was instigating the ruckus. On top of his desk, his notebook and textbook were not opened. As the students had previewed the course syllabus and policies, the boy, whose name was Matt Rademacher, said, "I'll bet you that I can guess your height within an inch, your weight within five pounds, and your age within two years. If I do, you let me skip class the first week. Okay?"

McCauley had smiled obligingly. These were the kinds of easygoing shenanigans you expected the first day of school. In the long run, playing along might establish valuable rapport with the kids.

"I don't know ..." he had said, and before his last word had died, Matt was condemning him for cowardice.

"All right, then," Matt replied now. "I won't skip class. But you have to let us go early, okay?"

Murmurs of approval spread through the room.

"Be my guest. Make your guess."

Every eye in the class turned to Matt, who closed his eyes tightly and placed his forefingers, dramatically, on his temples.

"Six foot ... one," he said. "Weight: 210 pounds. Age ... age ... age ..."

"Eighteen!" someone shouted, raising a round of laughter.

"Age: Thirty-five years old," Matt finished.

Every face returned to McCauley.

"That's pretty good," he said.

"But is it good enough?" Matt asked. "Let's see your driver's license."

McCauley reached into his hip pocket and felt a ripple of alarm shake his heart. His wallet was not there. It contained no money, it never did, but he could not afford to lose his Visa credit card or even his Riverside University library card, which would cost five bucks to replace.

"My weight is 213 pounds," he said. "My height and age are just as you said."

The students applauded and cheered, and Matt stood up and bowed to his admirers.

"So, B-Mac, when can we leave?"

McCauley held back from censuring Matt for calling him by the fabricated nickname. The kid was just trying to see how far he could push a part-time teacher. More and more, teenagers took it for granted

that they could assume informality in their relationships with adult authorities. The trend did not bother McCauley.

He answered, "As soon as we finish the handout." He had no doubt he could use up the final fifteen minutes.

On the wall the red second hand swept its regular tick-tick-tick around the face of the sterile white clock. Most of the twenty-five senior high school history students were darting occasional brazen glances at the clock, wondering how long their teacher might extend his introductory remarks. When he had been their age, McCauley remembered, you went to school only half-days for the first week, which helped you ease your body and mind back into the academic routine after a summer devoid of intellectual exercise. Not anymore. Halfway through the last period of the day, his class had become fidgety. He remembered that feeling, too. Even though winds of change had blown through education during his generation, clocks still looked the same, and he remembered how slowly the second hand moved from one minute mark to the next while you waited for the bell to ring. Sometimes it seemed as if time got stuck there, in between two seconds.

"Everybody look at the paragraph on late work," he said. "My main rule is this: Get your work in on time. Deadlines are crucial to me, because I work on such a tight schedule myself. I don't want to have late work coming in that fouls up my schedule. That's why the penalty is so severe. One letter grade for each day an assignment is late."

Some of the students fell to scribbling notes on the syllabus. First days always amused McCauley: So many students paid teachers and their rules a respect that eroded to contempt or ridicule before the week was out.

In the front row, a pretty brown-haired girl with a baggy gray Riverside T-shirt was gazing out the window, twirling a maple leaf by its stem between her thumb and forefinger, her sandals on the floor, her bare feet resting in the wire basket for books under the forward seat. Looking at her, McCauley remembered a vivid image from a song he loved, a pair of lines about a girl with her shoes kicked off, sitting on top of a car, sipping a drink under a gentle rain.

“As for grading, let me emphasize that the research paper will be the single most important piece of work you do in this class. Your progress on this paper will count for half your grade during the first quarter, and the final product will count for half your grade for the semester. During the first quarter you need to choose a topic, discuss it with me in conference, do the research, and prepare an outline. The second quarter you actually write the paper. If you’ve prepared well, the writing will be a snap.”

To emphasize his meaning he snapped his fingers, which shot a twinge of pain through his wrist.

“Second semester we will build on that paper,” he went on, unconsciously flexing his fingers. “For the next few weeks, every Monday I will take a minute to remind you about the research paper and encourage you to get to work. You won’t be able to say that you forgot. How many of you have ever done a paper that takes all semester?”

Of the half of the class still listening, about one third raised their hands. “Okay,” he continued. “Do *not* wait too long to begin. Choose a topic as soon as you can.”

The girl sitting next to the leaf-twirler raised her hand and asked, “Can you give us some ideas, at least?”

McCauley had expected this question and began shaking his head while it was still in the air.

“No, no, no,” he said with energy. “Why not? Because I don’t know any of you well enough to give you ideas. If I knew what interested you, then I could give you ideas. Look, I want this to be a personally rewarding project, not just a required part of the class. Take something you are really deeply interested in, and study its history. That’s all. For me, that would mean studying what the Founding Fathers of this country believed. But you decide for yourself.”

