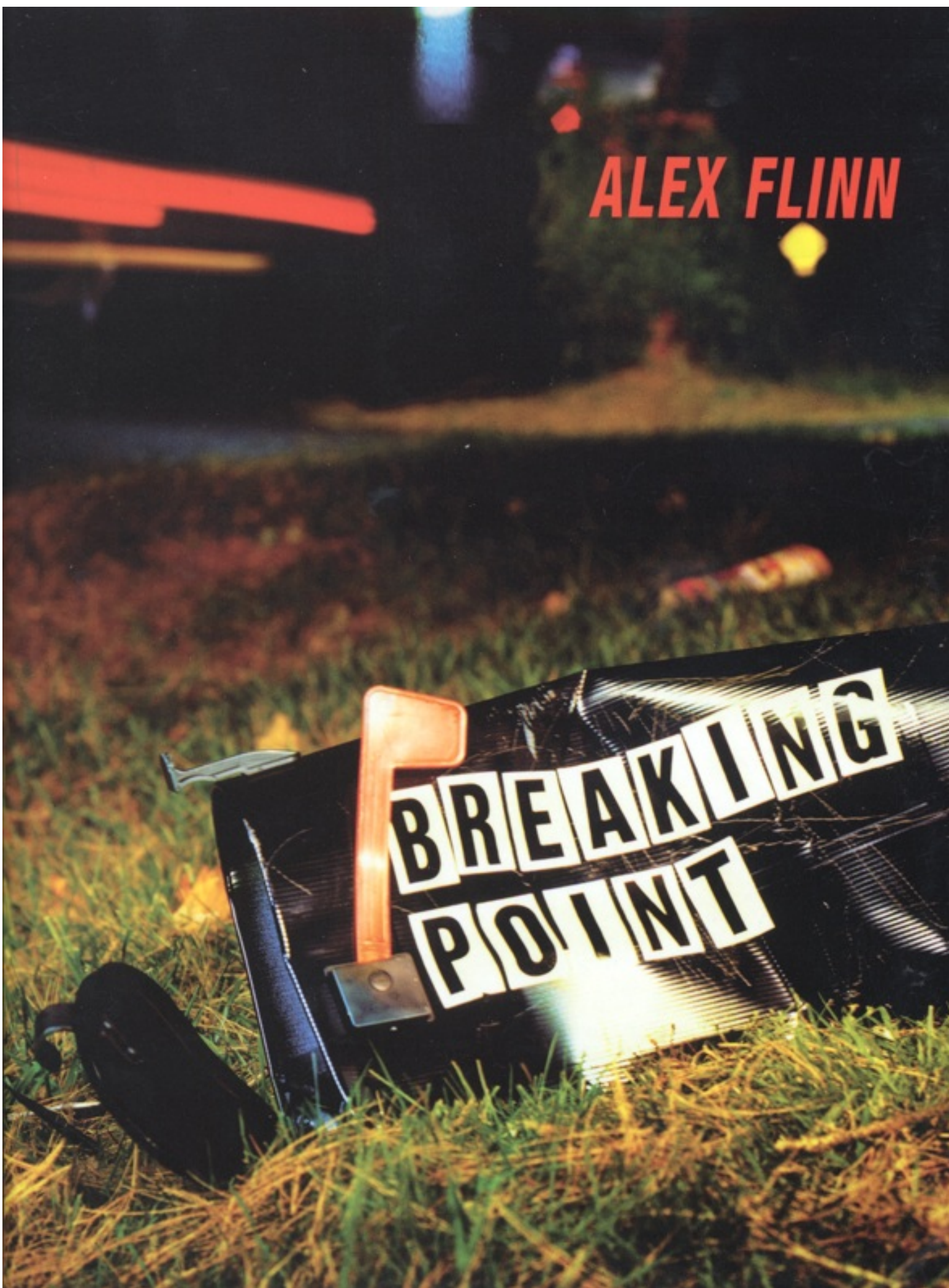


ALEX FLINN

**BREAKING
POINT**



BREAKING POINT

ALEX FLINN

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DEDICATION

For my family:

Katie, my muse

Meredith, my good-luck charm

and Gene, who let me find my way

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BOOKS BY ALEX FLINN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

PROLOGUE

Happy birthday to me.

The metal door slams behind me. I am on the outside. Mom starts to hug me but draws back when the guard shoves my release paperwork across the desk for me to sign. Two years ago, Mom filled everything out for me. But now I am an adult—at least in the eyes of the law. Old enough to be held fully accountable for my actions.

Some people say age doesn't matter. I should have paid more for what I did, even though I was only fifteen.

Maybe they're right. But they don't know what I've paid—inside my head, where it matters.

And doing the right thing isn't always easy. Maybe it's just been too long since they were in high school. Maybe they don't remember what it was like.

Or maybe they didn't go to school with someone like Charlie Good.

Two Years Earlier

I was a misfit. If you'd asked me, I'd have guessed school uniforms were a good idea. Like camouflage. I'd have been kidding myself. On registration day, in my blue regulation crested polo and khakis that cleared my ankle despite fitting the week before, I knew I'd never fit in at Gate-Brickell Christian, my new school, in Miami, my new town.

I stood in the registration line, squeaking the vinylized wood gym floor against my Top-Sider. (The student handbook mandated "conservative" shoes. Also, "traditional" haircuts and "no piercing except females, who may have one hole per ear only.") I tried to look shorter. At fifteen, I was already six one, skinny, and my dark head stuck out above the swarms of mostly blond ones. They greeted one another passionately after a long summer or, more likely, a long night. I watched them—the girls especially—trying to pretend I wasn't. A blond with glasses cornered a redhead.

"What'd you do this summer?"

