ANGIE THOMAS

WALKER
BOOKS
Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published in Great Britain 2019 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text © 2019 Angela Thomas
Cover photo by Prince Akachi on Unsplash

The right of Angie Thomas to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Bembo

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-7216-8

www.walker.co.uk

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C020471
FSC
www.fsc.org

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

For the kids with the SoundCloud accounts
and the big dreams. I see you.
And for my mom, who saw it in me first.

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

PART 1

OLD SCHOOL

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER 1

I might have to kill somebody tonight.

It could be somebody I know. It could be a stranger. It could be somebody who's never battled before. It could be somebody who's a pro at it. It doesn't matter how many punch lines they spit or how nice their flow is. I'll have to kill them.

First, I gotta get the call. To get the call, I gotta get the hell out of Mrs. Murray's class.

Some multiple-choice questions take up most of my laptop, but the clock though. The clock is everything. According to it, there are ten minutes until four-thirty, and according to Aunt Pooh, who knows somebody who knows somebody, DJ Hype calls between four-thirty and five-thirty. I swear if I miss him, I…

Won't do shit 'cause Mrs. Murray has my phone, and Mrs. Murray's not one to play with.

I only see the top of her Sisterlocks. The rest of her is hidden behind her Nikki Giovanni book. Occasionally she goes "Mmm" at some line the same way my grandma does during a sermon. Poetry's Mrs. Murray's religion.

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

Everyone else cleared out of Midtown School of the Arts almost an hour ago, except for us juniors whose parents or guardians signed us up for ACT prep. It's not guaranteed to get you a thirty-six, but Jay said I better get close since she "paid these folks a light bill" for this class. Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, I drag myself into this classroom and hand my phone over to Mrs. Murray.

Usually I'm cool with an entire hour of not knowing what the president tweeted. Or getting texts from Sonny and Malik (sometimes about shit the president tweeted). But today, I wanna go up to that desk, snatch my phone from the pile, and run out of here.

"Psst! Brianna," someone whispers. Malik's behind me, and behind him Sonny mouths, *Anything yet?*

I tilt my head with a *How am I supposed to know, I don't have my phone* eyebrow raise. Yeah, that's a lot to expect him to get, but me, Sonny, and Malik have been tight since womb days. Our moms are best friends, and the three of them were pregnant with us at the same time. They call us the "Unholy Trinity" because they claim we kicked in their bellies whenever they were together. So nonverbal communication? Not new.

Sonny shrugs with a *I don't know, I'm just checking*, mixed in with *Damn, you ain't gotta catch an attitude.*

I narrow my eyes at his little light-skinned Hobbit-looking behind – he's got the curly hair and the big ears. *I don't have an attitude. You asked a dumb question.*

I turn around. Mrs. Murray eyes us over the top of her

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

book with a little nonverbal communication of her own. *I know y'all not talking in my class.*

Technically we're not *talking*, but what I look like telling her that, verbally or nonverbally?

4:27.

Three minutes and that phone will be in my hand.

4:28.

Two minutes.

4:29.

One.

Mrs. Murray closes her book. "Time's up. Submit your practice test as is."

Shit. The test.

For me, "as is" means not a single question is answered. Thankfully, it's multiple choice. Since there are four choices per question, there's 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 snapback on, pulling the front down enough so it can cover

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

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 fucked.*

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."

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

"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

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

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.

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

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.

That's why I gotta kill it. I win tonight, I'll get a spot in the Ring's lineup, and if I get a spot in the lineup, I can do more battles, and if I do more battles, I'll make a name for myself. Who knows what could happen then?

Mrs. Murray's expression softens. "Following your dad's footsteps, huh?"

It's weird. Whenever other people mention him, it's like they're confirming that he's not some imaginary person I only remember bits and pieces of. And when they call him my dad and not Lawless, the underground rap legend, it's like they're reminding me that I'm his and he's mine.

"I guess. I've been preparing for the Ring for a minute now. I mean, it's hard to prepare for a *battle*, but a win could jump-start my career, you know?"

"Let me get this straight," she says, sitting up.

Imaginary alarms go off in my head. Warning: Your teacher is about to gather you, boo.

"You've been so focused on rapping that your grades have dropped drastically this semester. Forget that junior-year grades are vital for college admissions. Forget that you once told me you want to get into Markham or Howard."

"Mrs. Murray—"

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

"No, you think about this for a second. College is your goal, right?"

"I guess."

"You guess?"

I shrug. "College isn't for everyone, you know?"

"Maybe not. But a high school education? Critical. It's a D now, but that D will turn to an F if you keep this up. I had a similar conversation with your brother once."

