

CHAPTER 1

Seriously? Who asks an eighth grader whether or not he wants to go to jail? Like I'm going to jump up and say please pick me. I really want to go. Can I please? Pretty please?

Ummm...I say no to my principal, because I didn't mean for the toilet to explode. How was I to know that tossing in some sodium from the science lab would send porcelain and water into the sky like missiles? I didn't want to blow anything up. I just want to fit in and stop being teased. I actually like this school.

You're probably confused, and I don't blame you. I'm kind of confused myself. If you have a few minutes, I'll tell you everything. But if I tell you everything, and I mean everything, you have to promise not to tell anyone. Not my moms, or my friend Marty, either. No adults. No kids. Nobody. If you can keep my secret, I'll even tell you how I became a rifter.

Okay, so I get an hour a day in the library for a week for what the principal called terroristic behavior, but it beat the alternative.

"Have a seat over there." A woman I've never seen before calls out to me from behind the counter.

Without question, I drop my head and do as she says. My third strike, again. Probably my one-hundredth third strike. This time it's more serious, because I can go to jail just for trying to make friends. They'd told me it would be fun. Then they turned on me and ratted me out. That's it. I don't need friends. Ever. I just hope the principal won't call home—anything but that.

I take my place in the usual spot. My first day of detention this time. I can't believe that I haven't worn a hole through the wooden chair already. Only a few weeks at my new school and this is where I spend most of my time. I let out a giant huff and wait to find out what kind of torture this new librarian has planned for me.

I eye the woman behind the giant desk and wonder who she is and where she's from. She doesn't look like any librarian I've ever seen before, but she looks exactly like I've always imagined my *real* mom to look, if I had one.

Could it be her?

The brief spark of hope disappears as quickly as it comes, thank goodness. I quit wishing for a real family years ago.

Within seconds of sitting down, the librarian approaches me with eyes like a laser beam. She's probably coming to explain rules that I already know by heart. They're simple.

No talking.

No sleeping.

No music.

No texting.

No games.

Nothing but homework or reading allowed. In other words...lame! I don't care what they all say. I'm not a *problem child*.

"I've been waiting for you." The librarian looks at me like she knows me.

"Yeah, yeah," I murmur under my breath.

"I'm sorry, young man. What did you say?"

"Uhhh..." I look away from her. "Why are you waiting for me?"

Nobody has ever waited for me before, so it feels weird. For some reason this woman wears a strange smile stretched across her face. A smile so wide the edges nearly touch the bottom of her ears. She seems genuinely happy to see me. This is odd considering I've never laid eyes on her before.

"Because your name is on the detention list." She waves the clipboard in her hand.

What happened to Ms. Battle Ax? I never dare to say that out loud. Most kids don't like Ms. Ballacks because she makes a rattlesnake adorable. She's the kind of lady that genuinely hates kids.

She doesn't know me, so maybe I have a chance with her. "Where's Ms. Ballacks? She's the helicopter that normally hovers over me."

"She had to take off." The librarian circles my table. "I'm your new helicopter. I'm the one who will have to *hover* over you today."

Who is this woman? She's much different from any other adult I've known. Her stare cuts me in half. She creeps me out.

"I know the drill." Detention is kind of like my job now. "I've been through this a time or two."

"Good to know." The substitute taps a pencil against the clipboard. "Then I don't need to tell you that you need to find something productive to do, right?"

"Nope." I reach into my backpack and take out my notebook. If I have to do something, I might as well get my math homework done.

"I'll be right over there." The librarian points to the oversized library desk. A few kids walk around, while a few others wait to check out books before catching the bus.

I nod and flip through the loose pages poking out of my binder. Organization remains one of my greatest obstacles. I don't want to drag the mess in my backpack out in the open, so I spend five minutes digging for my homework. It's wrinkled, but readable.

The substitute librarian takes her place on the other side of the counter. She perches on the tall chair like a raven, her hair long and dark. She keeps an eye on me the whole time I work. At least I try to work, but her endless stare causes me to fidget and squirm.

I ignore her the best I can, but it isn't easy. She drags a book cart behind her as she comes my way. "Want to help me for a minute?"

What can I help *her* with? "I guess...if you need me to."

“Great! Maybe you can put this cart of books away for me.”

Ugghhh...I wish I'd says no. I'm not stupid or anything, but reading isn't easy for me. The letters kind of get jumbled up in my brain. It takes me longer to put them back together than most kids I know, but I already told her yes, so I get to work.

She walks back to her desk and leaves me with the books. It takes me longer than it should to find the right place for the books, but there is no way I'm going to let her or anyone else know how hard it is for me.

Another five minutes passes before something else catches my attention. Someone, actually.

Marty walks into the library. But he isn't alone.

One of the prettiest girls in the school bounces through the library door with Marty. Her curly brown hair sways from side to side as they walk toward me.

