Dear Martin

NIC STONE

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I BELIEVE THAT UNARMED TRUTH
AND UNCONDITIONAL LOVE
WILL HAVE THE FINAL WORD IN REALITY.

—Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1964

CHAPTER 1

From where he's standing across the street, Justyce can see her: Melo Taylor, ex-girlfriend, slumped over beside her Benz on the damp concrete of the FarmFresh parking lot. She's missing a shoe, and the contents of her purse are scattered around her like the guts of a pulled party popper. He knows she's stone drunk, but this is too much, even for her.

Jus shakes his head, remembering the judgment all over his best friend Manny's face as he left Manny's house not fifteen minutes ago.

The WALK symbol appears.

As he approaches, she opens her eyes, and he waves and pulls his earbuds out just in time to hear her say, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Justyce asks himself the same question as he watches her try—and fail—to shift to her knees. She falls over sideways and hits her face against the car door.

He drops down and reaches for her cheek—which is as

red as the candy-apple paint job. "Damn, Melo, are you okay?"

She pushes his hand away. "What do you care?"

Stung, Justyce takes a deep breath. He cares a lot. Obviously. If he didn't, he wouldn't've walked a mile from Manny's house at three in the morning (Manny's of the opinion that Melo's "the worst thing that ever happened" to Jus, so of course he refused to give his boy a ride). All to keep his drunken disaster of an ex from driving.

He should walk away right now, Justyce should.

But he doesn't.

"Jessa called me," he tells her.

"That skank—"

"Don't be like that, babe. She only called me because she cares about you."

Jessa had planned to take Melo home herself, but Mel threatened to call the cops and say she'd been kidnapped if Jessa didn't drop her at her car.

Melo can be a little dramatic when she's drunk.

"I'm totally unfollowing her," she says (case in point). "In life *and* online. Nosy bitch."

Justyce shakes his head again. "I just came to make sure you get home okay." That's when it hits Justyce that while he might succeed in getting Melo home, he has no idea how he'll get back. He closes his eyes as Manny's words ring through his head: *This Captain Save-A-Ho thing is gonna get you in trouble, dawg.*

He looks Melo over. She's now sitting with her head leaned back against the car door, half-asleep, mouth open.

He sighs. Even drunk, Jus can't deny Melo's the finest girl he's ever laid eyes—not to mention *hands*—on.

She starts to tilt, and Justyce catches her by the shoulders to keep her from falling. She startles, looking at him wide-eyed, and Jus can see everything about her that initially caught his attention. Melo's dad is this Hall of Fame NFL linebacker (biiiiig black dude), but her mom is from Norway. She got Mrs. Taylor's milky Norwegian complexion, wavy hair the color of honey, and amazing green eyes that are kind of purple around the edge, but she has really full lips, a small waist, crazy curvy hips, and probably the nicest butt Jus has ever seen in his life.

That's part of his problem: he gets too tripped up by how beautiful she is. He never would've dreamed a girl as fine as her would be into *him*.

Now he's got the urge to kiss her even though her eyes are red and her hair's a mess and she smells like vodka and cigarettes and weed. But when he goes to push her hair out of her face, she shoves his hand away again. "Don't touch me, Justyce."

She starts shifting her stuff around on the ground—lipstick, Kleenex, tampons, one of those circular thingies with the makeup in one half and a mirror in the other, a flask. "Ugh, where are my keeeeeeeys?"

Justyce spots them in front of the back tire and snatches them up. "You're not driving, Melo."

"Give 'em." She swipes for the keys but falls into his arms instead. Justyce props her against the car again and gathers the rest of her stuff to put it back in her bag—

which is large enough to hold a week's worth of groceries (what is it with girls and purses the size of duffel bags?). 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 *WHOOOOP* 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, I—"

"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 FarmFresh 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."

August 25

DEAR MARTIN (AKA DR. KING),

First and foremost, please know I mean you no disrespect with the whole "Martin" thing. I studied you and your teachings for a project in tenth grade, so it feels most natural to interact with you as a homie. Hope you don't mind that.

