

FIRST NOVEL
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Ryan was dead. And I was a murderer.

**The
End
of
the
Line**

ANGELA CERRITO

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To Terry

If you kill someone, you are a piece of murdering scum. When I saw his body all twisted and still, I knew . . . I knew my life was worthless. It didn't matter what Dad said or how hard Mom cried. There was nothing they could do.

It didn't matter that my teachers tried to pretend nothing had changed when I went back to school. "Nice to see you," they cooed. But I could tell by the way their voices got squeaky that they didn't believe a word from their own lips. I could tell by the way their eyes swept over me quick. They looked at my feet or over the top of my head, because they didn't want to look into the eyes of a murderer.

GREAT OAKS SCHOOL PRISON

They call this place Great Oaks School, but it must be a prison. I guess my parents have finally given up on me. They've locked me up. I've been trapped in this room for hours, just me and a school desk with a stack of paper. That's all, except a yellow pencil making a blister on my finger.

A key turns in the lock and the door opens. I'm not surprised to see Mr. Lester, the guy who took my backpack, my belt, my shoes, and even my socks before he pulled my hands behind my back and marched me into this room.

"In the chair," barks Mr. Lester.

I spring up from the floor and leap into the chair. He walks around the desk slowly, like he can't decide what to do next.

"Make a list," he says. "Tell me who you are."

I pick up the pencil and write *Robbie* on the top of my paper and slide it to him.

"What the hell kind of a list is that? Do you know what a list is?"

"Yeah."

"'Yeah' is not a word. Do you know what a list is?"

"Yes."

"Is one word a list?"

"No."

"You can write, can't ya?"

"Yes, sir."

“Good.” Mr. Lester picks up my paper and crumples it into a ball. He waves a few papers in front of my face. “Can you count, too?”

“Yes, sir.”

He puts a piece of paper on my desk and glares at me. He raises his eyebrows—a clear sign that he’s impatient and I’m screwing up again.

“One,” I say.

Mr. Lester thumps another paper on my desk.

“Two.”

He keeps slapping papers until I say, “Five.”

He holds his hand on top of the last sheet. “You hungry?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, write me a list. Tell me who you are. Fill up all five of these pages and I’ll see about getting you somethin’ to eat.” He circles around the room keeping his eyes on me every second, and I fill up those pages as fast as I can.

Robert Sander Thompson

Robbie

Robert

Rob

Robbie Thompson

Robbie S. Thompson

R Thompson

Bobby T

Mr. Lester leans over me and swipes my papers to the floor. “I guess you aren’t as hungry as I thought.” He walks out of the room and closes the door without even a glance in my direction. He locks the door and shakes it. The clank of the metal bolted tight confirms that I am in some sort of jail.

It’s about time.

RIVER FALLS

Ms. Lacey didn't even have time to tell us the new kid's name before he dashed to the back of the room, bumped into my chair, and crawled under the desk next to me. Under the desk! Just like Nicholas Spike used to do when he wet his pants in first grade, but this was sixth grade!

"It's time for math! It's time for fun," Ms. Lacey sang. She always sang when we changed from one subject to the next. We all stared at the new kid, so Ms. Lacey sang louder. "It's time for math. It's time for fun," and added a new line, "Robbie, please invite Ryan to come."

I put my book on the middle of his desk and opened it to chapter twelve. The entire classroom was quiet, even the girls. I bent down under the desk and tried to get a good look at the skinny kid. He was curled in a ball with his elbow pointing at me like a weapon. One of his shoes had a hole in the bottom.

"Hi," I said to the back of his shaggy blond head. It smelled like lemons under the desk. "We're going to do math now. Sit in your chair. Okay?"

He didn't move. Didn't make a sound. The math lesson went on without Ryan. Ms. Lacey tried to coax him out for observation circle, music, lunch, and even for recess. Ryan crunched himself into a ball and held onto the leg of the desk like his life depended on it.

Everyone tried to peek into the room at Ryan during recess.

“He’s a freak,” said Dylan.

“Can’t even talk. Bet he’s gonna cry,” said Colin.

