DEAR JUSTYCE

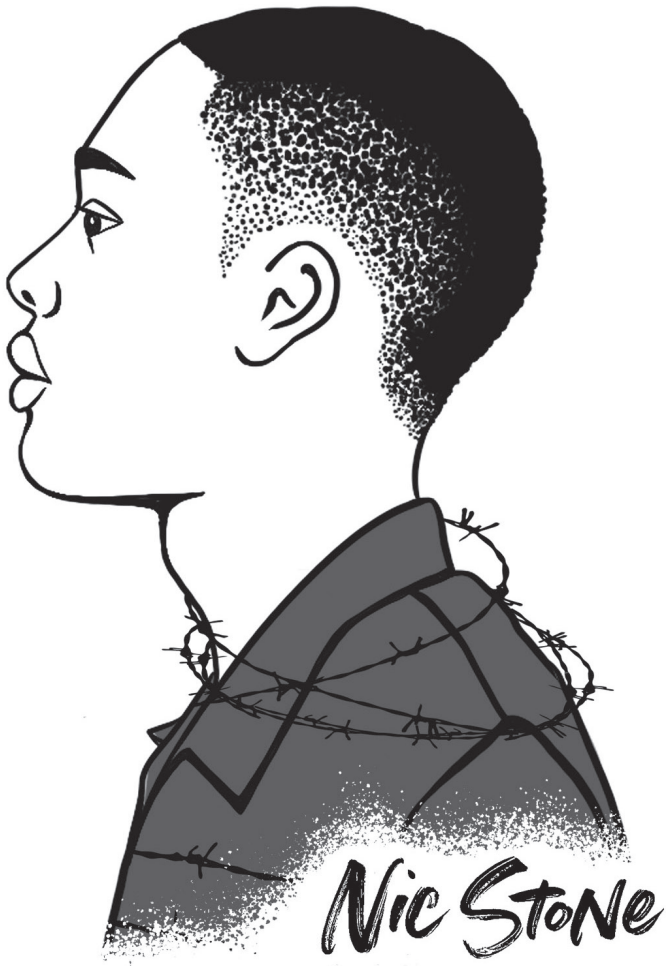
ALSO BY NIC STONE

Dear Martin

Odd One Out

Jackpot

DEAR JUSTYCE



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For Danny Ayers.
You will always be my hero.

Dear Reader,

I didn't *really* intend to write this book.

Sound familiar? It should. It's what I say about writing *Dear Martin*. It's as true now as it was then, though my reasoning's a little different: when I closed the back cover of *that* story, I told myself I was done with Justyce McAllister and the world he inhabited. He'd reached a place of relative peace and come to a deeper understanding of his role as the captain of his own life ship. I felt good, as a book mom, about setting him free to decide where he was headed next and how he'd get there.

But then came the day I received a set of text messages from a pair of boys I'd met *because* of *Dear Martin*—and grown to respect and admire. It went like this (literally):

D: Aye guys.
Z: Whassssuppp
Me: FAVORITES!
D: I've been thinking . . . maybe, just maybe . . . You should make a book about us.
Z: Yessss
D: Like black kids, you know . . . Not like Justyce. Cuz Justyce had hope. He went to a good college.
Me: Tell me more.
D: We don't go to good colleges. We don't

have a perfect family like everybody else.

Z: That's facts.

D: Honestly, we don't even know if we'll live past the age of 18.

Z: This stuff me and D go through every day.

D: You probably can't put it all in a book . . . but mannnnn.

Z: And we got family and friends locked up and everything.

D: I know people will listen. You're our voice.

Since that conversation, I've had the privilege of meeting *many* boys and girls who are very much not like Justyce. Who aren't high-achieving and headed toward blindingly bright futures. Who don't nail their SATs or win debate state championships. I've met them, not at preparatory academies or Ivy League universities, but in "alternative" schools and juvenile detention facilities.

Which made me realize that while Justyce's story might've come to a satisfactory conclusion (for me, at least), there was someone else—a different character—whose story had not: Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr.

If you don't remember him from *Dear Martin* (or haven't read it), don't worry: you will.

He has a story to tell you.



Nic Stone

PART ONE

The End

Snapshot:

Two Boys on
a Brand-New
Playground
(2010)

It didn't take much for Quan to decide he was leaving this time. He feels a little bit bad, yeah: knowing Dasia and Gabe are still in the house makes his stomach hurt the way it always does when he finds himself faced with grown-people problems he can't fix. But Quan's only nine. Running away *alone* is hard enough. Trying to bring a four-year-old sister and a two-year-old brother just isn't gonna work.