The girl said, “Can it be something that doesn’t have anything to do with school?”

McCauley’s fingers quit flexing and reached up to flatten out his thick black mustache, then ran down his chin, itchy from that morning’s dull-bladed shave. Suspecting another attempt to paint him into a corner, he replied, “It can be, yes. But we’ll decide that when you meet with me, individually, to talk about the topics.”

“How ’bout football?” blurted Matt.

“Football is okay for a general topic, but of course it would have to be narrowed down. You might study the history of certain football rules, for example. Or you might study how equipment has evolved. Get it?”

Matt nodded and whispered something to a buddy. The notion of narrowing a focus seemed to drain his excitement.

“I want you to have a genuine interest in your subject,” McCauley resumed, addressing the whole class. “That’s why I don’t have a list of sample topics. Make up your own topics yourselves. You must learn that everything has a history behind it, and that history has made it what it is. If you ignore the past, you won’t understand the present.”

He looked down at his wristwatch, which he had set on his desk, as was his custom when teaching. The time was 2:35. He still had ten minutes to go. With a college class, he would have no qualms about dismissing them early, but not here, where the taxpayer was footing the bill one hundred percent, where any indiscretion might elicit a hostile response from parents or other powers that be.

After all, this was Brookstone High School, the state’s pride.

“Look at the last page,” he said, initiating a flurry of page-turning. “It’s about cheating. In a word: Don’t.”

“Aw, BM, you’re no fun,” came Matt’s voice, trying a new nickname.

“You can try it if you want,” McCauley said. “But if you get caught, the penalty is spelled out for you on this page. It’s pretty severe, and I doubt if it’s worth the risk.”

“But Matt is a devoted gambler,” came another boy’s voice. The back of the room broke into more laughter and clapping. McCauley looked down at his seating chart, its ink barely dry, and determined the comment had come from Cody Summers.

McCauley was puzzled by the push-back against the standard rules against cheating. “I wouldn’t advise taking this gamble,” he repeated.

“But BM,” Matt said, “didn’t you ever cheat when you were in school?”

Still raw from Matt’s earlier line of questioning, McCauley flinched.

“I *am* in school,” he retorted, recovering his composure, and, with a burst of his own bravado, he added, “I can speak from personal experience that it isn’t worth the risk.”

“Personal experience? So you *have* cheated.”

“No, that’s not what I said.”

“Come on, tell us about your deep, dark secrets.”

McCauley tried to keep a straight face. If he smiled, he knew all too well, he would lose control of the class on Day 1 of the school year, and the next 179 would melt into absolute chaos.

“I keep them locked away in a safe,” he said.

“Ooooh. So you’ve cheated *and* you have hidden secrets.” The students at the back of the class were laughing uproariously, those in front struggling to quash giggles.

“Why are you all so curious about *cheating*? Why would you want to even think about compromising your integrity? Your integrity, your reputation, your good name—that’s the most important thing you’ll carry through your life. Don’t throw it away. In this class, I expect you to do your own work. If you try to pass off somebody else’s work as your own, you’re cheating yourself as well as that somebody else.” For emphasis, he was about to add “and God,” but he checked himself. In a public school, to mention even his unorthodox deity in an ethical context might land him in hot water.

Besides, he had already run into trouble with education officials one time too many. What a hypocrite he was, warning *them* not to cheat.

He settled against the front of the desk and changed the subject, saying, “Let me run through this seating chart.”

Sitting in the front desk of the right-hand row was the girl who was still staring out the window. She had filled in her name as Erin Delaney, and when he called it, she jerked to attention.

“That’s me,” she said. When he called the name of the student behind her, Erin looked outside again and kept twirling the maple leaf.

The girl next to her, who had asked the question about topics, was Jessica Southard. She looked a little like Erin.

Double-checking the seating chart, verifying nicknames and correct pronunciations, took less than ten minutes.

“Well, we still have a few minutes left. Does anyone have any questions about the class, or the syllabus?” McCauley asked. “Or about me?”

A student asked whether he was married. He was accustomed to that sort of thing, from both high schoolers and college undergraduates.

“No, but I’m engaged,” he said.

“Where’s your ring, then?”

Several students laughed as McCauley held up his left hand.

“I’m not engaged to a woman,” he said. This evoked even more laughter. “I’m engaged to my work.”

“You’re a history teacher,” one student said. “You’re living in the past.”

He smiled as if he had never heard the joke before, and he let his eyes move from face to face. They came to rest on Erin Delaney’s, which had rejoined the class, probably to check the time. Her skin looked brown and wholesome, her tan natural, not purchased. A crescent of freckles darkened her face, ear to ear.

“But your future is in my hands,” he said. Almost in unison, the class let out a low *oooooh*, and waited for a comeback from the student who had made the crack about living in the past. Erin Delaney made eye contact with McCauley, then quickly turned away.

