

ALEX GINO

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF **GEORGE**

RICK



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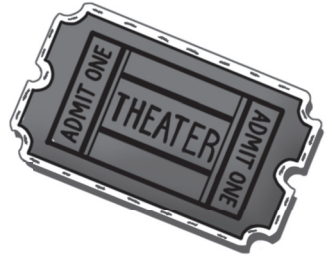
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RICK



ALEX GINO



Scholastic Press / New York

For my parents, Cindy and Steve Gino, who transcribed my stories from before I could write and who never once complained that it took three books for me to dedicate one to them.

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CHAPTER I



**RICK RAMSEY,
RIGHT HAND MAN**

Rick Ramsey sat on his bedroom floor on the last day before middle school, spinning quarters. He had just cleaned his room, on his parents' insistence that he start the school year fresh, so the floor was bare except for the rug that looked like a baseball. The whole room was baseball themed, from the time that

Mom and Dad had decided to redecorate just as he signed up for baseball in third grade. Baseball had only lasted eight weeks, but the wallpaper remained.

He chose an especially shiny coin, balanced it between his left thumb and his right middle finger, and set it spinning. He picked up a second and then a third, getting them going as the first tipped from a round-and-round spin to an up-and-down wobble that led to a lie-down flat with a final buzz.

His all-time record was seven quarters moving at once, and that was cutting it close. Most of the time, he could do five. It was harder than it looked. If you didn't give them just the right flick, the coins fell down after a turn or two, or spun under the bed. You had to move fast once the first one was going.

Rick kept spinning until the quarters were scattered around him. Then he scooped them up and began again. This time he put a shiny coin into each hand and spun them both at the same time. The

quarter on the right set to dancing on end, while the one on the left started wobbling right away. At least it didn't fall down immediately. When he started practicing simultaneous spins, his right hand produced nothing but wobblers, and his left hand would have gotten more movement by dropping the coin on the table with a plop.

He jumped up when Dad honked the car horn. The car was packed, and Dad was ready to drive Rick's sister, Diane, to her first year of college. Rick dumped the pile of quarters back into their jar and bounded down the stairs and out to the driveway to say goodbye.

"I hope you don't mind that I'm not joining you," Mom said, putting her arm around Diane's shoulder.

"I told you, it's fine! Dad's just going to drop off me and my stuff and then turn right around to go home."

"There's no room for you anyway." Rick was right. The back seat and trunk were filled with crates and bags.

“But we took Thomas out for dinner when he started college.”

“I’m not Thomas. Besides, I’m only going an hour away. I’ll visit all the time.”

“I’ll still miss you,” said Mom.

“I’ll miss you too,” said Diane, as though it were a challenge. They entangled in a mess of long straight black hair and pale pink limbs. Dad joined in with his thicker, hairier arms and wavy light brown hair, and called Rick into the family huddle. Rick had Dad’s hair and Mom’s skin tone, but sometimes, like most kids, he wondered where he had come from.

Rick and Diane exchanged a series of high fives and high tens before Diane enveloped him in her arms. “Promise you won’t grow up on me while I’m gone.”

“Uh . . .” Rick had no plans on growing up before her first visit home in three weeks, but it seemed like a weird thing to promise.

“Promise me!”

“Diane.” Dad put a heavy hand on Rick’s shoulder. “Rick’s about to start middle school. Whole new worlds are opening up for him. Girls . . .”

“Or boys,” added Mom.

“Point is, the two of you are on new journeys and we’re proud of you both.”

Rick didn’t really think there was much of a comparison. There would be plenty of kids at middle school he had known for years, especially his best friend, Jeff. Girls, or boys, were nothing new. Changing classes sounded like fun, but he didn’t get to pick them the way Diane did. And at the end of every day, he would still be coming home to the same house, just with one less person in it.

Mom embraced Dad and said, “Drive safe, Robbie.”