He's glad spring has sprung early. Didn't have time to grab a jacket as he fled. He's pretty sure there was too much commotion for anybody to notice, but he takes a few unnecessary turns en route to his destination in case Olaf—that's what Quan calls his mama's "duck-ass boyfriend" (which is what Quan's *dad* calls the guy)—*did* notice Quan's exit.

What Quan is sure of? He couldn't stay there. Not with dude yelling and throwing things the way he was. Quan knows what comes next, and he couldn't watch again. It was hard enough seeing the aftermath bloom in the funny-looking bluey-purple blotches that made Mama's arms and legs look like someone had tossed water balloons full of paint all over her. He couldn't really do anything anyway. Though Olaf (Dwight is the guy's *actual* name) isn't *too,* too big, he's a whole heck of a lot stronger than Quan. The one

time Quan did try to intervene, he wound up with his own funky-colored blotch. Across his lower back from where he hit the dining room table when dude literally threw Quan across the room.

Hiding that bruise from Daddy was nearly impossible. And Quan *had* to hide it because he knew if Daddy found out what really happened when Olaf/Dwight came around . . . well, it wouldn't be good.

So. He made sure Dasia and Gabe were safe in the closet. That was the most he could do.

As Wynwood Heights Park looms up on his left, Quan lifts the hem of his shirt to wipe his face. It's the fourth time he's done it, so there's a wet spot now. He wonders if there will be any dry spots left by the time he gets the tears to stop. Good thing there's no one around to see. He'd never hear the end of it.

He bounces on his toes as his feet touch down on the springy stuff the new playground is built on. There's a sign that says it's ground-up old tires, that the play structures are made from "recycled water bottles and other discarded plastics," and that the entire area is "green," but as Dasia pointed out the last time Mama brought them all here, whoever built the thing didn't know their colors because everything is red, yellow, and blue.

The thought of his sass-mouthed little sister brings fresh tears to Quan's eyes.

He makes a beeline for the rocket ship. It sits off in a

corner separate from everything else, tip pointed at the sky like it could blast off at any moment. Inside the cylindrical base, there are buttons to push and dials to turn and a ladder that leads up to an "observation deck" with a little window. It's Quan's favorite spot in the world—though he'd never admit that to anyone.

When he gets inside, he's so relieved, he collapses against the rounded wall and lets his body slide to the floor like chocolate ice cream down the side of a cone on a hot summer day. His head drops back, and he shuts his eyes and lets the tears flow freely.

But then there's a sound above him. A cough.

The moonlight through the deck window makes the face of the boy staring down at Quan look kinda ghostly. In fact, the longer dude stares without speaking, the more Quan wonders if maybe he *is* a ghost.

"Uhhh . . . hello?"

Dude doesn't reply.

Now Quan is starting to get creeped out. Which makes him mad. This is supposed to be the one place in the world he can *relax*. Where he's not looking over his shoulder or being extra cautious. Where he can close his eyes and count down from ten and imagine shooting into space, far, far away from everything and everyone.

"Yo, why you lookin' at me like that?" Quan spits, each word sharp-tipped and laced with the venom of his rage.

"Oh, umm . . ." The other boy's eyes drop to his hands.

He picks at the skin around his thumbs. Something Quan does sometimes that gets him yelled at.

Hmm.

The boy goes on: "I'm sorry. I just . . . I wasn't expecting anybody else to come in here."

"Oh."

The boys are quiet for a minute and then: "I'm Justyce, by the way."

Justyce. Quan's heard that name before . . . "You that smart kid they was talking about on the morning announcements at school? Won some contest or something?"

Justyce again doesn't reply.

"Hellooooo?" Quan says.

"You gonna make fun of me now?"

"Huh?"

Now Justyce looks out the observation window. Quan wonders what he's seeing.

"I wish they would've never made that announcement. Winning an academic bowl isn't 'cool.' Everybody just makes fun of me."

Quan shrugs. "Maybe they just jealous cuz they ain't never won nothin'."

Silence falls over the boys again, but this time, it's not so uncomfortable. In fact, the longer Quan sits there with Justyce above him, the better he feels. Kinda nice not being *totally* alone. Which makes him wonder . . .