The second girl, who managed to have breasts even in the hideous plaid jumpers the girls wore, shrugged. "Didn't do jack. Just vegged in Europe, then vegged here while the 'rents busted on me for wasting my youth."

The blond rolled her eyes. "I hear you."

A guy approached the blond. "Vamp 'do, Kirby."

An insult, from her reaction. Hard to tell. Their English was foreign, and I struggled to understand. Suddenly, I had the feeling I wasn't alone.

"You look confused." Someone behind me.

She meant me. I turned but said nothing.

Her hair was the best thing about her. From the rear, she could have been beautiful. Dark ringle hung down her shoulders, gypsyish. The hair was a waste. The face, downright ugly, a screwed-up little face with eyes like raisins sunk in rice pudding, all hidden behind enormous glasses. She stared me down. She was skinny and almost as tall as I was. I realized she'd been watching me awhile. "Can you talk?" she demanded. "I mean, are you physically able to speak? I'm not being sarcastic, just curious."

I glanced around to see if anyone was listening. No one was. "I'm not confused."

"It speaks." She smiled, sort of a Mona Lisa thing she was trying for. Apparently, word hadn't reached her that she wasn't a supermodel. "You look confused. Around here, looking confused is as bad as being confused. Worse, maybe. Any sign of weakness, they eat you alive."

"Oh." Was talking to her a sign of weakness?

"I'm Binky Lopez-Nande." She stuck out her hand, sort of a weird thing to do.

I took it. "Paul Richmond." Her ridiculous name sunk in. "Binky?"

"Short for Belinda. Couldn't pronounce it when I was little, so my parents called me Binky. It's the bane of my existence."

I doubted that.

“What are you confused about, Richmond?”

“Nothing. I’m just figuring out a schedule.”

“You’re new here? We don’t take well to newcomers unless you’re someone important. Are you?”

Her raisin eyes said I didn’t look it.

“No. I mean, I’m going here because my mother works here.” Hoping maybe that would end the conversation. Two guys my age had gotten in line behind us.

“Best reason I’ve heard for coming here.”

“I’m trying to decide between Spanish and art.” A few steps sideways, away from her, leaving only a toe in line.

“Depends. Are you college bound or running out the clock until some big trust fund kicks in?”

“Well, there’s no trust fund.”

“Didn’t think so.” A few steps toward me. “What sort of classes did you take at your old school?”

I shuffled, considering my answer, not wanting to reveal, even to her, that there was no old school. I’d been home-schooled and felt younger than the other sophomores, despite my height. I mumbled something about moving a lot because Dad was in the army. That was true, at least. I glanced back at the two guys. They paid me no attention. Why should they? They were part of things, normal. I tried to listen in. The bigger guy, who looked like a refugee from World Wrestling Federation, with arms threatening to bulge through the bands of his uniform polo, had said something to insult his friend.

“You’re a bastard, Meat,” the friend said. “Know that?”

“Watch your language,” the big guy—Meat—said.

His friend, even taller than me, but not clumsy, let fly a string of obscenities that would have offended a rap group. Meat took a swing. I thought they were kidding around, but next thing I knew they were on the floor, hurtling into my knees, and I was a human missile. My nonskid shoes didn’t help. My legs flew past my head, my butt hit ground. They stood, laughing, leaving me where I had fallen. I sat a second. When I was pretty sure they’d forgotten me, I stood, edged back into line. I ignored Binky’s averted eyes.

“Apologize!” A voice from nowhere.

I froze. Did he mean me? “What?”

“Not you,” said the voice. I dimly recognized there was a person connected to it. Whitish hair, white chinos, white polo. He turned toward the guys, and I understood he was their leader. “Apologize to the kid.”

“Aww, Charlie, we don’t have to,” Meat said.

The better-looking one nodded. “Not like geek-boy’s going to do anything.”

“Boys, boys.” Charlie folded his arms. He was much shorter than his friends, but he didn’t look up. Rather, they backed off to make eye contact with him. “When we crash into people, custom calls for an apology. No matter who they are.” He nodded at each of them. “Meat? St. John?”

And the subject was closed. Their unison apology sounded more like a curse. They walked away with heads down.

Charlie turned to me, and I, like his friends, found myself backing to meet his eyes. They were brown, which seemed just right with his light hair. Short though he was, Charlie wasn’t fat or fragile or childish like short guys usually are. Rather, he was just this small person, as if everyone else was a waste of materials. He wore sneakers—*forbidden* by the handbook—and his polo was nonuniform. He said WIMBLEDON TENNIS CHAMPIONSHIPS.

“Charlie Good.” He didn’t extend his hand. “No *E*, just plain Good.”

He expected a response. "Paul Richmond."

~~"Word of advice, Paul. Be aware of your surroundings. You're not from around here, are you?"~~

I shook my head.

"Well, this can be a dangerous place. Very, very dangerous."

He smiled and walked away. Did the crowds part for him? Must have been my imagination.

turned to Binky.

"Who was that?" I asked, feeling more confused than ever.

She pulled me forward, took a card for the Spanish class and handed me one. "That's trouble."

CHAPTER TWO

Mom broke the silence in our car. “So, how was registration?”

I grunted. I didn’t want to upset her. I didn’t want to lie either.

“That’s not an answer, Paul.” Mom yanked a blond hair from her head.

I tried not to notice. I stared out the window, at the strip malls, gas stations, and convenience stores. The car’s air conditioner was broken, and the humidity through the open windows pushed the air from my lungs. I felt Mom watching me. Finally I said, “The kids were sort of rich. They had Rolexes and stuff.”

And she said what I’d known she’d say. “We have to try not to think about money.”