The red second hand swept across the top of the clock, the 2:45 bell sounded, and students exited the room.

Matt stopped to ask, “How come you didn’t let us out early?”

“I never promised to. Hey, you work at an amusement park or something? Guessing ages and weights?”

“No.” He smiled defiantly.

“How’d you do it, then?”

“I *cheated*.” He tossed a thin wallet onto the desk.

“Where’d you get that? I was worried I had lost it.”

“We picked your pocket on the way in.”

“*We*? You and who else?”

“Cody mainly. Don’t worry, all your money and cards are still there.”

“All my *money*? That’s a good one. Why did you do it?”

“Some of the girls said we couldn’t, so we arranged a little wager.”

McCauley grunted, calculating. Too many of Matt’s verbal darts had struck near the bull’s-eye of his personal past. If Matt could pick his pocket so easily, was it possible that Matt might have also ... no, McCauley decided, no way. Still, he wished that when he had referred to his safe, he had also been studying Matt’s face, searching it for any sign of understanding.

“A wager with the girls,” he said. “I should have guessed. What do you win?”

Matt winked and said, “You don’t want to know. After all, you’re already married.”

McCauley nodded, pocketing his well-worn billfold. This Rademacher kid was clever with words.

“Just kidding,” Matt continued. “All I win is a can of Pringles. Some new flavor. They have about a hundred now.”

After the last student was out the door, McCauley swept his bare hand across the whiteboard to erase his name, then wiped his hand on his loose blue corduroy slacks, leaving a dark smudge of marker powder. He collected the papers off his desk, packed them into his green canvas backpack, and retrieved his motorcycle helmet from its safe haven under his desk. Almost ready to leave, he spotted the flotsam and jetsam of first-day trash in the back of the room, and when he went to clean up the mess, he found a note, addressed to nobody and signed by nobody, that said: DID YOU HEAR MATT WON \$50K? Nearby he picked up a folded paper on which someone had drawn a crude hangman scaffold with a completed stick-figure corpse, its head cocked in death to one side, above five blanks with only one letter filled in, an *E* in the middle slot.

Outside the door to his classroom he listened to the familiar sounds of a dawning semester—the rumble of hundreds of feet on stairways and in hallways, the metallic squeak and slam of lockers opening and shutting, the chatter of voices mingling in recognition and reunion. Every autumn marked a new beginning, as fresh as each morning. McCauley strapped his watch back onto his wrist and flexed his hand a few more times, wondering what new problem had arisen in his aging body.

In the hallway he stopped to watch the students, their faces bright with rest and the excitement of the summer that had crested a few weeks earlier. At that age, he remembered, seeing old friends in new settings brought an avid rush to your blood. School seemed so new and promising and romantic those first few days, bursting with so many dreams, so many hopes, and so many resolutions to study harder, pay more attention in class, goof off less, and impress teachers and coaches and parents and peers—especially the opposite sex. He remembered so well, for he had played that game so well. In fact, he was still playing it at a level where the stakes were higher and the dreams more ambitious.

Academically, Brookstone High School boasted the best players in the state of Indiana. Two years earlier the school had been honored as the best in its classification (between 500 and 999 students) by a governor's educational panel. Its reputation was unshakeable and growing. Its SAT scores averaged among the top two percent nationally, and the president of the United States himself had mentioned its remarkable achievements during an education speech in Indianapolis the previous year. Recent graduates had gone on to prestigious schools such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, MIT, Northwestern, Duke, Stanford, and UC-Berkeley. This record was quite significant for a school that less than a decade before had consolidated from seven smaller high schools with colorful rural names like Corbin Creek, Orange Stone, and Tipton.

J. Bradford McCauley did not put much stock in these tidbits of trivia, however, for he was just a part-time secondary teacher whose real interest and investment lay twelve miles south, at Riverside University, and—as the teenage wisecracker had truly pointed out—two centuries in the past. The only reason he knew about Brookstone's blue-ribbon achievements was that they were emblazoned for everyone to read about in two-inch letters on posters in the school's Wall of Fame, where administrators overseeing a staff of student assistants scurried to keep up with the accomplishments of the school.

On his way out of the building, McCauley paused in the Atrium that housed the "Hall." The principal, William LaGrange, and the guidance director, Tolan Myers, were leading a tour for a cluster of elderly visitors who were no doubt educators from Indianapolis or Chicago or Washington, taking a taxpayer-financed trip to find out what made Brookstone tick. LaGrange was speaking, and, because the Atrium was at that moment relatively empty, his voice came to McCauley in layers of echoes. Myers stood to the side, his hands clasped behind his back, his balding crown glistening in the muted sunshine that fell softly from the skylight overhead.