I've never talked to Jenny before. Not really. Other than the few times I've says hello in the hall, Jenny is as much of a stranger to me as most kids in the school. Heck, as most of the kids in any of my schools.

Pinballing from foster home to foster home doesn't allow me much time to make friends. Actually, I have time and opportunity to make friends, but I choose not to get too close to most people I meet, because I know it won't be long before the family I'm with will tell the court they can't keep me any longer. It's always the same. Besides, I'm used to being alone.

“We like Alex and all,” the different families say, “but we don't think he's a good influence on *our* kids.”

And just like that, I'm scooped up and dumped in a group home until another placement can be made. The problem for me is that I'm older now. It's much easier to be placed when you're younger. Excited parents want to help younger kids because they're cuter. Kinda like puppies. The older I get, the

less inclined a foster family is to take me in. I'm lucky that Veronica and Lisa took in a thirteen-year-old, and trust me, I know it.

They aren't my real moms I know, but they're as close as I'll ever get. So far, they've been good to me and treat me better than any of the other families I've lived with. I don't want to screw it up. Besides, I think it makes them feel good when I call them Mom.

"What's going on, man?" Marty whispers as he sits at a table a few feet from where I work. Jenny takes the chair next to Marty.

"Not much." I peek at the substitute. Marty can sit anywhere he wants, but he's not allowed to talk to me. "What are you doing here?"

"We came to see you." Marty waves his hand in the air like a magician.

"For what? I've got detention." I lower my head but maintain a visual on the lady behind the desk as I pretend to know what I'm doing. A week of this torture is more than enough. I don't want to extend my stay for talking to Marty. Even if the prettiest girl in the school is here too.

"Everyone thinks what you did to the toilet was bad-a, dude. They're all talking about it." Marty puts his hands together and makes an explosion motion. It doesn't matter to either of them that I didn't want to do it in the first place.

"Yeah, I can't believe you did that." Jenny twirls her brown curls. "I heard about it but didn't get to see it."

"Shhh..." I warn Jenny and Marty as the librarian glides our way. Before she gets there, Marty opens his bag, and my eyes nearly pop out of their sockets. This is not good.

CHAPTER 2

“What’s going on here?” The librarian stands inches away from Marty’s table. “What are you two doing?”

Marty never turns to look at her. “Nothing’s going on, ma’am.” He draws out the word ma’am as if it were three syllables. He zips up his backpack, so there is no chance she will see what’s hidden inside.

I can’t believe Marty is dumb enough to carry that stuff around with him in the first place. My eyes bounce back and forth like ping pong balls from the librarian to Marty’s bag. I don’t want to get in trouble again, because this time will be a death sentence.

“Sounds like talking to me.” The lady holds her position between us and rotates her head back and forth like a fan. From me to Marty to Jenny. Then repeat.

“Oh, no ma’am.” Jenny’s words drip with honey. “It’s just me and him.” Marty raises his hand. “We’re partners for a science project, and we need to do some research for our experiment.”

Her lie sounds a lot like the truth.

“And you have to sit here, right next to where he’s working?” I avoid the librarian’s stare. “He’s in detention you know.”

“Oh, we didn’t mean to sit next to him. It’s just closer to the books we need.” Jenny points to the books over my left shoulder. Marty smiles.

When the librarian and I turn to see what she’s talking about, it surprises me that she’s telling the truth. The shelf right behind me has SCIENCE in big, avocado green bubble letters taped to it. I can’t believe Jenny is so quick on her feet. *Impressive.*

“Better get to work then.” The librarian spins on her heels.

Jenny’s little story works, and she walks over to the science shelf and thumbs through some books.

Marty unzips his backpack again, and reveals the contraband inside. I swallow hard.

What are these two up to? Marty pulls out a notebook and a pencil, while Jenny hurries back to the table and drops two rather sizable books in front of him. They smack against the table, the librarian looks us over with warning eyes. I pretend to ignore them and put books on the shelf. Not in the proper spot, though.

“Is he going to do it?” Jenny asks Marty.

“I haven’t asks him yet.”

“Do what? What are y’all talking about?” I know that whatever Marty has planned for me, it won’t be good. If it has to do with the stuff in Marty’s bag, it’s a horrible idea.

“Think you can do it again?” Marty shows the sodium in his backpack. It peeks through the zipper just enough to laugh at me.

“Huh?” I’m blown away. *Are they out of their minds?*

“It would be awesome if you did it again.” Jenny leans close to my ear. “I don’t have a boyfriend, by the way, so if you do it for me you can maybe be my new boyfriend.”

I know exactly why Marty brought Jenny with him. What I don’t know is why he brought enough sodium to destroy the entire bathroom, not just one toilet.

“So will you do it?” Marty applies the pressure.

I don’t really want to do it again, but I hate to say no.

