

On the Come Up



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANGIE THOMAS

Angie Thomas was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. She was inspired to write when she was six years old: after witnessing a shootout, Angie's mother took her to the library to introduce young Thomas to the world beyond what she witnessed. She went on to receive a BFA in creative writing from Belhaven University, where she was the first black student to graduate from the program. Thomas's work is greatly influenced by the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, and the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole. This influence led to Thomas's first book [The Hate U Give](#), which was an immediate bestseller. To write it, Thomas received a grant from the organization We Need Diverse Books in 2015. [The Hate U Give](#) has won a number of prizes and awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award and the William C. Morris Award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though fictional, Bri's world in Garden Heights exists solidly within the context of late 2018 and into early 2019. Bri was exposed to the music of a number of famous rappers, including Biggie Smalls (1972-1997), Tupac (1971-1996), and Nas (b. 1973). The contemporary rappers she lists as favorites are overwhelmingly female rappers like Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, though her mention of Sonny's crush on Justin Bieber (whose first hit, "Baby," was released in 2010) suggests that she's plugged into the broader pop music scene as well. The state of Garden Heights post-riots (the riots Bri mentions took place in [The Hate U Give](#)) draws from the riots that broke out in Ferguson, Missouri, after a white police officer shot Michael Brown, a black teen, in 2014, and more broadly on the history of the Civil Rights movement—Bri notes that Malik idolizes Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. Bri, Malik, and Sonny are also excited about the 2018 superhero film *Black Panther*, which would've been out for about ten months by the time the novel starts. *Black Panther*, which was directed by a black director and features a predominately black cast, has been praised by critics for positively portraying people of color as nuanced individuals and powerful heroes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a companion novel of sorts to Thomas's first novel, [The Hate U Give](#), *On the Come Up* shares a number of similarities with it: both novels take place in the same fictional world, and both deal with the issues of racism and perception that people of color

face. The organization We Need Diverse Books, which provided Thomas a grant to help write [The Hate U Give](#), focuses on producing and promoting children's and young adult literature that features diversity of all kinds. The author John Green ([Turtles All the Way Down](#); [Looking for Alaska](#)) has created video content for the organization, and partner library organizations promote books like Nicola Yoon's [The Sun is Also a Star](#) and [The Marrow Thieves](#) by Cherie Dimaline. Finally, Bri's story shares broad similarities with *Decoded* by rapper Jay-Z. Though his book is autobiographical, like Bri, he writes about his thought process in crafting his rhymes, his involvement dealing drugs and with gangs, and the sense that the spectacle and the controversy created by his songs is what ultimately led to his success.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *On the Come Up*
- **When Written:** 2018
- **Where Written:** Jackson, Mississippi
- **When Published:** 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, issue novel
- **Setting:** Garden Heights
- **Climax:** A SWAT team raids the Maple Grove apartment complex, arresting Aunt Pooh and causing Bri's Timb to break.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, Poverty; specifically, the Crowns gang and Long and Tate
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Social Media Experience. Like Bri, Angie Thomas catapulted to fame thanks to an experience on social media, though her experience was significantly more positive than Bri's: Thomas found her agent by contacting them on Twitter.

Names. Thomas didn't choose a pen name to obscure her real identity or influence how her books were received (as J.K. Rowling did—her publishers believed that the Harry Potter series would sell better if it weren't immediately obvious she was female). Instead, Thomas chose to publish her books under her nickname, Angie, because she didn't want to be confused with author Angela Thomas, whose work differs wildly from Angie Thomas's.



PLOT SUMMARY

Sixteen-year-old Bri is barely able to concentrate on her ACT practice test: she's waiting for a call from DJ Hype, telling her she can participate in a rap battle in the Ring later. Bri doesn't receive the call until nearly an hour later. At home, she finds her mom, Jay, serving "Popkenchurch," a conglomerate fast-food meal that means something bad happened. Jay won't tell her what. Bri's Aunt Pooh, a member of the Garden Disciples gang, takes Bri to the Ring. They skip the line and the bouncers refer to Bri as "Li'l Law"—a reference to her dad, the famous rapper Lawless, who was murdered by the Crowns gang twelve years ago. Bri thinks that she'd like to make her own name. When it's Bri's turn to rap, she goes up against a kid named Milez. He's the son of Supreme, Lawless's old manager. Milez insults Lawless, but Bri performs so well in the second and third rounds that she wins.

That night, Bri has her recurring nightmare: Jay is addicted to crack and is leaving Bri and Bri's brother, Trey, with Grandma and Granddaddy. This is a memory, and it's why Bri calls her mom "Jay" instead of "Mom." In the morning, Bri feels excited: kids on the bus saw her rap battle video and her best friends, Sonny and Malik, congratulate her. As Bri tries to go through security, the guards, Long and Tate, ask to search her backpack. Bri refuses—she has illicit candy to sell, as she's saving up to buy a pair of **Timbs**—and Long slams her to the ground. Bri discovers in the office that Jay lost her job at their church, and the principal, Dr. Rhodes, insists that Long and Tate's attack wasn't racially motivated. She suspends Bri for selling candy. When Bri and Jay get home, Bri angrily walks off to find Pooh. Pooh and her best friend, Scrap, comfort Bri, and Pooh shares that Bri has an opportunity to record a song. Trey, dressed for work at the local pizza place, drives up and forces Bri to come with him. He tells Bri that everything is going to be okay.

Bri doesn't tell Jay that she's going to record a song. At the studio, just as Bri is ready to start, Pooh is called away to a drug deal. Feeling alone and angry, Bri writes a **song** about the issues that black people face and the stereotypes that they're expected to play into. Bri isn't quite sure what to do with the finished product. At church the next day, Bri agrees to sit with Grandma and Granddaddy. Sister Daniels, the grandmother of Bri's annoying classmate Curtis, tells Grandma about what happened to Bri. She also insinuates that Jay is on drugs. During the meal later, Bri is shocked when Curtis sensitively says that he hates the way the black students are treated at school.

On the bus on Wednesday, Bri asks Sonny (who is gay) if Curtis is cute, and lets him listen to her song. He loves it, as do the rest of the passengers on the bus. At school, Sonny confides in Bri that he's been talking online to a guy named Rapid, but he's anxious about pursuing a relationship. Bri reassures him and accepts Malik's invitation to get pizza for lunch, hoping that it's

a date. Bri is shocked to discover that it's not a date—Malik brings along Shana, who acts like his girlfriend. He embarrasses Bri, doesn't like her song, and asks Bri for permission to publicize the video he took of the incident with Long and Tate. Bri refuses.

That weekend, Jay makes Bri come to a food giveaway with her. As Bri finds a pair of Timbs in her size on a table, Supreme—who's volunteering at the event—compliments Bri. Bri isn't sure she can trust him, but when he mentions that he got local star Dee-Nice a record deal, Bri asks him to listen to her song. He loves it and asks for the link. Jay interrupts, but Bri feels hopeful—a record deal would lift her family out of poverty. On Christmas, Jay gives Bri Lawless's old **chain**. When Pooh stops by, she brushes off Bri's anger that she left Bri to record alone, and then takes offense to what Bri says in her song. She tells Bri to delete it, but Bri sends the link to Supreme instead. On the first day back to school after the break, Bri wakes up to the landlady asking for two months' rent. Jay, however, tells Bri that they can't sell Lawless's chain. At school, Curtis tells her that her song is going viral, while Malik continues to express his dislike for the song.

Two weeks later, Bri has another battle at the Ring. As they prepare to enter, a Crown sees the chain, threatens Bri, and he and Pooh draw guns. The bouncers won't let Bri in, so Bri angrily leads the people in line in an angry, impromptu performance. Bri refuses to go home with Pooh and instead accepts a ride from Supreme. Supreme tells Bri that her behavior will make her money—it's scary for white parents and therefore, attractive to white teens. He tells Bri she needs a better manager. The next morning, Bri realizes that Supreme was right when she sees comments about her on the internet, but she feels she can't fire Pooh—especially because Pooh is bringing food over later. Trey saw the video of Bri's behavior and cautions her that she shouldn't act like that. He admits that her song is good, but points out that she has no idea what she's talking about in terms of guns and gang activity.

At school, Long and Tate are back. Students start to recite Bri's song and several boys, including Curtis, attack Long and Tate. Bri grabs Curtis and runs with Malik, Sonny, and Shana to Malik's house. There, Malik tries again to convince Bri to let him publicize the video of her being attacked, but she refuses. At home, Jay finds out about Bri's song when the school rally ends up on the news. She forbids Bri from rapping. This makes Bri so angry that she agrees to meet with Supreme the instant he texts her.

Supreme buys Bri breakfast and gives her a gift—brand new Timbs—in congratulations for her song going viral. Dee-Nice is there too, and Bri realizes that Supreme is luring her away from Pooh. When Dee-Nice tells Bri that he can care for his family thanks to Supreme, Bri agrees to work with Supreme. When Bri gets home, Jay makes Bri study for the ACT. When Bri gets her phone back, she sees that a white reporter started a petition to

get her song removed from its online platform. Enraged, Bri goes live on Instagram and blasts the censorship attempt. She regrets it in the morning, especially when Trey tells her he's seen it. Sonny and Malik arrive to speak to Bri. Bri is angry with them and tries to ignore them, but finally agrees to play video games at Malik's house. Malik convinces Bri to let him use the footage of her attack to make a music video for her song. Once Sonny leaves, Malik hugs Bri and kisses her. The kiss is awful, and they walk home awkwardly.

Halfway to Bri's house, the Crown drives by, punches Malik, holds Bri at gunpoint, and steals Lawless's chain. Bri calls Pooh and tells her what happened. Pooh takes Bri home and disappears. In the morning, Bri wishes she'd sold the chain—the electricity in her house has been shut off. The next evening, Grandma and Granddaddy stop by. When they learn that the power is off, Grandma accuses Jay of being a bad parent, but Jay insists that she's just poor. Granddaddy gives Jay money for the bill. When they leave, Trey sends Bri outside. She gets a call from Supreme, telling her she has an interview with DJ Hype over the weekend.

Four days later, Bri accompanies Jay to the PTA meeting with the superintendent about the issue of school security. Though both Shana and Jay speak out about racial profiling, Dr. Cook refuses to acknowledge the issues. He begins to change his tune when Jay corners him afterwards, makes him understand that Bri is a child, and asks him to protect her. He also accepts Jay's resume, as he's looking for a receptionist. About a week later, Bri hears from Pooh. Near Pooh's apartment, small kids stop Bri for autographs and recite her lyrics. Hearing her words from children chills Bri, especially when the oldest, Jojo, asks Bri if she shoots gangsters. Pooh didn't get the chain back or kill the Crown, and she's surprisingly okay that Bri hired Supreme. She makes Bri promise to get out of Garden Heights—just as SWAT vans arrive and begin a drug raid. Curtis drags Bri into Sister Daniels's apartment while Pooh gets arrested. Curtis comforts Bri, they kiss, and he drives her home later. When Bri tells Jay that Pooh was arrested, Jay cries and locks herself in her room.

Bri is emotional on the day of her interview. Supreme laughs when Bri asks him to use her name and warns her that DJ Hype will try to push her buttons. True to form, Hype asks Bri about whether her song incites violence and is sexist. Bri angrily refuses to continue the interview. Supreme praises her: she acted like a "ratchet hood rat" and it will help her image. Bri is horrified. She goes immediately to see Trey at work. Trey is livid until Bri says she just wanted to save the family, at which point he tells her that she's a gift and she saved him. A few days later, Bri goes into Jay's room to ask her to get up. Jay invites her to come see Pooh in jail the next day, and Supreme calls to ask Bri to record a song for a record executive after school. On the bus, Curtis asks Bri out in front of Sonny and Malik. At school, Shana is disappointed that Bri can't come to a meeting with Dr. Cook

after school, but offers Bri her support.