“Cryin’ Ryan,” said Tyler. A few of the kids started chanting, “Cryin’ Ryan! Cryin’ Ryan!” In two seconds a crowd pressed against the window for a look. Our principal, Mr. Biggoth—we call him Big Mouth—walked into our room and started waving his arms and blabbing to Ryan. Then he saw us watching and pulled the blinds closed right in our faces.

A minute later, he was tugging Ryan’s arm and pulling him out to the playground. Ryan jerked away and Big Mouth almost lost his balance. As soon as Big Mouth let go, Ryan curled into a ball and leaned against the wall.

Big Mouth bent over him and huffed, “At recess, we play outside. That’s that!” He stomped off.

Every kid on the playground stood around Ryan. A few started to chant. “Cryin’ Ryan! Cryin’ Ryan!”

I went along. “Cry-in! Ry-an! Cry-in! Ry-an!” It’s easy to do what everyone else is doing even when it doesn’t exactly feel right.

Couldn’t they see he wasn’t crying? There was a pink mark around his upper arm where Big Mouth had grabbed him. Kids were calling him a crybaby, and he still *wasn’t* crying.

I looked over at Dylan. He was moving his mouth, but no sound was coming out. I wasn’t the only one who didn’t want to chant.

I grabbed Tyler’s basketball and squatted next to Ryan. “Wanna play?”

He turned his head and spoke under his arm. “I want them to shut up!”

“Go away,” I said. No one moved. “Come on. Just for a minute.”

Tyler held out his hands. “Gimme my ball back.”

I tossed it over his head and watched the guys go after it and start dividing up into teams. Most of the girls stepped back a little bit, but Anna Beth Carter and her giggle girls stayed close.

“Go on,” I told her.

“It’s a free country.”

“Just go, will you?”

“He’s not your property, Robbie Thompson.”

At least no one was chanting anymore. Anna Beth could be ignored; I’d been ignoring her all my life.

I tapped Ryan on the shoulder. “I kind of suck at basketball,” I told him. “I can run fast, get away from the group. But when I get the ball, I miss most of the time.”

Ryan didn’t say a word.

“If you want to play . . . it’s fun. No one cares if you’re good or not. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Ryan looked up at me like he hated me more than anything in the world. His voice was low. “I’m not afraid of anything.”

It sounded like a dare.

GREAT OAKS ~~SCHOOL~~ PRISON

I wait. And wait. Brick walls. Steel door. One chair. One desk. One pencil.

Mr. Lester finally comes back. He hands me water in a tiny paper cup. "There's lunch."

I drink it down in one gulp.

"You'll have the same for dinner." He opens the door to go.

"Wait!"

He stops but doesn't turn in my direction.

"Are you locking me in here?"

"Yes."

"Where's my bed?"

Mr. Lester turns, crosses his arms, and stares me down. "You'll get a bed when it's time to sleep," he says.

"You have to feed me."

He smirks. "Really? Why?"

"You just have to—I'm a person."

"I didn't see that on your list," he says, and walks out the door. The door thuds against the frame as he locks it.

A single sheet of paper slides underneath.

RIVER FALLS

After school, Ryan followed me home. I walked fast; Ryan stayed a few steps behind. I crossed the street. He followed. I crossed back. Ryan did, too. So I slowed to let him catch up with me and tried to talk to him.

“Where are you from? Do you like sports? When did you move here? Do you have brothers and sisters?” Ryan didn’t answer. I told him, “Kids at school aren’t usually like that. You’re just . . . no one knows you yet, that’s all.” Still he didn’t say anything. “Don’t wear yourself out talking too much.”

“I don’t talk too much. I hardly talk at all.”

When I got to my subdivision, I didn’t turn in. I didn’t want Ryan following me right into my house. I walked past Sunny Springs and turned on the back road, trekking all the way around the golf course. It took more than an hour to make it to the front entrance again. Ryan stuck with me.

He turned with me up the path to Sunny Springs subdivision.

“Do you live here, too?”

Ryan didn’t say a word. He just followed close. My shadow.

At the gatehouse, old Eddie tipped his head toward Ryan. “This kid with you?” They checked everyone who came and went at Sunny Springs, even kids.

