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## WITH THE FIRE ON HIGH

Elizabeth Acevedo

### *The Authors*

Ms. Fuentes has been my advisor since my first day at Schomburg Charter, and her classroom has never changed. Lady still has the same motivational sign above her door: You're the Author of Your Own Life Story. That sign has stared at us twenty advisory students from the time when we walked in as little bitty freshmen. And even though it doesn't make me roll my eyes anymore, I still think it's corny. Nonetheless, Advisory is my favorite class period of the day, even though it's also the shortest; it's where Ms. Fuentes takes attendance, makes announcements, and gives us college prep and "character-building" exercises. But most important, it's the only class that has had the same students in it since freshman year. So we can talk here the way we can't in any other class.

Ms. Fuentes looks up from the classroom window shades to see me staring at her inspirational sign. "Ms. Santiago, how was your summer?" she says as she adjusts the shades so they let in more light. She does that, the Mr. This and Ms. That. Has since we walked into her classroom at fourteen. I sit at my desk in the second row, closest to the door. It was clutch when I was pregnant and had to rush to the bathroom every five minutes, and I haven't switched seats since.

I shrug. "Good. Got a job. Yours?"

Ms. Fuentes stops mid-shade-fussing to side-eye me. "You're always so loquacious. It's refreshing to have a student who believes in something other than monosyllables." But she's smiling. She's never said it, but I know I'm one of her favorites. Other students begin trickling into the room.

I smile back at her. "Aw, Ms. Fuentes, I see you worked on your sarcasm this summer. It's gotten so much better."

She stops messing with the windows and walks closer to my desk. She says softly, "How's Emma? Where'd you get a job?"

"She's real good, Ms. Fuentes. [...]"

My silence doesn't faze Ms. Fuentes at all. "I have a surprise for you when the bell rings— a class I think you would love."

She squeezes my shoulder before giving her attention to Amir Robinson from the Strawberry Mansion area. "Welcome back, Mr. Robinson! Jesus, but you grew over the summer!" Ms. Fuentes walks away, calling out, "Ms. Connor, I dusted off your favorite seat in the back row just for you...."

### *That Girl*

Yup. I was that girl your moms warns you about being friends with. And warns you about becoming. Not even done with freshman year of high school and already a belly that extended past my toes. It's a good thing Babygirl was born in August since I probably would have failed out if I had to go to school the last month of my pregnancy. And the thing with being pregnant as a teen is that your body isn't the only thing that changes. It wasn't just that I always had to pee, or

that my back always hurt. It wasn't only that my feet ached and I cooked the funkiest meals (they were still so good they'd make you twerk something, but definitely off the wall: macaroni jalapeño burgers and Caribbean jerk lamb tacos).

The biggest changes weren't the ones that happened to my body at all.

It was that 'Buela had to scrounge up more sewing jobs to supplement the money she gets from disability, that the viejos playing dominoes on the corner shook their heads when I walked past, that dudes on the train smirked at my swollen boobs but wouldn't give up their seats; that I had to take a million make-up tests for the days I was at doctor appointments or too morning-sick to make it to school.

When they first learned I was pregnant, Principal Holderness and the guidance counselor called a special meeting in the main office. 'Buela had to come into school and they called in Ms. Fuentes, too. Principal Holderness and the counselor offered to transfer me to an alternative high school program specifically for pregnant teens. But Ms. Fuentes didn't play that. She said switching me midyear into a new school would be a hard adjustment, and that since the program had a decelerated curriculum it would affect my graduating on time. I know she called 'Buela beforehand to discuss it, and they must have come up with a plan, because 'Buela was quick to chime in, saying my staying at Schomburg Charter would be "pivotal for my retention and matriculation." The sentence sounded as if she'd rehearsed it, circling her mouth over those words in the mirror to make sure she got it right, and I know it was Ms.

Fuentes who had explained to 'Buela what that meeting would be about. I didn't even know what those words meant at the time, but I know now Ms. Fuentes was fighting to help keep me a regular kid for as long as possible.

I've always been small: physically petite, which made people think I had a small personality, too. And then, all of a sudden, I was a walking PSA: a bloated teen warning, taking up too much space and calling too much attention.

## ON THE COME UP

Angie Thomas

### Chapter One

Thankfully, it's multiple choice. Since there are four choices per question, there is a 25 percent chance that I'll randomly choose the right one. I click answers while everyone else collects their phones.

Everyone except Malik. He towers over me as he slips his jean jacket over his hoodie. In the past two years, he went from being shorter than me to so-tall-he-has-to-bend-to hug me. His high-top fade makes him even taller.

"Damn, Bri," Malik says. "Did you do any of the—"

"Shhh!" I submit my answers and sling my backpack over my shoulder. "I did the test." "Long as you're prepared to take an L, Breezy."

"An L on a practice test isn't really an L." I throw my snap back on, pulling the front down enough so it can cover my edges. They're a little jacked at the moment and will stay jacked until Jay braids my hair.

Sonny beat me getting to Mrs. Murray's desk. He goes for my phone like the true ride or-die he is, but Mrs. Murray grabs it first.