After school, Supreme takes Bri to the studio. The white executive, James, speaks about Lawless as though he made stupid decisions and as though Bri isn't there. He calls her sassy, which Bri hates, and when Dee-Nice arrives, they tell her that he wrote a song for her. Bri tries to refuse, but ends up recording it even though it's violent and sexist. At the jail the next day, Pooh spills all of Bri's secrets to Jay. Jay is livid and refuses to bail Pooh out of jail, since Pooh is still plotting revenge on the Crown who stole the chain. Outside, Jay tells Bri that she can't rap until she figures out who she is.

A few days later, Bri accompanies Sonny and Malik to the park to meet Rapid. Bri and Malik make up, Rapid turns out to be Miles, and Miles tells Bri that Supreme makes him pretend to be straight and he's giving up his rap career for this reason. Bri thinks about this information at church the next day. Trey's new girlfriend Kayla comes with him, and Bri realizes she's okay with Curtis being affectionate in public. Bri panics, however, when Jay, Grandma, and Granddaddy announce a family dinner after church, especially since Grandma isn't being nasty to Jay. At their house later, Jay apologizes for leaving Bri, and Bri starts to call her "Mom." Jay tells Bri and Trey that they're moving in with Grandma and Granddaddy so that Trey can go to grad school. Trey convinces Jay to let Bri rap, as long as she fires Supreme.

At the Ring the next week, Bri acts as though she's still on good terms with Supreme. She's terrified when she sees Crowns there, taunting her with the chain, but she insists on freestyling instead of performing Dee-Nice's song. Supreme and James walk out. Only a few weeks later, Bri gets an invitation on Twitter to collaborate on a song with a famous rapper.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Bri – The sixteen-year-old protagonist and an aspiring rapper. According to Bri's mom, whom Bri calls Jay, Bri has been rapping since she was old enough to hold a hairbrush like a microphone. Despite this, Bri feels she's invisible and hasn't rapped for anyone but Jay, her best friends Sonny and Malik, and her Aunt Pooh. Bri feels invisible in part because, though she lives in a predominately black neighborhood, she buses to the wealthier white neighborhood of Midtown to attend Midtown School of the Arts, where she tends to attract negative attention. Bri is labeled as "aggressive" and "confrontational," which she attributes primarily to being one of only a handful of black students at school. Internally, Bri struggles to make sense of several traumatic events in her life: her father, Lawless, was shot when she was four years old, and a year later, Jay became addicted to crack and left Bri and her older brother, Trey, with Grandma and Granddaddy—something so traumatic that Bri still has

nightmares. In the present, Bri spends much of her time worrying about whether she'll have electricity or food at home. She believes that a record deal will allow her to save her family from poverty. Being thrown to the floor and handcuffed by her school's racist security guards inspires Bri's first song, "**On the Come Up**." However, Bri is extremely upset when Aunt Pooh and others take issue with the lyrics that talk about violence and gang activity. Bri keeps her activities a secret from Jay as she becomes involved with Lawless's old manager, Supreme, who believes Bri's song will be an instant hit. He encourages Bri to play the part of the "ratchet hood rat," an identity that Bri feels isn't her. As Bri's fame spirals out of control and she makes several ill-advised public statements, as well as begins to prioritize objects—like Lawless's **chain**—above her friends, she comes to see that she doesn't like the person she's becoming. Jay encourages Bri to think about who she is, which gives Bri the strength to fire Supreme and engage with fame on her own terms.

Jay / Bri's Mom – Bri's mom. Bri began calling her Jay about a year after Lawless's death, when Jay became addicted to crack and left Bri and Trey with Grandma and Granddaddy. Jay fully recognizes and owns that she made poor decisions as a young mother, and in the present, it's clear that she's done everything in her power to be a good parent. She's been sober for eight years, though she's only had custody of Bri and Trey for five. At the beginning of the novel, Jay works as a secretary at Christ Temple Church, which her family also attends. She attends night school to earn a social work degree so that she can give others addicted to drugs the help that she couldn't get when she was addicted. Even after losing her job and while struggling to pay bills, Jay remains optimistic. She insists that God will help them and tells Bri that they'll figure something out. However, Jay also feels horrible about the fact that Trey is living at home and working in order to support the family—she doesn't believe either of her children should have to work or worry about the realities of how they're going to pay bills, which is why she won't allow Bri to get a job. As a parent, Jay is strict; Bri believes that Jay can see through walls, has eyes on the back of her head, and can hear nearly silent mumbling. Though she understands that Bri wants to rap, Jay doesn't think it's a viable career path and wants Bri to focus on school instead. When she learns that Bri went behind her back to record a song and give an interview with DJ Hype, Jay is incensed and refuses to let Bri continue rapping. She does stand up for Bri in other ways, as when she calls out Dr. Rhodes and Dr. Cook on the way that black and Latinx students are treated unfairly at Midtown. Jay encourages Bri to figure out who she is before she pursues her fame too far.

Aunt Pooh – Bri's maternal aunt. She's been in a relationship with her girlfriend, Lena, for almost a decade. Aunt Pooh was only ten when Bri was born, and this age difference means that Pooh switches back and forth between being Bri's aunt and

more of an older sister or friend figure. Pooh is a member of the Garden Disciples gang and has been since Lawless died. Lawless was her mentor, and feeling like she had nobody after he was gone, she sought community from the only place she knew she could: a gang. Pooh's gang affiliation makes Bri very uneasy. Though Pooh's friends in the gang are friendly to Bri and will always look out for her, all of Pooh's income comes from dealing cocaine—something that Bri can't quite wrap her head around, given that Jay was addicted to cocaine and Pooh still quietly resents Jay for abandoning her when she became addicted. Because Pooh is the only member of the family making enough money, she often tries to bring groceries or help Jay with bills. Though Pooh appoints herself Bri's manager, Pooh often makes Bri feel abandoned and alone. Bri believes and hopes that Pooh will stop dealing once Bri makes it big as a rapper, though she does recognize that Pooh hasn't promised to stop dealing if or when that happens. Bri struggles with feeling as though Pooh isn't there for her reliably for her music, though after the Crown steals Lawless's **chain**, Bri realizes that she doesn't want Pooh to get revenge for her—she just wants Pooh to be around for her. Pooh makes Bri promise to get out of Garden Heights just before a SWAT team arrests Pooh and finds cocaine on her. When Bri and Jay visit Pooh in jail, they find Pooh still scheming to get revenge on the Crown—something that Jay suggests indicates that Pooh *needs* to serve some time. Jay believes that Pooh is stuck in her current situation because she doesn't know who she is and doesn't know her own worth.

Malik – One of Bri's best friends. His mom, Aunt 'Chelle; Sonny's mom, Aunt Gina; and Jay were all pregnant at the same time, so the trio of Malik, Sonny, and Bri are referred to as "the Unholy Trinity." Malik is extremely tall, and Bri has had a crush on him since they were ten years old, though she believes that he's not interested in her. Since the riots that happened in Garden Heights about a year ago, Malik has become very interested in social justice and the Civil Rights movement. Bri and Sonny refer to him as Malik X, since Malik loves the Black Panthers. An aspiring filmmaker, Malik often films events that happen to him and his friends in the white neighborhood of Midtown, such as being followed around in stores or treated with suspicion. He films the entirety of Bri's assault by Long and Tate. Bri begins to feel as though Malik is betraying her when she learns that he is dating Shana, a dancer, and when Malik and Shana ask her to help them by letting them put the video of the assault online. Their relationship becomes even more fraught when Malik kisses Bri and then accuses her of flirting with Curtis to make him jealous, and the damage worsens when, not even an hour after this, Bri seems to prioritize objects and money over Malik's wellbeing and safety. He also takes offense to Bri's song, "**On the Come Up**"; he believes playing into stereotypes, like he thinks Bri does in the song, is the wrong way to protest. The two make up when Bri finally admits how much her family has been struggling and Malik

apologizes for kissing her and not having her back.

Trey – Bri's 22-year-old brother and Jay's son. Trey also attended Midtown and was a highly involved student who was also extremely smart. He got into a good college and earned a degree in psychology, but because of the economy and his sense of responsibility to Bri and to Jay, Trey returned to Garden Heights to help make ends meet. According to Bri, Trey is doing everything right, but still can't get out of Garden Heights—something that's extremely disheartening for both of them. He and Bri have always been close. Because he's so much older and has been the only constant in Bri's life, Trey has been a major mentor figure to her. Though he appreciates and understands rap, Trey is far more interested in academics and doesn't believe rapping is a viable career path for his sister. He reprimands her for some of her choices that Jay doesn't know about and takes major offense to **Bri's song**—he believes that because of the lyrics, people will think she *actually* carries a gun and is caught up in gang activity. He also points out that Bri doesn't know a lot about what she raps about. Though Trey is appreciative of Aunt Pooh's help, he's wary and skeptical of Pooh's dealing and gang involvement, and he often cautions Bri to not get too involved with all of it. By the end of the novel, when Bri seems to be on more of a Trey-approved track, Trey takes on the neighborhood kid Jojo, presumably to offer him mentoring and an adult figure in his life to look up to. Trey is set to attend grad school a few months after the novel ends.

Sonny – One of Bri's best friends and a member of the "Unholy Trinity." Bri and Malik refer to Sonny as the "hobbit" because of how he looks, though all three of them share a love of space operas, superhero movies, and fantasy like *Lord of the Rings*. Sonny is gay and desperately wants to get out of Garden Heights and attend college, where he believes he'll encounter less homophobia and racism. A graffiti artist, he spray paints rainbow fists in parks. One of these paintings attracts the attention of an Instagram user with the handle Rapid. Rapid and Sonny begin talking and develop crushes on each other, which presents a number of problems for Sonny. Sonny struggles with anxiety and worries often about whether he can properly study and have a boyfriend at the same time, which leads him to ignore Rapid in favor of studying for the SAT. Though he's extremely loyal to both Bri and Malik, he spends more time with Bri throughout the novel. He loves **Bri's song** from the beginning and helps convince her to let Malik make a music video using the footage of Bri's assault by Long and Tate. He's effectively able to remain on good terms with both Bri and Malik throughout their ongoing fight, though he resents having to be in the middle of it. Though Sonny never says so himself, Bri suggests that discovering that Rapid is actually Supreme's son Miles—and the artist behind the song "**Swaggerific**"—will be hard for Sonny, as Sonny hates "Swaggerific."

Curtis – One of Bri's classmates. When the reader first meets Curtis, Bri doesn't like him. He's a tattletale and makes

outrageous claims about all sorts of things, something he's done since elementary school. His claims often have to do with his mom, whom he insists is off doing something fantastic with celebrities when in actuality, she's in jail. Because of this, Curtis lives with his grandmother, Sister Daniels. This doesn't make Bri think any better of Curtis given that Bri's Grandma and Sister Daniels are enemies. Bri begins to reevaluate her opinion of Curtis when he says very seriously that he hates the way that Long and Tate treat students of color and doesn't believe that Bri deserved to be manhandled. After this, Bri begins to see Curtis as a potential romantic interest, though she still finds him obnoxious and too full of himself. There's definite chemistry between Bri and Curtis, but it doesn't come to head until Curtis pulls Bri to safety when a SWAT unit comes to his and Aunt Pooh's apartment complex to arrest Garden Disciples. Curtis comforts Bri and starts to look more human and interesting when Bri notices that he wears Spiderman socks. They kiss and it's as exciting as Bri always wanted. As their official relationship develops, Curtis shows that he's willing to do anything to impress Bri and he often comforts her and offers encouragement. He's presumably college-bound, as he's studying for the SAT at the novel's end.