"You're a fifth grader, right? You not gonna get in trouble for being out this late?"

"Oh, I will," Justyce says.

It makes Quan laugh.

"I snuck out," Justyce continues. "But it's not the first time, and I'm sure it won't be the last. I think my mama knows I'll always come back."

"Wish *I* didn't have to go back . . ." It slips out, and at first Quan regrets it. But then he realizes his chest is a little looser. This one time at Daddy's house, Quan watched a movie about this big ship that hit an iceberg and sunk, and there was this one scene where the main lady was being tied into this thing that went around her stomach and laced up the back like a sneaker. He later learned it was called a *corset*, but that's what comes into Quan's head when he thinks about his life. "My mom's boyfriend is a asshole," he continues.

The laces loosen a little more.

"He's my little brother and sister's dad, so like I *kinda* get why my mama keeps dealing with him . . ." Little looser. "But I hate him. Every time he come around, he mad about somethin', and he takes it out on my mom."

"Sounds familiar," Justyce says.

"And I be wanting to stick around for my brother and sister but—wait." Quan looks up at Justyce, whose chin is now propped in his hand.

All eyes (and ears) on Quan.

"What'd you say?" Quan asks.

"Hmm?"

"Just a second ago."

"Oh. I said that sounds familiar."

"Whatchu mean?"

Justyce sighs. "My dad was in the military and went to Afghanistan. Ever since he came back, he's been . . . different. He drinks a lot and sometimes has these 'episodes,' my mom calls them. Out of nowhere he'll start yelling and throwing stuff." Now Justyce isn't looking at Quan anymore. "He hits her sometimes." Justyce swipes at his eyes.

Quan stands up. "You ever come here during the day?"

"Occasionally." Jus sniffles. "Sorry for crying."

"Man, whatever. Now I see how you won that 'academic' thingy."

"Huh?"

"What kinda fifth grader says *occasionally*?" Quan shakes his head. "I'm gonna head home and check on my brother and sister," he says. "You should go check on your mom."

The boys meet eyes, and understanding passes between them.

"I'll see you around." Quan ducks and slips through the rocket's arched entryway.

He's almost back at the edge of the rubber-floored playground when—

"Hey! Hold up!"

Quan turns around to find Justyce is headed in his direction.

"You didn't tell me your name," Justyce says, out of breath.

Quan smiles—"Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr."—and lifts his hand. "Call me Quan."

"It was real nice to meet you, Quan," Justyce says, smacking his palm against Quan's and then hooking fingers. "Even, uhh . . . despite the circumstances."

Now Quan laughs. "You're ten years old, man. Loosen up."

"Sorry."

"Don't be." Quan shoves his fists in his pockets. It's gotten cooler. "Nice to meet you too, Justyce."

Quan turns on the heel of his well-worn Jordans and heads home.

1

Doomed

Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr. remembers the night everything changed. He'd fallen asleep on the leather sectional in Daddy's living room while watching *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* (the movie), and was dreaming about Count Olaf—who'd gotten a tan, it seemed, and looked suspiciously like his mama's "boyfriend," Dwight—falling into a pit of giant yellow snakes like the one from Montgomery Montgomery's reptile room. Screaming bloody murder as he got sucked down into the scaly, slithery quicksand.

Quan's pretty sure he was smiling in his sleep.

But then there was a ***BOOM*** that startled him so bad, he jolted awake and fell to the floor.

Which wound up being a good thing.

Next thing Quan knew, more police officers than he could count were pouring into the house with guns drawn.

He stayed down. Hidden.

Wouldn't've been able to get up if he tried, he was so scared.

There was a commotion over his head—Daddy's room.

Lots of thumping. Bumping. A yell (Daddy's?). Muffled shouting.

Get down! Put your hands in the air–

Oww, man! Not so tight, you tryna break my arm?

Wham. *BAM!*

Walls shaking.

Was the ceiling gonna fall?

Then the tumult shifted to the left. He heard Daddy's door bang against the wall, then what sounded like eight tons of giant bricks tumbling down the stairs.

Slow down, man! Damn–

Keep your mouth shut!

Quan closed his eyes.

Chill out, man! I'm not resisti–

There was a sharp pain in Quan's shoulder as his arm was suddenly wrenched in a direction he was sure it wasn't supposed to go. A thick arm wrapped around his midsection so tight it squeezed all the air out of him . . . or maybe it all flew out because of the speed at which his body left the ground.