“Always,” said Dad, kissing Mom on the lips. “Okay, give your mom one more hug, Diane, and let’s get out of here.”

Rick and Mom waved as the car drove away.

Neither of them moved from the sidewalk until it had reached the light three blocks down and turned out of sight.

“Well, two down, one to go, I guess,” said Mom with a smile propped on her face.

“Hey, Mom, is it okay if I go to Jeff’s?”

Jeff had instant messaged the night before that he had gotten the new *Barfight 3000* and that Rick should come over.

“And leave me with a quiet home to take a nap in?” said Mom. “By all means, my little dove. Just be home by seven for dinner. And come give your Mama Bird a hug before you go.”

Rick leaned over, and Mom kissed him on the forehead. It felt kind of wet, but he didn’t rub it off.

He grabbed his bike out of the shed and pedaled over to Jeff’s place. Rick and Jeff had been best friends since the second week of third grade, when Rick had done an impression of Mrs. Fields, the old

woman who volunteered in the lunchroom, and Jeff had laughed so hard milk had come out of his nose. Neither of them had known that could really happen, and that made them laugh even harder. Rick hadn't had a whole lot of friends, and Jeff was new, and soon they were a molecule, Jeff-n-Rick. Rick liked being part of a molecule.

That spring, when Rick signed up for baseball, Jeff signed up too. Two months later, when Rick admitted he was having a terrible time, Jeff quit right alongside him. And when Dad told Rick it was important to take on a challenge, Jeff had pointed out that video games were just as challenging as physical sports and just as good for hand-eye coordination, with none of the risk of being hit by a flying lump of rubber, yarn, and cowhide.

Sometimes Jeff didn't think before he spoke, or before he acted, especially when he didn't like something. But Jeff liked hanging out with Rick, and

Rick liked hanging out with Jeff, and sometimes that was all you needed to be best friends.

Jeff's little green two-story house had a steeply sloped red attic that looked like the letter A and a pair of pink rosebushes by the front door. Jeff's mom, Stacey, met Rick at the door and welcomed him in. She was tall, like Jeff, with thick lines on her face and her hair back in a messy bun. She wore black yoga pants and a gray tank top with faded writing that said, *I've already done my good deed for the day. Try again tomorrow.*

"C'mon up!" Jeff called from upstairs.

"You heard him—go do your thing," Stacey said with an offhand wave.

Rick ran up the wide first flight, then climbed more slowly as the stairs narrowed and turned in on themselves.

Jeff's room was the entire attic, so it was big, but the ceiling sloped down so you could only stand up

in the middle of the room. Old boxes and suitcases ran along the two long-but-low walls. A mattress with messy black sheets and a single pillow took up one corner. A worn wooden bureau with the top drawer pulled out and sitting on the floor was centered on the third wall, below a round window that opened outward. The fourth wall was mostly the staircase. A flat-screen TV sat on the floor in the middle of the room, flanked by stacks of video games and in front of two black leather beanbag chairs.

Jeff was already in one of the beanbag chairs, controller in hand and screen paused. His face was peachy white, with a small white scar on his forehead and short brown hair that stuck up like loose spikes. He wore red basketball shorts and a black sleeveless T-shirt.

“This game is awesome. You can actually crack a bottle on a guy’s head and the shards embed in his skull.”

“Lemme see!” Rick dropped into the empty chair.

Jeff pressed a series of buttons, and a hulking character on the screen picked up a bottle that read XXX and cracked it over the skull of a skinny little guy drinking at the bar.

“Aww man!” Jeff groaned. “None of them stuck that time! Here, you take the other controller and I’ll restart the game.”

“Won’t you have to do everything over?” asked Rick.

“Dude, it’s a bar brawl. Who cares?”

That was one of the cool things about Jeff—he didn’t really care about things like high scores and winning streaks. Rick’s older brother, Thomas, *never* restarted a video game to let Rick join in. In fact, sometimes, he used to leave a game paused for days because he was between save points on his quest and didn’t want to have to retrace his steps. Rick wasn’t allowed to play anything on the game system until Thomas was done.