I try not to roll my eyes. It's nothing against Trey or Mrs. Murray, but when you have an older brother who did great before you, if you don't at least match his greatness, people have something to say.

I've never been able to match Trey here at Midtown. They still have the programs and newspaper clippings on display from when he starred in *A Raisin in the Sun*. I'm surprised they haven't renamed Midtown "The Trey Jackson School of the Arts Because We Love His Ass That Much."

Anyway.

"He once went from As to Cs," Mrs. Murray says, "but he turned it around. Now look at him. Graduated from Markham with honors."

He also moved back home this summer. He couldn't find a decent job, and as of three weeks ago, he makes pizzas for minimum wage. It doesn't give me much to look forward to.

I'm not knocking him. At all. It's dope that he graduated. Nobody in our mom's family has a college degree, and Grandma, our dad's mom, loves to tell everyone that her grandson was "magnum cum laude." (That is so not how

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

you say it, but good luck telling Grandma that.)

Mrs. Murray won't hear that though.

"I'm gonna improve my grades, I swear," I tell her. "I just gotta do this battle first and see what happens."

She nods. "I understand. I'm sure your mom will too."

She tosses me my phone.

Fuuuuuck.

I head to the hallway. Sonny and Malik lean against the lockers. Sonny types away on his phone. Malik fiddles with his camera. He's always in filmmaker mode. A few feet away, the school security guards, Long and Tate, keep an eye on them. Those two are always on some mess. Nobody wants to say it, but if you're black or brown, you're more likely to end up on their radar, even though Long himself is black.

Sonny glances up from his phone. "You okay, Bri?"

"Go on now," Long calls. "Don't be lollygagging around here."

"Goddamn, can't we talk for a second?" I ask.

"You heard him," says Tate, thumbing toward the doors. He's got stringy blond hair. "Get outta here."

I open my mouth, but Sonny goes, "Let's just go, Bri."

Fine. I follow Sonny and Malik toward the doors and glance at my phone.

It's 4:45, and Hype still hasn't called.

A city bus ride and a walk home later, nothing.

I get to my house at exactly 5:09.

Jay's Jeep Cherokee is in our driveway. Gospel music

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

blares in the house. It's one of those upbeat songs that leads to a praise break at church and Grandma running around the sanctuary, shouting. It's embarrassing as hell.

Anyway, Jay usually only plays those kinda songs on Saturdays when it's cleaning day to make me and Trey get up and help. It's hard to cuss as somebody sings about Jesus, so I get up and clean without a word.

Wonder why she's playing that music now.

A chill hits me soon as I step in the house. It's not as cold as outside – I can take my coat off – but my hoodie's gonna stay on. Our gas got cut off last week, and with no gas, we don't have heat. Jay put an electric heater in the hallway, but it only takes a bit of the chill out the air. We have to heat water in pots on the stove if we wanna take hot baths and we sleep with extra covers on our beds. Some bills caught up with my mom and Trey, and she had to ask the gas company for an extension. Then another one. And another one. They got tired of waiting for their money and just cut it off.

It happens.

"I'm home," I call from the living room.

I'm about to toss my backpack and my coat onto the couch, but Jay snaps from wherever she is, "Hang that coat up and put that backpack in your room!"

Goddamn, how does she do that? I do what she said and follow the music to the kitchen.

Jay takes two plates out of a cabinet – one for me, one for her. Trey won't be home for a while. Jay's still in her "Church Jay" look that's required as the church secretary – the

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

ponytail, the knee-length skirt, and the long-sleeved blouse that covers her tattoos and the scars from her habit. It's Thursday, so she's got classes tonight as she goes after that social work degree – she wants to make sure other people get the help she didn't back when she was on drugs. For the past few months, she's been in school part-time, taking classes several nights a week. She usually only has time to either eat or change, not both. Guess she chose to eat tonight.

"Hey, Li'l Bit," she says all sweet, like she didn't just snap on me. Typical. "How was your day?"

It's 5:13. I sit at the table. "He hasn't called yet."

Jay sets one plate in front of me and one beside me. "Who?"

"DJ Hype. I submitted my name for a spot in the Ring, remember?"

"Oh, that."

That, like it's no big deal. Jay knows I like to rap, but I don't think she realizes that I *want* to rap. She acts like it's the latest video game I'm into.

"Give him time," she says. "How was ACT prep? Y'all did practice tests today, right?"

"Yep." That's all she cares about these days, that damn test.

"Well?" she says, like she's waiting for more. "How'd you do?"

"All right, I guess."