Supreme – A manager of rap artists who becomes involved in Bri's career. He's wealthy, lives in the suburbs, and always wears sunglasses no matter the time of day. He used to be Lawless's manager and, in the beginning of the novel, manages his son, Milez. Bri is wary of Supreme from the first time she sees him during her rap battle with Milez at the Ring. She recognizes that Milez's rhymes are prewritten in addition to being extremely rude, all of which suggests to Bri that Supreme plays dirty and just wants to win. Despite this and other evidence suggesting that Supreme is bad news and wants to profit off of other people's bad fortune, Bri desperately asks him to listen to her song, "**On the Come Up**." Supreme declares it a hit and follows through on his promise to send the song onto others in the industry. As Bri's song gets more popular and as she gets closer to Supreme, it becomes clear that Supreme does indeed just want to use others to get rich. He preys on Bri's desperate desire to raise her family out of poverty by offering her help and publicity, as well as baiting her with a pair of brand new **Timbs**. He encourages her to play the role of the "ratchet hood rat," despite Bri's insistence that that's not her identity. Once Bri agrees to work with him, he sets about putting her in situations where Bri is guaranteed to lose her temper and play into stereotypes even more. He insists that he told Lawless to do the same thing, but Lawless took the role-play too far and got killed for it. All of this takes place behind Jay's back, which is questionably legal given Bri's status as a minor. Bri ultimately chooses to distance herself from Supreme after realizing that to him, she's just a do-over of her dad. She obtains more evidence that she's being used as she gets to know Miles, who explains that Supreme makes him rap even though he hates it and makes him pretend to be straight, just to

make money.

Miles / Milez / Rapid – Miles is Supreme's son. He's about Bri's age and lives in the suburbs. His rap name is Milez, and Bri first meets him when he's using this persona. Milez the character is a jerk and a ladies' man, and he recently released a song called "**Swaggerific**" that became an instant hit—despite its repetitive, uninspired lyrics. Bri realizes that Milez isn't an exceptional rapper when she suspects that his rap battle rhymes are prewritten. She dislikes him for all of this, but begins to change her thinking when she hears him out of character: Miles—not Milez—is articulate, thoughtful, and likes female rappers, just like Bri does. Throughout the novel, Sonny gets to know a person online—who turns out to be Miles—who goes by the screen name Rapid. When Miles finally meets Sonny in person and reveals himself, he shares that he loves photography and hates rapping. To support the image of the character Milez, Supreme makes Miles pretend he's straight—something that Miles ultimately decides he doesn't want to do anymore. He chooses to give up his rap career, insisting that since he's not rapping as his true self, it's not his anyway.

Scrap – Aunt Pooh's best friend and a fellow Garden Disciple. Scrap is an easygoing person who often seems as though he's caught in the middle of doing something—his hair, Bri notes, is half cornrows and half Afro, like he lost interest halfway through having his hair braided. He's extremely loyal to Pooh and to Bri, and Pooh often leaves him to take care of Bri while she leaves to sell drugs. He adores Bri's music and is there when she writes and records her first song, "**On the Come Up**." Scrap is almost always with Pooh: he's with her when she comes to Bri's call after the Crown threatens her and steals Lawless's **chain**, and Bri often finds them sitting together on Scrap's car in the apartment courtyard. Fortunately for him, he's not around when the SWAT unit raids their apartment complex, so he isn't arrested. When he joins Bri and Jay to visit Pooh in jail, he demonstrates his loyalty to the Garden Disciples when he shares that he has new Garden Disciples ready to go after the Crown.

Bri's Grandma – Bri's paternal grandmother. Grandma is extremely stuck-up, though Granddaddy tells Bri at one point that Grandma is just playing—she grew up impoverished in the country and isn't well educated. Despite this, she feels superior to Jay and is constantly on the lookout for evidence that Jay has started using drugs again. She and Granddaddy care deeply for Bri and Trey, whom they cared for when Jay was addicted to drugs and couldn't care for them herself. When Grandma isn't getting annoyingly involved in Jay's business, she's gossiping with other church ladies about anything and everyone. Grandma is extremely upset when she discovers that Jay isn't able to keep up with her bills, and she attempts to make Bri and Trey come to live with her. Granddaddy explains that Grandma clings to Bri and Trey because they remind her of Lawless. Ultimately, Grandma and Jay are able to put their differences

aside so that Jay, Bri, and Trey can move in and get back on their feet.

Bri's Granddaddy – Bri's paternal grandfather. Granddaddy is a big, booming, and easygoing man and he always matches Grandma, no matter what. While Grandma is more interested in figuring out whether or not Jay is using drugs, Granddaddy is far more concerned with making sure that Bri and Trey are happy. He sometimes supports the kids by giving Jay money for utilities. He worked for 40 years for the city as an electrician, which has left him with a very specific and outdated view of what work should be like for a man. He takes specific issue with Trey, who, in his opinion, doesn't want to work, and refuses to acknowledge that Trey simply *can't* find work. Granddaddy's career also means that he is a consummate tinkerer and will fix anything. Though it's clear that Granddaddy misses his son, Lawless, Bri also understands that Granddaddy is further along in the grieving process than Grandma is and doesn't act as irrationally and emotionally when it comes to dealing with his grandchildren.

Lawless / Bri's Dad – Bri's dad. He was killed by the Crowns gang about twelve years before the start of the novel, just as he was starting to make it big as a local rap star. Though Bri idolizes her dad, loves his music, and enjoys the reputation she inherits as the "Princess of the Garden," Bri also feels that Lawless factors too heavily into the way that people think of her. Bri learns from Supreme, Lawless's old manager, that Lawless got into trouble and was killed because of how Supreme managed him. Lawless wasn't a gangster when he started rapping; Supreme encouraged him to get involved with gang activity to make himself look more authentic, but Supreme believes Lawless took it too far. Lawless was Aunt Pooh's mentor, and after his death, she joined the Garden Disciples to avenge his murder. Bri inherits Lawless's **chain**, which she uses to feel connected to him.

Dr. Cook – The superintendent of the school district that governs Midtown. He's an older white man, and when Bri first sees him speak, she thinks he's impossibly racist and corrupt, since he refuses to acknowledge that Tate and Long abused their power and unfairly target black students. He experiences a change of heart and begins to appear more human when Jay corners him after the meeting. There, when Jay gives him her resume and explains that her employment gap was due to drug use, he warms and admits that he's a former alcoholic and has been sober for 40 years. He eventually hires Jay as his secretary and begins to finally take action to remedy the racism at Midtown. Specifically, he asks Jay to help him work with African American and Latinx coalitions to hold regular meetings and improve things for students.

Shana – A dancer at Midtown School of the Arts. Shana is barely on Bri's radar until Bri discovers that Shana is Malik's girlfriend, at which point Bri begins to see Shana as naïve and shallow—especially since Shana likes Canadian bacon, a

preference that offends Bri. Shana is a founding member of the unofficial black and Latinx student coalition at Midtown, and she attempts to convince Bri to be their spokesperson and allow them to use Malik's footage of the Long and Tate incident to publicize the racial profiling that goes on at Midtown. Most of Bri's dislike for Shana has to do with the fact that she's jealous of Shana for dating Malik, whom Bri has had a crush on for years. While Shana *does* appear shallow at points, she also demonstrates great skill at organizing, public speaking, and generally articulating the ways that students of color are targeted at Midtown.

Dee-Nice – A 22-year-old rapper who got his start doing battles in the Ring. However, not long before the start of the novel, Dee-Nice hired Supreme as his manager and got a million-dollar record deal, which allowed him to "retire" from the Ring. Bri idolizes him, which is why Supreme uses Dee-Nice as bait when he tries to convince Bri to hire him as her manager. Though Dee-Nice appears to be a nice person, Bri also recognizes that he's entirely bought into Supreme's idea of what success is and how to get it, especially when he writes a song for Bri to perform in a studio as a test for a record label representative. The song he writes for Bri is even more violent than Bri's song, "**On the Come Up**," doesn't have a deeper meaning to justify the surface violence, and is extremely sexist.

Sister Daniels – Curtis's grandmother and Grandma's enemy at Christ Temple Church. Though the church still allows her to serve food, Grandma started the rumor that Sister Daniels's apartment is infested with roaches, so they no longer ask her to cook for the congregation. Sister Daniels loves to gossip and make people gasp when they hear her information, which leads to her telling Grandma about Long and Tate assaulting Bri before Bri has the chance to do so herself. Bri begins to feel more kindly toward Sister Daniels when she starts to get involved romantically with Curtis, who lives with his grandmother since his mom is in jail. Sister Daniels doesn't seem to hold it against Bri that she and Grandma are enemies when she finds Bri in her living room with Curtis.

DJ Hype – DJ Hype is a famous local DJ. He hosts a weekly radio show as well as rap battles at the Ring, and he facilitates Bri's first rap battle. At first, Bri idolizes DJ Hype. She sees him as a person who could hold the keys to her future, and it's extremely flattering when he plays the siren for her freestyle, a signal that he likes what he hears. Bri begins to change her mind about him when she appears on his radio show for an interview. Hype pushes Bri's buttons, is extremely sexist, and makes several jokes at her expense. When Bri sees him next at the Ring, she realizes that in addition to all of this, his jokes are corny and not funny at all.

Jojo – A ten-year-old boy who lives in Aunt Pooh's apartment complex. He rides around town on a dirt bike, and it's implied that he doesn't often go to school and has very little support or supervision from a parent or guardian. Bri tries to steer him in

the right direction, but she's mostly unsuccessful—Jojo idolizes Aunt Pooh and asks to join the Garden Disciples every chance he gets. He experiences some degree of fame by association after Bri's song, "**On the Come Up**," gets big, though he starts telling kids that Bri is actually involved in gang-related violence. When he shows up at the Ring to see Bri perform, Trey takes Jojo under his wing and does what he can to give Jojo some direction and a good role model.

Ms. Tique / Kayla – Bri first meets Kayla as Ms. Tique during one of Kayla's rap battles at the Ring. Kayla is a small young woman and an exceptional rapper—she wins her battle, and Bri idolizes her. When she's not rapping, Kayla works at Sal's with Trey, and Bri later discovers that the two are romantically involved. As Bri gets to know Kayla better, she finds that Kayla is a saint and willing to put up with Grandma's nosiness in order to be around Trey. Kayla is attending college and studying marketing, in addition to working independently as a rapper.

Emily Taylor – A white journalist for Bri's local paper who writes about how "**On the Come Up**" incites violence and makes the world unsafe for all children. She also starts a petition asking Dat Cloud to take "On the Come Up" off of the website. Bri angrily addresses her, and others who believe as she does, on a live Instagram video after seeing that Taylor is also a major proponent of second amendment rights—but as Bri sees it, just not when black people are involved.

The Crown – A member of the Crowns gang, the rival gang of the Garden Disciples. He first hassles Bri and Aunt Pooh at the Ring not long after Bri releases her song, "**On the Come Up**," as he takes issue with Lawless (and Bri by extension) and the gang references that Bri made in her song. He later holds Bri and Malik at gunpoint and steals Lawless's **chain**. He suggests when he does so that he was involved with murdering Lawless years ago.

Mrs. Murray – Bri's poetry teacher, who also runs the afterschool ACT prep program. She's the only black teacher at Midtown and is known to have high standards. Though Bri generally likes her for this reason, Mrs. Murray also remembers Trey and, in Bri's opinion, unfairly wants Bri to be as stellar as her brother.