“Yeah, will you do it for me?” Jenny cocks her head to the side like a poor little puppy dog and bats her eyelashes.

I find myself between a rock and a hard place. I want to say no, because it means big trouble. But I want to say yes even more, because Jenny doesn’t have a boyfriend and might go

out with me if I do it again. Before I have a chance to really think the situation through, I accept their challenge. “I’ll do it,” I say, keeping my voice just above a whisper.

“I told you he would.” Marty winks at Jenny. “There.” Marty nods toward the large glass windows. He targets the boys’ bathroom just across the hall. “Now.”

I’m not exactly prepared to do it right then. I’m really not prepared to do it at all, but I have no choice. Two times in one day is insane. If I don’t do it, Jenny will never talk to me again, and everyone will think I chickened out.

“Give them to me.” I hold out my hand. Marty drops the baggie of tablets into my open palm, and I stuff them in my pocket and walk away.

After swallowing my nerves, I press against the long desk that separates me from the librarian. “Uhhh...ma’am.”

“What is it?” The librarian interrupts me before I finish my question.

“I need to go to the...uhhh...bathroom.” Not exactly a question, I know, but I’m nervous.

“Then go.”

That was too easy. Ms. Battle Ax always says no. This lady doesn’t even ask if I can hold it until the end of detention. Something doesn’t feel right to me, but it’s too late to turn back.

Out the door and across the hall, I pass a couple of boys coming out of the bathroom talking about going to the football game at the high school. Once inside, I scan underneath the toilet stalls to make sure the coast is clear. I don’t want to hurt anyone.

I’ll have to drop the tablets and run. This much sodium will blow up immediately, so it makes sense to leave the tablets in the baggie and poke a small hole. *Maybe that’ll slow it down enough for me to get back to my seat.*

I creep to the farthest stall and pull the bag from my pants pocket, poke a small hole, and hold it for a moment. Then I contemplate whether or not to go through with it. Of course the answer is no, but something inside me forces me to do things I shouldn't.

With the bag suspended over the toilet, I prepare for launch. Just as I ready myself to drop the tablets, the door flings open. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I fumble the bag like a football, but thankfully for both of us, catch it before it splashes into the water.

The librarian stands directly across from me. *She set me up.* "Guess I'm busted."

"Guess you are." She holds her hand out like she's waiting for a dog to drop its ball.

"Here." I immediately regret the decision to listen to Marty. If Jenny hadn't asks, I would've easily told Marty no. Too late now.

"So, what are we going to do about this?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what are we going to do about you blowing up the school? *Again.*"

"You know about that?"

"I know more about you, Alex, than you can imagine."

"You don't know anything about me." She's like all the other adults I've dealt with. They think they know me, because they went to school and got a stupid degree.

"Willing to bet your life?"

"What are you talking about, lady? You're crazy."

It would be one thing if she read me the riot act about how much trouble I'm in and that she's going to take me immediately to the principal, but she doesn't. Instead, she doesn't say a word for what seems like forever. Like we're having a staring contest.

Finally, she looks to the floor. "I'm not crazy, Alex." She says my name like she knows me, which bothers me even more. "I am, however, someone who can completely alter your life right now."

It suddenly occurs to me that this woman is in the boys' bathroom. "You're not supposed to be in here." I push one hand deep into my jeans and used the other to show her the wall urinal.

"But I am." Her calmness weirds me out. I want to run past her or for someone to walk in. "Do you want to hear your choices?"

"Doesn't look like I have a choice."

"If I take you to the office, what'll happen?"

"They'll probably call my moms." I'm not going to lie to you and pretend that it doesn't bother me, because it does. If they call Veronica and Lisa then they will probably send me back to the group home.

"Your principal *will* call home. Or you can go with me."

"You want to kidnap me? You *are* crazy." I move sideways and try to make a break for it.

She blocks me with her hand. "Don't jump to conclusions, Alex." The situation forces me to take a step backwards. "I've got him." It freaks me out when she speaks to someone who isn't there. "Open the Rift now."

Who is she talking to?

A little bright light appears from out of nowhere. It expands to form an oval ring similar to clear, wiggly Jell-O. And I love Jell-O.

"The choice is yours." She moves toward the gooey doorway. "Come with me, or take your chances with the principal."

“What is that?”

“It’s a Rift.” The librarian motions me toward the blob. “What’s your answer going to be? Time’s wasting.”

I hesitate for a millisecond and glance toward the bathroom door but don’t know what to do. Wait for her to take me to the principal’s office or climb into the gooey hole? My heart thumps in my chest like a hammer against a drum. She wraps her fingers around my wrist and pulls, giving me no option. Doesn’t matter, though, because my curiosity gets the best of me, like it always does. I plunge headfirst into the hole and my whole body tingles like the time I pressed my tongue to a nine-volt battery, then the blob blinks out of sight.