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Written on March 3, 2014 at 8:42 am by [Editors](#)

Bang

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By **K.D. Van Brunt**



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As I approach the classroom door, a rush of adrenaline courses through me, and my hands begin to shake. In three strides I'm out the door, pushing my way into the hallway, where I lose myself among the mass of students rushing to their next class. *I've done it! Easy money. I'm actually good at this!* In the fifteen years I have been alive, I haven't been good at anything until now, not like my older sister, Kara, who is great at pretty much everything.

I turn a corner and make for a bank of lockers against the far wall where I see Carlos, his shoulder length brown hair looking slightly disheveled. He has on his trademark white undershirt and black jean jacket. With him are his friends, *the Crew* they call themselves. Serge, with his black do-rag and sunglasses, nods his head as Carlos talks to him. Tray and Daniel stand nearby, glowering at the kids passing by, as if challenging them to make eye contact. It's crowded in the hallway, but most know to give the Crew a very wide berth.

"Aimee," Carlos says to me. "Well?" He pushes himself away from the lockers, motioning me closer. He's tall, but not as tall as Serge, who towers over all of us. And even though Carlos is no lightweight, he isn't as muscular as Tray, who's built like a truck. Carlos is wiry and thin and the only thing soft about him is his auburn hair. A few delicate curls nestle in the hollow of his throat

as he leans towards me. I'd kill to have hair like that.

I look up into his brown eyes that stare back at me with feral intensity and pull the white envelope out from under my shirt. I hand it to him. I don't know what it is about him that sucks me in and pulls me to him. It's not looks really. I think it's the fact that he wants me, and the fact that no else seems to want anything to do with me.

Carlos arches an eyebrow up in surprise before taking the envelope. He turns to face his locker so no one can see him as he checks out the contents. He stuffs the envelope into his jacket pocket and turns back to face me. He winks at me and a huge grin spreads across his face, and then he tousles my already mussed up hair.

"Three hundred twenty five dollars," I say.

Serge whistles and gives me a punch to my shoulder, something I've seen Carlos do to Serge a hundred times.

"Not bad, Aimee," Carlos says in a deadpan voice, as if decidedly unimpressed with me. But then he punches me too and bursts out, "You did it, girl! You freaking did it! You got the bills, girl."

He gives me a high five before drawing me in for a crushing hug. I feel the others clapping me on the back. Then he kisses my forehead, and I can smell smoke on his breath. When he's not skipping class or hanging out in the hallways, Carlos spends most of his time smoking Marlboros in the unofficial designated smoking area across the street from the school. In the few weeks since I've begun hanging out with Carlos, I've tried three times to figure out the art of smoking a cigarette without coughing my insides out, but I've failed each time. I'll try it again – next time in private. I need to master this crucial skill if Carlos is going to take me seriously.

"So, tell us what happened," Tray says.

"It was a snap," I say. "When class ended, Tisdale was helping out that new kid. I walked up to her desk like I was turning in my homework. It was in her bottom desk drawer just like Carlos said."

"Did anyone see you?" Serge asks.

"Nope," I say, shaking my head. "The purse was sitting there wide open; all I had to do was slide my hand in and grab the envelope. Easy peasy."

The act of stealing was surprisingly simple and fast, but the build-up was a bitch, as I wrestled with whether to go through with it or not. I've never done anything like this before. I sweated through deaf and dumb Tisdale's Earth Science class, trying to run every scenario of how this might play out, and what I would do in each case. I imagined that this was like Kara's approach when she plays softball. Before each pitch, decide exactly where you will go with the ball if it's hit to you. I can't take too much credit, I know. Tisdale is at least sixty years old. She can't hear. She stutters. And perhaps her worst flaw . . . she trusts.

Carlos told me before homeroom that Daniel had seen Tisdale that morning put the cash in an envelope and stuff it in her purse. He told me exactly where I would find her purse. This was the day I finally got my shot to earn my cred with the Crew and with Carlos. And I did it. I feel triumphant.

"You freakin' rock, Weathers." This comes from Daniel, who has now joined us.

"I think we're going to have a new member of the Crew soon, real soon," Carlos says in a satisfied voice.

This wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear. I wanted to hear that I now *was* a member of the Crew. But it's a beginning. Acceptance, belonging. I lost these things last year. Soon, I can have them back. I feel closer to these guys than my own dysfunctional family, or more precisely, my dysfunctional mother and stepfather, Greg. It's because of them that I find myself a thousand miles away from the high school I attended last year. My parents decided they needed to put that much space between them, yet they still manage to fight, usually when child support is due.