"That's okay, Jackson." She uses his real name, which happens to be my last name. His momma named him in honor of my grandparents, her godparents. "I need to talk to Brianna for a second."

Sonny and Malik both look at me. What the hell did you do?

My eyes are probably as wide as theirs. Do I look like I know?

Mrs. Murray nods toward the door. "You and Malik can go. It'll only take a moment." Sonny turns to me. You're f\*\*ked.

Possibly. Don't get me wrong; Mrs. Murray is sweet, but she does not play. One time, I half-assed my way through an essay about Langston Hughes's use of dreams. Mrs. Murray went in on me so bad, I wished Jay would've gone in on me instead. That's saying something.

Sonny and Malik leave. Mrs. Murray sits on the edge of the desk and sets my phone beside her. The screen is dim. No call yet.

"What's going on, Brianna?" she asks.

I look from her to the phone and back. "What you mean?"

"You were extremely distracted today," she says. "You didn't even do your practice test."

"Yes, I did!" Kinda. A little. Sorta. Not really. Nah.

"Girl, you didn't submit any answers until a minute ago. Honestly? You haven't been focused for a while now. Trust me, when you get your report card next week, you'll see proof. Bs don't turn to Cs and Ds for nothing."

Shit. "Ds?"

"I gave you what you earned. So what's going on? It's not like you've been missing class lately."

Lately. It's been exactly a month since my last suspension, and I haven't been sent to the principal's office in two weeks. That's a new record.

"Is everything okay at home?" Mrs. Murray asks.

"You sound like Ms. Collins." That's the young, blond counselor who's nice but tries too hard. Every single time I get sent to her, she asks me questions that sound like they came from some "How to Talk to Statistical Black Children who Come to Your Office Often" handbook. How is your home life? (None of your business.)

Have you witnessed any traumatic events lately, such as shootings? (Just because I live in the "ghetto" doesn't mean I dodge bullets every day.)

Are you struggling to come to terms with your father's murder? (It was twelve years ago. I barely remember him or it.)

Are you struggling to come to terms with your mother's addiction? (She's been clean for eight years. She's only addicted to soap operas these days.)

What's good with you, homegirl, nah'mean? (Okay, she hasn't said that, but give her time.)

Mrs. Murray smirks. "I'm just trying to figure out what's up with you. So what's got you so distracted today that you wasted my time and your momma's hard-earned money?" I sigh. She's not giving me that phone until I talk. So fine. I'll talk. "I'm waiting on DJ Hype to tell me I can battle in the Ring tonight."

"The Ring?"

"Yeah. Jimmy's Boxing Ring. He has freestyle battles every Thursday. I submitted my name for a chance to battle tonight."

"Oh, I know what the Ring is. I'm just surprised you're going in it."

The way she says "you're" makes my stomach drop, as if it makes more sense that anyone else in the world would go in the Ring except for me. "Why are you surprised?" She puts her hands up. "I don't mean anything by it. I know you've got skills. I've read your poetry. I just didn't know you wanted to be a rapper."

"A lot of people don't know." And that's the problem. I've been rapping since I was ten, but I've never really put myself out there with it. I mean yeah, Sonny and Malik know, my family knows. But let's be real: Your mom saying you're a good rapper is like your mom saying you're cute when you look a hot mess. Compliments like that are part of the parental responsibilities she took on when she evicted me from her womb.

Maybe I'm good, I don't know. I've been waiting for the right moment.

Tonight may be the perfect time, and the Ring is the perfect place. It's one of the most sacred spots in Garden Heights, second only to Christ Temple. You can't call yourself a rapper until you've battled in the Ring.

## BRONX MASQUERADE

Nikki Grimes

### Wesley “Bad Boy” Boone

I ain't particular about doing homework, you understand. My teachers practically faint whenever I turn something in. Matter of fact, I probably got the longest list of excuses for missing homework of anyone alive. Except for my homey Tyrone. He tries to act like he's not even interested in school, like there's no point in studying hard, or dreaming about tomorrow, or bothering to graduate. He's got his reasons. I keep on him about going to school, though, saying I need the company. Besides, I tell him, if he drops out and gets a J.O.B., he won't have any time to work on his songs. That always gets to him. Tyrone might convince everybody else that he's all through with dreaming, but I know he wants to be a big hip-hop star. He's just afraid he won't live long enough to do it. Me, I hardly ever think about checking out. I'm more worried about figuring what I want to do if I live.

Anyway, I haven't had to drag Tyrone off to school lately, or make excuses for not having my homework done, because I've been doing it. It's the Harlem Renaissance stuff that's got us both going.

We spent a month reading poetry from the Harlem Renaissance in our English class. Then Mr. Ward—that's our teacher—asked us to write an essay about it. Make sense to you? Me neither. I mean, what's the point of studying poetry and then writing *essays*? So I wrote a bunch of poems instead. They weren't too shabby, considering I'd only done a few rap pieces before. My favorite was about Langston Hughes. How was I to know Teach would ask me to read it out loud? But I did. Knees knocking like a skeleton on Halloween, embarrassment bleaching my black cheeks red, eyes stapled to the page in front of me. But I did it, I read my poem.

