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# Self Defense

## 1

**So the first** day of fifth grade is supposed to be *all that*. Right? Wrong! Like all of last year, I'll have to get up super early every day and head off to school with my father.

Let me make this plain. It's not that my dad will just drop me off, because that wouldn't be too bad. What has me so bummed is that, in my case, he'll park in the spot marked "Principal." You see, my father now rules the school. He's over everybody. That puts me in a position to get teased by my peers. And I mean big time.

I guess you can tell this isn't something I want at all. But Dad is super excited about it. Heading to school the first day, all I could do was sit there and listen to him talk about what a terrific year it was going to be. I wanted to throw up.

Last year, when Dad was the assistant principal, a lot of kids thought I was the school pet with special privileges.

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Believe me, that wasn't the case. Now that he's been promoted, it's going to be even harder to convince people that I don't get any favors from him.

On top of that, he signed me up to do safety patrol. I'll have to wear this big orange belt across my chest and around my waist. Several cool points gone right off the bat, you think? It's funny because when I was in first and second grade, I sort of thought that having one of those belts and being a hall monitor would be really great.

Now I know it won't be so cool. Since Dad is the principal, it's going to be a no-win situation for me. Everybody's going to think I'm trying to be somebody big if I write them up. Or even worse, I'll lose my job and be in huge trouble with my dad if he catches me looking the other way.

Then, there's another reason why I'm unhappy about school this year. It hit me like a ton of bricks the other day when Dad started naming some of my classmates. Right away, I knew it was bad news for me.

A lot of kids don't want to be in a particular teacher's class. But in my case, I'm okay with my fifth-grade teacher. After all, Dr. Richardson is known as the coolest teacher in the whole school. It was even cool to find out that Morgan, Trey, and Billy are in my class again.

The problem for me is that I didn't shake Tyrod. Besides that, his equally troublemaking buddy, Zarick, is in my class too. I don't want to deal with them. But after much pleading with Dad, it looks like there's no escape.

All of last year, Tyrod was the person who got under

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my skin. Just to cause trouble for me, he made up stuff and got me sent to my dad's office several times. He even tried to cheat off my paper and then turned around and said I tried to cheat off of his. It was just one thing after another with that guy.

In my defense, I get along with most people. Yeah, I had to get over being angry and acting like a bully when I was in the second grade. But that was years ago. I've grown up a lot since then. However, with Tyrod and his friend constantly getting into all kinds of trouble, I just don't see how it's going to be a good year.

When Dad and I arrived at school, he was still going on and on in a happy mood. As we were getting out of the car, he said with a big smile on his face, "Oh yes, it's going to be a great year!"

All I could do was look at him and beg, "Dad, pleeeeesssss change my class!"

As we walked toward the door, he started giving me all these reasons why he wouldn't. But it just wasn't what I wanted to hear at that moment. "Alec, son, we've been over this already. Ever since you found out that your name is on Dr. Richardson's class list, you've been complaining. I know you're going to love her. She's a lot of fun and really knows her stuff. You're in the fifth grade now. You know you need to pass the CRCT like you did in the third grade. This year, it's a crucial exam for you, Alec, and I can't—"

"Dad! Dad! You're not listenin' to me! It has nothin' to do with Dr. Richardson. I just don't want to be in—"

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Cutting me off, he said, “No, son, you’re not listening to me! I’m not changing your class because of some other student. If you have a problem with Tyrod, you let me know, and I’ll deal with it.”

I shook my head and turned the other way. I wasn’t trying to be disrespectful to my father, but he didn’t get it. I couldn’t just run to him and tell on people. Yeah, I know there’s some stuff you’re supposed to speak up about. But this isn’t a life or death situation. Besides, I’m not a wimp, and I don’t need my dad to fight my battles.

Once again, Dad made it clear that he wasn’t going to change my class. So the only thing left for me to do is man-up and deal with it.

A few minutes later, I took my post by the front door. Standing across from me was Gilmer, a boy from my fourth-grade class. Last year, he was the new guy and didn’t say much. But he did tell me once that he was cool with not having friends. So I already knew that Gilmer was very shy and didn’t like talking to people.

If he was going to be my partner, I was thinking that we wouldn’t have much to say to each other. Then, to my surprise, I found out something different when Gilmer spoke to me.

“Hey, Alec! Hope you had a great summer!”

*Wow, is this the same Gilmer?* I thought. He sounded so happy and friendly.

“You’re talkin’ to me?” I said to him.

“I know what you’re thinkin’, Alec, but I’ve changed.

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I'm older now. I guess it took me a while to get comfortable with this school, but now I just wanna enjoy my fifth grade year. I wish we were in the same class because I think we could have a lot of fun. Maybe we can do that while we're on safety patrol duty. You okay with that?"

"Yeah. That's cool with me. We can be friends," I said to him, still shocked at the new, talkative Gilmer.

Okay, so now it seemed like everybody was ready for fifth grade—except me. Then, in a flash, I was reminded of why. I watched Tyrod and Zarick running toward the front door when they got off of their bus.

"Hey! Hey! Slow down," I said to the two of them, holding my arm out to block the doorway. I wasn't supposed to let anyone run into the school.

"Boy, you'd better get your hand back outta my way!" Tyrod said to me.