Now Rick and Jeff re-entered the game's bar—a blinking neon sign told Rick it was named The Rampage. The brawl was already going, so the two of them had to take on every hostile customer they encountered. Rick even managed to get some glass to stick to a woman's head, which got him a midgame high five from Jeff. They threw punches, kicks, and bottles until the room was empty and the bartender officially put their faces up on the Barred-Entry Wall of Fame list.

Jeff checked out his window. “Looks like Gene's gone. Let's go downstairs and get some soda.” Gene was Jeff's dad. Stacey was nice. Gene was . . . well, Stacey was nice, anyway.

Stacey appeared in the doorway of the kitchen while Jeff was pouring two large cups of orange soda. “So, Rick, you excited about middle school?”

“I guess.”

“I have to keep reminding this one over here that

it's not going to be like fifth grade." Stacey tipped her head toward Jeff.

Jeff grunted. "I know, Mom."

"There are going to be more responsibilities—"

"And more opportunities to get in trouble," Jeff finished Stacey's song of the summer.

"I'm glad you're aware. Now make sure you find those opportunities and *avoid them*." Stacey turned to Rick. "You'll make sure he stays out of trouble, right?"

"I'll try?" Rick stared at the streams of bubbles in his cup, wishing this conversation weren't happening. If he had raised his eyes, he would have seen that Jeff looked at least as uncomfortable.

"Mom," Jeff said, "this is our last day before middle school, and we just want to relax."

"Fine, fine," said Stacey. "I'm not here to give you a hard time. But if you get into trouble, you'll learn new meanings of the word *punishment*."

“Mom, when have I ever been in trouble?”

“You got into two fights last year!”

“Yeah, but neither of them was my fault. Right, Rick?”

Rick tried to sink into his chair. The way Jeff told it, nothing was ever his fault. And really, Jeff was right about the one kid at the park who had freaked out because he thought Jeff had stolen his bike, when it turned out they just had the same model. But with Evan at school, it had totally been Jeff who'd turned it into a fight. And he had punched a kid in fourth grade too, though that hadn't turned out well for him.

“It *was* your bike.” Rick hated lying, but he also hated having people mad at him. It was best when he could come up with a way to say the truth that left out the parts someone might not want to hear.

“Just do your best to stay out of trouble, okay?” Stacey said.

“I will. C’mon, Rick, let’s go.” Jeff grabbed his soda and headed for the stairs. Rick followed, glad both to get away from the conversation and that he hadn’t been the one to end it.

“Sorry about my mom,” Jeff said once they were back upstairs. “I was so worried about not running into the Dad-odile that I forgot the Mom-opotamus is the most dangerous creature on the Great Orange Soda River.”

“Especially on the day before school starts, when the parental beasts of the suburban savannah are most likely to pounce.”

“No kidding. So, what should we play now?” Jeff gestured at his pile of video games.

“What if we work on Nohomeworksburg? We’re only fifty thousand civilians from a major disaster.”

Rick and Jeff had been playing *VirtualTown* all summer, and they had read online that once their town of Nohomeworksburg reached a population of

one million, it would be hit by either a hurricane, an earthquake, wildfires, or Godzilla. Rick and Jeff were hoping for Godzilla.

“I could go for that,” said Jeff.

Rick smiled. He loved when Jeff approved of his choices. Sometimes Rick pictured himself as Alexander Hamilton, like in that musical Mom loved, and Jeff was General George Washington. Not that Jeff was anything like the first United States president, but there was this song about Hamilton being his right-hand man, and sometimes Rick felt like that. Jeff wasn't a general, or twenty-five years older than him, and he had never crossed the Delaware River in a rowboat, but he *did* know how to navigate a room full of kids. And with the choppy waters of sixth grade only seventeen hours away, that could be more important than ever.

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