Guess what. Nobody laughed. In fact, everybody thought it was cool. By the time I got back to my seat, other kids were shouting out: “Mr. Ward, I got a poem too. Can I bring it in to read?”

Teach cocked his head to the side, like he was hearing something nobody else did. “How many people here have poems they'd like to read?” he asked. Three hands shot up. Mr. Ward rubbed his chin for a minute. “Okay,” he said. “Bring them with you tomorrow.” After class Teach came over to my desk. “Great poem,” said Mr. Ward. “But I still expect to see an essay from you. I'll give you another week.” So much for creative expression.

## LONG LIVE LANGSTON

By Wesley Boone

*Trumpeter of Lenox and 7th  
through Jesse B. Semple,  
you simply celebrated  
Blues and Be-bop  
and being Black before  
it was considered hip.  
You dipped into the muddy waters  
of the Harlem River  
and shouted "taste and see"  
that we Black folk be good  
at fanning hope  
and stoking the fires  
of dreams deferred.  
You made sure the world heard  
about the beauty of  
maple sugar children, and the  
artfully tattooed backs of Black sailors  
venturing out to foreign places.  
Your Sweet Flypaper of Life  
led us past the Apollo and on  
through 125th and all the other  
Harlem streets you knew like  
the black of your hand.  
You were a pied-piper, brother man  
with poetry as your flute.  
It's my honor and pleasure to salute  
You, a true Renaissance man  
of Harlem.*

## *Tyrone Bittings*

School ain't nothin' but a joke. My moms don't want to hear that, but if it weren't for Wesley and my other homeys, I wouldn't even be here, aiight? These white folk talking 'bout some future, telling me I need to be planning for some future—like I got one! And Raynard agreeing, like he's smart enough to know. From what I hear, that boy can't hardly read! Anyway, it's them white folk that get me with this *future* mess.

Like Steve, all hopped up about working on Broadway and telling me I should think about getting with it too. Asked me if I ever through about writing plays. “Fool! What kinda question is that?” I said. He threw his hands up and backed off a few steps. “All I’m saying is, you’re a walking drama, man. You got that down pat, so maybe you should think about putting it on paper.” When that boy dyed his hair, I b’lieve some of that bleach must’ve seeped right into his brain. I grind my teeth and lower my voice. “Boy, get out my face,” I tell him. He finally gets the message and splits. I’m ticked off that he even got me *thinking* about such nonsense as Broadway.

White folk! Who they think they kidding? They might as well go blow smoke up somebody else’s you-know-what, 'cause a Black man's got no chance in this country. I be lucky if I make it to twenty-one with all these fools running round with AK—47s. Here I am one of the few kids I know whose daddy *didn't* skip out on him, and he didn't even make it to thirty. He was doing okay 'til he got blown away on a Saturday. Blam! Another statistic in a long line of drive-bys. Life is cold. Future? What I got is right now, right here, spending time with my homeys. Wish there was some future to talk about. I could use me some future.

I’m just about ready to sleep off the whole year when this teacher starts talking about poetry. And he rattles off a poem by some white guy named Dylan Thomas that sounds an awful lot like rap. Now, I know me some rap, and I start to thinking I should show Mr. Ward what rap is really all about. So I tell him I’ve got a poem I’d like to read. “Bring it on Friday,” he says. “As a matter of fact, from now on, I’ll leave time for poetry readings at the end of every month. We’ll call them Open Mike Fridays. Next thing I know, I’m digging my old rap poems out of my dresser drawer and bringing them to school. I’m thinking it can’t hurt to share them, even if there’s no chance I’ll ever get to be a songwriter. After all, it’s the one thing I could see myself doing if there really was a future. And I’m thinking that maybe there could be if I wanted it bad enough. And all of a sudden, I realize I do.



## Sorry for Your Loss

Jessie Anne Foley

### Chapter Nine

[...] "Were we in a class together?" She glanced up then, surprised. "I don't remember that."

"English. For a little while, anyway." He reached up, unclipped his negatives, and began arranging the photo paper Mr. Hughes had given him onto the enlarger. "It was the low track. I think Ms. Cole moved you up at the semester, though."

"That's *right*," she said. "I *was* in low track. Because I'd moved out of ELL and they didn't really have anywhere else to put me."

"ELL?"

"English Language Learners. I didn't speak a word when I came here."

"Whoa. Really? I'd never guess that. I still remember the speech you gave on Greek Mythology Day. It started like, 'All hail! I'm the goddess with the girdle slung low!' Or something like that. Jack Walters started snickering because you said 'girdle,' which I guess is sort of like underwear, and you stopped your speech and told him to shut up. Do you remember that?"

"Oh, *yeah!*" Abby laughed. "I completely forgot about that! Jack Walters is such a meathead. I was Demeter, goddess of corn and wheat. I wore a cornflakes box as a crown for my presentation. And a homemade necklace made out of Cheerios."

"I remember the cornflakes box!"