"Boy, you'd better slow down!" I quickly responded back to him.

"And if we don't slow down?" Zarick stepped up and added, looking and acting all tough. He is taller than me and a little intimidating.

"Yeah, what you gonna do?" Tyrod jumped up and down in my face, asking me.

It was clear to me that they weren't going to cooperate, and I knew this wasn't going to be pretty. Seconds later, Gilmer left me and I had to stand my ground alone. Other kids were coming into the school, and they were looking at the whole scene. If I was going to be good at safety patrol, I

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had to stand tall. Otherwise, kids would think I was a pushover. At the moment, the only thing I could think to do was take out my safety patrol merit notebook and wave it in their faces.

Before I got a word out, Tyrod said in a lower voice, “We’ll stop runnin’, but you’d better watch it!” He kept looking over my shoulder the whole time.

I wondered why Tyrod calmed down so quickly. Then I turned around to see what he was looking at. That’s when I saw Gilmer coming up behind me, along with my dad. It was cool that Gilmer was trying to have my back.

My father spoke right away. “Is there any trouble here, boys?”

Gilmer nodded and Zarick backed away from me. But Tyrod got closer to my ear and whispered, “Go on and cry to Daddy. You’ll be sorry.”

Tightening my jaws, I said, “Naw, everything’s fine, Dad. I was just tellin’ them to slow down.”

My father said to the two troublemakers, “I know you boys weren’t running, were you?”

“No, sir,” Tyrod said in a most respectful tone. Zarick just shook his head.

“Tyrod, we’re going to have a good year. Right?”

Faking it again, he replied, “Oh, yes. A great year, sir, a great year.”

After that, Dad allowed Tyrod and Zarick to enter the building. He told everyone else to hurry on to class.

Finally, my post for safety patrol was done, and it was

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time for me to get to class too. The teachers had already cleared the hallway of their students. As I headed around the corner, I picked up my pace so I wouldn't be late. Then, out of nowhere, I got tripped. Suddenly, I was on my back. All I could see were hands moving at lightning speed, chopping at the air—right in front of my face. It was happening so fast that I wasn't sure what was going on. It was like something out of an old Bruce Lee movie that my brother, Antoine, and I love to watch.

After blinking my eyes a couple of times, I realized it was Zarick. He was acting like some type of karate expert. Then he leaned down and said, "Tyrod and I can do whatever we wanna do. Remember that."

Next, Tyrod leaned over me and said, "And if you tell anybody about this . . . those moves that scared you right now . . . next time, they'll hurt you." Then he pointed at Zarick and said to me, "You might think you're tough and can fight, but you don't want any part of him. You can't protect yourself, little boy, so don't get in our way."

Through blurry eyes, I looked at both of them, too scared to get up or try to move. As they walked away snickering, it only took a minute for me to go over what just happened. It was pretty clear that Zarick had real skills, and I wasn't planning on challenging him. But at the same time, being scared all year long didn't sound so great either.

I just lay there a couple more minutes, thinking, *How am I gonna defend myself against the two of them? I knew*



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*this year wasn't going to be good the minute I found out we were in the same class.*



“Well, you must be Alec London,” the smooth-talking, short lady said with a big smile. She was wearing a nametag that read DR. RICHARDSON.

I didn't want to be rude to her, but I'd just been through an experience that still had me frazzled. I wasn't ready for any conversation. So I nodded to let her know that she was right.

As I tried to get by her, she put her hand on my shoulder and walked me back into the hallway. “Why the long face?” she asked. “This is going to be a super great year! You know, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!”

I looked at her like I didn't understand.

“Alec, you know that word is from the movie *Mary Poppins*, right?”

“I'm sorry, ma'am, but I've never seen that video.”

She went on talking. “Oh, you're missing something great. I'll make sure we watch it before the year is out. But again, why the long face? I just have to say, Alec, I know it's got to be tough having your dad as the principal of this school. I can't solve the world's problems, but if you have any issues, I want you to know that you can come to me. Mr. Wade and I talked about some of the incidents that occurred last year. However, I'm telling you now that I don't tolerate foolishness.”

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It was okay for her to let me know that she had my back. But again, I didn't want anybody handling things for me. It's like what Gilmer told me last year when Tyrod and four of his friends tried to gang up on him. I stepped in to help Gilmer, but he didn't seem to appreciate it. That offended me until I understood that he never asked for my help. I kind of wanted to say to Dr. Richardson that I wasn't asking for hers either.

Knowing that wouldn't be the right thing to do, I just tried to smile instead. She was a smart lady and seemed to understand my problem. Dr. Richardson then said to me, "Alec, I get that you're a fifth grader and you don't want to run to the teacher for every little thing. However, I just want you to know where I stand. I'm here for you."

"Is it because you don't want my dad to think you wouldn't help me?" I asked her.

I was thinking that maybe she wanted to score some brownie points with my father. After all, her title is "Dr." Richardson. It seems to me that most doctors in education would want to be a principal, a superintendent, or something like that. Most likely, she was trying to help herself by helping the principal's son.

My wise teacher looked at me and said, "Okay, so you do want to talk. The reason I want you to be able to open up to me is because I've walked in your shoes."

