

**BREAKING
OUT
BOB BRINK**

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Breaking Out

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*In memory of Daniel V. Bergman,
a great man.*

CHAPTER 1

Panic gripped Britt.

He and his two pals, all three juniors at Mayfield High School, had entered the school gymnasium from the north end and strolled to the corner of the bleachers, stopping to survey the rows for an empty space. They arrived just before game time because Britt had worked late at Noll's Drug Store, and the auditorium already was virtually filled. Bobby Jackson pointed at a spot three-quarters of the way to the other end and almost to the top row.

"See it?" he said. "That empty space is big enough for all three of us."

Britt was terrified of walking in front of all those people, completely exposed, with no one or nothing to deflect their attention from himself, Bobby, and Martin Brant. All eyes would fall on them as they walked. He desperately wanted to turn and head the way they'd come.

"Wait a minute," said Britt. "Why don't we go back out to the lobby and head to the other end and use that entrance, since it's a lot closer to our space?"

"What?" Bobby retorted impatiently in his naturally hoarse voice. "Why the heck would we do that? It would just be farther to walk."

"Gee whiz, Bobby," said Britt, "you lug golf bags miles every weekend for those Mayfield big shots. And you're bothered by walking a few extra yards?"

"Not bothered," Bobby said vexedly. "It just doesn't make sense. And the game's about to start. Now come on. Let's go." Martin, a frail fellow with a gentle disposition, was noncommittal.

The gymnasium was packed to its capacity of twenty-one-hundred for a basketball game between two fiercely competitive teams. The host hoopsters and the varsity squad from arch-rival Okeeloosie High were locked in a battle for the Mid-Iowa Conference championship. Fourteen years had passed since Mayfield held the title, and with only one game remaining, a win on this Friday night in February was critical. The atmosphere crackled with excitement as the two teams began warming up.

Students sat on bleachers framing the court and adults occupied fold-down seats above the bleachers. Bobby began the trek in front of them, leaning into each step as though he were bucking a strong gale, with Martin close behind. Britt could only follow. Doggone it, why did they have to move so slowly? He slid his hands into his pant pockets to feign a casual look, then glanced up at the crowd. His eye caught a senior girl student staring at him, then a boy and his date also watching him, and he immediately turned beet red. He knew they could tell just what he was feeling. That made him feel much worse. Now, everybody would see how embarrassed he was.

His agony remained as the three reached the narrow stairs bordering the section with the empty space and they slowly climbed toward the top. Bobby stopped and assessed how big the space was to be sure the three of them could fit, and Britt's pain intensified as he stood, not knowing what to do with his hands or where to look. He saw several persons in the section to the left quickly avert their gazes from him, and he knew why: His acute self-consciousness was apparent and they sympathized with him. Finally, the three were seated. Britt looked into the bleachers on the other side of the court and was sure some people were looking his way.

"These seats aren't the best, but they're not too bad," Martin volunteered.

"Yeah," Britt mumbled, still suffering.

The game began, and in short order the buzz of chatter and laughter in the auditorium metamorphosed into a frenzy of cheering and hollering. Britt realized that everyone was too engrossed in the action to be concerned with him, and he gradually lost consciousness of himself as the game riveted his attention and he, too, began cheering. It was a close contest, the teams frequently exchanging small leads, and the enthusiasm in the audience remained at a fever pitch almost without letup, ebbing only slightly now and then. Whenever a member of the Mayfield five drove for a layup, connected on a long jump shot, or blocked a shot by the opponent, large numbers of people leaped to their feet and roared in approval. Britt

had the urge to jump up, but was anxious about being seen by those remaining seated around him. It was only as the half drew to a close, when everybody stood and cheered Mayfield's two-point lead, that Britt felt comfortable doing so.

"Let's go get some popcorn," said Bobby.

"Yeah," Martin agreed. "I need a Coke, too. Let's go."

"Uh ... I'm okay," said Britt. "I think I'll just stay here and make sure nobody takes our spot. Bring me a Coke, will ya?" He pulled a nickel out of his pocket and handed it to Martin.

"Huh?" said Bobby, already heading for the stairs. "We can leave our coats. Nobody's gonna grab our space. Come on."

"Actually, I might run into somebody from Noll's and have to have a boring conversation."

"The drug store?" Martin asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, okay, have it your way," said Bobby.

They left, and Britt leaned back, resting his arms on the bleacher a row up. Now it was his turn to watch people as they stood at their seats or milled around the edges of the court, chatting and laughing. They seemed to be so comfortable, so unconscious of anyone watching them, Britt thought. He wondered how they could be so at ease with themselves, and envied them greatly.

Bobby and Martin returned fifteen minutes later and shared a box of popcorn with Britt. The game resumed and progressed in much the way it had in the first half, neither team able to go ahead by more than two or three points. Having risen from his seat only once, Britt's rear end was becoming sore, but he preferred that aggravation to the painful exposure of rising to applaud and shout, even when many others around him were doing so. In the last few minutes of the game, everybody in the auditorium—except for the small contingent that had traveled the sixty-five miles from Okeeloosie—was rising to cheer every basket that Mayfield made. That gave Britt the courage to also rise, and he felt much relief in his buttocks.

The game ended with Mayfield losing by one point, and the dejected fans slowly and quietly filed out the exits, their heads down, as though they had just been engrossed in a sad movie.