"Oh god. I hope nobody else does." Abby used the tongs to fish her photograph out of the chemical bath and clipped it, dripping, to the line. "Okay, so what god were you?" "I was Pan, the god of the forest. Which, like, of course I was. Even though we were supposed to be assigned at random, all the jocks somehow ended up with the cool gods. Zeus. Aries. Poseidon. And I was a half boy, half goat who prances around the woods playing a flute." "Oh my god!" Abby had a loud, unselfconscious laugh. It filled the tiny space of the darkroom. "I remember now! I remember your tinfoil ears. And the goat legs! They were these green shaggy things. You told Ms. Cole you made them by cutting up a bath mat!" "Yeah. The kids with the crafty moms had these crazy good costumes. I had tinfoil ears, a ripped-up old bath mat, and some loose-leaf paper hooves taped to my gym shoes." "And I wore a box of cornflakes on my damn head."

They giggled, and were silent again, so that all that could be heard between them was the hum of the enlarger machine and the drip of the drying photographs.

After a while Abby asked him, "So what's this final project about anyway?" "Well, that's the thing." Pup lifted his paper from the enlarger and submerged it carefully in the stop bath with the long silver tongs. "There *is no* project. Mr. Hughes just wants us to turn in something 'representative of our personal aesthetic,' using any medium we want. But look at me!" He posed for her in his baggy, too short jeans, his stained Nikes, his Chicago Park District T-shirt, his wiry, untamable hair. "I don't *have* an aesthetic. When I asked him what he actually meant by that, he said I should find a way to 'articulate the emergency inside of me.'" "Oh man. Whenever Mr. Hughes starts quoting Leonard Cohen, you know you're in trouble." Abby leaned

forward to scrutinize the photographs he'd enlarged. "What about this one? This is good." She squinted her eyes and peered closer at the image. "Actually—wow. This is *really* good."

She was pointing at the image of Luke, curled up on the roof with the sun lightening behind him and the early morning birds on the power lines, the scattered beer bottles, his unshaven sleeping face so inscrutable, even in sleep.

"*That?* I don't even know why I took that. That's my older brother Luke. He's the kind of guy who threatens to punch you if you look at him for more than, like, a second. He was asleep, though. So I was able to look at him. Maybe that's why I took it. Because it was sort of nice to just stand there and look at my brother."

Immediately, he felt like he had said too much. He braced himself for what he knew Abby would say next: *Awww*. Izzy was always saying *awww* to Pup, in this high, singsong voice. It was the same expression she reserved for YouTube video of kittens playing with balls of yarn, and implied how totally adorable he was in a completely nonsexual way. No girl had ever, or would ever, say *awww* about Brody, or Declan, or any other guy who was halfway decent-looking.

But Abby didn't say *awww*. She didn't say anything. Instead, she just stood there in the red light, cocking her head and observing the photograph.

"I'm trying to figure out what's so magnetic about it," she finally said. "I think maybe it's the composition. Your subject looks so—closed off or something. He's a person I want to know more about. Like he has so many things buried inside himself. And the objects. Did you pose those, or are they just arranged like that?"

"You mean the beer bottles?"

"Yeah."

"No, they were just like that."

"And that glass of—what is that, anyway?"

"It's a protein shake."

"See, that's so random. But it works. Mr. Hughes always says that unexpected objects can elevate a photograph."

"Huh," said Pup. "I didn't know that."

"And I love the way the dawn sky contrasts with his dark hair," she went on. "It's such a beautiful way to take advantage of advantage of the black-and-white film. Awesome point of view. Awesome juxtaposition and use of negative space. Awesome mood. I mean—I can *tell* how much this person means to you. And I can tell that you were *seeing* him when you made this picture."

"Wow." Pup lifted a hand to his neck. It came away hot. "Thanks."

## ***The First Part Last***

Angela Johnson

### **now**

MY MOM SAYS that I didn't sleep through the night until I was eight years old. It didn't make any difference to her 'cause she was up too, listening to the city. She says she used to come into my room, sit cross-legged on the floor by my bed, and play with my Game Boy in the dark. *We never talked.*

I guess I thought she needed to be there. And she must have thought her being there made everything all better for me.

Yeah.

I get it now. I really get it.

We didn't need to say it. We didn't have to look at each other or even let the other one know we saw each other in the glow of the Game Boy.

So last week when it looked like Feather probably wasn't ever going to sleep through the night, I lay her on my stomach and breathed her in. My daughter is eleven days old. And that sweet new baby smell ... the smell of baby shampoo, formula, and my mom's perfume. It made me cry like I hadn't since I was a little kid.

It scared the hell out of me. Then, when Feather moved on my stomach like one of those mechanical dolls in the store windows at Christmas, the tears dried up. Like that. I thought about laying her in the middle of my bed and going off to find my old Game Boy, but I didn't.

Things have to change.

I've been thinking about it. Everything. And when Feather opens her eyes and looks up at me, I already know there's change. But I figure if the world were really right, humans would live life backward and do the first part last. They'd be all knowing in the beginning and innocent in the end.

Then everybody could end their life on their momma or daddy's stomach in a warm room, waiting for the soft morning light.