She said it as we reached the parking lot for our building, a graphic reminder of the money we weren’t thinking about. We parked and walked through the peeling-painted breezeways to the elevator. A sign on the bulletin board advertised FREE KITTENS, but someone had crossed out *kittens* and substituted a synonym. Mom looked away. I ripped the sign down. Mom said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t want it to be like this.” She pulled another hair and sighed. “I suppose everything happens for a reason, sweetheart.”

“I know that.” *The reason is, my father’s sleeping with his secretary.* But I didn’t say that, didn’t even say anything about her calling me “sweetheart,” which she’d promised to stop.

We reached our landing and walked in silence, me closing my eyes and praying, *Please, God. Please let us get through this one day without her crying.*

She pushed open the door. We stood there, looking at the rented beige sofa, generic table, and every stupid figurine my parents had bought during their marriage. Dad hadn’t wanted mementos. He’d just wanted out. Through the still-open door, I heard a car backfiring, rap music, an argument down the hall. Mom’s hand strayed to my shoulder. I backed off.

“I’ll go put my books away.”

She nodded, and I retreated to my room. But seconds later, as I fitted my books into the mismatched crates we’d decided would work for shelves, I heard her crying.

So much for prayer.

I did what I’d been thinking about doing for a while. I walked to the phone and dialed my father’s number. He hadn’t called since the divorce. I didn’t even know what I’d say. It rang once. Twice. Three times. Then, Dad’s voice on the answering machine, “You’ve reached the residence of Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Richmond.” I hung up.

I flopped onto my bed. Mom was still crying. I wanted to go on-line, but in our tiny apartment Mom would hear the modem, then grill me about what I’d been doing. So I lay there, breathing deeply, drowning her out from inside my head. Dad’s voice was still in there too.

I couldn’t pinpoint the day Dad had stopped loving us. But if I had to guess, I’d say it began when we’d moved to Kentucky and Mom started homeschooling me.

We’d moved a lot. Between kindergarten and second grade, I’d attended four schools, always transferring midyear, always the new kid being sized up by everyone. I learned to be shy. Mom was pro at it already. By our third move, she stopped joining Bible-study groups, stopped doing volunteer work or signing me up for sports teams. I couldn’t catch a ball anyway. Mom spent her days cleaning

our spotless house, waiting for me to get home so we could do homework together, then curl up on the sofa and watch cartoons until Dad came home for dinner. When Dad came home for dinner.

My second-grade year, we lived in Washington. State, I think. At least, it rained a lot. Dad got home early one night, smile plastered to his face. I knew what was coming.

“Guess what?” Dad said over dinner.

“We’re moving again,” Mom guessed.

“Don’t look so happy. I got a promotion. I’ll finally be a major, and we’re going to Kentucky.” He grinned wider and tousled my hair. “Home of the Derby, son.”

“Can I have a horse?” I asked.

“Sure.” He patted my shoulder.

But Mom stood, her face a confusion of fear, fury, and despair. “Don’t do that. Don’t promise him things, get his hopes up like that.”

“Would you calm down? It will be fun—a new adventure.”

“For you, it’s an adventure. For Paul and me, it’s just another move, another new school, another grocery store to figure out, then move as soon as I know where the cereal is.”

“The cereal?” Dad’s smile disappeared like always. “This is what army families do, Laura.”

“Well, I’m sick of it. *We’re* sick of it.”

“Can I still have a horse?” I asked.

I got sent to my room. But I heard them fighting, into the night. In the morning, I came downstairs to find that, as all warring armies eventually do, my parents had reached a treaty.

Mom patted the seat beside her. “Paul, how would you like to stay home with me? No new school, no new kids to deal with. Just you and me—together.”

She’d made chocolate-chip pancakes. She always did when arguing with Dad. I loved them, though they made me sick to my stomach later. I nodded. I didn’t like school anyway. But mostly, I wanted Mom and Dad to stop fighting. I wanted Mom to be happy because maybe, if Mom was happy, Dad would be happy. Maybe he’d come home more.

“Paul!” Now Mom was knocking on my bedroom door.

I jumped up. “Yeah?” It had become dark as I’d lain there.

Mom came in. She wore her ratty bathrobe, though it was still hours to bed. She shrugged. “No sense staying dressed for just the two of us.” She pulled a hair.

Stop that! I wanted to scream. *Just stop it!* I didn’t know whether I meant the hair-pulling or the way she’d just given up on everything. Was she doing it to torture me? And how could I keep from being a loser when *she* was so content to be one? I was through being a loser. I’d been one long enough.

She sat at the edge of the bed and motioned for me to sit too. I shook my head, but did her the favor of meeting her eyes. On the verge of tears, as usual. I knew I should feel guilty, but I didn’t. I knew she was lonely. I knew she was depressed. I knew all that. But she’d been this way as long as I could remember. Too long.

But I switched on the light and sat beside her. “It will be okay,” I said.

“Oh, sweetheart, I hope so.” Then she was crying again. She scooted closer, wrapping her arm around my neck, reaching to stroke my hair. “I didn’t want it to be like this.”

“Yeah, I know.” I stayed there a second, then pulled back, stood. I gestured toward the books. “I want to put this stuff away before dinner.”

Over the years, the cooking had fallen to me. But today, I hadn’t even started. Mom sniffled a few more times, then forced a smile. “I’ll make a salad, okay?”

She didn't close the door when she left. I flopped back onto my bed, staring at the ceiling.

~~At first, I'd liked staying home with Mom. We'd had time for reading, going to the park, playing games, doing nothing. We went to museums and saw other kids, groups on school field trips. They formed human arm chains that tangled around the statues or Civil War relics. Instead of examining the muskets, I watched the spitball-shooting boys, giggling girls, weary moms, like they were a study in what was doing.~~

And if it hadn't been for the Internet, the people I met in the safe anonymity of chat rooms, I never would have known anything except what Mom thought, what she believed in. I spent more and more time on-line.