Pastor Eldridge – The pastor at Christ Temple Church, where Bri's entire family attends services and, prior to the start of the novel, Jay worked as a secretary. He portrays himself as a generous and kind man, though Bri and Trey think he's an awful hypocrite for laying Jay off and then acting concerned for her and her family.

Big Sal – The Italian woman who owns Sal's, the pizza place in Midtown. Both Trey and Kayla work for her, and the restaurant is the one place in Midtown where black kids don't have to be constantly on guard. She's loud, abrasive, and acts like a protective aunt to Bri, Malik, and Sonny.

MINOR CHARACTERS

James Irving – The CEO of Vine Records, where Supreme takes Bri to record a song and hopefully land a record deal. He speaks quickly and seems to love making money off of controversial rappers. Bri dislikes him immediately, especially when he calls her "sassy."

Dr. Rhodes – The principal of Midtown School of the Arts. A white woman, she doesn't take seriously the accusation that Long and Tate are unfairly targeting students of color.

Zane – One of Bri's classmates from Garden Heights. He's self-important, but both Bri and Sonny think he's extremely handsome. He's arrested during the rally at Midtown, as he's one of the boys who attack Long and Tate.

Deacon Turner – A homophobic deacon at Bri's family's church. He spoke one week about how hugging boys makes them gay, after which Sonny's family stopped attending. Bri flips him off whenever she gets the chance.

Ms. Lewis – Jay's landlord. Though she's black and also lives in the difficult Garden Heights neighborhoods, she still says things about how black people are beggars. She threatens eviction often.

Karen Pittman – A white parent who speaks at the PTA meeting about how things at Midtown have gotten worse and less safe since the school began busing black students in.

Aunt Gina – Sonny's mom. She, Aunt 'Chelle, and Jay have been best friends for years—Sonny's real first name is Jackson, after Jay's in-laws' last name. She works as a beautician.

Aunt 'Chelle – Malik's mom. She works as a security guard and is extremely loyal to Jay and Aunt Gina, her longtime best friends.

Mr. Watson – The elderly bus driver who drives the students from Garden Heights to Midtown School of the Arts. He loves Christmas and is, without fail, always on time.

Lena – Aunt Pooh's girlfriend. She and Pooh have been together since they were seventeen.

Long – One of the racist security guards at Midtown School of the Arts. Though Long is black, he's just as racist as Tate is.

Tate – One of the racist security guards at Midtown School of the Arts, along with Long.

Frank – One of the bouncers at the Ring.

Reggie – One of the bouncers at the Ring.

Deon – One of Bri's Midtown classmates from Garden Heights.

Doc – One of Aunt Pooh's friends who runs a recording studio out of a trap house.

Ms. Clark – The secretary at Midtown School of the Arts.

Mr. Barry – The owner of the restaurant the Fish Hut.

David Rodriguez – The president of the Midtown PTA.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

On the Come Up follows a sixteen-year-old aspiring rapper named Bri. As a strong-willed African American girl at a predominately white arts magnet school, Bri often feels like her identity isn't entirely in her control—she often finds herself in the school office for being "aggressive" or "confrontational," earning her a reputation on campus and among teachers as a troublemaker. Outside of school, Bri's identity is also determined for her, but in a different way: her deceased father was the rising rap star Lawless, a local hero. Because of this, Bri is often referred to as "Li'l Law" and given opportunities to perform her own raps based on her father's reputation. However, as these identities converge on Bri and begin to stifle her and control her life, Bri realizes that what she wants most is the opportunity to shape her own identity and come of age on her own terms, without being bound by other people's ideas about who she is. Through the example of Bri, Thomas suggests that crafting one's own unique identity is a crucial part of coming of age.

Bri finds herself in an odd situation when it comes to her dad, Lawless, as she was only four when he died and therefore doesn't remember him. Nonetheless, Bri idolizes her dad's memory and, at least at first, enjoys it when people around town treat her like "royalty" because of her association with him. From the beginning, however, Bri finds her association with Lawless somewhat difficult to handle, as it reminds her that she's the *only* person who doesn't remember him. When she first goes to the Ring, the local boxing place that holds rap battles, Bri even begins to get annoyed by the nickname Li'l Law and the suggestion that she's "carrying the torch" for her dad—as far as she's concerned, she's there to carry her own torch and make a name for herself, not just to keep Lawless's memory alive. This experience impresses upon Bri that for her, coming of age will mean reconciling the positive and negative sides of her connection with her father.

Thomas explores Bri's relationship with Lawless through the symbol of his **chain**. The chain is the most valuable thing that Bri's family owns, and Bri sees it as a reminder that she can succeed in the rap world just like her dad was poised to do—plus, it's an insurance policy if she doesn't succeed, as selling it would solve some of her family's financial troubles. Bri begins wearing the chain and out and about after she receives it for Christmas, but not long after, the Crown—a member of

the gang that killed Lawless—holds her at gunpoint and steals it. The chain forces Bri to confront the reality that identifying so closely with her dad brings its own set of dangers, even if it can also bring comfort.

Though Bri's primary issue of identity is the one that stems from her relationship to her father, other forces beyond her control also influence how people see her. At school, she discovers that her older brother Trey's immense academic success means that, to many of her teachers, Bri is a bit of a disappointment: she's not as involved, popular, or academically talented as Trey was. Even worse, Bri is also caught up in the racial tensions and stereotypes prevalent in her community. At one point, Bri is assaulted by school security guards for refusing to allow them to search her backpack. The real reason that she wouldn't let the guards look in her backpack is that she was selling candy against school rules, but because of Bri's race and reputation as a troublemaker, rumors spread that Bri was actually selling drugs. The racial tensions at Midtown School of the Arts cause the rumor to quickly gain traction: many of Bri's classmates (who are mostly white) believe the rumor, as do white parents, who are concerned that the black kids being bused in for grant money might bring drugs and violence into the white neighborhood. Bri begins to realize that in all of these cases, other people dehumanize her based on their assumptions about her identity. That is, they don't view her as a real human at all; instead, they define her in simplistic terms based on her family, race, and community. Put another way, people flatten Bri into just being Lawless's daughter, Trey's sister, or a black Garden Heights resident—all of which are parts of her identity, but none of which defines Bri as a unique individual.

Though Bri initially tries to keep what happened to her dad's chain a secret, when the truth comes out, Bri begins to see the importance of crafting an identity for herself that is truly her own and isn't based on who other people say she is. To this end, she uses an appearance at the Ring to fire Supreme, her almost-manager, through an unscheduled freestyle. In her freestyle, Bri insists that people recognize her as Bri, not Li'l Law, and declares that she won't put up with others' assumptions about her. While Bri's age means that she still has a ways to go in terms of coming of age and developing her own identity, this is a formative moment for her. It suggests that for her, the most important element of the coming-of-age battle is recognizing—and rebelling against—the ways that her relationships and others' perceptions shape her identity. With this, the novel suggests to readers that there's nothing wrong with drawing on relationships and communities for support, it's freeing and often necessary to take personal responsibility for declaring one's own identity.



RACISM AND PREJUDICE

The subplot of *On the Come Up* that deals with the racist security guards at Bri's school offers the reader a window into what it's like for Bri, a young

black woman, to move through a prejudiced world. Bri and her black and Latinx classmates are targeted by the guards, Long and Tate, with shocking regularity and for no reason other than the color of their skin—and though Bri is only sixteen, plenty of people that she comes into contact with see her as a threat for the same reason. By exploring the ways that Bri must try to keep herself safe as she navigates her world, as well as examining the ways in which people of color more broadly are denied opportunities of all sorts, Thomas illustrates clearly and viscerally how people of color are systematically set up to fail and in a world that fears them and denies them opportunities to succeed.

Throughout the novel, Bri regularly points out to the reader what she and her fellow black students are supposed to do: work hard, attend college, and ultimately, get out of Garden Heights and the poverty that most people of color in the neighborhood experience. Though she's well aware of how things are "supposed" to play out, she's also cognizant of the ways in which both prejudice and the realities of the post-recession U.S. economy keep people of color from progressing along this hypothetical path. Bri's brother Trey is one of the most pointed examples of the ways that the expected narrative fails many black students. Though he was an involved and successful student in high school and went on to attend a prestigious college, Trey is unable to find a job thanks to the combination of his race and the economy. Because of this, Trey spends the novel working in a pizza joint for minimum wage.

Meanwhile, the way that Bri's teachers at school treat her as a belligerent troublemaker, even when she displays the same normal teenage attitude as the white girls at school, suggests to Bri that it might not be worth it to even try to succeed in the world of academics—a world that, from what she's seen, is overwhelmingly white and unforgiving of her and other black students. Bri sees the combination of Trey's trajectory and her treatment at school as possible proof that the version of success she's expected to achieve isn't something that's actually available to a student of color, especially when she adds to that the social strain of being one of only a few black students.

Even beyond what Bri experiences in school, the black characters in the novel are often caught in a double bind when it comes to being seen as acceptable and appropriate in the eyes of white people. For example, Bri watches her mother, Jay, who spent several years homeless and unemployed because of her addiction to crack, struggle to find a job. Most employers don't want to employ a former drug user, as they see her as a liability and assume she is likely to start using again. Jay, like Trey, is doing everything "right" when the novel starts—she has

a job and is attending college to become a social worker—but this doesn't mean that she's protected from prejudice or, for that matter, is "good enough" to impress white potential employers when she loses her job.

On the other hand, Bri also understands that though drugs harm users like Jay, dealing drugs is wildly profitable. Aunt Pooh, a gang member and drug dealer, is doing everything that Bri has been told over and over again not to do—and yet, Pooh is the one helping Jay pay bills and put food on the table, and she and the other drug dealers are the only ones in Garden Heights not struggling financially. Importantly, however, Pooh also tells Bri that she doesn't want to have to deal drugs her entire life to make ends meet; she understands that it's not a reliable long-term solution, even if in the present, it's the only way to reliably make a living. To add even more nuance to this, however, Pooh doesn't practice what she preaches and shows no indication of having any inclination to do anything but deal. She remains wound up in the drug-affiliated gang violence even after ending up in jail, suggesting to Bri people like Pooh have little incentive to actually stop dealing, even when the stakes of continuing are insanely high. The contrast between Pooh and Jay makes it clear that for many people of color, there are no "good options for surviving in a racist world."

When it comes to Bri's music, Bri discovers that her blackness and the stereotypes that come with it are both a blessing and a curse. While her lyrics about gang activity, police brutality, and economic inequality resonate with Garden Heights' black residents, neighboring white communities latch onto them as proof that the black students attending Midtown are dangerous and infusing the school with drugs and violence. Bri can't win: in order to be honest and appeal to her black audience, she risks white onlookers viewing her as a one-dimensional, racist caricature of "dangerous" black culture.

While *On the Come Up* doesn't offer any failsafe remedies for these toxic racial dynamics, the exchanges between Bri, Jay, and Superintendent Cook at the PTA meeting offer some hope for improving the racist systems plaguing Midtown. Jay forces Cook to speak privately with her and Bri and, after Cook apologizes to Bri for the way the school treated her in the aftermath of Long and Tate's assault, she encourages him to understand that Bri is a child—not a "dangerous" black kid, but a child deserving of a safe environment in which to learn. With this, the novel suggests that the best way to fight racism is by creating situations in which feared minorities become inarguably human to those who would never have a reason to examine their own prejudices. In a broader sense, the novel makes a case for its own existence through this argument, as Bri's story offers readers a window into what may be a very different world from their own—one that's nonetheless inhabited by people fighting to succeed and be respected for their innate humanity.