### **then**

AND THIS IS how I turned sixteen. . .

Skipped school with my running buddies, K-Boy and J.L. and went to Mineo's for a couple of slices. Hit a matinee and threw as much popcorn at each other as we ate. Then we went to the top of the Empire State Building 'cause I never had before.

I said what everybody who'd ever been up there says.

"Everybody looks like ants."

Yeah, right . . .

Later on that night my pops, Fred, made my favorite meal – cheese fries and ribs—at his restaurant. I caught the subway home and walked real slow 'cause I knew my mom had a big-ass cake for me when I got there, and I was still full. (In my family, special days mean nonstop food.)

I never had any cake though 'cause my girl friend Nia was waiting on our stoop for me with a red balloon. Just sittin' there with a balloon, looking all lost. I'll never forget that look and how her voice shook when she said, "Bobby, I've got something to tell you." Then she handed me the balloon.

**Before the Ever After**  
Jacqueline Woodson

**Memory like a Movie**

The memory goes like this:

Ollie's got the ball and he's running across my yard when  
Dad comes out of nowhere,  
soft tackles him to the ground.  
Then everyone is cheering and laughing because  
we didn't even know my dad was home.

*I thought you had a game*, I say, grabbing him.  
It's a half hug, half tackle, but  
the other guys—Darry and Daniel—hop on too  
and Ollie's escaped, so he jumps  
on top of all of us jumping on my dad.

*Yeah, Mr. J.*, Darry says. *I thought we'd be watching you  
on TV tonight.*

*Coach giving me a break*, my daddy says. He climbs out from under,  
shaking us off like we're feathers, not boys.

*Ah man!* Darry says.  
*Yeah*, we all say. *Ah man!*

*Sometimes a player needs to rest*, Daddy says.  
He looks at each of us for a long time.  
A strange look. Like he's just now seeing us.

Then he tosses the ball so far that we can't even see it anymore.

And my boys say *Ah man, you threw it too far!*  
while I go back behind the garage where - we have a whole bunch of  
footballs waiting and ready  
for when my daddy sends one into the abyss.

## Before the Ever After

Before the ever after, there was Daddy driving  
to Village Ice Cream  
on a Saturday night in July before preseason training.

Before the ever after, there was Mom in the back seat  
letting me ride up front, me and Daddy  
having Man Time together  
waving to everyone  
who pointed at our car and said *That's him!*

Before the ever after, the way people said  
*That's him!* sounded like a cheer.

Before the ever after, the people pointing  
were always smiling.

Before the ever after, Daddy's hands didn't always  
tremble and his voice didn't shake  
and his head didn't hurt all the time.

Before the ever after, there were picnics  
on Sunday afternoons in Central Park  
driving through the tunnel to get to the city  
me and Daddy making up songs.

Before the ever after, there were sandwiches  
on the grass near Strawberry Fields  
chicken salad and barbecue beef  
and ham with apples and Brie  
there were dark chocolates with almonds and  
milk chocolates with coconut  
and fruit and us just laughing and laughing.

Before the ever after, there was the three of us  
And we lived happily  
Before the ever after.

**Spin**  
Lamar Giles

## KYA

I did not kill Paris Secord.

I should've told the two police officers staring at me from across the table, though they hadn't asked. There'd been other questions about the night, I answered as honestly as I could—as honestly as felt smart. Yet, I wanted to state, unequivocally, that I was not the murderer here. Sweat made my shirt sticky, like a licked envelope, even though the tiny room was cold.

"You go to Cooke High?" Detective Barker asked.

Through my damp shirt, I clutched the oblong charm that dangled from a nylon necklace and rested against my chest. "Yes."

"My daughter was an Eagle. Class of '97." He dragged a finger down the sheet in the open folder before him. How did he have a paper about me, and this? "Sophomore?" "I'll be a senior in the fall."

I did NOT kill Paris Secord. Even rehearsing it in my head it seemed too loud, too fake. I did not KILL Par—

If I understand the situation correctly, your friend Paris was a DJ known for throwing impromptu parties in unsanctioned locations."

"Pop-ups. Yeah. Not so much these days."

"Something changed with her?"

"She got busy. With her music production." My hands kneaded into each other, worked invisible dough between them.

"Help me understand that a bit more. I'm an old guy. That means what exactly?" "She made songs. The beats, sometimes lyrics, but not always. She made it all sound good together."

"This was more than a hobby?"

"She had a song go viral some time ago. Then she did it again. And again. Bigger artists have been wanting to work with her. I heard J. Cole had some interest."

"You heard?" One of the detective's bushy eyebrows lifted. "Not from her?" "No." There hadn't been many meaningful conversations between us lately. That last real talk was just mean. More name-calling than career updates. I had a feeling some of this stuff they knew already. How could they not? Paris was famous. Maybe not that get-mobbed-in-the-mall kind of fame. Not yet. Her name rang out in Virginia, and with music heads in general. She was on her way...

And now she wasn't.

My hands kept working, even though I willed them to stop. Nothing was in my control that evening. Not even my own body.