I looked at my computer again. I ached to log on now, to see who was on from my buddy list and how *their* first day of school had been, wherever they were. I'd have settled for a round of Tom Clancy's *Raider*. Anything to get myself out of my head. But the door was open. Mom was listening. The computer cut into "family time," which was why I liked it and why Mom hated it.

So, I just lay on the bed, stuck there with myself.

The telephone's ring startled me out of my trance. Was it Dad?

No. I hadn't left a message.

Still, I answered on the second ring.

"Faggot." A voice, a mean voice, invaded my ears.

"Go back where you belong." Another voice.

"Who is this?" I asked stupidly.

The line went dead.

I stood there, looking at the receiver, then at my own hands.

"Who was that, sweetheart?" A voice from the hall.

My mother. She'd been listening, of course. Did she know?

No, of course not.

"Just ... just a wrong number." *Don't come in here.* "I'll be out in a sec."

"Salad's almost ready."

"Fine."

I stood and started putting away my books.

The last place we'd lived was North Carolina. I was home with Mom. Dad worked late every night, coming home long after I'd gone to bed, if he came home at all. Until, one night, he got home early. He announced he was moving out.

I gaped. Mom said nothing. Dad looked at me for once. "This isn't your fault, Paul."

Then why say it?

"No one's fault, really. Who understands the reason for something like this?"

But the following week, we found out the reason. Her name was Stephanie—Hurricane Stephanie. Mom called her. She worked with Dad. She was pregnant.

The divorce was quick and painful, a Band-Aid ripped from a festering wound. We moved again to Florida. But now, it was just Mom and me, and Mom had to work. She hadn't done well in the divorce. She explained that everything they owned was part of Dad's job, protected somehow. The only things Mom got were their collection of Royal Doulton figurines and me—the junk Dad hadn't wanted.

"Paul!" Mom's voice from the kitchen was trembly. *For God's sake.*

I shoved the last book into the milk crate. The telephone rang again.

I shouldn't answer. Probably another crank call.

Still, what if it was an obscene phone call and my mother picked it up?

Or maybe it was Dad.

“Hello?”

“That you, Richmond?”

I recognized the voice. Binky, from the registration line. “Yeah. How’d you get my number?”

“School directory.”

“What’s up?” *Why are you calling me?*

“Just wanted to find out your schedule. We moved here three years ago, so I know it’s weird your first day.”

“Is it like that for everyone?”

“Sure. Why would you be different?”

“No reason.”

We talked longer, me reading her my schedule, her assuring me I’d drawn all the teachers who come to Gate because Principal Meeks allowed them to practice electroshock therapy or use their co’-nine-tails on unruly students. But I was blown away, thinking, *I made a friend*. Maybe she was another loser like me, but she was still a friend. And that was one more than I’d ever had before.

CHAPTER THREE

“Anyone else?” Mrs. Ivins, my Algebra II teacher, looked hopefully around the room. No other hands. I tried to sneak mine down. Too late. I was nabbed.

“Mr. Richmond.” It came out a sigh.

Mrs. Ivins had begun class each day by putting a word problem on the board. They were pretty easy quadratic equations. Yet, for the third straight day, I was the only one to volunteer.

Everyone stared as I walked to the board. But a senior jock in the front row slapped my back as I passed. “Go, Richmond!”

So, I was grinning when I started.

A man can build a brick wall in 2 hours less than his coworker. Working together, they can finish in 2 hours, 24 minutes. How fast can each man do it alone?

I wrote:

	Total Time	Part in 1 Hour
Man 1	x	$\frac{1}{x}$
Man 2	$x + 2$	$\frac{1}{x+2}$
Both	$2\frac{2}{5}$	$\frac{1}{2\frac{2}{5}}$

Behind me, a snicker. Someone shushed the snickerer. Why had I volunteered? Why? I turned. Mrs. Ivins twisted to see the board. She nodded.

I wrote:

$$\frac{1}{x} + \frac{1}{x+2} = \frac{1}{2\frac{2}{5}}$$

Another snicker. *Ignore it.*

$$\frac{1}{2\frac{2}{5}} = \frac{1}{\frac{12}{5}} = 1 \div \frac{12}{5} = \frac{5}{12}$$

$$\frac{1}{x} + \frac{1}{x+2} = \frac{5}{12}$$

The room erupted in laughter. I looked at Mrs. Ivins again. She checked my work.

“Fine. Now, clear the fractions.”

By the time I finished multiplying everything by the LCD, the room had calmed. I wrote the answer, $x = 4$, $x + 2 = 6$, in tiny print, then walked, head down, to my seat. I didn’t look up the rest of the period. I swore never to volunteer again.

In the hallway, people still laughed when they saw me—even people who hadn’t been in my class. Binky materialized through the crowd. She patted my back.

“Rough morning?” she guessed.

“You can tell that by looking?”

She held up a sheet of paper, really three big yellow Post-it notes stuck together. I read:

$x = \text{I'M A HOMO}$

$x + 2 = \text{I HAVE A HAIRY ASS}$

$\frac{1}{x} = \text{I JERK OFF A LOT}$

“The jock.”

“Which jock?” Binky crumpled the paper.

“When I went up to the board, some guy put it on my back.” It struck me that the jock had understood the math problem, too. But he’d preferred to humiliate me.

Binky aimed and made a basket into the garbage pail. She looked at me. “Lesson one, Richmond. It might be a good idea not to let everyone know you’re smarter than them. They hate that.”

“I’m not smarter than anyone.”

“Yeah. Trust me. You are.”

Down the hall, I saw Charlie Good, the guy from the registration line. He was talking to the jock who’d humiliated me. Charlie looked up, met my eyes. He waved.