I gave her another confused look. "I don't get it."

Dr. Richardson explained, "My mother was the principal of my elementary school. So I know firsthand about all the

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stuff someone in your shoes has to go through. Therefore, in addition to teaching my class, part of my role as an educator is to create a safe and healthy learning environment. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't let you know that you can talk to me if you have an issue. However, it works both ways with me. If you do something wrong to anybody in my class, and you don't act like the upstanding young man that everyone says you are, then you and I will have problems. I don't play favorites. I only reward excellence. Is that clear?"

I nodded at her that I understood. Finally, she said, "Now, I have something to take care of, and I'll be back in a few minutes. The class is in there getting to know each other by working on a puzzle that I passed out. There's one on your desk, so get in there and start mixing. And remember our discussion. Okay, Alec?"

"Yes, ma'am."

As I walked into the classroom, everyone looked at me as if I had something like the mumps, the measles, or the chicken pox. I knew it was because my dad is the principal and a lot of kids aren't sure how to treat me. Thankfully, Trey and Billy called out to me.

"Hey, man! I'm glad to see ya," Billy said. "We're in the same class again. That's so awesome!"

Without any excitement, I replied back, "Yeah, it's cool." I know that Billy likes to eat, but I was surprised to see how much bigger he was since last year.

Next, Trey jumped in, "Hey, man. My dad said it would

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be okay to have you come to a Falcon's practice with me soon. You have a good summer?"

Hearing that news, it was hard to hold back a smile. "That sounds real good, man," I responded. Trey reminded me of some good times, so I added, "Yeah, summer was cool. I went to California to stay with my mom."

"What? You mean, you were in Hollywood?" Trey asked, reaching out to give me a fist bump.

"Yeah," I said, pointing my fist toward him.

Billy jumped in and added, "Oh yeah, people said they saw you on TV. Were you really?"

"Just a little public service announcement that ran on the PBS channel. No biggie."

"Wow! My friend is a star," Billy said with a proud grin. Tilting his head toward one corner, he said, "Those girls over there keep lookin' at you."

I glanced over and saw two girls I'd never met before. They were giggling and quickly turned away.

Just then Morgan came up behind me and said, "Hey, Alec! They're giggling because they like you."

"So? I don't like them," I shot back real fast.

She teased me and said, "Already, they won't be my friends because you like me."

Frowning at that, I said, "Who says I like you?"

Morgan looked embarrassed and responded softly, "I only meant as a friend."

As soon as she walked away, I realized that I'd hurt her feelings. I wasn't trying to be mean to her. But I'd never

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told anyone I liked her, so I couldn't help but react. Still, the way it felt when she was across the room looking sad, I wished I could take back those words.

A minute later, Billy headed back to his desk. As he stooped to sit down, Tyrod pushed his chair away from him and Billy fell to the floor. When laughter broke out around the classroom, Trey and I just looked at each other. We didn't think it was so funny.

By the time Dr. Richardson came into the room and explained the next assignment, Tyrod had already gotten to me. The teacher passed out bingo cards and told us we had to find the right person in the class to match each square. I got Trey to initial the one that said to find a good friend. Billy signed the one that said to find someone whose favorite hobby is eating. I asked Morgan to sign the one that said to find someone who has a younger sibling.

Once you got somebody to sign one square, they couldn't sign anymore. For me to have bingo, I had two more boxes to complete. One asked, "are you a ballerina?" and the other asked, "are you a girl?" I thought about the two girls who were looking at me earlier. I knew at least one of them would probably sign for me.

Just as I was walking toward them to ask, I heard a loud bump and someone yell out. I looked back and saw that Trey had fallen on the floor. I then noticed that his shoelaces were tied together. Zarick and Tyrod were huddled together, grinning real hard. I figured it was their way

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of telling the class that they owned the room and dared anyone to say anything.

Dr. Richardson gave the class a stern warning, telling us she wouldn't allow any misbehavior. In frustration, I stopped playing the game right then and sat down.

Seconds later, Tyrod jumped up and called out that his card was full. He was the winner. Someone could have knocked me over with a feather.

At lunchtime, I got my tray and found a seat. Trey came and sat next to me. He was pretty upset about what happened to him in class. "That boy Zarick knows karate," Trey started. "But I'm not gonna be pushed around. I'm gonna tell my dad that I want to take karate lessons. I'm gonna find a way to deal with him."

That was an interesting thought. I had to be able to defend myself too. Karate, huh? If Zarick knows it, maybe I need to learn it too. And if I work twice as hard, maybe I could catch up to his level pretty quickly. I mean, he couldn't be as good as a black belt. But one thing is for sure—he's pretty scary.

Trey had given me a great idea. I wasn't going to be frightened anymore. I could learn karate and beat Zarick at his own game. Hmmm, now that sounded real exciting to me.



"So Dad, what do you think? You just finished talking to Trey's dad. Can I go to karate class? It'd be good for me,

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right?" I asked question after question, trying to find out what Dad's answer was going to be. For some reason, he wouldn't give me one.

My father just hung up the phone, huffed a little, and walked away. I followed him and asked even more questions, but he still wouldn't respond. He didn't say whether I could go to karate or not. He said nothing at all.

"Daaaaaadddd!!" I finally shouted.

