

RIFTERS

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 said no to my principal, because I didn't mean for the toilet to explode. Who knew that raiding the science lab and tossing in some sodium would send porcelain and water into the sky like missiles? I didn't want to blow up anything. I just wanted to fit in and stop being teased. I actually liked 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 mom, 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 got 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'd never seen before called out to me from behind the counter.

Without question, I dropped my head and did as she said. My third strike, again. Probably my one-hundredth third strike. This time it was more serious, because I could end up in juvie just for trying to make friends. They'd told me it would be fun. Then they turned on me and ratted me out. That was it. I didn't need friends. Ever. I just hoped the principal wouldn't call Mom—anything but that.

I took my place in the usual spot. My third day of detention. I couldn't believe that I hadn't worn a hole through the wooden chair already. Only a few weeks at my new school and

this seemed to be where I spent most of my time. I let out a giant huff and waited to find out what kind of torture this new librarian had planned for me.

I eyed the woman behind the giant desk and wondered who she was and where she came from. She didn't look like any librarian I'd ever seen before. Maybe you've seen her before...I'm not sure if she travels to other libraries all over the country or not. Anyhoo, I'd never seen her before, but she looked exactly like I'd always imagined my *real* mom to look, if I had one.

The closest memory I have of a mother is of a woman with long hair. I haven't seen her since my fifth birthday. Geez, I'm getting old. That was eight years ago last week. Anyhoo, here's a worn out picture of her if you want to take a look.

Could it be her?

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

You probably don't care about all of that. So anyhow, the new librarian approached me with eyes like a laser beam. She was probably coming to explain rules that I already knew by heart. They're simple.

No talking.

No sleeping.

No music.

No texting.

No games.

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

“I’ve been waiting for you.” The librarian looked at me like she knew me.

“Yeah, yeah,” I murmured under my breath.

“I’m sorry, young man. What did you say?”

“Uhhh…” I looked away from her. “Why were you waiting for me?”

Nobody had ever waited for me before, so it felt weird. For some reason this woman wore a strange smile stretched across her face. A smile so wide the edges nearly touched the bottom of her ears. She seemed genuinely happy to see me. That was odd considering I’d never laid eyes on her before.

“Because your name is on the detention list.” She waved the clipboard in her hand.

What happened to Ms. Battle Ax? I never dared to say that out loud. Most kids didn’t like Ms. Ballacks because she made a rattlesnake seem adorable. She was the kind of adult that genuinely hated kids. Behind her back they called her Ms. Battle Ax.

She didn’t know me, so maybe I had a chance with her. “Where’s Ms. Ballacks? She’s the helicopter that normally hovers over me.”

“She had to take off.” The librarian circled my table. “I’m your new helicopter. I’m the one who will have to *hover* over you today.”

Who was this woman? She seemed much different from any other adult I’d known. Her stare cut me in half. The new librarian creeped me out.

“I know the drill.” Detention was kind of like my job now. “I’ve been through this a time or two.”

“Good to know.” The substitute tapped a pencil against the clipboard. “Then I don’t need to tell you that you need to find something productive to do, right?”

“Yup.” I reached into my backpack and took out my notebook. If I had to do something, I might as well get my math homework done.

“I’ll be right over there.” The librarian pointed to the oversized library desk. A few other kids milled about and others waited to check out books before catching the bus.

I nodded and flipped through the loose pages poking out of my binder. Organization remained one of my greatest obstacles. I didn’t want to drag the mess in my backpack out in the open, so I spent five minutes digging for my homework. It was wrinkled, but readable.

The substitute librarian took her place on the other side of the counter. She perched on the tall chair like a raven, her hair long and dark. She kept an eye on me the whole time I worked. At least I tried to work, but her endless stare caused me to fidget and squirm.

I ignored her best I could, but she didn’t make it easy. She dragged a book cart behind her as she came my way. “Want to help me for a minute?”

What could *I* help *her* with? “I guess...if you need me to.”

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

Ughhhh...I wished I’d said 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. I’d already told her yes, so I got to work.

She walked back to her desk and left me with the books. It took me longer than it should have to find the right place for the books, but there was no way I was going to let her or anyone else know how hard it was.

Another five minutes passed before something else caught my attention. Someone, actually.

Marty walked into the library. But he wasn’t alone.

One of the prettiest girls in my new school bounced through the library door with Marty. Her curly brown hair swayed from side to side as they came toward me.

I'd never talked to Jenny before. Not really. Other than the few times I'd said hello in the hall, Jenny was 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 didn't allow me much time to make friends. Actually, I had time and opportunity to make friends, but I chose not to get too close to most people I met, because I knew it wouldn't be long before the family I was with would tell the court they couldn't keep me any longer. It was always the same. Besides, I was used to being all alone.

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

And just like that, I'd be scooped up and dumped in a group home until another placement could be made. The problem for me was that I was older now. It was much easier to be placed when I was younger. Idealistic parents wanted to help younger kids because they're cuter. Kinda like puppies. The older we get, the less inclined a foster family is to take one of us in. I just turned thirteen, so you know what that means. I was lucky that Jim and Veronica took me in, and trust me, I knew it.

That was before Mom adopted me. So she wasn't my real mom, but she was as close as I'd ever get. So far, she'd been good to me and treated me better than any of the other families I'd lived with. I didn't want to screw that up. Besides, I think it made her feel good that I called her Mom.

“What’s going on, man?” Marty whispered as he sat at a table a few feet from where I worked. Jenny took the chair next to Marty.

“Not much.” I peeked at the substitute. Marty was allowed to sit anywhere he wanted, but he wasn’t allowed to talk to me. “What are you doing here?”