The rest of the week, I watched my back. Problem was, I’d learned about school from television. On television, when a new guy shows up, everyone wants to know him. Within an episode, he has a place in the action, some friends, a girl. Gate was nothing like that.

Wednesday, there was a foot, tangling through my ankles in social studies, tripping me. Could have been an accident. The next time, I thought maybe it wasn’t. The third time, I was sure.

My locker got trashed Thursday. Someone managed to spray Coke up through the air vents. My fresh-from-the-bookstore texts were annihilated. I watched the brown liquid seep across the white pages, and I remembered being dragged to the shooting range with Dad and getting him mad by asking why they’d invented guns. Now, I understood.

Friday, whoever it was did one better, switching the combination locks so I couldn’t get into my locker at all. I found the janitor scrubbing the toilets in the upstairs boys’ room. Everyone called him “Old Carlos” though he wasn’t much older than Mom.

“What your combination is?” Through an accent I could barely understand.

“I told you. I don’t know.”

Old Carlos pulled back his Florida Marlins cap, revealing his baldness. First period had started but I needed my books. “You no got your combination?”

“Someone switched the locks.”

“We give it a try. What your combination?”

No point explaining. I told him the old combination and watched him dial it. He pulled down the mechanism. The lock opened.

“It work now.” Old Carlos smiled. He was missing two teeth. “You forget, maybe.”

I nodded. But I hadn’t forgotten.

I was by my locker after school that same day. I’d come from the computer lab, where I killed time in chat rooms until Mom got off work. It was almost four. The breezeway was quiet. The only students left were athletes, who had practice, and me. The air was hazy, silent yellow.

Then, a voice. “Hey, faggot!”

Why did I turn? I saw a pair of white moons topping muscled legs. Then, another. And another. I looked away.

“Like that, faggot?”

I stared at my locker. The leftover drips of Coke had attracted an ant parade, swarming across the gray metal in a sugar frenzy. The three jocks left, guffawing.

“Why can’t I go to public school?”

Mom was sitting in the living room, watching TV. She’d brightened when I entered, but at my question, she yanked a hair and sighed, making me sorry I’d asked.

“Lots of people go to public school,” I said.

“Public schools aren’t safe. I wouldn’t feel right, letting you go.”

“They can’t be worse than Gate.”

“You think that because I’ve protected you.”

She pulled another hair.

“You don’t know what’s out there,” she said. “Crack cocaine ... shootings ... gangs—”

“Those things could happen here, too.”

“Please, Paul.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I’d die if anything happened to you. You’re all I have. Your father left us with nothing.”

It wasn’t her fault, I realized. I hadn’t told her about the stuff that was happening. Now I tried.

“But the problem is, people are all so mean there. At least, if I went to public school, I wouldn’t be the poorest kid there. The kids at Gate, they...”

She sighed, looked away.

I stopped. I’d been about to tell her everything, about the Coke in my locker and the locks being changed, the jock in algebra class, and getting tripped practically every time I walked into the cafeteria. But I realized she didn’t want to hear about my problems. She only wanted to dissect her own.

“Never mind,” I said. “It’s okay.”

She looked back at me and patted my arm. “Of course it is. All we need is each other.” She reached to the coffee table and flicked the pulled-out hairs off her hands. She turned her back to me. “Can you rub my back, please? I’m so tired.”

I didn’t want to, but I reached over and did it, like always.

But inside, I was mad. Mad at her for ignoring my problems, but more than that. Mad at her for being tired. She was always tired. Tired of life, tired of work. Tired of me.

Well, I was tired too. Tired of trying to make everything okay for her. For once, I wanted to think of myself.

Later, I did the only thing I could. I called Dad again.

I got his answering machine. “Dad, it’s me. I was wondering ... if maybe I could live with you. Just during the school year or something....” I sounded like a dork. “Anyway, call me back.” I left the number and hung up.

That night, I waited. He had to call back. He was my father, for Christ’s sake. But when the telephone rang, it was only Binky.

What kind of father would just leave me here, with Mom and this school? Could he really be that selfish?

At twelve thirty, I went to bed.

I asked Binky, “Why are people such assholes to me?”

We were eating in the shade of the oak canopy that stretched across campus. It did nothing for the heat. The suffocating feeling had settled in permanently. I’d filled my tray with food Mom would have called nonnutritive: two burgers and an oatmeal cookie sandwich. Binky had a burger too, which

marked her as strange for a girl. I watched girls a lot. Most got the salad bar, which skinny Binky described as “anorexic.” In the first weeks, she was still my only friend.

“Probably they figured out you’re a subsidy student,” she said. “That your mother works here.”

“I guess so.”

“This is the most expensive school in Miami, Richmond, and everyone knows it. Others have academics, sports. We have snob appeal.” She extracted a pickle from her burger bun, ripped it in two and replaced the halves on the burger. “People get emotional over who pays full price.”

“That’s messed up.” I watched a squirrel, leaping tree to tree.

Binky shrugged. “Could be worse. At least your mom works in the office. Have you seen what they do to David Blanco? *His* mom’s a lunch lady, and his father’s the janitor.” She pretended to shudder.

I downed the second burger in four bites. Across the way, two guys in blue caps, the kind worn by Gate’s student ambassadors, looked at us, laughing. I didn’t want to know what they did to David Blanco, who must have been the weird-looking guy I’d seen talking to his fat mother in the cafeteria. Or what they’d do to me. I didn’t even know why I wanted to fit in with these people, but I did.