"Doggone," said Martin when they reached the parking lot. "That was hard to take."

“Well, I think Mayfield played as good as they could,” Bobby said. “Listen, how ’bout we go to Hess’s for a sundaes?”

They climbed in the 1947 Ford that Britt co-owned with his older brother, Kevin, who was at college, and drove across town to the popular teen hangout on the north edge of the downtown. It was on a corner, next to two seedy bars and the shabby Iowa Theater. As Britt pulled into a parking space, Bobby spotted Rosemary Cramer about to enter Hess’s with two other girls.

“See that?” he asked.

“What?” asked Martin.

“What?” Bobby retorted, scornfully incredulous. “That is the best-lookin’, sexiest chick in all of Mayfield High.”

“You mean Rosie Cramer?” asked Britt.

“I sure as heck don’t mean those other two,” Bobby declared. “All I have to do is look at Rosemary and I get a hard on.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said Martin.

“Oh ... yeah, sure. Me too,” Britt said hesitantly.

Britt didn’t hear “hard on.” He heard “heart on.” His buddies were using the term a lot lately, and he knew it had something to do with sex but didn’t know what. He was afraid to ask because he felt abnormal in his ignorance. It obviously was something other teenage boys were familiar with, because they joked about it all the time. Where did they learn it? Was it something they read about—in dirty books or magazines, maybe? Britt never read that kind of stuff for fear of facing eternal damnation. Hell had been a major theme in the indoctrination that the four Rutgers children had received since birth from their devoutly Calvinist Christian parents, especially their mother. Conversely, heaven had been portrayed as an appealing place populated by pleasant people. Britt’s chief concern, however, was avoiding the destination with the awful climate rather than reaching the one with the good company.

Rosie, whose light-brown hair fell like Niagara Falls into a tumult of lush curls at her shoulders, stood at the counter waiting for a cup of hot chocolate she had ordered. She wore a downy, light-blue sweater and a plaid skirt that outlined her luscious figure all the way to mid-calf. Bobby and Martin waited behind her, trying not to stare, while Britt was positioned to their left, his view of Rosie partly obstructed by a teenage fellow. Bobby and Martin ordered sundaes and Britt chose his favorite, a banana split with vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry ice cream, chocolate fudge topping, and nuts. They took their delights to a table.

"I thought I was gonna faint," said Bobby. "I kept lookin' sideways at her butt, and I was gettin' a hard on."

"Yep," said Martin, "she's got it all."

"You're not sayin' nothin', Britt," said Bobby. "Don't tell me she doesn't give you a hard on."

Britt blushed. "Jiminy cricket ... I mean, heck ... that kid was standing in my way and I couldn't get a good view of her," he stammered.

"Yeah, we know," Bobby snickered. "You're in love with the preacher's daughter, Jane, uh"

"Jansen," said Britt, relieved that Bobby hadn't divined the real reason for his consternation. "You gotta admit, she's pretty darned good-lookin'."

"She's all right," said Bobby. "Hey, let's go and drive past her house. We might spot her if she's standing by a window."

"Well ... okay," said Britt, "but don't do anything. I've got to go to church Sunday morning."

Britt climbed into the Ford while Bobby and Martin followed, Bobby talking to his companion in a hushed tone. With Martin in the front passenger seat and Bobby in the back seat, the three headed to the other side of the downtown.

"Okay, we're on Third Street. That's where the parsonage is," Britt announced.

"Slow down and point it out," said Bobby.

Britt slowed, and Bobby and Martin rolled down their windows.

"There. The two-story white house."

"Hey Jane, here's Bob," Martin hollered.

"He's got a big hard on for you," Bobby shouted much louder.

Britt jammed his foot on the accelerator and sped away while Bobby and Martin laughed gleefully. "Aw, doggone you guys, now I'm in big trouble," said Britt, mortified to the bone. "Why'd ya hafta go and do that?"

"C'mon," said Bobby. "It's after eleven and the house was dark. They were probably all in bed asleep."

"I saw a light," said Britt. "I'll bet they heard you guys. What am I gonna do now? I'm gonna have to try to hide from Jane in church Sunday."

He drove hurriedly to Bobby's and Martin's houses in Mayfield and dropped them off. Then he headed west of town to U.S. Highway 6 for the fifteen-minute drive to the small farm where the family had moved

from Mayfield in the fall of Britt's freshman year. Britt's parents, Milton and Miriam, had gone to bed, as had his younger brother, Dale, and sister, Kyra, the youngest in the family. Britt quickly climbed into his bed, next to Dale's.

A sliver of moonlight leaked between the shade and the window into the dark room. No sooner had Britt's head hit the pillow than the evening's events began flitting through his mind, jabbing his consciousness like darts and keeping him awake. He relived the anguish of walking in front of the crowd at the basketball game, catching the eyes of persons staring at him in his embarrassment, and felt himself reddening. The one person he wanted to notice him, Jane Jansen, acted like he didn't exist, even after the double date they'd had at a football game five months earlier. Well, if she was awake tonight, she knew he existed now. Yeah, and she'd never get near him again. Even if she wanted to, he was sure her dad wouldn't let her after what his pals had done. Hard on: Did everybody except him know what it meant? Did Jane's dad, the pastor, know? Heck, even Jane probably knew. What was the matter with him?

He switched positions a hundred times until the warring within his head subsided and segued into the peace of oblivion.