American Girl

Nancy Bourne

He sits down next to me. Not the skinny old teacher with chapped lips and the caved in chest. Not him. The young one, Jeremy. He's maybe twenty-five? Comes to juvie once a week to teach English.

He puts a book on the table in front of me. *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky.* I look around. I'm the only one. How come?

What's this? I say.

He smiles and says, Read it. See what you think.

A week later, he pulls up a chair next to me. He smells like soap. He wants to know what I think about the book. I tell him it's good.

Do you like the girl, he wants to know. Do you like the ending?

I shrug. I don't want to talk that bullshit.

He looks right in my face. His eyes are darker than dark. Okay, he says. How 'bout you write it?

Write what?

Your opinions, he says, smiling. I'm guessing you have a lot of opinions, JoJo.

What's he know? I keep my mouth shut in class.

But I'm thinking, Grandma sent me this notebook, says *My Life* on the cover. Clean sheets of paper, no lines. Might try writing something, but nothing 'bout that book.

I been two years in this dump. Back in, back out. Mostly for dealing; I don't use. I know from my mama how that goes. Lucky she grew me during one of her dry periods. Didn't last for my two little brothers. The State took 'em, put 'em in foster care. They'll show up here sooner or later.

Jeremy's back. Sits next to me. Feels funny. Is anybody watching?

Have you done any writing, he asks.

I pull out the notebook. Do I want to impress him?

You've got a way with words, JoJo, he says and smiles at me.

The girls in here go on about his sexy smile.

Keep writing, he says, about your life, about what you do when you're outside.

I sell a quality product, got steady customers, money's good. I cover the high schools. Two of them. Mingle easy with the kids from the projects, the hotels, the streets. I'm an American girl top to bottom; my mom claims she's got Egyptian, Chinese, even Indian in her. Probably because so many men were hanging around back when grandma got knocked up. I got a little Hispanic and white from my dad. He's in Ironwood. Assault and battery.

Jeremy's all over it. Egyptian, he says. I knew it. You've got one of those Egyptian profiles you see in the museums.

What's he on about? I'm pretty. I know that. But I don't know nothing about Egyptian profiles.

Girls in here don't miss a thing. Lucky bitch, they say. He hot for you, that Jeremy.

Don't give me that, I say. He just says I got an ear for language.

Girl, he interested in more than your writing, they say.

And I'm noticing how he be sitting close up to me, talking so serious. Of course, he moves around the room, talks to other kids. Reads their stuff.

What grade are you in, he asks.

I quit, I tell him.

How'd you manage that?

Signed my grandma's name on the permission form, I tell him. I'm sixteen.

You in here for selling drugs? he asks.

What's he? Dumb?

I get caught. End up here. Not because the kids rat on me. It's their funeral if they do. It's the competition that does it. They want my beat, so when they get picked up selling on the street, they give the cops my name and try to steal my territory. And back here I come.

I get called into one of the little lawyer offices they got in here. A porky kind of guy is sitting in one of the two plastic chairs, his belt tight under his gut, pink cheeks. Claims he's the DA. That gets my back up right there. He points to the other chair and asks me did I know Raymond Ortez. I stay on my feet. Turns out they got Raymond on a murder charge. No surprise there.

What's that got to do with me? I ask.

You know his sister, right?

What's it to you?

Just sit down and answer the question, JoJo.

I stay on my feet. Sister's name's Urlene. She alright. Goes to one of the high schools where I deal. She's not a customer, don't use. Smart. I figure she might go to college someday, she so smart.

The dick grins. You were on parole on April 5.

So?

You saw a *Spider-man* movie that day.

I said, might be. I can't remember that far back.

He says I went to the movie with Urlene.

Could be.

He tells me he might need me to testify.

Not a chance. I stay away from courts. They been nothing but trouble for me.

The fat DA stares right in my face. He tells me all I gotta say is I was at the *Spider-man* movie with Urlene on April 5 and Raymond wasn't there.

I get it. I be busting his alibi.

What's in it for me? I ask.

He grins again. You testify against Ray, we cut you loose from here.

I tell him I got five more months.

No matter, he says. You'll walk.

I'll think about it, I say and leave him sitting there.

I hear him calling out *wait,* but I'm done.

Back in my cell, I'm thinking, it's a tough one. If I snitch, I'm outta here. I could do it. Nail old Raymond. I can look a body square in the face and make up all kinds of garbage when I want to. And shit, I got no feeling for Raymond. He's a nasty piece of work.

But his sister Urlene. She's a different story.

I'm thinking, what if Raymond really didn't do it? What if he *was* with Urlene the night of the murder? What if she backs him up? Then I come along and bust him. Say I was at the movies with Urlene that day. I'm not family, like Urlene. Jury'd believe me over her. Raymond's future would snap shut, twenty-five to life, no question. That's harsh.

Of course, I'd be telling the truth to say I went to the movies with Urlene. *Could* be on the day of the murder. I don't know.