TRAUMA, POVERTY, AND CHILDHOOD

Sixteen-year-old Bri's immediately family has been struggling financially for years. After Bri's dad, Lawless, died before getting a record deal about twelve years before the novel's story begins, it became even more difficult for Bri's mom, Jay, to support her two small children. In the present, things haven't changed much: Jay loses her low-paying job as a church secretary right before Christmas; Bri's 22-year-old brother, Trey, does what he can to help by working at a local pizza joint; and the family often has to choose between food and utilities. Thomas suggests that experiencing an innocent childhood is a privilege that not everyone in present-day America gets—and that living in poverty traumatizes children and denies them that privilege.

Bri implies that her childhood ended abruptly when she was four years old, and her dad, local rap star Lawless, was shot and killed by a member of the Crowns gang. Things deteriorated quickly after this: Jay became addicted to crack and, unable to support her children, left Trey and Bri with Lawless's parents a year later. The experience of being left was, for Bri, even more traumatic than losing her dad. Even in the present, more than a decade later, Bri still experiences recurring nightmares of her mother leaving her—and after being left, she stopped referring to her mom as "Mom" and instead began calling her by her first name, Jay. Bri makes it very clear that because of this early childhood trauma, she doesn't feel comfortable truly trusting any of the adults in her life to care for her. As finances become even more dire in the novel's present, Bri fears that her grandparents will try to make her move back in with them, and she also secretly fears that Jay has begun using crack again. Aunt Pooh presents her own challenges for Bri, as Bri is uncomfortably aware that Aunt Pooh is financially comfortable only because she deals crack—one of the things that thrust Bri's family into poverty in the first place. All of this makes Bri feel isolated and as though she's a burden, as she's the only one in her immediate family who isn't contributing financially to the family.

The combination of distrusting the adults around her (the effects of trauma) and feeling like a burden (the effects of poverty) in turn causes Bri to believe that she has to take matters into her own hands to improve her family's financial situation. This financial pressure, combined with the lingering trauma of Bri's childhood, leads her to make a number of questionable decisions when producing her first song ("**On the Come Up**") and subsequently attempting to get a record deal, which she believes is her only shot to pull Jay out of poverty. Things begin to spiral out of control when Pooh abandons Bri at the studio to write and record her first song alone. Without Pooh's mentorship, the song that Bri writes touches on dangerous and mature subjects that create more problems for Bri than they solve. The lyrics of her song offer a window into the ways in which Bri's maturity level is no match for her talent,

at least when that talent goes unchecked. While everyone, Aunt Pooh and Jay included, agree that the song is well-written and will be an instant hit, they all take issue with the subject matter. Trey points out that Bri has no idea when she's talking about when she raps about "clips on her hips"—and Bri confirms this ignorance when she says that a clip is "the thingy that goes on the thingy on a gun." As far as the adults in Bri's life are concerned, the song's content is indicative of Bri's youth and immaturity.

Bri, however, initially sees "On the Come Up" as evidence of her growing maturity and of her entrance into the adult music world, even though she had to draw on her own trauma to get there. It's not until Bri hears young children rapping the most violent of her lyrics that she begins to see the wisdom of her mentors' hesitation. At this point, she finally sees that while rapping about her poverty and her involvement-by-proxy with gang activity may make for a good song, experiencing those very things is what put Bri in this financially desperate situation in the first place. She realizes, in short, that she doesn't want to make that violence, hunger, and fear that she grew up with something normal or attractive to other children by rapping about it like this—she realizes that doing so only perpetuates cycles of trauma and poverty that rob children of their innocence.

Luckily for Bri, Jay's decision to ask Grandma and Granddaddy for help means that going forward, Bri will have much less to worry about in terms of poverty. Grandma and Granddaddy are financially comfortable, generous, and desperate to help their grandchildren succeed, and moving in with them allows Bri to inhabit a space in which she can be more of a child, instead of grappling with adult worries of whether there will be food or electricity. In particular, the fact that the novel ends with Bri studying happily in her room for the ACT test (something indicative of her role as a college-bound high school student) suggests that Bri will have a good chance of breaking out of the cycle of poverty. Though the novel makes it clear that this happy turn of events is the exception, not the rule, this change in Bri's story offers a sobering reminder of all the things that poverty steals from children, as well as an example of the positive things that can happen when a child doesn't have to experience its traumas.



CONTROL, IMAGE, AND FAME

Following Bri's assault by school security guards and the release of her first **song**, Bri soon finds the effects of her fame spiraling out of control. Though she does what she can to control her image and how others use it, Bri quickly discovers that there are others out there trying to use her image in ways that directly contradict what Bri herself wants. Through this tension, *On the Come Up* argues that fame can have complex consequences, especially within the context of the social media landscape and when combined with racial

prejudice and exploitation.

Initially, Bri thinks that recording her first song and experiencing her big break will be simple. She believes that the process will be a matter of getting the opportunity to record her song, attracting the attention of a record label, and signing a contract—which, in her understanding, will then allow her the resources and the freedom to continue writing raps. Bri, in other words, sees fame as a simple if-then state of affairs: *if* she gets famous, *then* she'll have the freedom to do everything she wants, from writing and performing the raps she loves to raising her family out of poverty with the money she believes she'll earn.

Bri discovers quickly, however, that there's more to being a rap artist than writing raps, recording them, and performing them live. While Aunt Pooh, Bri's initial manager, suggests that this is all there is to making it in the music world, Bri's introduction to Supreme, Lawless's former manager, shows her that fame is actually a political game full of power plays, compromises, and carefully orchestrated moves designed to shape a star's public image. After Aunt Pooh arranges for Bri to record her first song, Bri runs into Supreme at a food drive, allows him to listen to her song, and later accepts his offer to send the web link to the song around. As Supreme draws Bri closer into his orbit, he slowly reveals what his plan is for Bri if she agrees to hire him and fire Pooh: capitalize on the fact that Bri's song is polarizing and already has white listeners up in arms. More specifically, Supreme plans to exploit Bri's loose associations with police violence and gang activity. Supreme encourages Bri to embrace the public persona of an angry "hood rat," a public identity he insists is compelling for the largest demographic of rap and hip-hop fans: "white kids in the suburbs." With this, Supreme suggests that fame, at least for a black female rapper like Bri, means playing a role that seems exotic and dangerous to white listeners, specifically the parents of those white teens. Controversy and fear, he suggests, are the elements that will bring about Bri's big break.

While Bri isn't upset, per se, about the fame that Supreme correctly predicts she'll experience after the release of her song, she does feel uneasy about the role that Supreme asks her to play. Bri wrote her song to speak out about the violence and prejudice that black people in Garden Heights experience daily, and she intended the song to amplify those often-unheard voices. Bri never meant to scare white parents into making the song attractive to their children by trying to ban it. In the same vein, after the security guards Long and Tate assault Bri, Bri flat-out refuses to become the poster child for the black and Latinx students at Midtown, who see her as a convenient spokesperson and symbol for the prejudice and discrimination they all experience. Even though Bri's best friend, Malik, filmed the entire encounter, leaving no doubt about how the whole thing started, Bri resents being asked to assume the role of the victimized black person in public. She's

seen enough evidence to understand that no matter what she said or did, white people online will inevitably think she deserved what happened.

Bri tries over and over again to explain both her song and what happened with Long and Tate—she even allows Malik to use the footage to craft a music video for her song, shedding light on some of the points she was trying to make. However, Bri ultimately finds that her fame runs away with her anyway: the very stereotypes that make her song marketable (according to Supreme's plan) are the exact ones that make her terrifying lived experience a commodity as well. She gets the fame she wanted, but the consequences—that is, the way that her fame is co-opted to supported toxic stereotypes—are much different than she imagined. Being asked to record a ghostwritten song is the final straw for her: it shows her that if she agrees to continue working with Supreme, she'll have to let him define her fame and give up her own idea of what it should mean, an idea that Bri finds demoralizing and, in the end, not worth it.

By rejecting the role that Supreme encourages her to embrace and consequently giving up her chance of getting a record deal, Bri insists on engaging with fame on her own terms. This choice illuminates the novel's larger argument that fame is a serious force that has meaningful consequences. If Bri wants to produce and be famous for the music she believes in and the person she is, rather than letting her work and image perpetuate harmful stereotypes, her only option is to focus on creating work she believes in, putting it out in the world, and focusing on the positive effects that follow.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BRI'S SONG, "ON THE COME UP"

Bri's song, "On the Come Up," is representative of a variety of things over the course of the novel. It first emerges as a symbol for Bri's youth and her need for mentorship and specifically, her need for Aunt Pooh to be there for her. Bri angrily admits to the reader after recording her song that she wouldn't have said what she said had Pooh been there, which suggests Bri sees her song as a symbol of her sense of abandonment. In contrast, Pooh and other adults, including Trey, see the lyrics and subject matter as proof that Bri has no real-world experience and, in her immaturity, is willing to say anything to attract attention and get famous.

The lyrics themselves speak to the ways that Bri—and, the novel suggests, people of color in America more broadly—feels pushed down and invalidated by society. However, even this interpretation isn't entirely straightforward: as true and meaningful as Bri's lyrics might be for her and for the black

residents of Garden Heights, white people in the Midtown neighborhood see the song as the *reason* for the racially charged events happening at Midtown, not a *response* to them. In this way, the song more broadly comes to represent the ways that black culture—and the black people creating that culture—are vilified.



TIMBS

Timbs—Timberland brand work boots, which are often worn by New York-based hip-hop artists—are an item that Bri desperately wants to own. The way Bri feels about Timbs mirrors the way that she feels about the relationship between fame and her family at any given time. Her "fake Timbs" (white cloth work boots that she's colored black with permanent marker) speak to her status as an aspiring rapper and her desire to work for her success singlehandedly, just as she's working to save money and buy herself a pair of real Timbs. Bri's refusal to take a pair of Timbs in her size at a charity giveaway, especially since Supreme is watching, signals her unwillingness to accept more or different help—at this point, while she's beginning to see that she needs help from someone like Supreme to make it big, she's too dedicated to Aunt Pooh to hire someone else. When Bri later accepts a new pair from Supreme and agrees to hire him as her manager, Bri sees the new Timbs as a symbol of her selling out. Having them around makes it so Bri cannot ignore her conscience telling her that she betrayed her family by agreeing to let Supreme manage her, and later, gives her the power to fire him.



LAWLESS'S CHAIN

When Bri receives her dad's chain for Christmas, she learns that it was the first thing Lawless purchased when he got paid for his music. She sees it as a symbol of her dad himself, and her desire to wear the chain at all times speaks to Bri's sense of feeling deeply connected to Lawless and his story. Weeks later, however, the chain begins to take on a more sinister connotation. When the Crown holds Bri at gunpoint and steals the chain, Bri begins to understand the dangerous situation Lawless was in—an understanding that guides Bri toward beginning to develop her own identity, separate from her dad's. Though not getting the chain back is tragic both for sentimental and financial reasons, Bri also recognizes that losing it is the thing that impresses upon her the importance of striking out on her own and making the music *she* wants to make, rather than filling a role set out for her by others—which, she ultimately learns, is what her dad did, and which led to his death.



"SWAGERIFIC"

Bri initially sees Milez's song "Swagerific" as an annoying encapsulation of the privilege afforded to some artists in the music industry: because of Milez's manager (and father), Supreme, he's able to come out with a song that's silly, repetitive, and not creative—but a hit nonetheless. Later, Bri realizes that "Swagerific" is indicative more of the fact that oftentimes, it's necessary for an aspiring star to hide their true identity and produce songs like "Swagerific" in order to stay successful. She discovers that Milez actually prefers to go by Miles and isn't all that interested in being a star—it's something his dad wants him to do. Miles is also gay, showing Bri that all his lyrics about how girls want him are contrived and designed only to promote his image as a ladies' man. Taken together, Bri's understanding of "Swagerific" and all that it represents shows how she comes to view the established music industry as one that's built on playing a role, not on speaking one's truth.