He couldn't even scream. Looking back, *that* was the scariest part. That his voice was gone. That he couldn't cry out. That he'd lost all control of his body and surroundings and couldn't even make a sound to let the world know he wasn't feelin' it.

It's how he feels now as he jolts awake in his cell at the Fulton Regional Youth Detention Center, unable to breathe.

Quan tries to inhale. And can't. It's like that cop's still got him wrapped up and is squeezing too tight. No space for his lungs to expand.

Can't.

Breathe.

The darkness is so thick, he feels like he's drowning in it. Maybe he is. Maybe Quan can't draw breath because the darkness has solidified. Turned viscous, dense and sticky and heavy. That would also explain why he can't lift his arms or swing his legs over the edge of this cotton-lined cardboard excuse for a "bed" that makes his neck and back hurt night after night.

What Quan wouldn't give to be back in his queen-sized, memory foam, personal cloud with crazy soft flannel sheets in his bedroom at Daddy's house. If he's going to die in a bed—because he's certainly about to die—he wishes it could be *that* bed instead of this one.

He shuts his eyes and more pieces of that night fly at him:

Daddy yelling

Don't hurt my son!

before being shoved out the front door.

The sound of glass breaking as the unfinished cup of ginger ale Quan left on the counter toppled to the floor. His foot hit it as the officer with his dumb, muscly arm crushing Quan's rib cage carried Quan through the kitchen like Quan was some kind of doll baby.

The sudden freezing air as Quan was whisked outside in

his thin Iron Man pajamas with no shoes or jacket . . . and the subsequent strange warmth running down Quan's legs when he saw Just. How. Many.

Police cars.

There were.

Outside.

Barking dogs, straining against leashes. A helicopter circling overhead, its spotlight held steady on the team of men dragging Daddy toward the group of cop vehicles parked haphazardly and blocking the street.

Quan had counted six when his eyes landed on the van no less than *five* officers were wrestling his dad into.

Wrestling because Daddy kept trying to look back over his shoulder to see what was happening with Quan. He was shouting.

It's gonna be okay, Junior!

Get in the goddam van!

It'll all be fi–

One of the officers brought an elbow down on the back of Daddy's head. Quan watched as Daddy's whole body went limp.

That's when Quan started

Screaming.

Two of the officers climbed into the back of the van and dragged Daddy's body inside the way Quan had seen Daddy drag the giant bags of sand he'd bought for the sandbox he built in the backyard when Quan was younger.

Kicking.

Cut it out, kid!

Wait . . . are you *wet*?

They rolled Daddy to his back, and one of the officers knelt beside him and put two fingers up under his jaw. He nodded at the other officer, who then hopped down from the back of the van and shut the doors.

Flailing.

Screaming.

Kicking.

The taillights of the van glowed red and Quan wished everything would *STOP*. He was sobbing and twisting, and the officer holding him squeezed tighter and locked Quan's arms down.

As the van pulled off, Quan screamed so loud, he was sure his mama would hear him back home some twenty miles away. She would hear him and she would come and she would stop the van and she would get Daddy out and she would get Quan. All the blue-suited Dad-stealing monsters and blue-lit cars would *POOF!* disappear and everything would go back to normal.

Better yet, Mama would bring Dwight-the-black-Olaf, and she'd toss *him* in the back of the van in Daddy's place. And they'd lock *him* up in a snake-filled cell and throw away the key.

Quan screamed until all the scream was outta him. Then he inhaled. And he screamed some more.

His own voice was all he could hear until—

"Hey! You put that young man *down*! Have you lost your ever-lovin' mind?!"

Then the officer holding him was saying

Ow! Hey!

And

Hey! Stop that!

And

Ma'am, you are assaulting a police officer–

"I said put him *DOWN*. Right now!"

Ma'am, I can't–

All right! All right!

The grip on Quan's body loosened. His feet touched down on the porch floor just as a wrinkled hand wrapped around his biceps and a thin arm wrapped around his lower back, a sheet of paper in hand. "You come on here with me, Junior," a familiar voice said.

Ma'am, he can't go with you. Until further notice, he's a ward of the state–

"Like hell he is! You can call his mama to come get him, but until she arrives, he'll be staying at *my* house." The woman shoved the paper into the officer's face. "You see this? This is a *legally binding* document. Read it aloud."

Ma'am–

"I said read it aloud!"

Okay, okay!