Even Tray throws a compliment my way, sort of. "Pretty good for a freshman."

"I'm a sophomore," I remind him, though I know I don't look the part. I'm scrawny and flat chested; I look malnourished, despite all the chocolate milk I drink. So, I wear baggy hoodies. I tell myself it's not about looks, but in the pit of my stomach I know it's

always about looks. Take my sister. She's athletic and has an unfairly perfect body, so no surprise when she became best friends with half the school by our second week here.

As I push away from Carlos to head to my next class, I see Emily up ahead. During the initial week or two at my new school, she helped me and showed me around. Now, though, I watch her eyes scrunch up when she looks my way, as if she's seen something vile. She shakes her head and turns to one of her letterman guy friends and murmurs something. I pick up a few words from Emily and her friends. "Gang slut." "Loser."

Carlos and Daniel step forward, but I push in front, holding them back. I shove Emily hard and she falls back against a bank of lockers. Carlos and Daniel now stand beside me ready to fight Emily's lettermen entourage. I feel a surge of power.

"What did you say?" I demand. Then I flash the switchblade that Carlos gave me last week, but I don't flip the blade open. I just show them the imminent possibility of stainless steel. It's enough. The football players edge nervously away. Hell, they want to play on Friday night, and even Emily is not worth risking that.

I see fear in Emily's eyes now – not disgust. She winces at the sight of the knife and inhales raggedly. Then I tilt my head toward the hallway commanding her to leave in that direction.

"Get out of here," I say when she hesitates. She opens her mouth to say something, thinks better of it, and slips away. I walk to my next class, exhilarated and with my hoodie pulled up over my head. I try to stroll nonchalantly down the hall, but my hands are shaking like my Gram's palsied arms. Daniel and Carlos saunter up along side me then, both putting their arms around me. This feels good. Kids look at me sideways, but few meet my eyes. It's weird, but kind of cool. I slip my arm around Carlos's waist, hoping that he will do more than put his arm on my shoulder.

In between classes my iPhone vibrates. Kara. She probably heard what happened and wants to give me an earful. My iPhone offers me the option of decline or answer. I press the decline button. Sorry, I'm so unavailable, Kara.

Later, after PE, I head for the lunchroom. I want to talk to Carlos about tonight. He says we're to meet at Finneran's variety store for a special five-finger shopping spree. I hope this is my last test. Do this one last thing and I'm undeniably Crew. But Carlos wants me to stop by his HQ afterwards, which consists of an abandoned building, dusty and forgotten and private. I think I know what he has in mind, and it makes me uneasy. *Don't think about it*, I tell myself fiercely. *It's not that big a deal. You really like him after all, right?* The question echoes in my brain unanswered.

As I stride through the hallway, someone grabs my arm, fingers digging painfully into my flesh.

"What the hell are you doing, Aimee?" Kara says, dragging me roughly into the bathroom and shoving me against one of the stalls. "You pulled a knife for Christ sake!"

I want to take a swing at her with one of my new fighting moves, but I can't. She's my sister—my perfect sister who has no idea what it's like to be me. I do manage to push her hand off my arm.

"Leave me alone! It's no big deal."

"It's a felony," Kara says, giving my shoulder a rough shake.

I want to push her back, but I don't. Kara is almost three years older and two grades ahead. We never fought growing up, at least not physically. But we didn't play together much either. I was always too young for Kara and her circle of friends.

"What's going on with you, Aimee? Are you trying to get expelled? What does that accomplish?"

"What, like you care?"

She doesn't protest that. She's the great ignorer of me at school—unless I'm in trouble. Instead, she stares at me for a long moment and finally says. "Well, Mom cares. Don't do this to her, Aimee."

I roll my eyes. Mom's half the reason I'm here. The other half of the reason is probably drinking away what should be my child support check right now. I shove Kara hard. She's bigger and stronger than me, but I'm angry, and I manage to back her up enough to slip around her. She grabs the back of my hoodie and my forward progress stops.

“Get rid of those new jerk pals of yours,” she says. “They’re nothing but trouble.”

“They’re my friends!” I holler back.

“They’re not friends. They’ll just use you and then spit you out when they’re done.”