I pressed my palms flat against the table. *Stay!* I shouted inside my skull, only slightly more convincing than my silent assertion of innocence. The camera just above the interrogation

room door caught every bit of me acting weird while answering the simplest questions. When the cops rewatched this video, I'd look guilty. If they ever played it before a jury, I'd look guilty times twelve.

"Is there something you want to tell us?" Barker said. He was dark-skinned, like me, with matted black-and-white grandpa hair that looked like he'd been rolling in baby powder and coal dust. He'd smiled when he walked me into the room, and I remembered wondering if they'd found a black man who smiled so I'd forget that badge on his belt and say something wrong. Were his simple questions *meant* to make me act weird, like a trap?

I DID NOT KILL Paris Secord.

"Hey, hey, Kya." His hands raised, palms facing me, a sign of peace. His smile twitched away. He looked as frightened as I felt. "I only asked because you were moving your lips a moment ago."

Moving my lips. I mouthed words when I got nervous. I'd probably mouthed *jury*; an expert lip reader might tell them I was already thinking of a way to trick the jury because I was 100 percent guilty.

His partner—a silent, youngish white policeman who was scary in a way I was used to—burst into the room, making me yelp. He held a box of Kleenex. Only then did my vision blur from accumulated tears that spilled over. I accepted the tissues and oh God, Paris was gone.

Staying quiet was the smart move. They hadn't arrested me. They never read me those rights cops read criminals on TV. I didn't know if that was a good or bad thing. I only knew that silence was always advised. How many movies had a lawyer yelling at their innocent client to keep their mouth shut? But there was the thing I needed to say. Out loud, once, and make it sound true. "I did not—"

Something crashed just outside the interrogation room. Shrieking curses followed. A general sense of panic soured the air inside the Ocean Shore Police Department's Second Precinct.

Barker and his partner rushed from the room, joining a couple of uniformed officers trying to contain the destructive lunatic who should be in here, handcuffed. Maybe muzzled too. *I did not kill Paris Secord. Had absolutely nothing to do with her death.*

Could all her so-called friends say the same?

**Dear Martin**

Nic Stone

**Chapter One**

[...] He unlocks the car, tosses the bag on the floor of the backseat, and tries to get Melo up off the ground.

Then everything goes really wrong, really fast. First, she throws up all over the hoodie Jus is wearing.

Which belongs to Manny. Who specifically said, "Don't come back here with throw-up on my hoodie."

Perfect.

Jus takes off the sweatshirt and tosses it in the backseat.

When he tries to pick Melo up again, she slaps him. Hard. "Leave me *alone*, Justyce," she says.

"I can't do that, Mel. There's no way you'll make it home if you try to drive yourself." He tries to lift her by the armpits and she spits in his face.

He considers walking away again. He could call her parents, stick her keys in his pocket, and bounce. Oak Ridge is probably *the* safest neighborhood in Atlanta. She'd be fine for the twenty-five minutes it would take Mr. Taylor to get here.

But he can't. Despite Manny's assertion that Melo needs to "suffer some consequences for once," leaving her here all vulnerable doesn't seem like the right thing to do. So he picks her up and tosses her over his shoulder.

Melo responds in her usual delicate fashion: she screams and beats him on the back with her fists.

Justyce struggles to get the back door open and is lowering her into the car when he hears the WHOOOP of a short siren and sees the blue lights. In the few seconds it takes the police car to screech to a stop behind him, Justyce settles Melo into the backseat. Now she's gone catatonic.

Justyce can hear the approaching footsteps, but he stays focused on getting Melo strapped in. He wants it to be clear to the cop that she wasn't gonna drive so she won't be in even worse trouble.

Before he can get his head out of the car, he feels a tug on his shirt and is yanked backward. His head smacks the doorframe just before a hand clamps down on the back of his neck. His upper body slams onto the trunk with so much force, he bites the inside of his cheek, and his mouth fills with blood.

Jus swallows, head spinning, unable to get his bearings. The sting of cold metal around his wrists pulls him back to reality.

Handcuffs.

It hits him: Melo's drunk beyond belief in the backseat of a car she fully intended to drive, yet Jus is the one in handcuffs.

The cop shoves him to the ground beside the police cruiser as he asks if Justyce understands his rights. Justyce doesn't remember hearing any rights, but his ears



had been ringing from the two blows to the head, so maybe he missed them. He swallows more blood.

"Officer, this is a big misundersta—" he starts to say, but he doesn't get to finish because the officer hits him in the face.

"Don't you say shit to me, you son of a bitch. I knew your punk ass was up to no good when I saw you walking down the road with that goddamn hood on."

So the hood was a bad idea. Earbuds too. Probably would've noticed he was being trailed without them. "But, Officer, 1—"

"You keep your mouth *shut*." The cop squats and gets right in Justyce's face. "I know your kind: punks like you wander the streets of nice neighborhoods searching for prey. Just couldn't resist the pretty white girl who'd locked her keys in her car, could ya?"

