



the **PLOT**

QUICKREADS

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Tara Tiongson looked at her calendar and gasped. The deadline was in just two days, and she hadn't even received her application yet! She ran downstairs and found her mom and sister watching TV.

"Mom!" she cried. "Didn't I get anything in the mail from the Summer Bridge Program?"

"What?" said her mother, reaching for her coffee mug without taking her eyes from the TV screen.

"The Summer Bridge Program," said Tara. "Didn't it come in the mail?"

"Hon, I can't be expected to know about every little thing that comes in the mail. I don't know why we get so much junk—" her

mother grumbled.

“Mom! You threw it out, didn’t you?” said Tara.

Tara’s older sister, Kimmie, glared at her and reached for the remote to turn up the volume.

“Oh, honey, I don’t know,” said her mother. “Why’s it so important?”

Tara gritted her teeth at her mother’s favorite expression. “Mom,” she went on, “I want to apply for a special math program. I’d get to take classes at the university. It’s important to *me!*” But her mom had her eyes glued to the TV. Corny music was swelling as a tall blond man entered the room.

“It’s Brad!” Kimmie said. “Remember, Mom? He’s supposed to be dead.”

Mom said, “Oh, yeah. Brad—”

Tara gave up and went into the kitchen. As always, it was a mess. But this morning she just didn’t have the energy to clean up. She looked for cereal, finally finding a box on the stove. But all the bowls were dirty, crusted with bits of dried food. So Tara filled

a mug with cereal and grabbed milk from the refrigerator. As she opened the carton, she noticed a sour smell. Disgusted, she dropped the carton in the sink, where the bad milk slowly chugged out over a pile of dirty plates, candy wrappers, and lumps of clotted rice.

Kimmie wandered in and began to search for cereal, too.

“Here’s some,” Tara said, handing her the cereal box. “Kimmie, could you clean up the kitchen for once?”

“Not now. I’m wiped out. *You* try an eight-hour job sometime,” Kimmie said.

“That’s not fair, Kimmie! I’ve got work *plus* tons of homework every night!” Tara shot back.

“Homework’s a waste! When you graduate, you’re just going to get a regular old job, anyway,” Kimmie said.

“I don’t want a *job*,” Tara insisted. “I want a career.”

“Oh, *please!*” Kimmie said mockingly. “You keep trying to act like you’re better than Mom and me! But you’re not! I can tell you,

baby—you're just the same!"

Tara opened her mouth for a smart retort, but then decided against it.

Fighting with her sister would only make her bad mood worse. She stomped out of the room, grabbed her books, and ran out to catch the bus to school. Her stomach was growling.



Just before math class, Derek Rodis caught up with Tara in the hall. "Did you send in your application yet?" he asked excitedly.

"No," said Tara. "I never got it."

Derek looked alarmed. "You *didn't*? You should call them!"

"That's a good idea," said Tara, hoping her mother had paid the phone bill. Last month they'd been without phone service for two weeks.

As she went to her seat, Tara's friends surrounded her. "Why are you talking to that geeky guy Derek?" Pati teased. "He's so *homely!*"

“The word is *ugly*,” Kaitlin chimed in. “I agree. Why waste your breath on ugly guys?” she added.

Tara looked over at Derek, who was bent over his math book. He was a thin guy with big ears and an intense look. He *wasn't* ugly! Once he'd told her he'd gotten in trouble for getting a B on his report card. She wondered what it was like, having parents who expected nothing less than straight A's.

As Mr. Ferris started lecturing, Tara felt boredom settle over her like a heavy blanket. Last year, when she'd been a sophomore, Mr. Marinucci taught math. Every class had been exciting. One day, after they'd done a unit in architecture, Mr. Marinucci had caught up with her in the hall. “Tara,” he said, “you seem to have a real talent for architecture. You're quite gifted in math, and your drawings are—wonderful, exceptional! Have you ever given any thought to architecture as a career?”

The truth was that Tara hadn't considered *any* career. She only knew she didn't want to end up like her mother and sister.

Mr. Marinucci's suggestions opened up a whole new world to her. She began to dream of the steel and glass buildings downtown. She imagined a gleaming white office building that was hers alone.

That was last year. Although the dream was still there, every day, during Mr. Ferris' lectures, it faded a little. Still, she was hopeful enough to go up to his desk after class.

"Mr. Ferris, I wanted to apply for the Summer Bridge Program—" She stopped at his blank look.

"Summer Bridge Program?" he asked. "What's that? Does it have something to do with math?"

"Never mind," Tara said.

She left the classroom and hurried down the jammed hallway. Suddenly, she felt like she couldn't get out of Maxwell Senior High soon enough.

Kimmie had dropped out in her junior year. Maybe she'd felt the way Tara did now—that she simply couldn't take another

minute of slamming lockers and yelling kids, peeling paint, and the heavy, stale odors of lunch leftovers.



As Tara walked into the back room at Lupo's 1-Hour Photo and Copy, Josie greeted her with bad news. "Billy called in sick, Tara. Mrs. Lee said she wants you to close up tonight."

"And *you* can't?" Tara asked.

"She said *you*," Josie said smugly.

Tara put her backpack on the floor. There was very little space in the back room. Most of it was taken up by the film processor, the big machine that developed film. There were also heavy rolls of photographic paper and bottles of chemicals stacked all around.

The front room, where customers came in, was crowded, too. The printer processor, a big machine that printed the photos on paper, took up most of the space. But there was also a bulky copy machine—and behind the counter, a cash register. Next to the

window was a tall plastic plant that Mrs. Lee always decorated at Christmas.

Frowning, Tara looked through the orders to be filled that night. The film had been developed yesterday, but so far today only a few prints had been made.

“Josie—” Tara began.

Tara’s co-worker turned and looked at her, her eyes wide and innocent. Tara was sure Josie had plenty of excuses for not doing her work. But right now she was too tired to hear them.

“Never mind,” Tara said with a sigh.

Tara loaded the negatives in the machine and got it ready to go. Josie was busy with the copier, an order sheet in her hand. Tara got out her life science book. There was a test tomorrow and she had to study. She read two paragraphs, and then Josie was at her side.

“Look. I was saving these until you got here,” Josie said. She shoved some photos at Tara. It looked like a scene from a slumber party. A bathroom was jammed with girls in pajamas, some holding beer bottles. One

girl, perched on the edge of the toilet, was getting her ears pierced. Tara stared at the blurry close-up. The girl's face seemed to be half-laughing, half-scared.

Josie pulled the photo away and stuck another in Tara's face. "Look at this one—she's throwing up!" Josie howled with laughter.

"Josie, we shouldn't be gawking at people's pictures. They're private!" Tara said, frowning.

"Oh, come on! When they come out, we have to check them over anyway. What's the difference?" Josie asked.

"It just isn't *right!* When people send in their film, they don't want to think that strangers are making fun of their photographs," Tara said.

"At least I don't make copies—like Billy does. Remember those people in the hot tub?" Josie giggled.

Tara rolled her eyes and said, "Don't remind me!"

Then the door opened, and two women