From a distance, I saw Charlie Good crossing the field. The two blue caps yelled to him, and Amanda Colbert, the mere sight of whom made my stomach flip, tried to start a conversation. But Charlie walked alone. I’d seen him often. We had no classes together, but I passed him in the hallway. And I heard about him. Not by accident, but more like Charlie was a research project. What I found contradicted Binky’s statement about Charlie being trouble. He seemed like the most normal person there. True, he was never fully in uniform, always wearing either contraband shorts or sneakers, always dressed in white. But his name was on last year’s low honor roll, posted in a case in the breezeway, and that first Friday’s newspaper carried his picture, acing his serve for match point. Charlie had made the front page.

I didn’t speak to Charlie again until Thursday, second week. I was at my worst—P.E.

Soccer was invented by masochists.

I lunged, feetfirst, toward the black-and-white ball that burned on my brain like a tattoo. Up was blue, framed by a stand of oaks. Down, there were only feet. Feet, somehow making contact with the black-and-white missile as mine couldn’t. Across was the goal, near but unattainable; still, yet elusive. I was inches away, running in circles. Finally, I saw an opening. The ball hit the canvas side of my Kmart sneaker and soared heavenward, carried more by wind than by my kick, crooked but straight enough. Seconds later, it hit ground, bouncing clear, no defense in sight. No one but me as it leaped toward the goal. All around, people screamed my name.

Richmond! Richmond!

I turned, faced them.

“Richmond, pay attention!” Coach Kjelson’s voice rose above them. “Your side called time-out!”

But time-out was never long enough.

It started again. And again, I was in a time warp, where nothing changes, the ball never moves, and I was always inches from glory. And as the ball slipped away, my eyes filled with watery sun, and I saw Charlie. He wore tennis whites, oblivious to the ninety-degree heat. His smile was so loud, I knew he was laughing at me. Then I heard it, ringing above the buildings. Someone slammed me into the dirt again, and when I looked up, he was gone.

I ran for the rest of the period, not even trying for the ball. That’s the only good thing about soccer: You don’t actually have to do anything. It was maybe five minutes, but it seemed an hour. Finally, Coach let us go, and I drifted to the locker room.

I'd stripped to my jock, inhaling the sour smell of sweat and frustration. I saw Charlie. His hair was damp from the shower. His white polo had Gate's logo; his white chinos, Ralph Lauren's. He wore his forbidden white tennis shoes. He smiled.

"You must be one hell of a student."

I stared, dumb in both senses of the word. A witty reply leaped to mind.

"Huh?"

He tilted his head back to the ceiling, not looking at me. He had no reason to remember me, yet somehow, I knew, he remembered everyone. "I said, anyone that uncoordinated must be a real brainiac."

It wasn't news, but it hurt anyway. "Whatever." I pushed past him, not difficult. I was a giant, after all. I headed for the showers, lifted the grimy, plastic curtain, stuck my toe under the spray. His voice came again.

"You always shower in your jock, Einstein?"

I jumped back, saving myself from all but a few drops, and turned to avoid his gaze. But he was gone. Still, his laughter hung in the sweaty air. The door slammed.

The next morning, I walked up the center stairway before third period. A crowd clogged the way, all staring at something hanging from the second-floor landing. People laughed and talked and didn't move an inch. I tried to shove through. Finally, when the bell rang and everyone ran for class, I saw what they'd been looking at.

The picture, taken from a calendar or something, was an obese woman, naked except for a garter belt, spread-eagle. Gross. I stared, revolted, yet unable to turn away. Across the enormous, rumpled stomach, in red marker, someone had written Blanco's Mom.

I remembered what Binky had said about David Blanco, David Blanco and me. God, what would I do if anyone did that to my mother?

For one moment, I stood there, imagining it. I wanted to hurt them.

Then, a guy's hand reached down for the picture. I heard it rip. I looked up. He was gone.

Dad hadn't returned my calls. I'd left four, maybe five, messages, and it bugged me. I mean, even if he was away, he'd have called for messages. He couldn't be this big an asshole. Then, I remembered Hurricane Stephanie. Of course. She wouldn't want me living with them. Why should she? They had a new baby. Everything was perfect. She was probably erasing the messages before Dad even got them. That night, I left another.

"Dad and Stephanie?" I paused, stupidly, like they might answer. "It's me again. Paul." One ear tuned to the hallway, to make sure Mom wasn't listening. I knew I was betraying her. "Your son, Paul. Look, if you let me live there, I won't get in the way or anything. I'll take the bus to school—whatever school's most convenient. Or walk. You wouldn't see me hardly at all. And if you need a baby-sitter for..." I stopped, realizing I didn't know my half brother or sister's name. "... for the baby, I'll do that too."

CHAPTER FOUR

The bell tower stood on the far end of campus, behind the chapel and near the athletic field. A three or four-story structure, it stared over Gate's grounds, meant to symbolize tradition or excellence or something. Not to me. Every hour, when its bells rang, another hour of my life was gone.

Near the end of September, I walked in its shadow. Four o'clock. I kicked a rock, killing time until Mom was ready to leave. Usually, I went to the computer lab after school. I fooled around on the Internet away from Mom's eyes and ears. Sometimes, I even helped the sixth-graders with their homework because, I guess, it made me feel important that they thought I was some kind of computer genius.

But I wasn't in the mood today. Someone had made cookies in my locker. At least, it was filled with eggs and flour. I'd considered changing the lock. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction— whoever "them" was. Word of my untouchable status had traveled across campus, and now the spitballs flew so thick I sometimes ducked into the boys' room to rinse my hair between classes.

The day before, I'd asked Binky, "Why hang with me? Bet it does nothing for your image."

She snorted, probably at the idea of her having an image. "Haven't you figured it out, Richmond? I don't care what the clones think. I buck the system."

"So, I'm some project, some statement you're making?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, you're just Paul. But they can't tell me what to do."

