



Breaking Point

QUICKREADS

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Alana and Tiffany were heading toward the cafeteria when they heard the boys fall in close behind them.

“Notch, notch, notch,” one of them said. His voice was soft and insulting.

Alana whirled around. “*What?*” she demanded. The taller boy smirked as he looked her up and down. The shorter one stared hard at Tiffany. His look was threatening.

“*Hey—*” Alana shouted, but Tiffany tugged at her arm to keep her quiet.

The boys followed them down the hall. Now they made wet smacking noises. The taller boy said, “Hey, Torres, looking good!

If you're lucky, baby, you'll be my next notch."

Alana stopped and faced them.

"Ooooh, Torres looks real mad now," the taller one taunted. "Protect me, guys! I'm scared to death!"

Alana clenched her fist. Her hand was strong from hours of basketball.

The girls quickly ducked into the bathroom. Derisive hoots of laughter followed them.

"What's *with* them?" Alana said. "What's this notch thing?"

"It's like a club," Tiffany said. "They put a notch on their belts for every girl they've gone out with. You just have to ignore them."

Alana was furious.

"Look, you're new here, so I'm telling you, Alana—don't mess with them. Especially that shorter guy, Chuy."

Alana remembered the way Chuy had looked at Tiffany. She started to speak, but then Marisol stuck her head in the door. "Come on, you guys," she said. "It's time for lunch."

Their friends were waiting in the

cafeteria. Seeing their smiling faces, Alana felt a warm rush of gratitude toward Tiffany. On her first day at Oceanside High, Tiffany had invited Alana to sit at her table at lunch. Now Tiffany's friends were hers, too.

Alana had just pried the lid off her yogurt when Chuy appeared at the head of the table. "Hey, Tiff," Chuy taunted. "I got something you're really going to like." He moved his hips. Alana got a good look at his thick black belt, which was cut with deep notches halfway around.

She glanced at the other girls. Tina and Marisol were talking, ignoring him. Tiffany stared at her sandwich.

With a flick of her spoon, Alana sent a gob of blueberry yogurt flying. It landed at the top of Chuy's zipper.

The girls broke out in nervous giggles. Chuy, his face contorted with anger, made a lunge for Alana.

But just then Ms. Martin, one of the PE teachers, strode up to her. "I saw you

throwing food, Alana Torres!”

“He was hassling us!” Alana cried.

“Mr. Perez, you sit down! And you, Alana—any more food throwing and you’re on detention,” said Ms. Martin.

As the teacher walked off, Marisol said, “Chuy’s like the head of the Notch Boys, Alana. Don’t make him mad.”

“Oh, yeah? What can he do to me that’s so terrible?” Alana grumbled.

“He’ll spread stories about you. Real nasty stuff, believe me,” said Tina.

“Last year this one girl, Briana, tried to get Chuy and another guy expelled,” Marisol said. “They made it so bad for her that she had to leave. She goes to a different school now.”

Alana looked at Tiffany, but Tiffany seemed very busy opening a package of cookies. Alana noticed that her friend’s hands were trembling.

When the bell rang, Alana had barely finished her lunch. Alana and Tiffany left the cafeteria together.

“Want to come over after basketball today?” Alana asked.

Then, too late, Alana sensed someone moving up behind her. She looked back just as a boy grabbed the back of her skirt and flipped it up above her waist. Chuy did the same thing to Tiffany.

“*Whoooo!*” A chorus of hoots and cheers came from the kids who were walking along behind them.

Alana caught sight of the boys’ grins before they darted off through the crowd.

Alana blinked back tears of anger and embarrassment. “I’m going to the principal’s office!” she said to Tiffany. “Will you come with me?”

“Are you crazy?” Tiffany said. “Didn’t you hear what those girls were trying to tell you back there?”

“I’m begging you, Tiff. Will you come with me?” Alana said insistently.

Tiffany slowly shook her head. “Alana, if you want to fit in around here, there are certain things you just gotta understand,” she said.



“**W**hat’s the matter with you? Why are you so scared of them? Why are you scared of Chuy?” Alana demanded.

Tiffany’s face turned blank and cold. “I can’t come over today,” she muttered. Then she hurried away.

Alana walked into the principal’s office. Mrs. Lachine was busy talking to the secretary.

Their conversation about a plumbing problem went on for several minutes. Finally, Mrs. Lachine noticed Alana and led her into her office.

The principal’s face looked tired. “Is there a problem, Alana?” she asked.

Alana was telling her about the Notch Boys when the phone rang. After finishing a long conversation, the principal turned back to Alana. “Now, where were we?”

Alana’s mouth tightened with frustration. She went on.

When she finished, Mrs. Lachine said,

“Don’t worry about this notch thing. I’ll talk to the boys.”

“Right! My worries are over,” Alana muttered to herself. She left the office feeling worse than ever.



Alana escaped to the gym. She hoped basketball practice would wipe out the disappointments of the day. Marisol met her at the door.

“Tiff quit the team!” she cried.

“*Why?*” Alana gasped.

“I don’t know,” said Marisol. “She just said she was tired of it.”

“Tell me something, okay? Why’s she so afraid of Chuy?” said Alana.

“Afraid? Sure, she watches her step around Chuy—like all the girls do—but I don’t think she’s *afraid*,” Marisol said. “A while back he was asking her out a lot. When she wouldn’t go, he bothered her for a while, but I think he stopped.”

“I’m going over there tonight—to see

what's going on," said Alana.

"That's good," Marisol said. "For some reason Tiff's been kinda down lately—but she won't say why."

When Alana rang the doorbell, Tiffany's brother Rich answered the door. He had a square, strong face and lively black eyes. He and Alana smiled at each other. Then she noticed the notches on his belt. "Is Tiff here?" she said coldly.

Rich smiled and made a deep bow, sweeping his arms out in the direction of Tiffany's room.

Alana marched past him and knocked on Tiffany's door. "Tiff, it's me, Alana," she said.

"Just a second," Tiffany called out.

Alana saw light appear at the bottom of the door. She realized the room must have been dark before.

"I just dropped in," Alana said. "I hope that's okay."

"Sure," said Tiffany. "Let's go in the living room."

As the door closed, Alana caught a

glimpse of Tiffany's room. What a mess! Every surface was covered with piles of clothes and dirty dishes.

They went to the living room, and Tiffany flopped on the couch.

"Hey, what's going on?" Alana asked.

"Nothing," said Tiffany.

"Come on, Tiff! Why did you quit the team?" Alana said.

"I just got sick of it," Tiffany said. "Too much work, day after day."

Alana wasn't satisfied with that answer, but she changed the subject. "Want to study for the math test?"

Tiffany shook her head. "It's a waste of time. I'm gonna flunk it anyway."

"Okay," Alana said patiently. "Want to go get something to eat?"

"I'm not hungry," said Tiffany.

"Tiff, come on! Are you mad at me or something? Do you want me to leave?" Alana asked.

Tiffany gave her a thin smile. "No, Alana—I'm glad you came," she said.