Except that doesn't even make sense. If Mel had locked the keys in the car, Jus wouldn't have been able to get her inside it, would he? Justyce finds the officer's nameplate; CASTILLO, it reads, though the guy looks like a regular white dude. Mama told him how to handle this type of situation, though he must admit he never expected to actually need the advice: *Be respectful; keep the anger in check; make sure the police can see your hands* (though that's impossible right now). "Officer Castillo, I mean you no disresp—"

"I told your punk ass to shut the fuck up!"

He wishes he could see Melo. Get her to tell this cop the truth. But the dude is blocking his view.

"Now, if you know what's good for you, you won't move or speak. Resistance will only land you in deeper shit. Got it?"

Cigarette breath and flecks of spit hit Justyce's face as the cop speaks, but Justyce fixes his gaze on the glowing green *F* of the Farm Fresh sign.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, boy." He grabs Justyce's chin. "I asked you a question."

Justyce swallows. Meets the cold blue of Officer Castillo's eyes. Clears his throat. "Yes sir," he says. "I got it."

## Call Down the Hawk

Maggie Stiefvater

### PROLOGUE

This is going to be a story about the Lynch brothers.

There were three of them, and if you didn't like one, try another, because the Lynch brother others found too sour or too sweet might be just to your taste. The Lynch brothers, the orphans Lynch. All of them had been made by dreams, one way or another. They were handsome devils, down to the last one.

They looked after themselves. Their mother, Aurora, had died the way some dreams did, gruesomely, blathelessly, unexpectedly. Their father, Niall, had been killed or murdered, depending on how human you considered him. Were there other Lynches? It seemed unlikely. Lynches appeared to be very good at dying.

Dreams are not the safest thing to build a life on.

Because the Lynch brothers had been in danger for so much of their lives, they'd each developed methods of mitigating threats. Declan, the eldest, courted safety by being as dull as possible. He was very good at it. In all things—school, extracurriculars, dating—he invariably chose the dullest option. He had a real gift for it; some forms of boring suggest that the wearer, deep down inside, might actually be a person of whimsy and nuance, but Declan made certain to practice a form of boring that suggested that, deep down inside, there was an even more boring version of him. Declan was not invisible, because invisible had its own charm, its own mystery. He was simply dull. Technically he was a college student, a political intern, a twenty-one-year-old with his whole life ahead of him, but it was hard to remember that. It was hard to remember him at all.

Matthew, the youngest, floated in safety by being as kind as possible. He was sweet humored, pliable, and gentle. He liked things, and not in an ironic way. He laughed at puns. He swore like a greeting card. He looked kindly, too, growing from a cherubic, golden-haired child to an Adonic, golden haired seventeen-year-old. All of this treacly, tousled goodness might have been insufferable had not Matthew also been an excruciatingly messy eater, a decidedly lazy student, and not very bright. Everyone wanted to hug Matthew Lynch, and he wanted to let them.

Ronan, the middle brother, defended his safety by being as frightening as possible. Like the other Lynch brothers, he was a regular churchgoer, but most people assumed he played for the other team. He dressed in funereal black and had a raven as a pet. He shaved his hair close to his skull and his back was inked with a clawed and toothed tattoo. He wore an acidic expression and said little. What words he did unsheathe turned out to be knives, glinting and edged and unpleasant to have stuck into you. He had blue eyes. People generally think blue eyes are pretty, but his were not. They were not cornflower, sky, baby, indigo, azure. His were iceberg, squall, hypothermia, eventual death. Everything about him suggested he might take your wallet or drop your baby. He was proud of the family name, and it suited him. His mouth was always shaped like he'd just finished saying it

The Lynch brothers had many secrets.

Declan was a collector of beautiful, specific phrases that he would not let himself use in public, and the possessor of an illuminated, specific smile no one would ever see. Matthew had a forged birth certificate and no fingerprints. Sometimes, if he let his mind wander, he found himself walking in a perfectly straight line. Toward something? Away from something? This was a secret even to himself.

Ronan had the most dangerous of the secrets. Like many significant secrets, it was passed down through the family—in this case, from father to son. This was the good and bad of Ronan Lynch: The good was that sometimes, when he fell asleep and dreamt, he woke with that dream. The bad was that sometimes, when he fell asleep and dreamt, he woke with that dream. Monsters and machines, weather and wishes, fears and forests.

Dreams are not the safest thing to build a life on.

After their parents died, the Lynch brothers kept their heads down. Declan removed himself from the business of dreams and went to school for the dullest possible degree in political science. Ronan kept his nightmare games confined to the family farm in rural Virginia as best as he could. And Matthew—well, Matthew only had to keep on making sure he didn't accidentally walk away.

Declan grew more boring, and Ronan grew more bored. Matthew tried not to let his feet take him someplace he didn't understand.

They all wanted more.

One of them had to break, eventually. Niall had been a wild Belfast dreamer with fire biting at his heels, and Aurora had been a golden dream with the borderless sky reflected in her eyes. Their sons were built for chaos.

It was a sharp October, a wild October, one of those fretful spans of time that climbs into your skin and flits around. It was two months after the fall semester had begun. The trees were all brittle and grasping. The drying leaves were skittish. Winter yowled round the doorways at night until wood fires drove it away for another few hours.