(The officer cut his eyes at Quan before beginning. Then sighed.)

"In the event of the arrest of Vernell LaQuan Banks Sr., Mrs. Edna Pavlostathis is named temporary guardian of Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr. until . . ."

But that was all Quan needed to hear. (Did Daddy *know* he would be snatched away from his son in the dead of night?)

"Come on, honey," she said, and as she ushered Quan away from the tornado of blue—lights, cars, uniforms, eyes—that'd ripped through everything he knew as normal, everything clicked into place.

Mrs. Pavlostathis. The fireball old lady who lived next door to Daddy.

"Let's head inside and I'll go over to your dad's to grab you some fresh clothes so you can get cleaned up. How dare those so-called *officers* treat you that way. The *nerve* of those whites—"

She trailed off. Or at least Quan thinks she did. He can't remember her saying anything else. He *does* remember thinking that under different circumstances, that last statement would've made him smile. He'd known Mrs. Pavlostathis since he was seven years old—she was close to eighty and used to babysit him when Daddy had to make "emergency runs" on weekends Quan was there. Despite her skin tone, Mrs. P let everyone know she was *Greek*, not white.

She was also one of Daddy's clients (*"A little ganja's good for my glaucoma, Junior"*) and, Quan had noticed over the years, the only neighbor who didn't look at him funny—or avoid looking at all—when Quan would play outside or when he and Daddy would drive through the neighborhood in Daddy's BMW.

It was something Mama always grumbled about when she'd drive the forty minutes out into the burbs to drop Quan off. *I don't know why your daddy wants to live way out here with all these white folks. They're gonna call the cops on his ass one day, and it'll be over . . .*

As he and Mrs. P made their way over to her house, Quan wondered if Mama's prediction was coming true.

And in that moment: he hated his mama.

For saying that. Wishing the worst on Daddy.

For staying with duck-ass Dwight.

Putting up with his antics.

For working so much.

For not being there.

Especially right then.

"I'll run ya a salt bath," Mrs. P said as they stepped into her house, and fragrant warmth wrapped around him like a hug from a fluffy incense stick with arms. "I know you're not a little kid anymore, but it'll do ya some good. I just made some dolmas, and there's some of those olives you like, the ones with the creamy feta inside, in the fridge. Put something in your belly. I'm sure you're starving."

In truth, food was the furthest thing from Quan's mind . . . but one didn't say *no* to Mrs. P. So he did as he was told. He stuffed himself with Mrs. P's world-famous (if you let her tell it) dolmas—a blend of creamy lemon-ish rice and ground lamb rolled up into a grape leaf. He ate his weight in giant feta-filled olives.

And when the salt bath was ready, he stripped down and climbed into the fancy claw-foot tub in Mrs. P's guest bathroom.

Quan closed his eyes.

Swirling police lights and Daddy's collapsing body flashed behind them.

Van doors shutting.

Taillights disappearing.

Would Daddy go to prison?

For how long?

What would happen now?

Quan wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

So he sank.

It was easy at first, holding his breath and letting the water envelop him completely. Even felt nice.

But then his lungs started to burn. Images of Dasia and Gabe popped into his head. He remembered telling Gabe he'd teach him how to play Uno when he got back from Daddy's house this time. Little dude was four now and ready to learn.

Quan's head swam.

Dasia would be waiting for Quan to polish her toenails purple. That was the prize he'd promised her if she aced her spelling test. And she did.

His chest felt on the verge of bursting, and everything in his head was turning white.

And Mama . . .

Dwight—

Air came out of Quan's nose with so much force, he'd swear it shot him up out of the water. As his senses returned to normal, he heard water hit tile and the bathroom at Mrs. P's house swam back into focus.

He took a breath.

Well, more like a breath took him. He gasped as air flooded his lungs, shoving him back from the brink of No Return.

It's the same type of breath that's overtaking him now.

Here.

In his cell.

And as oxygen—a little stale from the cinder block walls and laced with the tang of iron—surges down his throat and kicks the invisible weight off him, Quan knows:

He won't die now just like he didn't die then.

He can breathe.

January 12

Dear Justyce,

Look, I'm not even gonna lie: this shit is weird. I don't write letters to my mama, but I'm writing one to you?

Smh.

(Wait, can I even write that? This ain't a text message . . .)

(See? Weird.)

(You better not tell nobody I wrote this.)