Write about your cell, Jeremy says. Why? I say. I want to know. It'll give you practice with descriptive prose, he says. Hmmm, I say. But truth is, I want to give it a try.

My cell's on the second floor. You climb the stairs up out of what they call the rec room, go along a crossway past six other rooms to get to mine. The bed's a cement block with a two-inch-thick mattress and the light's never turned off. In the beginning, I banged my fists against the door, screamed and shouted, kicked the guards, spat on my no count lawyer. Didn't learn to sleep through the night til my fourth time round. It's freezing in winter. Yard's mostly dirt with weeds here and there.

But my door is fire engine red; painted it myself. Shiny acrylic, fire engine red, they let me choose the color.

Beautiful, Jeremy says. Just beautiful. And he gives me a look.

DA's back. Puts the squeeze on me. Tells me Raymond's trial is coming up. They have to name me as a witness if I'm gonna help 'em.

I ask him what Urlene gonna to say.

He says she made up this bullshit story about how she and Raymond were watching TV at home on April 5, the afternoon the murder took place. DA says nobody else was home, nobody saw 'em go in or out of the house. Perfect alibi. Except she's lying, of course.

I think about it. She can lie, I know, because she one time saved my ass with a lie. I was at her school dealing, when a teacher asked me was I selling drugs. Urlene jumped in and said no way, I was her friend, just visiting and on my way out. Urlene would have no trouble lying to save her brother's ass.

But this is different. DA's asking me to lie to put somebody under. A kid, really. Nasty as he is, Raymond's just eighteen.

DA must be reading my mind, because next thing, he starts talking about the murder, how bloody it was. Says Raymond saw this homeless dude sleeping on the street and started stomping his head and kicking him in the stomach. Yelling like he's hella crazy. For no reason, just mean. I could see Raymond doing it. Especially when he's high.

The victim was down on his luck, the DA tells me, jerking all the strings. Had a family, a wife and little girl. Think

about it, JoJo, a little girl, he says. Like he cares. Then he tells me the guy died. Right there on the street in the middle of the afternoon, covered in blood.

I ask about witnesses. DA tells me Raymond disappeared before anybody could get a photo. But several witnesses saw him on the street. What about drawings? I ask. The cops always ask witnesses for drawings. DA says drawings aren't good evidence.

You got any? I ask, pointing to his slumped down briefcase on the floor.

I can tell he don't want to, but he pulls 'em out. I spread 'em on the metal table in front of me and pick 'em up one at a time.

I tell him I'd feel better lying on the stand if the drawings showed that little snake tattoo on Raymond's neck just below his right ear. It's not there.

They must not have seen it, DA says, because of that army jacket Raymond had on.

I get it. No witnesses. Drawings in Raymond's favor. Sister provides the alibi. These jokers really need me. Plus it sounds fishy. Why Raymond?

DA says he got picked up running down the same street where the murder occurred. Got picked out of a line-up.

So you don't need me.

Line up evidence is flimsy, he tells me. With the sister's testimony, Raymond walks. He reminds me of the deal. I testify. *I* walk.

I don't want you to lie, he says, lying through his teeth. But you saw *Spider-man* with Urlene. That's the truth.

I tell him I'll think about it.

Jeremy pulls up a chair at my table and asks me how come I go right back to selling when I get paroled.

I look straight into those dark, dark eyes and smile.

Here's why, I say. I like it.

He don't pull back, don't look shocked, don't lecture me. Just smiles back at me, that sexy smile the girls go on about, and says, write about it. Face all smooth, like he don't shave, curly hair cut close.

Write, he says. Write.

I deal because I like the respect. Like the money, like playing dumb when the cops show up at school. Like acting mainey. Even like the streets, all the crazies out there. The streets are cold, but they know me out there, tell me stories you wouldn't believe. Not that I'm homeless, though I've spent a night or two under the overpass. Mostly my grandma takes me in, fusses over me, feeds me beans and tacos, cries when I go back to juvie. Rags on me to clean up my act.

You're so smart, JoJo, he tells me, giving me the look.

Street smart, I say.

That too. But I'm talking book smart. You've got potential.

Potential? I be mocking him.

You could be anything you set your heart on.

Bullshit, I say. You seen my record?

You get yourself out of here, he says, and we'll see what we can do.

Like what?

Maybe write letters to get you back in school, he says. Help you find a job so you don't have to deal.

He looking at me so serious. Then he reaches over and puts his hand on top of mine. Is anybody looking? He's not supposed to do this. But I don't move my hand. His is large and warm. I feel lit up, like I'm smiling all over.

I'm hearing it now. They all teasing. Sexy Jerry's got the hots for you, girl. I saw you holding hands. You in love for sure.

I don't say nothing. I'm too confused.

DA's back. Writes out a witness statement for me. I sign it. I'm out a here. On my way to high school, college. On my way to …

First thing I see when I come into the courtroom is Raymond's eyes looking like he'd kill me if he had a chance. The room's hot and small, only a few benches for the public. I look around. Nobody I know. Not even Urlene, who's a witness like me and can't be in here until her turn comes. The judge is up there, fussing with his papers. Face white as his hair, thin lips, no color. A ghost in black robes.