"Look, Alec, calm down. You know that I don't play games. You put me on the phone with another adult when I had no idea what it was about. Don't ever ambush me like that to get a yes out of me. It won't work."

"No, no, Dad. That's not it. I was just talkin' to Trey, and he was sayin' that his dad wanted to talk to you, and . . ."

"His father didn't want to talk to me. He didn't even know what it was all about. You and Trey are in the fifth grade. You're too old for silly first-grade behavior. If you want something, come to me and ask me. If I need more information, then I'll find it out. The man started talking about how much it costs as if I couldn't afford it. It was just uncomfortable. Don't do that anymore."

"Yes, sir," I said, bowing my head.

"So I can't go?" I asked him.

"You wanna do karate?" Antoine said as he came out of the bathroom after listening to our talk. "I could teach you karate. Come on over here and let me school you with a few cool moves."

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My brother started dancing all around me and waving his hands like a chicken flapping his wings. He had no karate skills and couldn't teach me anything, but there was no telling him that. I just stood there and looked at him.

"Don't play. You know I got skills," Antoine said to me. When he finally realized I wasn't paying him any attention, he backed off and left us alone.

"Daaadddd, can I go? Please? I'm sorry I didn't just come and ask you. But I don't ask if I can participate in much. I'm always doing what you and Mom want me to do. I even tried new things like baseball and acting. Now, I wanna try karate. Please?"

"All right, son, I'm going to take you so we can check it out. Actually, the instructor goes to our church, and I respect him a great deal. So maybe it'll be good for you."

"Who at our church knows karate?" Antoine called out from his room.

"Kids call him 'Stone' because that's his last name. At one time he was a boxer. Now he gives karate lessons."

"Oh, that man. I hear he's real mean," Antoine said, as he came back into my room. "His daughter's in my class and most of the kids are scared of her. People say she gets it from her dad. I wouldn't want to take karate from him."

Quickly, I said, "Well, you're not me. It can't be that bad."

Shrugging his shoulders, Antoine responded, "Don't say I didn't tell ya."

Two hours later, I was at Mr. Stone's martial arts center,



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getting fitted for my karate outfit. When he and Dad finished talking, my father came into the dressing room and said, “Son, I’m going to warn you right now. Mr. Stone doesn’t play. He told me if he finds that you’re not serious, he’ll stop your lessons. Besides that, I won’t get a refund on that suit . . . so are you sure you want to do this?”

I nodded.

“Boy, you can speak up!”

Clearing my throat, I said, “Yes, sir. I want to do it.”

“All right then, don’t come whining and crying if he’s tough on you.”

Why my father thought I was such a baby got to me. But I figured my actions would speak louder than any words I could say. So I was determined to show him that I could handle this. Before we said good-bye, he told me he’d be back to pick me up in an hour and a half.

When Trey came through the door, it made me feel a little bit better. If Mr. Stone was as strong as everyone said, then at least it would be good to have my buddy around. We could support each other.

“This is gonna be great!” Trey said, while he was getting dressed.

I was standing outside the curtain, listening to my friend and getting more excited. “We’ll be able to show Zarick he’s not the only one with karate moves. We’ll chop him with our hands and bring him down with our feet—”

Just before Trey could finish his sentence, Mr. Stone walked up with a serious look on his face. He reminded me

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of my father when he wasn't in a playful mood.

"I hear a whole bunch of talking over here! You boys should be out on the floor warming up."

In a flash, Trey pulled back the curtain and hid behind me.

Mr. Stone was a big, tall man, who looked as strong as any super hero. Not only did he have a reputation for being mean, he looked mean. He wasn't smiling, and his eyes were squinted like he was really checking us out.

"I want to see both of you! Step out on the floor, now!" he growled.

I was really nervous and started talking fast. "I'm ready, sir, to learn all you can teach me. I'm really committed to this. I need to be good at karate like yesterday. There's this boy at our school who knows karate, and he's been torturing people. Trey and I figure, if the two of us learn karate, we'll be able to show him that we can take care of anybody."

Then Trey peeked from behind me and jumped in. "Yeah! We'll be the baddest! I mean, you know what I mean, sir?"

"Boys, sit down on the floor!" Mr. Stone barked in a really harsh tone. "You've got the wrong idea if you want to learn martial arts so that you can hurt someone. If that's what you want to do, I'm not going to be the one to teach you. This skill is not intended to harm others. If anything, it's for you to use as self-defense."



## Letter to Mom

Dear Mom,

What a first day at school! Being the principal's son is going to be difficult. I don't even want any special privileges. That would only make my life at school even harder.

I'm trying not to whine all the time, Mom, but this is a lot of pressure. I want to be judged on my own merit, not my dad's. I don't need people staring at me like I'm always under a microscope. I know I sound frazzled, but I'm trying to avoid having any incidents.

Mom, I need to know how to defend myself. Would you be okay with me taking karate lessons in case I have to beat someone up? I'll tell you all about it in my next letter.