I break away, shaking my head. She doesn’t understand. Kara doesn’t have to make friends. She never has. Everyone lines up to be friends with pretty Kara. Not me. Until Carlos and I started talking in study hall, I had nothing and no one at this new school. I didn’t even have my own sister.

“Well, at least they talk to me!” I shout.

She flinches a little and releases me. Six weeks ago I think I’d probably be crying right now.

“Look, it’s been a tough year,” she says finally. “Come on, let’s get out of here and get something to eat.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. I’m meeting Carlos.”

Kara grimaces at this, as if she has seen a particularly grisly piece of road kill, and says, “Ditch that guy, Aimee. He’s a loser.”

I roll my eyes at this. “Yeah, well, maybe I’m a loser too.”

Kara doesn’t stop me this time as I shoulder past her. As I exit the bathroom she speaks in a soft voice, as if she’s talking to herself.

“I do care, Aimee.”

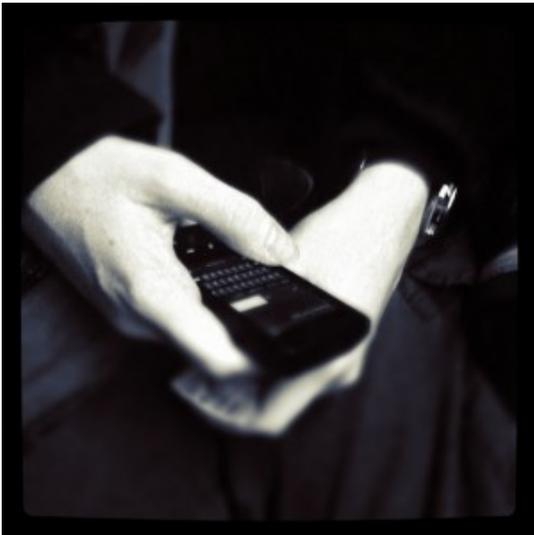


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As I walk down the hall I retrieve my iPhone from my pocket. I have three texts, all from Carlos. He wants to know where the hell I am, each message shriller than the last. He texts me constantly from the moment he gets up in the morning until he falls asleep at night. I know Kara would call this stalking by iPhone, but I like the attention. I text him that I’m having lunch with Kara. Well, it’s sort of true—we did spend part of our lunch hour together.

As I finish texting Carlos, my iPhone rings and the theme from the movie Halloween begins playing—it’s the ringtone I chose for Mom. What could she possibly want? We barely talk. The iPhone again prompts me to push answer or decline. *Decline.*

Almost immediately my phone starts to ring again. I almost press decline again, but I see it’s my grandmother calling. We live with her now. Since we moved in, Gram has become a surrogate mother for Kara and me. She does all the cooking, laundry and nagging. I hardly see Mom anymore, what with the long hours she’s putting working double shifts, not that it matters—she

checked out months ago. She wants to save enough so that we can move out of Gram's house into our own place. I don't see that ever happening. But Gram's okay. I hit *Answer*.

"Hello, Gram?"

"Aimee, Hon, could you stop at D'Agostinos after school and pick up some shampoo for me?"

"Sure."

It's out of my way, but I don't mind. I feel bad for Gram. She shouldn't have been called out of retirement to take care of her daughter and her daughter's kids. Gram is another victim of the Weathers family implosion.

When my last class finally ends, I sprint for the door. My plan is to hook up with the Crew by the football field, but I'm barely out the front door of the school when I feel a hand wrench my shoulder around. It's Kara again. I can't restrain a scowl.

"Come on, I'll walk you home," she says.

"I'm not going home," I say through clenched teeth.

"We don't have to go home. Let's get a latte."

I sigh and my shoulders slump. I don't want to argue, but I also don't want to go with her. "I have plans," I say.

She gives me a sour look. "He can wait."

He can't. I can't. I don't have time for this. "Don't you have, like, basketball practice?" I say, narrowing my eyes in suspicion.

She shoots a smile at me. "I'm taking the afternoon off."

"Great, then you can stop by D'Agostinos for Gram."

My iPhone dings again. It's Carlos wanting to know where the hell I'm at. I text him that I'm helping Kara with something. He sends me back, 'AFDN!!!' I glance over at Kara. I know she'd love to launch into a big sister lecture about how I'm ruining my reputation and how no good boy will ever have anything to do me, like they ever wanted anything to do with me before. Christ, I haven't even done anything, Kara.

"You should get a job after school," she says.

"Right. So, that way I won't have time to hang around the bad element."

She shrugs. "You need some space, some time away from those losers."