It was a philosophy I hoped to cultivate. I wasn't having much luck yet.

The clones were out in full force that afternoon. There was a game the next day, and a pep rally. The football team was grunting. Cheerleaders were yelling pointless things, bouncing and flashing their legs in those short, blue-and-white polyester skirts and sleeveless tops where you felt you could see more if you looked hard enough. I tried not to. Why bother? Looking only made you want to touch and that wasn't happening. I walked alone, writing a letter in my head to Dad, since he wouldn't return my calls. I felt stupid, writing him, but I had no choice. I hated Gate, hated living with Mom. Hated my life. I had to leave.

I sat on a high tree stump away from the shadowy area where mosquitoes hid. I wrote in my mind. When I reached down for my notebook and pen, I saw him.

He was about my age. He led a small, white dog on a leash. I recognized him. David Blanco, from the cafeteria and the hallway. It was the first time I'd been near enough to get a good look at him. I'd been curious since Binky had compared us, but really, I saw no similarities. Where I tried to fit in, David clearly wanted to stand out. His dark hair was bleached white, and his face bore the scars of various piercings—not allowed by Gate's dress code. His pushed-up sleeves revealed a tattoo. I couldn't make it out. The dog, on the other hand, was white and clean, brushed like he'd just come from the groomer.

What was he doing with the dog, so far away from the cottage at the back of campus where he and his parents lived?

I shook my head, imagining having to live at Gate on top of everything else.

I watched him from a distance. He walked the white fluff ball in gradually tightening circles, near the football practice field. What was he doing? Finally, the dog hunched. David whispered something

to it, I couldn't hear what, then picked it up by its fluffy shoulders and put it down right in the center of the athletic field entrance. I grinned. The guy had balls, not to mention the right idea. He was making his dog crap in the exact spot where the football team would be walking in their cleats.

The dog finished its business and walked on, red ear ribbons flapping side to side. David reached out to pat its head. He caught sight of me. I smiled again. David saluted and walked away.

The sermon in chapel that week was "Love Thine Enemies." I figured it would be a good idea for me to listen to that. But it was hard.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Happy teen years are overrated,” Binky announced.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Show me someone who’s cool in high school, I’ll show you the unemployed guy eating double his share of hors d’oeuvres at the ten-year reunion.”

Being Binky’s friend wasn’t doing much for my social life. But then, I didn’t have one anyway. So every Friday, I went over her house after school. I’d never invited her to my place. I hoped I’d never have to. Usually, we watched television. Sometimes I got to hear Binky’s theories about life. She had plenty.

“Hope you’re right,” I said.

“I am.”

We sat a few minutes, watching soaps merge into Maury Povich. Suddenly, Binky stood. “I want to show you something.”

“What is it?” I was bored but too lazy to move.

“Just come on.”

She took off. In a few seconds, I gave up and followed her through the empty house. She was in a hurry, nearly knocking over priceless artwork with her flying arms, me behind her. It was almost dark. Mom was picking me up in an hour. I didn’t know where Binky was taking me, but I followed, across the neighbors’ yards, then over a fence and into an empty, fresh-mowed lot.

“Where are we?” I dropped over the fence after her.

“We’re going next door. To my church.”

“That sounds fun.”

“We’re not going to a service, Squid. We’re going to swing.”

Which didn’t make a whole lot of sense, either. But I had no other options, so I followed her across the lot, over another fence, through a garden where she stopped.

“Look!” Pointing at something, nothing.

“What?”

“Don’t you see?” She pointed someplace different. “There!”

“What am I looking for?”

“Hummingbird.” Pointing back at the first spot.

And then I did see. Or, at least, I saw something bouncing from limb to limb, over the yellow flowers lining the fence. It moved so fast I doubted it knew where it was going. Could have been a moth, in that dim light. Or the wind. “How do you know it’s a hummingbird?”

“Just do. It’s here most nights, this time.”

“You’re here every night?”

“It’s peaceful.”

I’d had enough peace for a lifetime. I really wanted something besides just peace for a change. We stood, watching until the bird or whatever it was disappeared over a red-flowered tree. Binky motioned for me to follow her and, finally, we reached an old swing set crusted with leaves and spiderwebs. She brushed off a swing and sat.

“Oh,” I said. “You meant swing like ... *swing*”.

~~“Sure, what else? It’s fun, pretending to be a little kid with no deadlines or worries, nothing serious at all. Right?”~~

I didn’t know. I’d never been a kid like that. I flashed back—Mom pushing me on a swing at some kind of army picnic, Dad saying I wasn’t a baby anymore. He’d been mad I’d placed last in the sack races. We hadn’t gone the following year. But I said, “I guess.”

“So, do it,” she said. “Swing.”

I started to. It came back to me, the pumping motion, pushing my body through the chains, legs flying ahead of me and back. Soon I was watching Binky, trying to outdo her.

But she wasn’t competing. She looked like she was someplace else, someplace really flying. As she swung, she sang softly, a sort of lilting tune, blending with the rhythm of her swinging legs.

“What are you singing?” I asked finally.

Anyone else would have stopped, caught in something so private, silly. Not Binky. She didn’t care what people thought, lucky her. She kept singing until she finished.

“What is that?” I asked when she did. “Some Cuban folk song?”

She laughed. “It’s a show tune.”

The last thing I’d expected from her. “Where’d you learn a show tune? Thought your family was from Cuba.”

She slowed a little. “My dad’s family is, but they’ve been here a long time. *Abuelo* and *Abuelita*—my grandparents—left early. They were lucky. Sometimes, I wonder how our lives would be if they hadn’t.”

She paused a second, thinking about that. We both thought about it.

