

Chapter One

I'm next door in Andy's driveway, shooting hoops with him and Marty. The holidays are over next week, and we've hardly been together at all. Andy was in summer school for math all July. After that, he and his family took Marty to their cottage on the Canadian side of the Thousand Islands. They just got back yesterday.

I could have gone too, except for Dad. Other times he's let me, but when he heard that Mr. and Mrs. J. wouldn't be there 24/7, he pulled the plug. "You're too young to handle the responsibility," he said.

"What responsibility?" I demanded. "We'll be swimming. Fishing. Dad, please. I'm almost sixteen."

"I've said what I've said."

Yeah, and it's totally not fair. I don't do drugs. I hate booze. And that stuff with Mary Louise Prescott happened over a year ago.

The worst was watching the videos Andy and Marty e-mailed of them hiking, swimming, and cannonballing off the Johnsons' dock. They even got to take the boat out on their own. "So, Sammy, what are you doing?" they laughed as they hot-dogged through the islands.

But now they're back and everything's fantastic.

At least it was. Dad's stepped onto our verandah. The day's been a scorcher, but it seems nobody's told him. Even home, after dinner, it's like he's still at work, supervising the microbe researchers at the lab. His jacket's off, but he's wearing everything else: silk tie, dress shirt, pearl cuff links, and flannels.

I tense as he stands by the railing, watching us play. I was doing great. Now I suck.

"Close, very close," Dad says, as my third shot in a row rockets off the backboard.

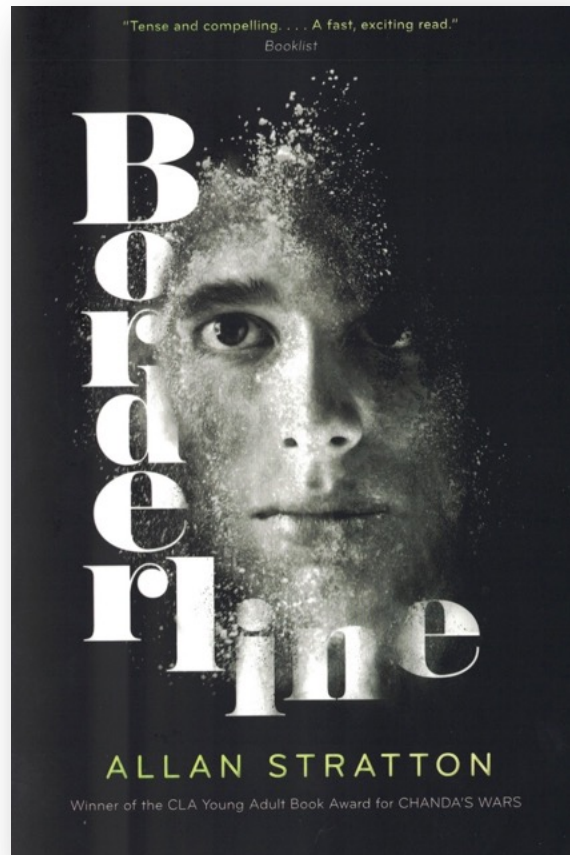
I get the basketball before it bounces into the street, pass to Andy, and fix Dad with a stare. "You want something?"

"Can your mother and I borrow you for a while?" Translation: It's time for prayers. Years ago, Mom convinced Dad to give me prayer calls in code, so I wouldn't be embarrassed in front of my friends. But Andy and Marty know the drill.

"You need me this second?"

"Not right away. But, say, in five minutes?" Dad flashes his fake smile, the one where his lips go stiff. "Sorry to interrupt your game."

Go, Dad. Just Go. I shoot out imaginary force fields, picture him flying through the air into tomorrow, but he hangs around like a bad fart.



“You boys have grown this summer!” he says out of nowhere. Dad makes stupid announcements like this almost every time he sees us. It’s his idea of Taking An Interest. Well, if he really took an interest, he’d know Andy’s been six feet tall since ninth grade; the guys call him Stiltz. And Marty doesn’t grow up, just out. Fries, Cokes, chips. If he keeps at it, he’ll turn into his parents.

Dad waits for one of us to break the silence. We don’t. He bobbles his head like a dashboard ornament, gives us a tight little wave, and finally—*finally*—goes back inside.