"Was it hard? Easy? Were there any parts you struggled through?"

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

Here we go with the interrogation. "It's just a practice test."

"That will give us a good idea of how you'll do on the real test," Jay says. "Bri, this is serious."

"I know." She's told me a million times.

Jay puts pieces of chicken on the plates. Popeyes. It's the fifteenth. She just got paid, so we're eating good. Jay swears though that Popeyes isn't as good here as it is in New Orleans. That's where she and Aunt Pooh were born. I can still hear New Orleans in Jay's voice sometimes. Like when she says "baby," it's as if molasses seeped into the word and breaks it down into more syllables than it needs.

"If we want you to get into a good school, you gotta take this more seriously," she says.

If *we* want? More like if *she* wants.

It's not that I don't wanna go to college. I honestly don't know. The main thing I want is to make rapping happen. I do that, it'll be better than any good job a college degree could give me.

I pick up my phone. It's 5:20. No call.

Jay sucks her teeth. "Uh-huh."

"What?"

"I see where your head is. Probably couldn't focus on that test for thinking about that Ring mess."

Yes. "No."

"Mm-hmm. What time was Hype supposed to call, Bri?"

"Aunt Pooh said between four-thirty and five-thirty."

"*Pooh*? You can't take anything she says as law. She's the

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

same one who claimed that somebody in the Garden captured an alien and hid it in their basement."

True.

"Even if he does call between four-thirty and five-thirty, you've still got time," she says.

"I know, I'm just—"

"Impatient. Like your daddy."

Let Jay tell it, I'm stubborn like my daddy, smartmouthed like my daddy, and hotheaded like my daddy. As if she's not all those things and then some. She says Trey and I look like him too. Same smile, without the gold grill. Same dimpled cheeks, same light complexions that make folks call us "redbones" and "light brights," same dark, wide eyes. I don't have Jay's high cheekbones or her lighter eyes, and I only get her complexion when I stay out in the summer sun all day. Sometimes I catch her staring at me, like she's looking for herself. Or like she sees Dad and can't look away.

Kinda how she stares at me now. "What's wrong?" I ask.

She smiles, but it's weak. "Nothing. Be patient, Bri. If he does call, go to the gym, do your li'l battle—"

Li'l battle?

"—and come straight home. Don't be hanging out with Pooh's rough behind."

Aunt Pooh's been taking me to the Ring for weeks to get a feel for things. I watched plenty of YouTube videos before that, but there's something about being there. Jay was cool with me going – Dad battled there, and Mr. Jimmy doesn't tolerate any nonsense – but she wasn't crazy about

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

me going with Aunt Pooh. She definitely wasn't crazy about Aunt Pooh calling herself my manager. According to her, "That fool ain't no manager!"

"How you gon' shade your sister like that?" I ask her.

She scoops Cajun rice onto the plates. "I know what she's into. *You* know what she's into."

"Yeah, but she won't let anything happen—"

Pause.

Jay puts fried okra on the plates. Then corn on the cob. She finishes them off with soft, fluffy biscuits. Say what you want about Popeyes' biscuits, but they're neither soft nor fluffy.

This is Popkenchurch.

Popkenchurch is when you buy fried chicken and Cajun rice from Popeyes, biscuits from KFC, and fried okra and corn on the cob from Church's. Trey calls it "pre-cardiac arrest."

But see, Popkenchurch is problematic, and not because of digestive drama that may ensue. Jay only gets it when something bad happens. When she broke the news that her aunt Norma had terminal cancer a couple of years ago, she bought Popkenchurch. When she realized she couldn't get me a new laptop last Christmas, Popkenchurch. When Grandma decided *not* to move out of state to help her sister recover from her stroke, Jay bought Popkenchurch. I've never seen anybody take their aggression out on a chicken thigh quite like she did that day.

This isn't good. "What's wrong?"

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.

"Bri, it's nothing for you to worry a—"

My phone buzzes on the table, and we both jump.

The screen lights up with a number I don't recognize.

It's five-thirty.

Jay smiles. "There's your call."

My hands shake down to my fingertips, but I tap the screen and put the phone to my ear. I force out the "Hello?"

"Is this Bri?" an all too familiar voice asks.

My throat is dry all of a sudden. "Yeah. This is she … her … me." Screw grammar.

"What's up? It's DJ Hype! You ready, baby girl?"

This is the absolute worst time to forget how to speak. I clear my throat. "Ready for what?"

"Are you ready to kill it? Congratulations, you got a spot in the Ring tonight!"

Copyright © [first year of publication] Individual author and/or Walker Books Ltd. All rights reserved.