I wanted to say no. But I shrugged and said, “I guess.”

My house was quiet. No babies screaming. No two-year-olds

eating paint. No after-school kids blaring the TV. Mom's daycare was just a big empty playroom.

"Robbie, where were you?" said Mom.

"We were just walking." I looked over at Ryan and gave Mom a help-me-get-rid-of-him look.

She didn't help. He followed her into the kitchen, not even a half step behind. He was her shadow now.

"Robbie, come show your friend—"

"He's not my friend."

Mom glared at me.

"I mean," I said, "we just met. He's the new kid, Ryan."

"It's not easy being the new kid." Mom smiled at Ryan and he scooted closer to her. I wanted to ask him why he didn't just crawl under the table.

"Ryan," said Mom, "I'm sorry I can't invite you to dinner, but we're having a family meeting tonight."

I froze. There were only two kinds of family meetings at the Thompson household. They each lasted for one sentence. One kind, the almost good kind: Your father and I would like you to know that you may be having a brother or a sister, but it is too soon to get our hopes up. The other, the very bad kind: Your father and I would like you to know that we're not going to have a baby; it wasn't meant to be.

Mom handed me four plates. I set a plate down at Dad's place and studied Mom. She zipped across the kitchen with choppy steps.

"Who's coming for dinner?"

Mom turned from the counter with a handful of silverware and shook it at me like jingle bells. "Robbie, please. Just set the table."

I set a plate down and moved around the table.

"What'll you eat for dinner?" asked Ryan. I almost dropped the plate. He spoke! He looked down at his feet. "So I'll know for next time."

The phone rang. Mom snatched it before it finished the first ring. "Okay. What time? You have to come tonight."

Mom put the phone in the middle of the table, like it was a vase of flowers, and began dealing the silverware next to the plates. She slapped the forks and spoons down the way Grandma deals cards when she's losing.

"Ryan, let's call your parents. As it turns out, you're welcome to join us for dinner after all." She smiled at him. She gave me a worried look and said, "We'll have our meeting after dinner."

The phone rang again and Mom swooped down on it. "Robbie, get the glasses," she said. She held the phone out from her ear and shook her head. Grandma's fast squeaky voice filled the room. Every once in a while Mom added a few comments. "I know, Mom." "Yes, he is your son."

Grandma was probably complaining about Uncle Grant again. She didn't like Christie, Uncle Grant's girlfriend who was sometimes his fiancée. And she hated that he worked as a delivery guy. I set the glasses on the table. Ryan stood at the sink looking our dish soap like it was the most amazing thing in the world.

Mom said, "We all know what you think of the war." Mom half begged and half warned Grandma, "Don't you dare call the news or even think about trying to phone the president." She set the phone on its base and said, "That woman drives me crazy!"

"What was that all about?" I asked.

Mom turned to Ryan and said, "This phone hasn't stopped ringing long enough for me to call your parents. They must be worried sick."

Ryan dug a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Mom. "My grandparents." Mom took his paper, and as she dialed the phone I headed to my room, alone.

GREAT OAKS ~~SCHOOL~~ PRISON

I make a new list:

I am...
I am a person
I am hungry
I am a boy
I am 13 years old
I am a son, a grandson, a nephew
I am sick of this place
I am angry
I am thirsty
I am skinny
I am a runner
I am a *kitter* murderer

I push the list under the door and lie flat on my belly. I hold my breath and squish myself against the floor, straining to see. Mr. Lester will find my list. He has to.

I can't see anything, not even a sliver of light. I roll onto my back, close my eyes, and imagine Mr. Lester bending down for my paper, reading my list, nodding, smiling. *No, that's not right, Mr. Lester wouldn't smile.*

Please read my list and bring me food.

I can think only of food. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes,

biscuits, applesauce, hamburgers, steak, ribs, corn on the cob. My stomach aches. I curl on the cold floor remembering every meal I've ever eaten.

The door finally opens and smacks right against the top of my head. I sit up. Mr. Lester stands with something square and white in his hand.

"I brought you a bologna sandwich," he says, and plops it on my desk.