We play a bit more, but it’s not the same.

Then Dad taps on the living room window. When he was a kid, he fled Iran because of the secret police. So what did he learn about freedom? Not much, apparently. I can’t even shoot a private game of hoops with my friends.

“Catch you later,” I say.

I take off my shoes and socks inside the front door, wash my hands, face, and feet in the hall bathroom, and head to the family room. I’m expecting Mom and Dad to be standing by the prayer rugs, waiting. Instead they’re sitting on the leather sectional, eating grapes, and the rugs are rolled up on their shelves under the flat-screen TV. Mom’s green silk hijab is folded loosely on top; she only wears it at mosque and prayers—a big relief, as far as I’m concerned.

“What’s up?”

Mom’s eyes dance to the ceiling the way they do when there’s exciting news. Dad pats the cushion next to him. “I don’t only call you in for prayers,” he says. I hate how he reads my mind. Does he know what I say to Andy and Marty?

I sit on the edge of the seat, take a paper napkin from beside the fruit bowl, and twist it gently in my fingers.

“You want to tell him?” Dad asks Mom.

“No, no, it was your idea.” Mom always likes to make Dad look good.

He rubs his thumb against his ring. “End of September, I’m off to a four-day security conference in Toronto. I’ll be leading a seminar Friday afternoon, and touring their new category-four lab Monday morning. But I can skip the weekend workshops.” He looks at Mom as if he’s not sure what he’s supposed to say next.

“Your Dad noticed the Toronto hockey team . . .,” Mom prompts.

“Yes, the Leafs,” he says. “They’ve got a preview with the New York Islanders, Friday night. Baseball’s in town too: The Jays have a doubleheader Saturday with Boston.” He takes a deep breath. “I can get us tickets through the conference organizers.”

I lean forward, the napkin tight between my hands. “Us? You can get us tickets?”

“Not us,” Mom bats the air with her hand. “Just you and your Dad. I couldn’t be dragged kicking and screaming.”

I smile. Whenever there’s sports on TV, even playoffs, Mom leaves Dad and me for a bubble bath or to squirrel away with a book. The exception is golf. She’ll watch that crap for hours. Go figure.

“We’d be flying out of Rochester early Friday morning, coming back late afternoon Monday, Inshallah,” Dad says. “You’ll be missing two days of school, but I’m sure I can make arrangements with the Academy.”

Two days off school? Has Dad had a brain transplant?

“We haven’t done anything special for quite a while,” he continues. “I was thinking a father-son weekend would be nice. That is, if you’re interested.”

I'm interested, sure—in having two days off school to see baseball and hockey. But the father-son part, that's scary. It's bad enough when Dad and I are alone watching TV. We sit on opposite ends of the sectional, like there's this invisible border between our cushions and we're in totally different countries that don't talk to each other, or even speak the same language. When there's a commercial and somebody should say something, one of us leaves for a snack or a pee. So to go all Friday through Monday, with just the two of us . . .

Dad sees me hesitate. "Of course, you and your friends . . . You may have plans"

"Maybe. I don't know. They just got back."

He takes a deep breath. "I understand."

Mom shoots me a look: *Your father's trying.*

I know and I'm being a shit and I hate myself. But I can't help it. Before Mary Louise Prescott, things were normal. Dad could be fun. He'd tease me, and I'd laugh. Even when I messed up, we could talk. I wasn't just a disappointment.

Dad stares awkwardly at the sliding patio doors. Our backyard faces the Meadowvale Country Club. Through the glass, I can see the sun touching the row of maples that line the fourteenth fairway. "Time for prayers," he says quietly. His shoulders wilt.

I can't stand it. "Dad," I hear myself say. "About the weekend. Why don't I just say yes?"

He looks at me like he's not sure he heard right. "You want to come?"

I nod. "Sure, I guess. Yeah. I can do stuff with Andy and Marty any time."

A smile rolls over his face. His chest swells. His fingers stretch.

Oh my god, is he gonna hug me? Am I supposed to hug him?

From the look on Dad's face, he doesn't know what to do either. He clears his throat, claps his hands, and goes to the prayer rugs.

Whew, that was close!