The fact that it's comforting for Bri to be reminded that she and Lawless are related suggests that she's not entirely comfortable with this current state of affairs. It's disconcerting for her that while being Lawless's daughter affords her a number of good things and opportunities around Garden Heights, she still isn't fully aware of who her dad was and how they relate to each other as people. At this point, this suggests that Bri wants to form her identity more around who her dad was as a father, not necessarily who he was as a rap star.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ "Carrying the torch for Law, huh?"

Not really. More like making my own torch and carrying it. I say, "Yeah," though, because that's what I'm supposed to say. It's part of being royalty.

Related Characters: Bri, Frank (speaker), Reggie, Lawless / Bri's Dad, Aunt Pooh

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

As one of the bouncers at the Ring, Frank, lets Bri in, he suggests that she's following in Lawless's footsteps by trying to make it in the music world. Bri's explanation to the reader illustrates the difficult position she finds herself in as Lawless's daughter. She desperately wants to make a name for herself and be recognized as an individual, something that's entirely understandable for several reasons—Bri is a teenager and coming into her individual, adult identity is a normal part of growing up, and it's also potentially true that if she did choose to lean into her dad's fame and try to borrow from it, she'd have to deal with whatever his past actions and words might have been. All of this explains why Bri understandably wants to be treated like her own person. However, when she feels compelled to follow the expected script and agree that she is following in Lawless's footsteps, it suggests that this is going to be a more difficult endeavor than it might be for some teens. Bri's entire community is united in their love of Lawless, and they see Bri as almost as a symbol for him, suggesting that Bri will only be able to break out of this by taking drastic measures.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Balzer + Bray edition of *On the Come Up* published in 2019.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Bri, Mrs. Murray (speaker), Lawless / Bri's Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

After Bri confesses to her poetry teacher that she's waiting for a call so that she can participate in a rap battle later, Mrs. Murray asks if Bri is going to follow in Lawless's footsteps. Bri's interpretation of what it means to hear him called "her dad" shows that she's struggling to really piece together who he was and how he affects her in the present. The reader will later learn that he's been dead for about twelve years, which is why Bri barely remembers him. Instead, she lives with his memory because of the way that other people talk about him.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ Five years back with her, and yet I still dream about her leaving us. It hits me out of nowhere sometimes. But Jay can't know I dream about it. It'll make her feel guilty, and then I'll feel guilty for making her feel guilty.

"It was nothing," I tell her.

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

After Bri has her recurring nightmare, a memory of Jay leaving her and Trey with Grandma and Granddaddy, Bri feels unable to tell Jay the truth about her nightmares. Bri's sense of not being able to tell Jay in order to care for Jay is one of the effects of being left in the first place. Bri and Jay's relationship fundamentally changed when Jay left Bri, and now, Bri is understandably wary about trusting Jay to still be there, hence the dreams. That Bri feels guilty about all of this reminds the reader that this experience forced Bri to grow up in important ways, as feeling like she has to take care of Jay in this way shows Bri stepping into a more adult role and in a way, reversing the parent-child dynamic.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ Not that the Garden was ever a utopia, hell no, but before I only worried about GDs and Crowns. Now, I gotta worry about the cops too? Yeah, people get killed around here, and nah, it's not always by the police, but Jay says this was like having a stranger come into your house, steal one of your kids, and blame you for it because your family was dysfunctional, while the whole world judges you for being upset.

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Bri explains for the reader how the riots (which took place about a year ago and which Thomas explores in *The Hate U Give*) changed the way that the police involve themselves in Garden Heights. Jay's assessment shows how power structures function, using blame and humiliation to keep black communities from ever being able to escape cycles of violence and poverty.

Bri suggests that the way things were before in Garden Heights was relatively inoffensive. While the gang activity was a potentially scary and dangerous element of life, Bri suggests that the gangs—which are a part of the community, regardless of the dangers they pose—are far less intimidating and dangerous than police, who overwhelmingly come from outside the community and don't treat those in the community with respect or even as though they're fellow humans. This begins to draw out the ways that Bri sees police as a whole as being against her and people like her. These same ideas are applicable to the way that Bri is treated at Midtown. There, Bri is essentially targeted for being "dysfunctional," and she's the one who gets in trouble for something she can't control and which the school sees no reason to fix.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ He graduated with honors. Worked his ass off to get there in the first place, only to have to come back to the hood and work in a pizza shop.

It's bullshit, and it scares me, because if Trey can't make it by doing everything "right," who can?

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Trey

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

As Trey talks to Bri about the incident with Long and Tate, Bri admits to the reader that Trey's trajectory makes her wonder if it's even possible to experience the kind of success expected of her. As Bri sees it, both she and Trey were expected to do well in high school, attend good colleges, and then land jobs that would allow them to get out of Garden Heights—and in doing so, keep away from drugs, gang activity, or other illicit activities that would distract them from academics. As far as Bri's concerned, the fact that Trey can only get a job making pizzas suggests that success like this isn't something available to people like her, which in turn makes her suspect that they're going to be stuck in Garden Heights and unable to escape the cycle of poverty forever.

Bri's word choice also shows how she conceptualizes herself in relation to Trey. Trey is the family's golden child, and Bri doesn't think she has it in her to be as successful as Trey has been. As she sees it, Trey should've been able to make academics work for him. Though it's important to note

that what's happened to Trey isn't at all his fault—he's struggling in a post-Recession economy, where jobs are hard to come by and a college degree doesn't always guarantee a job—Bri understands Trey's trajectory to mean that she likely won't be able to make it either. In turn, she's led to ask what the point is of even trying.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Sometimes she babies me, like it's her way of making up for when she wasn't around. I let her do it, too. I wonder though if she only sees me as her baby girl who used to snuggle up with her until I fell asleep. I don't know if the snuggles are for who I am now.

This time, I think the snuggles are for her.

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Bri explains that Jay still pulls Bri onto her lap and snuggles her, even though Bri is sixteen. The fact that Bri allows Jay to do this speaks to her desire to have a normal, functional, parent-child relationship with her mother, something that she doesn't necessarily have because of Jay's past abandonment of Bri and Trey. By allowing intimacy like this, Bri is able to recreate some of the good times she experienced when she was little, before Jay left, and in turn, feel like a child who needs her mother for comfort. Understanding that Jay might need these moments as much as or even more than Bri does is a surprisingly mature interpretation for Bri. It reminds the reader that as immaturely as she acts at times throughout the novel, Bri is keenly aware of the fact that Jay regrets leaving her children and is trying to make up for it in innumerable ways. For her part, Bri wants to do whatever she can to not make Jay feel bad about it, hence the reason for keeping secrets and allowing herself to be babied like this.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ I mean...I don't think she is.

For one, eight years is a hell of a long time to be clean. Two, Jay wouldn't go back to all of that. She knows how much it messed us up. She wouldn't put me and Trey through that again.

But.

She put us through it in the first place.

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Aunt Pooh, Supreme, Sister Daniels, Trey, Bri's Grandma, Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

At church, when Sister Daniels suggests that Jay might be back on drugs, Bri has a hard time confidently defending her mom. This is entirely because of the trauma that Bri experienced as a child. Though Bri doesn't describe living with her mom while Jay was using drugs in a lot of detail, she does at points mention that Jay seemed barely there, even if she was present in body. Being left made a deep impression on Bri and showed her that Jay wasn't someone she could trust to care for her.

Bri's inability to trust that Jay is still sober is a direct result of these childhood traumas, and it means that just when Bri is at a point in her life when she needs to be able to trust the adults around her as she moves toward adulthood, she finds herself questioning if those adults will continue to be there. This makes her feel even more unmoored and paranoid, and later, makes her even more susceptible to Supreme's advances—since Bri sees his help and the attached record deal as a surefire way to keep both Jay and Aunt Pooh off of drugs and out of the business for good.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ I almost roll my eyes. How would these people feel if they knew Milez was here to see how messed up we are to remind him how good he's got it? He's gonna go to his nice house in the suburbs and forget this in a week, tops, while we're still struggling.

My situation shouldn't be his after-school special.

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Miles / Milez / Rapid, Supreme, Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 169-170

Explanation and Analysis

When Bri runs into Supreme and Milez volunteering at a food drive and giveaway, she's incensed that Supreme brought Milez with the express goal of making him

understand that he's fortunate. Bri has every right to roll her eyes at this—while volunteering isn't a bad thing, the way that Supreme frames it shows that he's willing to use other people's poverty for his own goals and gains. This becomes even more apparent to Bri later, when Supreme goes on to encourage her to embrace the role of the "ratchet hood rat" and use her poverty to sell her music—for kids like Milez, Supreme suggests, that kind of poverty is exotic and compelling. Bri's sense that this isn't an ethical way to go about things is an early indicator that she and Supreme won't get along, and that she'll do her best to stand up for herself and what's right later.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ "I don't want you to grow up too fast, baby," Jay says. "I did, and it's not something I can ever get back. I want you to enjoy your childhood as much as possible."

"I'd rather grow up than be homeless."

"Hate that you even have to think like that," she murmurs.

Related Characters: Bri, Jay / Bri's Mom (speaker), Trey

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

After Jay's landlady stops by and asks for two months' worth of unpaid rent, Bri suggests they sell Lawless's chain in order to make rent, or that she get a job to help out. Jay's insistence that Bri shouldn't have to get a job shows that she's doing everything she can to protect Bri and give her an opportunity to be a child, even when insisting on Bri not working makes Bri feel anxious and desperate.

In this situation, though Bri is certainly still a child, she's also more than aware of the adult realities of being able to pay rent and utilities—something that she can't become unaware of again, no matter how hard Jay tries. This acts as a reminder that it's impossible to return a child's childhood to them entirely after they've already lost it. While Jay is trying to do the right thing here, she's also trying to do an impossible thing—and in the process, makes Bri even more likely to go behind her back to make money in the hopes of helping her family stay in their house.

☞ There I am, on the front page of *Blackout*. They posted a picture from when I was in the Ring. The headline? "Teen Daughter of Murdered Underground Rap Legend Lawless Just Killed Us Her Damn Self with This New Heat!"

Side note: Do I have a name or nah? It's short enough that it could've fit, too.

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Lawless / Bri's Dad, Malik, Curtis

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Bri discovers that Supreme followed through and sent the link to her song around, which landed her on the front page of a black gossip blog. Bri's note that they didn't use her name is one of her first indicators that fame isn't going to be all it's cracked up to be. She's still fighting the association with Lawless—which, while it gives Bri some nice perks, like friends in the neighborhood and the ability to skip the line at the Ring, is making it so that people don't see her as a person or an artist separate from him. Despite the fact that this is annoying and hurtful for Bri, this does show her what her goal will need to be as she moves forward with her song: attaching it to her name and her fame, not just making a name for herself as Lawless's daughter.

☞ "What's wrong with what you say?"

"I talk about guns and stuff, Curtis. He doesn't want people to think that's me."

"They're gonna think it anyway. If you can get something from this, forget the nonsense and go for it."

Related Characters: Bri, Curtis (speaker), Malik

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Curtis is confused as to why Malik isn't especially supportive of Bri's song and her newfound fame, and he suggests that Bri should take what she can get and say what

she needs to say to make a name for herself. While Curtis does emerge as one of Bri's biggest cheerleaders, this advice does unfortunately line up with what Supreme tells Bri to do—which, ultimately, leads to Bri choosing to reject him and that version of fame.

Coming from Curtis, however, this shows that he sees that black people are already put into boxes and he recognizes that in the right circumstances, those boxes can be extremely profitable. This outlook and encouragement helps Bri embrace her fame, even though it doesn't always feel particularly comfortable.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ "You know who the biggest consumers of hip-hop are?"