Quick intro: My name is Justyce McAllister. I'm a 17-year-old high school senior and full-scholarship student at Braselton Preparatory Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm ranked fourth in my graduating class of 83, I'm the captain of the debate team, I scored a 1560 and a 34 on my SATs and ACTs respectively, and despite growing up in a "bad" area (not too far from your old stomping grounds), I have a future ahead of me that will likely include an Ivy League education, an eventual law degree, and a career in public policy.

Sadly, during the wee hours of this morning, literally none of that mattered.

Long story short, I tried to do a good deed and wound up on the ground in handcuffs. And despite the fact that my ex-girl was visibly drunk off her ass, excuse my language, I apparently looked so menacing in my prep school hoodie, the cop who cuffed me called for backup.

The craziest part is while I thought everything would be cool as soon as her parents got there, no matter what they told the cops, these dudes *would not* release me. Mr. Taylor offered to call my mom, but the cops made it clear that since I'm 17, I'm considered an adult when placed under arrest—aka there was nothing Mama could do.

Mr. Taylor wound up calling my friend SJ's mom, Mrs. Friedman—an attorney—and she had to come bark a bunch of legal hoo-ha in the cops' faces before they'd undo the cuffs. By the time they finally let me go, the sun was coming up.

It'd been hours, Martin.

Mrs. F didn't say a whole lot as she drove me to my dorm, but she made me promise to go by the infirmary and get some cold packs for my swollen wrists. I called my mama to tell her what happened, and she said she'll file a complaint first thing in the morning. But I doubt it'll do any good.

Frankly, I'm not real sure what to feel. Never thought I'd be in this kind of situation. There was this kid, Shemar Carson . . . black dude, my age, shot and killed in Nevada by this white cop back in June. The details are hazy since there weren't any witnesses, but what's clear is this cop shot an unarmed kid. Four times. Even fishier, according to the medical examiners, there was a two-hour gap between the estimated time of death and when the cop called it in.

Before The Incident last night, I hadn't really thought much about it. There's a lot of conflicting information, so

it's hard to know what to believe. Shemar's family and friends say he was a good dude, headed to college, active in his youth group . . . but the cop claims he caught Shemar trying to steal a car. A scuffle ensued (allegedly), and according to the police report, Shemar tried to grab the cop's gun, so the cop shot Shemar in self-defense.

I dunno. I've seen some pictures of Shemar Carson, and he did have kind of a thuggish appearance. In a way, I guess I thought I didn't really need to concern myself with this type of thing because compared to him, I don't come across as "threatening," you know? I don't sag my pants or wear my clothes super big. I go to a good school, and have goals and vision and "a great head on my shoulders," as Mama likes to say.

Yeah, I grew up in a rough area, but I know I'm a good dude, Martin. I thought if I made sure to be an upstanding member of society, I'd be exempt from the stuff THOSE black guys deal with, you know? Really hard to swallow that I was wrong.

All I can think now is "How different would things have gone had I not been a black guy?" I know initially the cop could only go by what he saw (which prolly did seem a little sketchy), but I've never had my character challenged like that before.

Last night changed me. I don't wanna walk around all pissed off and *looking* for problems, but I know I can't continue to pretend nothing's wrong. Yeah, there are no more "colored" water fountains, and it's supposed to be illegal to discriminate, but if I can be forced to sit on the

concrete in too-tight cuffs when I've done nothing wrong, it's clear there's an issue. That things aren't as *equal* as folks say they are.

I need to pay more attention, Martin. Start really *seeing* stuff and writing it down. Figure out what to do with it. That's why I'm writing to you. You faced way worse shi—I mean *stuff* than sitting in handcuffs for a few hours, but you stuck to your guns . . . Well, your lack thereof, actually.

I wanna try to live like you. Do what you would do. See where it gets me.

My wrist is killing me, so I have to stop writing now, but thanks for hearing me out.

Sincerely,
Justyce McAllister