DA got on a suit, pants too short. Sweat dripping off his fat chin. Puts me on the stand, shows me my statement, asks me if all of it's true. I say yes. I don't look at Raymond. The PD, a woman, then has a go at me. Her skirt is wrinkled and too snug on the hips. I figure this kind of law's no way to get rich. She asks if I'm sure the day I saw *Spider-man* was April 5. I lie. It ain't even hard. I'm on my way out. She tries to trip me up with questions about the time of the movie, about what else I did that day. I rehearsed it all with the DA and stick to my story.

In the hall on the way out, there's Urlene. *Traitor bitch* she calls out. PD pulls her off to a corner. First time I feel bad. But it don't last. I'm on my way.

DA's here with some papers. His big old face grinning. You did good, he says. Scored a conviction. Judge gave him twenty-five to life.

Raymond. I don't want to think about it.

I ask when do I get out. Soon, he says. Just got to do the paper work. Soon.

First time Jeremy shows up, I tell him. I'm getting out. He's smiling. Pulls me up from the table and hugs me. Just like that. I feel the muscles in his arms, smell that clean soap on him.

I feel light, happy. Don't stop. Don't stop.

Write about it, he says. All the things you want to do out there.

I'm coming out! Coming out! First thing I'm gonna do is eat nachos with lots of cheese and cookie dough ice cream and drink a supersize root beer. Then I'm gonna dump my stash outa my

I'm on my feet. I'm yelling. He touched me. Get him away.
Son of a bitch touched me.
Guards jumping up. Everybody watching.
Done for.

rubber boots where I hid it. I'm gonna cruise the streets, make all those crazies happy, handing the stuff out free.
After that, I'm gonna call up Jeremy, ask him to get me back in school like he promised. Ask him about getting me a job on weekends waitressing. I'd be good at that. All those tips. Bring him to meet Grandma. She'd like that.

Interesting is what Jeremy says, reading it.

How am I gonna find you? I ask him. What do you mean? he says. You know, when I'm out. Like your number, your email.

I can't give you that in here, he says.

How come?

Juvenile Education policy.

I'm thinking, where was that policy when you held my hand? Hugged me?

But I got practical things on my mind. How am I gonna find you? I ask him.

I'll come up with something, he says.

Back home with Grandma. She all excited, filling me up with beans and rice. I try to act happy. Poor old lady. I'm all she has. Her son at Ironwood. My little brothers back in foster care. They too wild. She tried, but she's old and they wild.

The street's too hot for me. Everybody buzzing about Raymond, how he's innocent, how I put him away. Can't sell, even if I want to. No customers. They'll be back. But I'm keeping myself scarce right now.

Tried to call Juvenile Education to get Jeremy's number. Nothing. I did find a number online for the State Juvenile Facilities and called it. Nothing but answering machines, sending me to one machine after another till I got a busy signal.

I try not to think about Jeremy.

I go to Central High, try to enroll. Bitch in the office takes one look at me, says school's too full. Sends me to Washington High. Same thing. Principal says District got a program for troubled youth. Maybe I could try that. Not a chance.

I try not to think about Jeremy.

I get hired for a shift at McDonald's. Quit after a week. Pay's lousy, work's disgusting.

Wake up at night, feel Jeremy's hand, warm, strong. Feel his arms. Smell his soap clean skin.

Dude from Raymond's old gang knocks on Grandma's door. All in black, hoodie pulled low. Hella scary.

You in trouble, girl, he says. Better make yourself scarce. They after you.

I don't waste no time. Tiptoe into Grandma's room. Kiss her cheek. Snoring, sounds like a whistle. Glad she isn't awake. Makes me sad, letting her down. Again. Kiss her. Again.

Once outside, I figure I have no choice. Juvie or else. I know the drill. I hang out till daylight, then wander down to the street. Buyers always there, day and night, some walking by casual, like they shopping, some wild-eyed crazy, all on the lookout. I wait till I see a cop cruise by. Make my move. Bingo.

Busted.

You're back? It's Jeremy, acting all disappointed. I been waiting for him.

Sits down beside me. Close. I'm waiting.

So what happened, JoJo? voice so sweet. Can you tell me?

I keep quiet.

He leans over, Can you write about it? I'm waiting. Then he does it, takes my hand, squeezes it. Write about it, JoJo.

I'm on my feet. I'm yelling. He touched me. Get him away. Son of a bitch touched me. Guards jumping up. Everybody watching.

Done for.

Son of a bitch. All the time telling me to write my feelings.

Here's the truth. Jeremy. You did me shady. All that bullshit about how smart I am. You were getting off on it.

Here's the truth, Jeremy. I ain't gonna change. This is who I am. I'll be back, out on the streets, ducking the red and blue lights. Selling my product. Playing my cards right. Living my life.

Trying not to think about Raymond.