"Kara!"

"You're in over your head, Aimee."

"So, basically you want me to have zero friends," I say. "I have to go." I start to walk away, but Kara comes alongside me.

"We need to talk," she says. "Now."

"There's nothing more to say. Leave me alone." Hot tears begin to sting my eyes and the air is so heavy I can't breathe. I have to get out of here; I can't let Carlos see me like this. Okay, I decide, I'll run Gram's errand, get my shit together, and meet the Crew at Finneran's.

Kara keeps pace with me as I fast walk toward the store. "Aimee. You have to stop blaming me for Greg."

"I don't want to talk about this." Now I can't stop the tears at all. In minutes, my face is going to be a total wreck. I need to get away from Kara and breathe. I take off down the street at a run, swiping at my eyes with my hands. I don't see Kara following, thank God. She doesn't think I should blame her. Well, I do. Sure, Greg could be a real douche, but if Kara had just let me handle

it we wouldn't be here now. I didn't ask her for help.

When I get to D'Agostinos Market, I push through the heavy, glass doors, causing an old bell that hangs from the inside door handle to jingle. D'Agostino's is a small mom & pop store not much bigger than your typical 7-Eleven. The linoleum floors are worn down to the concrete subfloor in places and the overhead fans are dusty with cobwebs drooping off the blades. Mr. D'Agostino has known Gram going on forever. He says he even remembers Mom when she was a little girl. I think he may have fought in the Civil War. But he's nice to me.

"Afternoon, Aimee," Mr. D'Agostino says in a cheerful voice, but then his face darkens with concern. I'm sure he notices my swollen, red eyes and the makeup running down my cheeks. I must look like a mess.

"Hi" I answer, trying to sound under control, but my voice breaks a little. I quickly turn away and thread my way through the aisles to the toiletries section. They don't have a great selection here, but they do have Gram's favorite—Bell's Tangerine Shampoo & Conditioner in 1. I grab some toothpaste nearby and head for the checkout, but then on impulse I veer toward a bank of refrigerators. I decide that I need a Yoo-Hoo, double fudge.

As I open the door and feel the ice-cold glass of the bottle, I notice out of the corner of my eye a guy standing in front of the beer area. He's not much taller than me, but he looks to be eighteen, maybe nineteen. He's turning slow circles while talking on his cell. He looks agitated. I only give him the briefest of glances, but I'm struck by his greasy blonde hair that hangs in stringy tangles down to his shoulders, and his jeans and sweatshirt are grimy and stained, like the guy has been sleeping in alleys and beside dumpsters. *Just go home and take a shower, dude.* His sweatshirt sleeves are pushed up almost to his elbow. As I turn away I see the track marks up his right arm. I wonder what he's jacking up on, but I let the thought slide away as I glide down the potato chip aisle. I know Tray has tried C, and Serge too, I'm pretty sure.

I stand in line behind a young boy who's buying a bag of M&Ms and a Mountain Dew. An elderly lady falls in line behind me. I recognize her. It's Mrs. Castellini, who lives a couple of houses down from us. Gram doesn't like her, says she an old gossipmonger. I grinned when she first told me this, thinking it takes one to know one.

"Hi, Mrs. Castellini," I say. "You can go in front."

"No, no, Aimee," she says. "I'm fine."

My iPhone has dinged me with texts repeatedly since I entered the store and now it starts up again. Carlos. I let it go to voicemail, and then I look at string of texts he's sent in the last fifteen minutes, each more insistent and obnoxious than the one before. I stare at the last: WTF!!! NOW! or YBS. Why is he being such a dick? I start to step out of line and abandon my shopping errand for Gram, but the words 'or you'll be sorry' irritate me. I've heard them before. Biting my lower lip until the pain clears my brain, I shove my phone back in my pocket and stand my ground.

When the young boy walks away, I step up to the counter and set down my items. I fish out a crumpled ten-dollar bill and smooth it out on the counter using my hand like an iron. Mr. D'Agostino bags my stuff, and the cash register drawer zips open with a clang and he reaches in to make change.

At this instant, several things happen. Mr. D'Agostino opens his mouth in a wide O, Mrs. Castellini gasps, and something grabs my biceps and shoves me to the side. Violently. I land hard on my ass and my back smashes into a candy bar display. The next thing that registers is that Kit Kat bars are raining down on my head and falling in a heap on my lap.

Mr. D'Agostino yells something indistinguishable and guttural.