Your son,

Wanting to be tougher, Alec

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### Word Search:

#### Parts of the Body

M	Z	T	U	A	E	I	A	M	H	F	A
A	T	A	M	A	S	J	B	A	P	D	P
Q	X	S	J	K	T	H	N	U	A	B	Z
X	M	L	G	T	A	A	I	R	K	P	N
C	V	Y	R	F	V	Y	A	S	I	I	N
F	O	M	Q	J	O	K	J	O	B	T	L
Q	E	K	T	E	K	O	Z	U	A	E	K
C	P	C	Z	M	H	U	S	A	R	M	C
V	D	H	P	L	G	L	U	E	E	P	I
N	D	P	N	U	V	S	T	J	N	I	O
T	G	W	Z	K	U	S	F	M	I	E	W
Z	A	X	O	I	W	V	I	J	I	H	N

**Atama (ah-tah-mah):** head

**Ashi (ah-she):** foot and/or leg

**Empi (em-pee):** elbow

**Hana (hah-nah):** nose

**Hiji (he-gee):** elbow

**Karada (kah-rah-dah):** body

**Kubi (koo-bee):** neck



# Deep Secret

## 2

**Was I hearing** Mr. Stone correctly? Did he mean he didn't want to teach us karate? That couldn't be the case. I looked over at Trey, and Trey looked back at me. We were both confused. We have to be taught these skills. Mr. Stone had to understand. We were fifth graders, and we didn't even feel safe in our own school.

Even though he was pretty scary, I said, "Mr. Stone, please wait. You've got to hear us out. We need to learn martial arts, and it is for the right reasons. This guy named Zarick can do all sorts of stuff, and he's being influenced by this tough boy named Tyrod . . ."

"And I think he's teachin' Tyrod some moves too," Trey cut in and said.

I nodded my head. "That's why we need to defend ourselves. We wanna learn from you because we hear you're the best."

"Whenever he gets a chance," Trey added, "Zarick uses his martial art skills. He does all kinds of karate moves and

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tries to hurt people. So it will be self-defense. But we can't stand up to him if we don't know how to do the same moves that he does. You've gotta help us, sir."

"Young man, I don't have to help you do anything. Besides, you're only in elementary school. It's hard for me to believe what you're saying. Alec, isn't your dad the principal of your school? It can't be an environment that's so terrifying. I'm certainly not going to help you learn what I hold as dear and precious so you can physically assault someone. Whether you think they deserve it or not, you have no authority to decide."

Really needing Mr. Stone to understand, I tried again to explain. "Sir, it's like in the movie *Karate Kid*. If you could just see the bullying, then you'd understand."

Just then Dad came in. Mr. Stone threw up his hands and walked over to my father. Actually, he stormed over to my father. We hadn't been able to convince him, and he was quite upset with us. Trey looked as if he were about to cry.

We were both thinking about how we were going to handle Zarick. "What are we gonna do now?" I asked.

Trey was quick to speak. "I'm gonna find another instructor. That's what I'm gonna do. This time I won't tell him why I want to do karate. I have to learn this stuff, Alec. Zarick is not gonna make me petrified to go to school. It's just not right and it's not gonna happen. I'm not that same scared little second-grade boy anymore. I'm done with all that, and I'm not going backward."

## DEEP SECRET

“All right, do you have to keep rubbing it in my face?” I said it a little salty because I was already disappointed in the fact that Mr. Stone didn’t understand us. Now my friend was trying to make me feel bad because years ago I was just like Tyrod and Zarick, always bullying people around. However, that was then, and this is now. I wasn’t about to let Trey get me down.

“I didn’t say it to mess with you,” Trey replied, after he saw that he’d made me a little upset. Then he explained, “Alec, I was talkin’ to myself. Besides, even though you’ve changed for the better, I’m still gonna remember. Second grade was hard, then I kinda got a break in third grade. But with Tyrod around, last year wasn’t all that good. I definitely want to have a better time this year. I’m not a football player like you. Nobody thinks I’m cool.”

Before I could say anything, Trey kept on talking. “I mean, I’m around football players all the time, pro players at that. I really hope that I get bigger and stronger soon. Remember that running back you met last year? He told me, when he was my age, he was the smallest guy in his class. But he had heart and started working out. He worked hard and didn’t take any mess off of anybody. That’s how he got to the level he’s at, and I guess I just wanna do the same.”

“I don’t look at you as a wimp, Trey.”

“Sometimes I feel like a wimp. Like when I hid behind you because Mr. Stone looked like a grizzly bear who wanted to bite our heads off and stuff. I’ve got to get



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tougher. If this man doesn't wanna teach us karate, then I'm gonna find somebody who does."

Trey's cell phone started to ring. It was his dad calling to say that he was waiting outside.

"I've gotta go. See ya tomorrow."

I replied, "All right, man, I'll see you later."

Then my friend was gone. It was actually pretty cool talking to him, both of us getting out our real feelings. I wasn't upset with him. He didn't want me to feel bad. He was just keeping it real. I had to own up to the fact that I did hurt him years ago. Yeah, times have changed, and he's forgiven me. But even though we've moved past it, it's still a part of him.

"Alec, come on, son. Let's go," Dad said to me in a tone that let me know he was a little irritated with me.

As soon as we got in the car, he confirmed my suspicion.

"Just so you know, Mr. Stone said you're not ready to learn karate right now."

"Ah, Dad, he's just trippin'."