There was something else afoot that October, something else stretching and straining and panting, but it was mostly as of yet unseen. Later it would have a name, but for now, it simply agitated everything uncanny it touched, and the Lynch brothers were no exception. Declan broke first.

While the youngest brother was in school and the middle brother malingered at the family farm, Declan opened a drawer in his bedroom and removed a piece of paper with a telephone number on it. His heart beat faster just to look at it. He should have destroyed it, but instead, he entered it into his phone.

"The Lynch boy?" said the voice on the other side of the line.

"Yes," he said simply, "I want the key." Then he hung up.

He told no one else about the call, not even his brothers. What was one more tiny secret, he thought, in a life full of them.

Boredom and secrets: an explosive combination.

Something was going to burn.

**The How & The Why**  
**Cynthia Hand**

Prologue

*Dear X,*

*Today Melly has us writing letters to our babies.*

*I'm not keeping you, so this felt like cruel and unusual punishment. There are fifty girls at this school, and only a few of us are choosing adoption, and most of those are open adoptions, where everyone knows each other's names and you send emails back and forth to the new parents and get pictures and an update every month or something. But I'm not doing that, either.*

*So I said I'd like to opt out of this assignment.*

*Melly said fine, I could opt out if I wanted to, but then she said that there's a program where you write a letter to your baby, which they can request when they turn eighteen. So if there's something you want to say that can't be done by checking a box or writing down your blood type, here's your chance.*

*"You can write whatever you want," Melly said. "Anything."*

*"But it's optional, right?" I asked.*

*"Yes."*

*"Which means I don't have to do it."*

*"Okay," Melly said. "You just sit here and chill."*

*Then she passed around some yellow notepads, like legal ones (which seems kind of old school if you ask me) and she gave one to me, too. "Just in case," she said. Sneaky Melly.*

*The other girls started scribbling away. Apparently they all have important things to tell their babies.*

*Not me. No offense, but I don't even know you that well.*

*To me, you're still sort of intangible. I know you're in there, but you're not obvious yet.*

*You're tight pants.*

*You're heartburn.*

*You're the space alien slowly taking over my body.*

*You're X.*

*I can't imagine you as an actual baby, let alone an eighteen-year-old person reading this letter. I'm not even eighteen yet myself.*

*So what could I possibly have to say to you? I don't have any great wisdom to pass along that couldn't be summed up by the words use birth control girls. But that's complicated, because if I'd done that, you wouldn't exist. I'm sure you prefer existing.*

*Some things are better left unsaid, was my thinking. So I sat there, chilling. Not writing a letter.*

*But obviously I changed my mind.*

*I started to consider you, I guess. If I were an adopted kid, I'd want there to be a letter for me. Because I'd want to find out the things that aren't in the paperwork. I'd be curious. I'd want to know.*

*So ... hi. I'm your birth mother, aka the person who lugged you around inside of me for nine months,*

*I have blue eyes and brown hair and I'm a Libra, if you're the kind of person who's interested in signs. There's not much more to tell about me, I'm afraid. I'm solidly average—sorry, I wish I could report that I'm a genius or gorgeous or spectacularly gifted at the piano or chess. But I'm just typical. My grades aren't fantastic. I don't know what I want to be when I grow up. I'm not a cheerleader. I don't do sports.*

*I am into music. I collect old vinyl records. I go to concerts, music festivals, that kind of thing. I follow some of the local bands.*

*Right now I'm living at Booth Memorial, a place where pregnant teens go to finish high school. It's a school, but it's also a group home—like in those days when girls used to disappear for months and their parents would tell everybody they were “visiting an aunt.” Most of the homes for unwed mothers around the country have closed, since having a baby out of wedlock isn't the super shocking thing it used to be. This place is mainly a school now. A few of us live here, but the majority of the students live at home, and, like I said, they're keeping their babies. There's a daycare on campus where they can bring them after they give birth.*

*I guess you must be wondering why I'm not keeping you. The simplest answer is this: I'm not cut out to be a mother.*

*Not that I'm a terrible person. But I'm sixteen years old. I don't think anybody is exactly qualified to be a mother at sixteen. I'm trying not to be judgmental, but the girls around here, the ones who are keeping their babies and who look at me like I'm some kind of monster because I'm not keeping mine, they think it's going to be sharing clothes and braiding each other's hair and being BFFs. But that's not the real world.*

*The real world. God, I sound like my father. He would not approve of this letter-writing thing. Dad's a believer in the clean-slate philosophy. “After this, you can start over,” he keeps telling me. “You can wipe the slate clean.”*

*What he doesn't say, but I hear anyway, is, “And then nobody will have to know.”*

*So here I am, hiding out like it's the fifties. At school—at my old school, I mean—nobody knows about my predicament except my best friend. I'm sure people are asking her where I am. I don't know what she tells them. But maybe it's easier being here than parading my pregnant belly through the halls of BHS. It's less to deal with, anyway.*

*The point is, I hope you get it—the why of the whole thing. I hope you have a good life—a boring, no-drama, no-real-problems kind of life. Good luck, X.*

*I wish you the best.*

*Your host body, S*

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