"White kids in the suburbs," Miles answers dryly, as if he's heard this before.

"Exactly! White kids in the suburbs," Supreme says. "You know what white kids in the suburbs love? Listening to shit that scares their parents. You scare the hell outta their folks, they'll flock to you like birds. The videos from tonight? Gonna scare the hell outta them. Watch your numbers shoot up."

It actually makes sense that white kids in the suburbs will love the videos. But Long and Tate called me a "hoodlum," and I can't seem to shake that word.

Related Characters: Bri, Miles / Milez / Rapid, Supreme (speaker), Tate, Long

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

When Supreme gives Bri a ride home after she's kicked out of the Ring, he explains to her that the videos people took of her leading onlookers in singing her song and heckling security will only help her. The revelation that hip-hop as an industry exists mostly to entertain white people impresses upon Bri that there are major differences in the way she's writing and thinking of her music and the way that the music industry is taking it. Bri wrote her song to speak to residents of Garden Heights and other similar communities—specifically black communities—about the issues they face in terms of violence, police brutality, and the roles that white people assign to them when their behavior isn't considered "acceptable." When taken in this light, Bri's song is a rallying cry and seeks to make people

like her feel heard, not to entertain or scare possible white listeners.

While Bri's song is, as others confirm, a great one, it does show how young, naïve, and inexperienced she is. She didn't write it with the audience Supreme talks about in mind, which is one of the reasons her song becomes such a lightning rod in Midtown especially. Bri herself can't be faulted for this, which does put some of the blame on Aunt Pooh for leaving Bri to record the song by herself, without assistance from someone who might have had the knowledge or the ability to suggest that Bri consider this audience when writing her song—if, of course, writing an uncontroversial song was going to be Bri's intent in the first place.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ "Pooh and her drug-dealing money, saving the day."

It is kinda messed up. Here my brother is, doing everything right, and nothing's coming from it. Meanwhile, Aunt Pooh's doing everything we've been told not to do, and she's giving us food when we need it.

That's how it goes though. The drug dealers in my neighborhood aren't struggling. Everybody else is.

Related Characters: Bri, Trey (speaker), Aunt Pooh, Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

As Jay says that Pooh is going to buy groceries for them, Trey sarcastically notes that drug money is going to keep the family fed. Bri's comment about how dealing drugs is the only way for people in her neighborhood to make money illustrates the system in place to disadvantage people in poverty—particularly people of color—offering few opportunities to do anything but deal drugs. Trey is living proof that a college degree doesn't guarantee him anything in terms of success. In terms of Pooh's behavior later in the novel, it's important to keep in mind that dealing is extremely profitable. As she sees it, she has little incentive to do anything else, even when most other jobs would be safer and more reliable.

☝ "But," he says, in a way that tells me to wipe the smile off my face, "although I get the song, now people are gonna take your words at face value. And let's be real: You're clueless about half the shit you rapped about. Clips on your hips?" Trey twists his mouth. "You know damn well you don't know what a clip is, Bri."

"Yes I do!" It's the thingy that goes on the thingy on a gun.

Related Characters: Bri, Trey (speaker), Aunt Pooh, Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

When Jay leaves the room, Trey calls Bri out on the fact that she doesn't know about most of the stuff she rapped about in her song. With this, Trey shows that he views her song as a symbol of Bri's youth and immaturity—and because of this, he sees the song as dangerous. Essentially, Trey understands that on the surface, the song glorifies Pooh's lifestyle. Because of this, he sees it as a liability and something that could hurt Bri in the long run, even though Bri herself isn't directly involved with gang activity and certainly doesn't own a gun. Bri's response to the reader confirms that she's young and inexperienced, but it also shows that she has a firm understanding of the power of what she's rapping about to capture people's imaginations, even if she doesn't entirely understand the concepts or objects. In this way, the song comes to encapsulate Bri's in-between state, as she exists in a place where she can sound and look like an adult, but is still truly a child without the experience to back up all the things she raps about.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝ She's still not listening to me. "If you would just listen to the song—it's not what they made it out to be, I swear. It's about playing into their assumptions about me."

"You don't get that luxury, Brianna! [We](#) don't! They never think we're just playing!"

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Jay / Bri's Mom

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

After Jay finds out about Bri's song and the rally at Midtown on the afternoon news, she forbids Bri from rapping and reminds her that as a black person, prejudiced white people will inevitably take her at face value and decline to look for deeper meaning in her words. With this, Jay makes it clear to Bri that in her opinion, playing a role like Supreme wants Bri to do is a very dangerous proposition—there are plenty of people in the world who won't understand that it is just a role, and that there's a real person underneath who isn't a gangster, doesn't have a gun, and isn't actually advocating for violence against the police.

Though Bri isn't wrong—to her and to black residents of Garden Heights as a general rule, her song is about playing into assumptions and the problems that come with that—Jay points out that Bri is being dangerously idealistic by doing this. This is something that could hurt Bri, just like it hurt Lawless.

☝ But it's like how when she does stuff I don't like and says it's "for my own good." This is for hers. I'm willing to do anything to keep that sadness in her eyes from becoming permanent.

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Jay / Bri's Mom, Supreme

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Bri's meeting with Supreme, she agrees to work with him and tells the reader that she's going to keep this a secret from Jay for as long as possible. Bri feels this way in part because she's desperate to help her family get out of poverty however she can, and at this point, when Jay is struggling to pay for food, electricity, and rent, lying seems like a better deal than making an honest appeal to Jay to support her in this.

This also shows that Bri is still suffering from the damage to her relationship with Jay that happened when Jay became addicted to drugs and couldn't care for her. Now that Bri doesn't fully trust Jay to support her, she feels as though she has to take matters into her own hands. Just as Bri

believes that Aunt Pooh will stop dealing when she makes it big, she also believes that getting her big break will make drugs less attractive to Jay for a variety of reasons.

It's also worth noting that Supreme is likely aware of all of this. He wants to get rich, he knows that Bri is talented, and he's also certainly aware of how desperate Bri is to make money. This makes Bri an easy target for him, though it should also be said that Supreme is doing an extremely unethical thing here by agreeing to work with Bri and not insisting on being upfront with her parent.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ "That's right, fuck censorship," I say, to three hundred viewers. "They don't get it because it ain't for them to get. Besides, if I am strapped like backpacks, maybe it's 'cause I gotta be, bitch. Ain't my fault if it makes you uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable every goddamn day of my life."

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Emily Taylor

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

After seeing the article and petition from Emily Taylor, who wants to have "On the Come Up" taken down off of Dat Cloud, Bri goes live on Instagram and addresses her followers. Though Bri is angry and extremely emotional, she hits on some important truths about what it's like to move through the world as a young black woman. The assault by Long and Tate for little reason crystallized for Bri—if another event hadn't already—that white people see her as a threat, simply because of the color of her skin. Because of this, Bri has to remain hyperaware of what's going on around her and what people think of her, either to try to mitigate their assumptions or protect herself, depending on the situation. Bri's position is a fundamentally dangerous one thanks to the way that racial prejudice manifests in present-day America.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝ "The worst thing I've done is become poor, Mrs. Jackson! [...] The worst thing!" she says. "That's it! Excuse me because I have the *audacity* to be poor!"

[...]

You think I *want* my babies sitting in the dark? I'm trying, Mrs. Jackson! I go on interviews. I withdrew from school so these kids could have food! I begged the church not to let me go. I'm sorry if it's not enough for you, but good Lord, I'm trying!"

Related Characters: Jay / Bri's Mom (speaker), Trey, Bri, Bri's Granddaddy, Bri's Grandma

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 311

Explanation and Analysis

When Grandma loses her temper upon discovering that Jay's electricity was shut off and tries to force Bri and Trey to come live with her, she also insults Jay's parenting. Jay tries to make it clear to her mother-in-law that she's not purposefully keeping her children in poverty; rather, she's stuck in a cycle and a situation that becomes increasingly difficult to dig out of, especially when she has to make sacrifices like dropping out of school (and thereby giving up on a degree that would eventually allow her to earn more money) to keep them from ending up homeless in the short-term. With this, Jay begins to lay out for the reader how difficult it is to recover from landing in poverty in the first place. Remember at this point that in addition to having no electricity, Jay is also two months behind on rent—and without a job, there's no way for her to ever expect to get ahead in that regard. The world is essentially stacked against her, and it's no help to have people like Grandma accusing Jay of being a bad *person* for ending up in a bad *situation*.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ "I want you to look at her for a second, Dr. Cook," Jay says. "Really look at her."

She sets her hand on my back so I have no choice but to stand straight and look him in the eye, too.

"She's sixteen, Dr. Cook," Jay says. "Not a grown woman, not a threat. A child. Do you know how I felt when I was told that two grown men manhandled my *child*?"

Related Characters: Jay / Bri's Mom (speaker), Tate, Long,

Dr. Cook, Bri

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 324

Explanation and Analysis

Jay insists on a private conversation with Dr. Cook, the superintendent, and forces him to acknowledge that Bri is a child. By doing this, Jay asks that Dr. Cook see all the students he oversees in the district as people rather than bodies that guarantee the district grant money, or graduation rates, or troublemakers. The novel overwhelmingly insists that this is one of the most effective ways to combat prejudice on an individual level, as it puts those who hold prejudicial views in a situation where they have little choice but to face that they're standing in front of a person, not a problem. Indeed, this encounter later encourages Dr. Cook to hire Jay as his secretary and ask for her help in working with the Black and Latinx Coalition—an action indicative of the fact that he's beginning to reevaluate his views.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝ "Me and my twin know all the words to your song!" this snaggle-toothed girl pipes up.

I scribble my name for her. "Oh, for real?"

"Strapped like backpacks, I pull triggers;" she and her sister squeak. "All the clips on my hips change my figure."

I stop writing.

How old are they? Six? Seven?

Related Characters: Bri (speaker), Jojo

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 331-32

Explanation and Analysis

When Bri stops to give autographs to a group of small children, she stops short when she hears two little girls rapping some of her more violent lyrics back at her. Bri will acknowledge later that these little girls don't understand what the song is about on a deeper level. Instead, they engage with the song in much the same way that Bri's white audience does, in that they take the lyrics at face value and don't understand that Bri is critiquing a system and isn't

actually advocating for this kind of violence. With this, Bri begins to realize the power that her words have to influence the lives of young people in her neighborhood, people that Bri doesn't want to grow up thinking that joining the gangs is cool, or that poverty is cool. This gives Bri the wakeup call she needs to evaluate again how her song is perceived, and the responsibility she has to her community to properly represent it and how the world sees it—and many, as evidenced by these children, see something very different in this song than Bri does.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝ It's like having a bucket of ice water thrown into my face.

Ratchet hood rat.

Thousands of people just heard me act like that. Millions more may see the video. They won't care that my life is a mess and I had every right to be mad. They'll just see an angry black girl from the ghetto, acting like they expected me to act.

Supreme laughs to himself. "You played the role," he says. "Goddamn, you played the role."

Problem is, I wasn't playing. That's what I've become.

Related Characters: Supreme, Bri (speaker), DJ Hype

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 355

Explanation and Analysis

Following Bri's decision to walk out of her DJ Hype interview, Supreme praises Bri for acting like a "ratchet hood rat" and Bri worries that she's actually taken on that identity. This is a major turning point for Bri, as she begins to more fully understand how she appears to the public and the dangers of putting out a song like hers (that to the casual listener makes her sound like a stereotypical "hood rat"). Bri isn't interested in actually being that person—she wants to make music that smartly critiques the stereotype and the systems that force people into the stereotype—but she sees here that if she wants to become the rapper of her dreams, behaving like this isn't the way to go about it.