Anyway, I had this dream last night and when I woke up, the first thing I saw was that notebook you gave me with all the Martin Luther King letters in it.

Sidenote: I really do appreciate you popping by to see ya boy before you headed back to that fancy college you go to. Ol' smarty pants ass. But for real, it was good to see you. It, uhh . . . did a lot for me. Gets more than a little lonely in here, and I don't get many visitors, so you coming through was—well, that was real nice of you, dawg.

Now back to this notebook you left. At first I thought it was wack ("THOSE" black guys, huh?), but the more I read, the more interested I got. Like it was a lot of shit in there about Manny—my own cousin!—that I didn't know because I ain't really KNOW him, know him. That was kinda wild.

And YOU! Man, we got way more in common than I woulda thought.

It was one letter in the notebook that made me wanna write this one to you. Not sure what happened (you mentioned doing the "wrong thing"), but there's a line you wrote: "Those assholes can't seem to care about being offensive, so why should I give a damn about being agreeable?"

I don't know what it is, but that shit really got me.

I've never told anybody about the night my dad got arrested. It was a couple years after you and me met in the rocket ship. I was eleven. Cops busted up in the house in the dead of night like they owned the place and just . . . took him.

And I haven't seen him since. They gave him 25 years in prison.

It's only one other time in my life I ever been that scared, J. It all happened too fast for me to figure out what I could do. I think deep down, I knew he was prolly going away for a long-ass time—I was fully aware of his "occupation," and while I was sure the cops wouldn't find any contraband in his actual house (he was real careful about that), he dealt in more than just green, and the net was wide, so it was only a matter of time.

I really miss him, though.

I dream about the whole scenario a lot. Did last night, in fact. And when I woke up and looked at the date? Today is the sixth anniversary.

Shit hit me harder than it usually does. Probably because it also means I've been up in here for almost sixteen months. It's the longest stretch I've ever done, and I don't even have a trial date yet. I do my best to just cruise—not really think about where I am and what it's actually like to be here. But today I couldn't help but notice how bad the food is. How heavy the giant iron doors are, and how . . . defeated, I guess, everyone up in here seems, even though a few of the others talk a good game about getting out.

I keep thinking, like: What would my dad say if he could see me now? How disappointed would he be?

Yeah, what he did for a living wasn't exactly "statutory," as he used to say. But if there's one thing he was hell-bent on, it was me NOT ending up like him. We talking about a dude who used to drop my ass at the library when he had to make some of his runs. (Head librarian had real bad anxiety and was one of Dad's clients so she took good care of me.) Don't nobody know this, but I used to eat up the Lemony Snicket "Unfortunate Events" joints like they were Skittles. You ever read those? Them shits go hard. Kinda wish I had my collection here.

Anyway, that was all him. Vernell LaQuan Banks Sr. He's the reason they tested me for Accelerated Learners and I wound up in that Challenge Math class with you.

He wanted me to do good. To go far and be better.

But then he was just . . . gone.

(Sorry for getting sentimental, but like I said before: you better not tell nobody I wrote all this. Or that I used to read books about little rich white kids.)

That night he got arrested turned everything upside down. I knew things were about to get bad because my dad had been like the duct tape holding our raggedy shit together. He paid for a lot and gave my mom money, and he really was the reason I stayed out of trouble. The minute that van drove away with him in it, I felt . . . doomed.

It's why I stopped talking to you. Everybody else too, but especially you. I woulda never admitted this (honestly don't know why I'm admitting it now . . .), but I kinda looked up to you. Yeah, you were only a year older and you were dorky as hell, but you had your shit together in a way I wanted mine to be.

I knew if I could just be like you, my dad would be proud of me.

Seeing what you wrote in that post-whatever-the-hell-set-you-off letter . . . I dunno, man. If YOU felt that way, maybe everything my dad tried to push me toward really <u>was</u> pointless.

Don't really matter now anyway. I'm prolly gettin' WAY more time than my dad did.

Guess it's whatever.

I don't even know if Imma send this. Maybe I should. You better write back, though. Cuz otherwise I ain't never writing you another letter again.

Got me over here pouring my heart out and shit.

Smh.

(There I go again!)

Later,

~~Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr.~~ QUAN

P.S.: I know you already knew my government name, but don't ever call me by it.

P.S.S. (or is it P.P.S.? Yo, you ever heard that song "O.P.P."? I love that song.): REMINDER—don't tell NOBODY I wrote this!