“We came to see you.” Marty waved his hand in the air.

“For what? I’ve got detention.” I kept my head lowered but maintained a visual on the lady behind the desk as I pretended to know what I was doing. A week of this torture was enough. I didn’t want to extend my stay for talking to Marty. Even if the prettiest girl in the school was there too.

“Everyone thinks what you did in the bathroom was bad-a, dude. They’re all talking about it.” Marty put his hands together then made an explosion motion. It didn’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 twirled her brown curls. “I heard about it but didn’t get to see it.”

“Shhh…” I warned Jenny and Marty that the librarian was heading our way. Before she got there, Marty opened his bag. My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. This was not good.

CHAPTER 2

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

Marty never turned to look at her. “Nothing’s going on, ma’am.” He drew out the word ma’am as if it were three syllables. He’d already zipped up his backpack before she arrived, so there was no chance she’d seen what was hidden inside.

I couldn't believe Marty was 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 didn't want to get in trouble again. This time would be a death sentence.

"Sounds like talking to me." The lady held her position between us and rotated her head back and forth like a fan. From Alex to Marty to Jenny. Then repeat.

"Oh, no ma'am." Jenny's words dripped with honey. "That was just me and him." Marty raised his hand. "We're partners for a science project, and we need to do some research for our experiment."

Her lie sounded a lot like the truth.

"And you have to sit here, right next to where he's working?" I avoided 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 pointed to the books over my left shoulder. Marty smiled.

When the librarian and I turned to see what she was talking about, it surprised me that she was telling the truth. The shelf right behind me had SCIENCE in big, avocado green bubble letters taped to it. I couldn't believe Jenny was so quick on her feet. *Impressive.*

"Better get work then." The librarian turned on her heels.

Jenny's little story worked, and she walked over to the science shelf and thumbed through some books.

Marty unzipped his backpack again, and revealed the contraband inside. I swallowed hard. *What were these two up to?* Marty pulled out a notebook and a pencil, while Jenny sloughed back to the table and dropped two rather sizable books in front of him. They smacked

against the table, the librarian looked us over with warning eyes. I kept my head down and put books on the shelf. Not in the proper spot, though.

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

“I haven’t asked him yet.”

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

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

“Huh?” I was dumbfounded. *Were they out of their minds?*

“It would be awesome if you did it again.” Jenny leaned 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 knew exactly why Marty brought Jenny with him. What I didn’t know is why he brought enough sodium to destroy the entire bathroom, not just one toilet.

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

I didn’t really want to do it again, but I hated to say no.

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

I found myself between a rock and a hard place. I wanted to say no, because it meant big trouble. But I wanted to say yes even more, because Jenny didn’t have a boyfriend and might go out with me. Before I had a chance to really think the situation through, I accepted their challenge. “I’ll do it,” I said, keeping my voice just above a whisper.

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

I wasn’t exactly prepared to do it right then. I wasn’t prepared to do it at all, but I had no choice. If I didn’t do it, Jenny would never talk to me again, and everyone would think I’d chickened out.

“Give them to me.” I held out my hand. Marty dropped the baggie of tablets into my open palm, and I stuffed them in my pocket and walked away.

After swallowing my nerves, I pressed against the long desk that separated me from the librarian. “Uhhh...ma’am.” I didn’t know what else to call her.

“What is it?” The librarian interrupted me before I completed my question.

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

“Then go.”

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

Out the door and across the hall. I passed a couple of boys coming out of the bathroom talking about going to the football game at the high school. Once inside, I scanned underneath the toilet stalls to make sure the coast was clear. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, you know.

I’d have to drop the tablets and run. This much sodium would blow up immediately, so it made 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 crept to the farthest stall and pulled the bag from my pants pocket, poked a small hole, and held it for a moment, then contemplated whether or not to go through with it. Of course the answer was no, but something inside me forced me to do things I shouldn't. Does that ever happen to you?

Anyhoo, with the bag suspended over the toilet, I prepared for launch. Just as I readied myself to drop the tablets, the door flung open. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I fumbled the bag like a football, but thankfully for both of us, caught it before it splashed into the water.

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

"Guess you are." She held her hand out like a master waiting for a dog to drop its ball.

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"You knew about that?" How did she know what I'd done?

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

"You don't know nothin' about me." She was like all the other adults I'd dealt with. They think they knew 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 was in and that she was going to take me immediately to the principal. But she didn't. Instead, she didn't say a word for what seemed like forever. It felt like we were having a staring contest.

Finally, she looked to the floor. "I'm not crazy, Alex." She said my name like she knew me, which bothered me. "I am, however, someone who can completely alter your life right now."

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

"But I am." Her calmness weirded me out. I wanted 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 foster parents." I'm not going to lie to you and pretend that it wouldn't bother me, because it would. If they called my foster parents then they'd probably send me back to the group home.

"They *will* call them. Or you can go with me."

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

She blocked me with her hand. "Don't jump to conclusions, Alex." The situation forced me to take a step backwards. "I've got him." It freaked me out when she spoke to someone who wasn't there. "Open the Rift now."

Who was she talking to?

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

“The choice is yours.” She moved toward the gooey doorway. “Come with me, or take your chances with the principal.”

“What is that?”

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

I hesitated for a millisecond and glanced toward the bathroom door but didn’t know what to do. Wait for her to take me to the principal’s office or climb into the gooey hole? My heart thumped in my chest like a hammer against a drum. She wrapped her fingers around my wrist and pulled, giving me no option. Didn’t matter, though, because my curiosity got the best of me, like it always did, so I didn’t fight her. I plunged headfirst into the hole and my whole body tingled like the time I pressed my tongue to a nine-volt battery, then the blob blinked out of sight.