"Son, slow down and be respectful. Mr. Stone is an adult, and he's also an expert. He knows when people want to learn moves that can be extremely dangerous for the wrong reasons. That's why he refuses to teach you right now."

Knowing my dad never likes to waste a dollar, I said, "But you paid, Dad."

"He gave me my money back and even told me you

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can keep the suit until you're ready."

"Are you serious? Take me back in there, Dad. I can convince him that I'm ready now. I've gotta do this."

"Why do you think you have to do this, Alec?" my father bluntly asked me. Then he said, "Talk to me, son. Mr. Stone was telling me some very disturbing things about what you think is going on in your class. If Tyrod and Zarick are using martial arts skills to terrorize other students, then I need to know this so I can take care of it."

Looking out the window and watching the sky getting darker, I said, "Dad, I'm not a tattletale, okay?"

"Alec, you are a safety patrolman for a reason. You're growing up, and I trust you. Why won't you tell me if it's so bad? I'm raising you to do something to make the world a better place—not just to stand by and look the other way."

When he said that, I started to let it all out. "Well, that's what I'm tryin' to do. I'm tryin' to handle it my own way. I am growing up, Dad. I already have enough pressure on me. I'm the principal's son, and all the teachers want to impress you. Of course, they're gonna be extra nice to me. You don't understand. Please, Dad, I don't even wanna talk anymore."

"Son, it really disappoints me that you don't want to open up. We need to talk it through so that I can help you and give you a better idea on how to handle all this. Treating violence with violence is the wrong way. Deep down inside you know that."

Then, he reached over and placed his hand on my

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shoulder, as if to say everything was going to be okay. I just looked out the window again and prayed, “*Lord, why doesn’t my father understand what’s going on with me? Why does life have to be so hard? Trey isn’t the only one who needs to get tougher. Mr. Stone won’t help me. I need You to make me strong. Do You hear me, Lord? Are You going to help me? Please?*”



On Saturday morning, I woke up with a huge smile on my face. Yeah, it had been a tough first week of school. My father and I had gotten into it, and I wasn’t quite sure if I was going to like the fifth grade. Dad wanted me to be tough, a big guy, and talk to him about everything. But he didn’t really get me at all.

Today, I have something to be happy about. My mother’s coming home for a visit and that’s certainly worth looking forward to. Although it hasn’t been long since I’ve seen her, two weeks was long enough. After all, I’m still Mom’s baby boy. Of course, I meant it when I told my dad I was growing up. I know that I’m not a baby anymore. But somehow being in my mom’s arms and venting to her just seems different.

The house phone rang, and I could hear Antoine shouting, “Get it! It’s for you!”

He knew that because Trey’s name popped up on the screen when he was watching TV. I picked up right away.

“Hey, Alec!” Trey said in an excited voice. “Hope it’s

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not too early to call you on a Saturday morning. My dad found another karate teacher and he's gonna take me. I wanted you to know that he can swoop by and get you too."

I sprang to my feet. I looked right in my closet where my uniform was hanging. It was practically new, without a mark on it. I couldn't wait to put it on and get it dirty. Then, just as I was about to rush out of the door and yell for my father to get the phone, I remembered something.

"Wait, wait. My dad's not gonna go for this. He doesn't know anything about another instructor. He doesn't want to be put on the phone with your dad just because I tell him to pick it up. I got in trouble last time. I can't do it, man."

"All right, well, you go and talk to him. The guy's name is Mr. Black. He's supposed to be just as great as Mr. Stone," replied Trey.

"Besides, I can't go because my mom's comin' in today."

"But it's early. What time is your mom supposed to get there?"

"I dunno exactly. Sometime this afternoon."

"We'll have you back home by then. Go ahead and ask your dad, then call me back."

"I just can't ask my dad right now."

As soon as I said that, Dad was standing at my door. He must have heard Antoine shouting at me to pick up the phone. "Ask me what?" he said.

I turned around with my mouth hanging open, but no

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words came out. I didn't know what to say.

"Ask me what, Alec?" he demanded.

In a low voice, I responded, "If I can go to karate class with Trey."

"You know Mr. Stone is not going to teach you right now. Maybe we'll try again next month. But you need to let him cool off for a while."

"No, no, Dad. Trey's dad found another place."

"Is that Trey on the line?"

"Yes, sir," I said feeling like I had a chance after all. I could almost see myself learning the moves.

However, my father frowned and said, "Boy, hang up. Right now."

In a disappointed voice, I said, "I'll call you back, man." I put down the phone and then looked at my dad. "Yes, sir."

"I know Mr. Stone. He goes to our church. I feel comfortable with him teaching you karate. Besides, he's got a good point. He thinks that you don't want it for the right reasons, and I agree with him. I'm not going to just let you hop from one instructor to the other. You've got to learn to get on the right page with someone who has your best interests at heart, not somebody just trying to make a quick dollar. That might work for others, but you're going to wait until Mr. Stone thinks you're ready."

That wasn't at all what I wanted to hear, and right away I got upset. "But Dad, that's not fair!" I shouted.

My father didn't look like he cared whether I thought it

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was fair or not. “If you’re going to get an attitude about it then you’re going to stay in this room all day.”

Thinking he may have forgotten, I reminded him, “I can’t stay in my room all day. Mom’s coming.”