She said, “But Mom’s family is different. They’re Irish, from El Dorado, Kansas. Mom’s father worked in the oil refinery. But Grandma was a beauty who tried for the Rockettes at Radio City. She never had made it, too, except she was two inches too tall. She raised Mom on Broadway show tunes, and after Grandpa died from all the asbestos he’d inhaled at work, Grandma lived with us and raised me and them too.” Binky swung higher.

I laughed at her long, stupid explanation. “So, what’s the song?”

“One of Grandma’s favorite swinging songs. She had songs for every occasion.”

I kept looking at her. She began to swing high, singing loudly:

*Buy yourself something you really don’t need—
Something sweet like beautiful candy too pretty to eat.*

She stopped, self-conscious, suddenly, but swung higher. “That’s all I remember. I’ve looked for sheet music, or a tape with the rest of it, but there’s nothing. It died with Grandma.”

We swung in silence, me hearing the song in my head still. Finally, she said, “What do you think that means?”

“I don’t know. I guess that you should try to get the best stuff, no matter what it costs.” *Like Dad*, she added silently.

“Even if you don’t need it?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

She stopped pumping, slowing until her feet started hitting ground. Finally, she said, “I think that the pretty apples are the poisonous ones. I think I’d rather have a plain, old Hershey bar than the mo-

beautiful candy in the world. That's what I think." She jumped from the still-moving swing and ran with her hair streaming behind her, to the church. "Come on!"

I jumped off too and followed her, past the stained-glass windows that glowed from within. She was right. About the Hershey bar, I mean. I wished I could feel that way. But I needed something else, something more. I needed some beautiful candy.

Binky led me to a side door. She pulled the handle. It didn't give.

"Locked," I said, starting back toward her house.

But she pulled harder, and it opened with a crack of peeling paint. "They leave it unlocked in case someone has spiritual needs outside normal church hours or something."

"They aren't scared of vandalism?"

"Guess they trust people."

I shook my head at this. We stepped into a small alcove that had a Bible, some used-up candles, and, of course, a collection box. Binky pushed through the door on the other side and entered the sanctuary.

I'd never been in a Catholic church. It smelled different from Protestant churches I remembered—the chapel at Gate. It smelled ancient, like candles and dust. The room glowed dull red. Binky led me around to the side, then stopped by a statue in a glass case. I could barely see in the dim light, but the case, at least, was locked. The glass looked thick. Binky crossed herself, and I barely made out that the dull, red-brown object was a wooden statue of a woman.

"What is it?" I asked.

She looked at me like I was stupid. "It's the Madonna. The Virgin Mary."

"Oh."

"It's been here forever. Someone brought it back from Spain—said the guy who sold it to him told him it was a thousand years old. They found it singing by the road."

She stopped a second, and we both listened, like it might be true. Nothing.

"He didn't believe that," she said. "Still, he bought it and brought it back here, and when it came to our church, it began to weep."

"Weep?"

"You can still see the marks on it. It wept for six days, real tears."

That was truly stupid. Probably a roof leak. These people were worshiping a roof leak. Then, I felt bad for thinking that. Gate was a Christian school. Did I believe in anything?

"There are lots of weeping Madonnas," Binky said. "They weep for the crucifixion of Christ or the sins of mankind. Some cry blood, but this one was just water. Old ladies in our church say she grants wishes, too."

I looked again. It sure was old. You could barely tell what it was, but sure enough, there were tracks of tears. And for a second, I envied Binky being able to believe in that, in anything. "Do you believe it? The wishes part, I mean?"

"You're not supposed to. The church believes in miracles, like with God, but not luck or magic or superstitions like knocking on wood. Not officially, anyway. But there are lots of superstitious people."

Which didn't answer my question. So I asked, "Have you wished on it?"

"Never had anything to wish for, really."

I shook my head. Seemed like all I'd ever done was wish, and I didn't need a statue for it.

Then, suddenly, she spun around like a little girl. She looked up at me. "But I have something now—a wish." She closed her eyes, and we stood, silent. When she opened them, she looked at me again.

She smiled. She turned and planted a soft kiss on the glass cover. "Did it. Now, you."

"What'd you wish for?"

"Secret." But she kept looking at me until, finally, I closed my eyes and wished too. I knew I should wish for something important, Mom to stop crying all the time, or money, or for Dad to return my calls. Or even to be happy with who I was, with the one friend I'd ever had besides my mother. Or to believe in—something. But I closed my eyes and wished:

Please, let me make more friends. Please let me be popular.

I was ashamed of the wish. I opened my eyes and saw Binky's face, so close. *I should kiss her.* But I didn't want to. Even though I knew her wish had been about me—maybe especially because of that. Instead, I said, "Do I have to kiss the glass?" When she nodded, I did.

It was only later, sitting in Binky's family room, waiting for Mom to pick me up, that she looked at me and said, "Of course, Grandma always said, 'Be careful what you wish for. It might come true."

"You spend too much time with that girl," Mom said on the drive home.

At that point, I was almost ready to agree with her, but I didn't. "I only see her at school. And on Fridays."

"But she calls you at home, invites you over. It's not a proper way for a young lady to conduct herself."

"We're friends."

Mom said nothing. We drove in silence, watching the neighborhood turn from ... well, turn. Finally, she said, "I suppose you're right. It's just ... we have no time together anymore between my job and just scraping to feed ourselves. We were so close before your father did this to us."

"We're close," I said. And part of me was thinking, *God. I have one friend, and it's too much for her.* But the other part thought how easy, how easy it would be just to go back to who I'd been. Mommy's little boy. Do what she wanted and never worry.

She patted my shoulder. "I'm glad you still think so."

I shrugged her hand away. She looked wounded and yanked about three hairs at once before replacing her hand on the steering wheel.

Sometimes, I realized, I hated her. And, more than that, I hated who I was when she was there.

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