McCauley's own high school and high school experience had been only average. He had never breathed an atmosphere of serious academia until college, and he regretted this deficiency once he saw how better college preparation would have served as a springboard to the success he still sought, saving him perhaps five years of his quest. He was thirty-five

now, and the superstardom he pursued and hoped to claim with his doctoral dissertation was almost within his reach. Expecting to finish his Ph.D. within the year, he could already taste the satisfied thrill of reputation that awaited him when his contribution to the field would be hailed as a landmark of avant-garde scholarship.

McCauley daydreamed a while longer beneath the black-and-white faces of past Brookstone valedictorians and other award winners looking down from on high, their photographs intentionally and symbolically situated above eye level so that visitors and succeeding generations of students would have to look up to see them.

He heard his name called. LaGrange was waving for him to join the group.

“This young man is an example of what I mean by taking advantage of our natural resources,” the principal said, placing his hand on McCauley’s shoulder. “When you have a Riverside University a stone’s throw south, you figure out ways to benefit from it. Brad McCauley is a Ph.D. candidate at Riverside, and we have been privileged to have him teach U.S. history for the past four semesters. Each semester we have up to ten part-time faculty from Riverside. Of course this cuts our costs because we don’t have to pay for their full benefits”—here McCauley noticed Myers smiling from the fringe of the group—“and at the same time we get top-flight teachers.”

One of the visitors asked whether McCauley was certified.

“He is,” LaGrange answered quickly. “He taught a few years in Ohio public schools before coming to Riverside for graduate school. Not every one of our part-time faculty is as formally qualified.”

Another visitor asked, “Why would someone in Mr. McCauley’s position want to teach in a public school?”

McCauley paused until he knew LaGrange had no answer for him. Then he said, “It’s partly economics and partly for career purposes. A graduate student can always use a few extra dollars. And I believe that the scholar of the future owes a debt to the generations who will follow, even to those students who will not study history past high school.”

He opened his mouth to add to his explanation, then checked himself. There *was* a third part to his answer—he longed for a past that

he could never recover, to walk back through a door forever shut to him—but why dredge up that piece of history?

Nodding, the questioner said, “Do you also teach classes at Riverside?”

“I do.”

“And which do you prefer?”

He shrugged and answered, “The highest bidder.” These days, that was the plain truth. “Actually, my answer would depend on where you are from.”

After the chuckles died down, LaGrange said, “Thank you, Brad. I know you’re on a strict schedule, and so are we.” He said to the group: “If you’ll follow me on into the library . . .”

McCauley loved his phrase “the scholar of the future.” His eyes surveyed the pantheon of academic stars looking down from the heavens and wondered whether among them might not be a rival with whom he would lock horns in the years to come. He relished the prospect of pitting his learning and rhetorical skills against those of other experts, other scholars.

By and by, the click of a woman’s shoes echoed into his ears from across the hardwood floor, and he turned to see the petite form of perky Robin Hillis, the English teacher.

She called hello to him and waved, and a glitter of gold from her wrist also waved.

“Welcome back, Mr. McCauley,” she said. She stopped at a door leading out of the Atrium to give him a chance to reply.

“Thank you,” he said. “Did you have a good summer? Did you teach?”

“Not me. Summer is for family.” He thought the words sounded mechanical, possibly remorseful.

He nodded.

“Are you teaching just the one class again?”

“Just the one,” he said. “I wouldn’t have time for more.”

He could see that she felt awkward. Should she go on through the door, or keep talking from a distance, or walk over to him? McCauley decided to help her out. He looked at his watch and said, “I hardly have

time for *this*. I have a class at Riverside at four o'clock." Robin waved again and went through the door, her long dress swishing.

Outdoors a flood of sunlight poured down from a cloudless sky. Bees buzzed among the sappy tree boughs hanging over the nearest parked cars. Students milled about in pockets that were either rowdy or secretive. McCauley put on his sunglasses. Behind their dark cover he could see that many eyes were watching him, sizing him up as a teacher, regarding him as the unknown quantity that he was. Though this was his third year, he had taught only four classes total, all senior-level, so every student he had taught before was now gone. He was a perpetual question mark.

McCauley put on his helmet but immediately removed it to clean off a smudge from the faceguard. To inspect his work, he held it up and turned it at different angles, and in so doing he saw a distorted convex reflection of the ornate Brookstone High School building—its tall marble columns, its wide portico and steps, the arches above the doors and windows, the detailed decorative brickwork, the ivy climbing the brown stone walls. Even in the puffed-up image it looked impressive. It really was pretty fabulous for what was basically just a small-town school, he had to admit.

He started his motorcycle and pulled out of the parking lot as the first of the fleet of yellow buses pulled in. A Frisbee sailing across his path momentarily eclipsed the brilliant disk of the sun and he jumped at the brief flash. Matt Rademacher's question came back to him—"What are you afraid of?"

A block farther he slowed down to cross the bumpy railroad tracks. Then he sped south.