After taking a deep breath, Dad said, “Son, she needs you to call her.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

Dad looked away and said, “Just call her.”

Again, he let out another long sigh.

“Isn’t she supposed to be on her way to the airport by now?” I asked. Suddenly, I was having a funny feeling inside me that she wasn’t coming.

“No, she’s got an early rise this morning. If you’re going to catch her, this is the best time.”

Okay, maybe she was coming. Maybe that meant she was about to take an early plane and I wouldn’t be able to reach her for a while. So, wanting to think positive about it, I quickly dialed the number. I just knew Mom wasn’t going to let us down. She was the one who said she was coming every two weeks. Why would Mom say that if she wasn’t going to do it? But if she was about to let me down, it would be devastating. Mom couldn’t be going back on her word. Or, could she?

She picked up right away. “Is this my Alec on the line?”

“Yes, ma’am, it’s me.”

“Sweetheart, you know Mom loves you. Right?”

Already, I didn’t like how the conversation was going.

“Yes, Mom. I know you do. Please tell me you’re still

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comin’.” I jumped right to it and said.

“I want to be there, baby, but—”

Cutting in without letting her finish, I said, “Mom, you’re not comin’?”

“Calm down, Alec. Let me talk to you. Let me explain.”

“What? It’s the job again? They want you to shoot something? Is it a promo? Do you have to do some marketing? I’ve heard it all. Remember, I’ve been there with you. Things got moved around again? I thought this was gonna be different.”

“If I could make it different, baby, I would. I just need a little understanding from you.”

“Is the show more important than me?” I asked. It was a hard question, but I really wanted to know.

My mom’s feelings seemed hurt, but mine were all messed up too. We were both silent for a bit. I was so disappointed.

“All I can do, Alec, is pray that you’ll understand. It’s not more important than you, but it is my job. It’s helping to provide a much better life for you. I’ll be there soon, just not today. I pray you’ll forgive me.”

“Whatever,” I said under my breath, not wanting to be disrespectful, but just letting out my honest feelings.

This was hard. She told me that she cared, but it felt like she didn’t. Her actions were speaking louder than her words. I put down the phone, locked my door, jumped on my bed, and put my face in the pillow.



Sitting in class, I couldn't help but wonder what was going on inside of me. I was looking at Morgan and she looked really pretty. But something else was bothering me too. It was the fact that Morgan and Zarick were standing by the pencil sharpener. They were smiling at each other, but I couldn't hear what they were talking about. I just didn't like the way that she was smiling at him.

I scrambled around in my desk, looking for a pencil. I found two, but both of them had points. So I pushed down hard on my paper and broke them. Why was I doing this? I had no clue, but I had to get over to where they were standing and find out what was going on.

Morgan, a friend of mine, talking to Zarick just didn't sit well with me. I made my way over and stood behind them. Neither one was using the sharpener. They were just laughing together.

Zarick took his finger and played with Morgan's hair. I have to admit that it looked so soft. "Morgan, you look so pretty. I think you could be a model or something," he was telling her.

I had to do something, so I pretended to cough. They both turned around and looked at me.

"Are you gonna sharpen your pencils, or what?" I said, as if they were in my way.

Turning back to face each other, they smiled again. Then Morgan sharpened hers. Zarick rolled his eyes at me



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and I just stood there, staring at him. He knew that Morgan was my friend, and he could tell that I didn't like the way he was trying to buddy up to her.

Later at lunch, when she was passing by with her tray, Zarick called out, "Hey, Morgan, why don't you sit over here by me?"

Morgan let out a silly laugh and acted all giddy again. I have to admit that I was a little irritated as I watched her put her tray down and sit next to him. Now, I know I didn't ask her to sit by me, but she definitely didn't need to sit by him. This was awful. Zarick was looking at her like he was really interested. All I could do was keep my eyes on them. I didn't even want to eat.

A few minutes later, Trey came and sat down beside me. It didn't take him long to notice that I didn't want to talk to him. The next thing I knew, he was laughing at me.

"Alec, you need to talk to her. If you don't, you're gonna pop from being mad about it."

I hurried to respond. "I'm not mad."

"Somethin' is makin' you boil, and I bet I know what it is. Man, you like her!"

"What are you talkin' about? I do not."

"Then, why are you sittin' here lookin' like the other team just scored a touchdown every time you look over there at Morgan and Zarick?"

I shook my head and denied it again.

"Okay, then, I'm gonna go and tell her that you want to talk to her."

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"It doesn't matter what you tell her. I'm gonna deny it, because I don't."

"Okay, cool. I won't say anything to her . . . if you tell me the truth." Trey said, as he slowly started to get up from the lunch table. He was actually calling my bluff.

As soon as he took three steps, I jumped up and pulled him back over to our table.

"Okay, okay, okay. Maybe I do like her," I finally admitted.

"I knew it! Man, you've liked her since the second or third grade. But you've been pushin' her away. Now that she's talkin' to somebody else who's givin' her some attention, you don't like it," Trey said with a lot of confidence.

"Shhh!" I said, as I put my hand over his mouth. "I can't believe you're being so loud! Morgan is lookin' over here. I don't want anybody else to know. Trey, we're supposed to be boys. You've gotta keep this between us. Okay?"