Then I hear a sound that I recognize even though I've never heard it in real life before—a metallic snap, the sound of a pistol slide being pumped back to push a bullet into the chamber. It's Blond Guy. I can see the tendons in his neck bulging, taut and quivering.

"Just give me the bills!" Blond Guy yells, spittle flying from his mouth. In his hand, he has a small silver pistol with a light brown wooden handle. It is so small and shiny, almost like an ornament. The sight of the palm-sized chunk of metal sends waves of fear washing through me.

Blond Guy then suddenly thrusts the pistol forward, pointing it at Mr. D'Agostino's chest, who stands frozen with his back to the cigarette rack behind him.

“Move it, pops!” Blond Guy shouts, jerking the gun. Mr. D’Agostino still doesn’t move.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Castellini has morphed into a mannequin. I’m not sure she’s even breathing. Her face is as white as salt.

I don’t think ten seconds have passed, but Blond Guy’s face is reddening with anger and impatience. He looks over at me, where I still sit with Kit Kats scattered around me like confetti. He motions with his hand for me to get up. I start to rise, but it’s awkward; my legs are wobbly and unresponsive, as if paralyzed by the sight of the gun.

“Hey, you. Runt!” Blond Guy bellows at me. “Go back there and get the bills.”

I shuffle sideways toward the swinging door that leads to the area behind the counter, but I’m moving slowly, as if trudging through deep snow. I don’t take my eyes off of Blond Guy, who is probably not above shooting me in the back. Then Blond Guy pivots and swivels the gun towards me. My heart starts pounding even more than before. I can feel the blood draining from my face. Fear surges up inside and threatens to overwhelm me, but there’s anger too—anger that I’m always such a tool. The anger is more than enough to shove aside the fear. I stop and face Blond Guy, and I glare in disgust at him.

Blond Guy takes a step toward me, pointing the gun at me in his outstretched hand. I close my eyes, but I refuse to move. The image of his grimy face is burned into my mind, and in his dull eyes I see Greg, I see Carlos, and I see me. Seconds go by. Then I hear it.



Image courtesy of Geoffrey Fairchild
(flickr.com)

BANG.

I expect to feel whatever it is you feel when a bullet pierces some part of your body, but nothing happens. When I open my eyes, I see the gun pointed up at the ceiling. There’s smoke in the air and an acrid smell that must be gunpowder sears the inside of my nose. A trail of dust from the ceiling falls like fine snow.

Hey, I am alive.

The gunshot causes Mrs. Castellini to reanimate. She screams and then promptly de-animates—I think she faints. Mr. D’Agostino doesn’t faint, but he throws himself to the ground. Yeah, so it’s just me and Blond Guy standing.

“Come on, move it!” Blond Guy shrieks at me. Now he points, the gun pointing directly at my face and says, “You want some of this?”

Survival instinct kicks in. I race behind the counter to the open cash register, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Kara standing outside the front door waving her cell phone above her head. I nod at her in understanding. She’s calling for help again. This time, I’m glad she is. I quickly scoop out all of the bills from the open cash register and lay them out on the counter on top of my ten-dollar bill that still sits there. Blond Guy scoops them up with one fluid swipe of his hand. He grins and then winks at me, as if we’re on the same team and we’ve just shared some bonding moment. I look away, loathing him and me. At the distant sound of a siren, Blond Guy bolts out the front doors.

Kara rushes in as soon as he’s gone.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Not really.” I want to say more, but I shut up and let her fold her arms around me. A feeling of déjà vu washes over me. My world is about to fall apart again, but this time I hug Kara back. The police arrive moments later, and it takes over an hour before the police are done with us and we can leave.

As soon as I’m outside, my iPhone vibrates again. Carlos again. If I hurry, I can just make it to Finneran’s by four. The biting wind whips my mop of dull, unremarkable hair across my face and I shove the strands back behind my ear. I hit *decline* and turn the thing off.

“Wanna split my Yoo-Hoo?” I ask Kara. “It’s double fudge.”

“God no,” she says, disgusted. “You’re such a oh whatever, let’s go home.”

“K,” I say with a sigh. “Lead on, girl.”



When not writing or reading, **K.D. Van Brunt** works in Washington, DC as a lawyer. K.D.’s passion is reading everything YA and writing fiction. His debut YA novel—*Win the Rings*—will be published later this year by Evernight Publishing. You can find out more on his website: <http://www.kdvanbrunt.com>.

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