"I got you, man. I got you." Trey said, trying to be real cool. "But it's nothin' to be ashamed of, dude. You like a girl. What's the big deal?"

Still, I wasn't convinced that he would keep my secret. I looked him in the eye because I wanted to make sure he understood. This was personal. After we gave each other a fist bump, I felt like Trey would keep this to himself.

When it was time for our class to leave the lunchroom, I was feeling pretty awful and dragging behind. My dad noticed and came over to me.

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“Son, what’s going on? Why is your head hanging so low? It looks like you just lost your best friend or something,” he said to me.

I didn’t know where to go with his questions. I was still watching them, as they walked along in line. Morgan and Zarick weren’t holding hands or anything, but the way she kept playfully punching his shoulder, they might as well have been.

“Can I talk to you for a second, Dad?” I asked, unable to take it any longer.

“Sure, let me tell your teacher. I’ll give you a pass to class. Meet me in my office.”

I did what he told me and a few minutes later, Dad came in. “What’s going on, son? Talk to me,” he said.

“Promise me you won’t get mad?” I said to him, as he nodded. “I’m not sayin’ that I lost my best friend, but things are different with Morgan and me. And I’m not happy about it.”

“What do you mean, things are different?”

“She’s not talkin’ to me. She’s not playin’ with me. She doesn’t wanna eat with me. She doesn’t wanna hang out,” I said, dropping my head low.

“Okay, son, why is that?”

“Well, lately she’s been talkin’ to that guy named Zarick. Dad, he’s not even the kind of boy Morgan should be hangin’ out with.”

“Why’d you think I’d get mad about this? Are you telling me that you think you like a girl?”

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"No. I mean, yes," I said, scratching my head and looking away from him.

"I don't know, Dad. It just feels weird and I really don't like feeling this way. I'm used to not caring about what Morgan does, or anybody else in our class, for that matter. But all day long the only thing I could focus on was her."

"Well, what do you know? My son is growing up. There's nothing wrong with liking a girl, Alec, but let me be clear. You are in the fifth grade and you have to get your feelings under control. Having a girlfriend is out of the question. I don't even allow your brother to have one, and he's in the seventh grade. But I realize that you are growing up. You're changing, and you're going to experience lots of different emotions. Just know that it's okay as long as you pray about them and ask God to help you. You also have to understand that you want the best for your friends. That includes allowing them to grow and not just be around you. There's no need for you to be jealous, son. Nor do you want to keep your feelings hidden."

"So I should tell her?"

"Not right now. I don't think you know exactly what you're feeling. The sooner you involve God and honestly tell Him how you feel, the better. Let me pray for you now," Dad said, as he held out his hand.

I took it and bowed my head.

Then Dad prayed, "Heavenly Father, I thank You for my son, Alec. He's growing up, Lord, but I know if he keeps You at the center of his heart, all these different emotions

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and feelings he's going through will find their right place. Guide him, Lord. Help him to make wise choices. Help him to keep an open heart toward You and others, not a closed one. In Jesus' name, we do pray. Amen."

I squeezed my dad's hand real tight. Then he gave me a pass, and I walked out of his office with my head held high. For the moment, I felt a little more comfortable, knowing that I could share with my father and trust him with a deep secret.



## Letter to Mom

Dear Mom,

Finally, I had to admit it. I confided in Dad that I think my friend Morgan is really special. Dad said that I shouldn't tell her right now, but I should pray and ask God to give me guidance. I hope you don't mind that another girl is important to me. But don't worry, Mom, you'll always be my best girl.

I want to learn karate to defend myself from this bully at school. It's not that I like fighting, but I have to protect myself. I have been petrified of this guy named Zarick, so I really think learning karate is important. Dad is irritated about the whole thing, but I hope you understand, Mom. Can you help me convince Dad that I need to learn self-defense skills right away?

Your son,

Needing your help, Alec

## WINNING THE BATTLE

### Word Search:

KIHON WAZA (key-hone wah-zah)  
BASIC TECHNIQUE

U	I	U	M	B	U	T	N	G	I	E	C
T	D	A	O	L	S	C	T	T	L	K	H
B	J	J	R	E	K	U	I	H	C	U	O
N	P	D	O	A	D	I	P	U	I	I	U
Y	N	O	A	N	B	R	P	I	Q	E	I
A	T	U	S	U	O	N	J	I	C	T	Z
K	I	Z	H	W	S	E	A	N	B	O	B
U	V	A	I	T	Q	B	M	D	G	H	V
Z	J	O	D	A	N	U	K	E	E	S	T
U	V	A	A	D	C	E	G	F	B	G	B
K	I	H	C	A	D	N	A	S	I	E	S
I	I	T	H	F	L	X	A	R	M	X	H

**Gedan Barai (geh-dahn bah-rye):** downward block

**Jodan Uke (jo-dahn oo-key):** upward block

**Moro Ashi Dach (moor-oh aah-she dah-chee):** fighting stance

**Seisan Dachi (say-san dah-chee):** forward stance

**Shotei Uke (sho-tye oo-key):** palm/heel block

**Uchi Uke (oo-chee oo-key):** inward block

**Yaku Zuki (ya-koo zoo-key):** reverse punch