Supreme's happiness with Bri's behavior reminds the reader that though this isn't what Bri wants, it is what Supreme wants—as this role is an extremely profitable one. It allows him to make money off of Bri (and in theory, will pay Bri at some point too) and because of this, he has little

incentive to help Bri become the kind of rapper she wants to be.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☝ "I think about everything we've been through, and if I'd gone through it by myself, I'd probably be where Pooh is right now."

Damn. Aunt Pooh did say she became a GD because she didn't have anyone. Now she's in a jail cell without anyone again. I never realized that Trey could've been like her, with a record instead of a diploma. I know there's so much else that made their lives turn out differently, but he makes it sound like the difference between them was me.

Related Characters: Bri, Trey (speaker), Aunt Pooh

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 362

Explanation and Analysis

During Trey and Bri's conversation after Bri's disastrous DJ Hype interview, Trey admits that if he hadn't had Bri to take care of, he may have followed in Pooh's footsteps and joined the Garden Disciples. The fact that Bri hadn't considered that this was a possibility speaks to how much she idolizes Trey. He's always been a good kid who took care of himself and dedicated his time to academics—in her mind, it's unthinkable that Trey would even have an interest in gang activity.

However, the knowledge that Pooh became a Garden Disciple because she felt like she didn't have anyone shows that joining a gang offers people community when it seems like there's none on offer elsewhere. For Pooh, who joined sometime after Lawless's death and around the time that Jay was too caught up in drugs to care for her, the Garden Disciples offered her hope that there was someone out there to care about her, even if involving herself with them was dangerous. Trey, though he was in the position of a caregiver rather than the person who needed care, still sees relationships with others as supremely important. It's his responsibility to Bri that keeps him working for a better future for the whole family.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☝ "Do you know what your aunt's biggest problem is?"

I look at the jailhouse. That's kinda obvious at the moment. "She's locked up."

"No. That's not even her biggest problem," says Jay. "Pooh doesn't know who she is, and by not knowing who she is, she doesn't know her worth. So, who are you?"

"What?"

Related Characters: Bri, Jay / Bri's Mom (speaker), Aunt Pooh

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 397

Explanation and Analysis

When Jay finally finds out that Bri has been working with Supreme and giving interviews behind her back, she suggests that Bri isn't in a place where she can successfully be famous because she doesn't know who she is. The fact that this catches Bri off guard and that she's not able to answer suggests that Jay is right—Bri cannot, in this moment, tell her mother who she is and how her identity will make her a good rapper. Put another way, Bri is currently using all sorts of different identities to piece together who she is as an artist (hence all the questions people have about Bri's song and what it says about her), rather than drawing on who she knows she is to make music that's true to her identity.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☝ "I'm done being who my dad wants me to be," Miles says. "It's not worth it."

Does he mean what I think he means? "You're giving up your rap career?"

Miles slowly nods. "Yeah. I am. Besides, is it really mine if I'm not being myself?"

Related Characters: Bri, Miles / Milez / Rapid (speaker), Sonny, Malik, Supreme

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 406

Explanation and Analysis

When Sonny first meets Rapid—Miles—for the first time, Miles explains to Bri how Supreme makes him assume an identity that's not true to who he is in order to make it as "Milez." Miles's words make a major impression on Bri, who sees herself in them. She understands at this point that Supreme is asking her to assume a role that's not who she is, just like he asked of Miles, and she's already felt a lot of discomfort about this. She knows, based on how uneasy she feels being asked to act like a "ratchet hood rat," that that's not her identity—and Miles suggests to her that the rap career she'd build off of that identity wouldn't really be hers either. Though Jay said as much when she asked Bri who she is outside the courthouse, hearing much the same thing from a peer makes it easier for Bri to swallow and interpret. Seeing other people her age struggle with similar things and make brave decisions to stand up for themselves gives Bri the power she needs to do the same.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝☝ "But I believe she's smarter than that," he says. "Don't you?"

"I know she is."

"Can you act like it then?" I ask, and my voice is super soft. "It's not like anybody else does."

This look of surprise quickly appears in my mom's eyes. Slowly, it's replaced by sadness and, soon, realization.

Related Characters: Bri, Jay / Bri's Mom, Trey (speaker), Lawless / Bri's Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 422

Explanation and Analysis

During the family meeting between Jay, Trey, and Bri, Bri asks Jay to treat her like an intelligent and contributing member of the family, not just a naughty child in need of guidance. This represents a major coming of age moment for Bri, as this is the first time that she calmly works up the nerve to ask Jay to treat her like an adult, rather than pouting like a child or getting overly emotional about it. In other words, Bri is finally acting like an adult and asking to be treated as such. Jay's willingness to do so (as represented by the look in her eyes recognizing that she is indeed not treating Bri like an adult) shows that coming of age is a process that encompasses a young person's whole family. Just as Bri must advocate for a place at the table within her family, Jay must change her behavior and be willing to adapt to the person Bri is growing up to be. By allowing Bri to feel more grown up, Jay also makes it clear to Bri that she'll take her seriously, and that Bri won't have to feel like she needs to go behind Jay's back to make her dreams happen.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Sixteen-year-old Bri tells the reader that she might have to "kill somebody tonight," but this is assuming she gets "the call." She's currently stuck in Mrs. Murray's class, doing ACT test prep. Bri is usually fine turning her phone in to Mrs. Murray for an hour, but today, she's waiting for a call from DJ Hype. Bri's friends, Sonny and Malik, nonverbally ask if she's heard anything, and Bri narrows her eyes at them. Mrs. Murray calls for students to submit their practice tests and Bri hastily clicks through the multiple-choice answers without looking at them.

Malik looks over Bri's shoulder and starts to say something about her test, but Bri shushes him. Sonny tries to grab Bri's phone from Mrs. Murray, but Mrs. Murray sends both Malik and Sonny outside so she can speak to Bri. Bri tries to insist that she wasn't distracted in class and is shocked when Mrs. Murray says that her grades are slipping even though she hasn't missed class lately. Bri tells the reader she hasn't been suspended in a month, and tells Mrs. Murray that everything is fine at home. With a sigh, Bri says she's waiting for a call from DJ Hype so that she can battle in "the Ring" tonight.

Mrs. Murray says she's surprised Bri would be going to the Ring and wants to be a rapper, which makes Bri's stomach drop. Bri tells the reader that she's been rapping for years now, but just for Sonny, Malik, and her mom, Jay. Battling at the Ring is her chance to get her name out there and, if she wins, continue to participate in rap battles. Softly, Mrs. Murray asks if Bri is going to follow in her dad's footsteps. Bri thinks that hearing him referred to as "her dad" is weird, as she barely remembers him and people only ever call him by his rap name, Lawless.

Bri tells Mrs. Murray that she's been preparing for this for a while and believes it could jump-start her career. Sharply, Mrs. Murray reminds Bri that if she wants to go to college or even just get through high school, she needs to bring her grades up. She mentions having this conversation once with Bri's older brother, Trey, which makes Bri roll her eyes: Trey was a genius, but despite graduating from college with honors, he now lives at home and works at a pizza shop. Bri promises to improve her grades and accepts her phone. She meets up with Malik and Sonny in the hallway. They eye the security guards, Long and Tate, and leave when the guards nastily tell them to.

This introduction to Bri sets up the fact that she is already prioritizing rapping over education and college specifically, as represented by the ACT test prep. That her friends are curious if she's gotten "the call" too suggests that they're just as excited about this as she is, and want to see their friend begin her rise to stardom.



Bri will later explain that she's one of only a handful of black students at her school. This is one of several reasons why Bri ends up in the office and suspended so much—her white teachers target her unfairly because of the color of her skin. This begins to offer up some reasons why Bri might not be all that interested in school, given that it doesn't appear to be set up to properly serve her. Instead, she has to be constantly on guard.



It's important to note that throughout the novel, Bri's dad is only ever referred to as her dad or as Lawless—people never use his given name, or even a nickname that's entirely personal rather than his public persona. This suggests that Lawless exists for most people as a public figure, not necessarily as a regular individual—a side effect, Bri will learn later, of fame.



The fact that even college-educated Trey is living at home and working in food service offers even more evidence for why Bri isn't especially interested in applying herself at school—she can see that even doing everything right doesn't always lead to success in a world that seems determined to see people like her fail. Mrs. Murray's earlier comment about following in Lawless's footsteps may suggest that to Bri, making it as a rapper is an easier and more likely way to be successful in the world.



Bri gets home and finds Jay blasting Gospel music, which is unusual. The house is freezing—the gas is shut off—and Jay is getting ready to head to night school to get her social work degree after her day job as a church secretary. She wants to give people on drugs the help that she never got when she was addicted. As Jay serves up Popeyes chicken, Bri moans that DJ Hype hasn't called her yet. Jay just wants to know how the practice ACT went and reminds Bri that she has to take school seriously if she wants to get into a good college. Bri rolls her eyes; she wants to rap. She mentions that Aunt Pooh said that the call would come between 4:30 and 5:30, and Jay points out both that Pooh isn't trustworthy and that there are still ten minutes to go.

Jay says that Bri is impatient like Lawless, and Bri tells the reader that Jay says this often—even though Jay is *also* impatient. Jay tells Bri to come right home after the battle and not stay out with Pooh and all the "things" Pooh is into. Bri starts to defend Pooh, but then notices what Jay is serving: food from KFC, Church's, and Popeyes. This is known as "Popkenchurch," and it means that something bad has happened. Bri asks what happened, but then she gets her call from DJ Hype, telling her she'll battle later.

CHAPTER 2

Bri texts Aunt Pooh that she got into the battle, and a few minutes after Jay leaves, Pooh arrives. Her ponytail holders and sneakers are green, since she's a member of the Garden Disciples gang. She happily greets Bri and seems unconcerned when Bri says that Jay bought Popkenchurch. Narrowing her eyes, Pooh refers to Bri's Darth Vader hoodie as "nerd shit," but Bri ignores this and climbs into Pooh's car. Bri tries to get into the zone, but she can't help but feel like something is very wrong.

Pooh pulls into the parking lot, where people are showing off their cars and stereo systems. The parking lot is one of the few safe spaces after last year, when a cop murdered a kid. After weeks of riots and protests, most of Garden Heights' businesses burned or were looted. Cops drive by the parking lot, and Bri knows that they're keeping an eye on Garden Heights' black residents. Pooh leads Bri to the door, and people greet Bri as Li'l Law. The bouncers, Reggie and Frank, ask if Bri is "carrying the torch for Law," and Bri thinks she'd like to make her own name. They wave Bri and Pooh inside and Pooh finds them a spot. A rapper named Dee-Nice enters the building and Pooh whispers that Dee-Nice just got a million-dollar record deal.

Jay's wish to be a social worker represents a desire to break the cycle of poverty that, the reader will learn, is gripping so many people in Garden Heights and those involved with drugs in particular. This shows that Jay understands that having a mentor figure is one of the most important indicators of whether or not a person will be able to get clean and pursue a more culturally-sanctioned version of success. That she's doing this while her gas is shut off speaks to Jay's sense of responsibility to her community.



"Popkenchurch" tells Bri that there's probably more amiss than just having the gas shut off, which her tone suggests is unfortunate but not unexpected. This indicates that for Bri, poverty is something that she deals with every day and is something that she's relatively acclimated to.



The way that Pooh speaks about "nerd shit" indicates that though Bri may be less interested in school, she still has a foot firmly in a "nerdy" world that's very different from Pooh's life as a gang member. While Pooh's word choice may or may not translate to a belief that education isn't cool, this still shows that Bri is caught between different worlds and is trying to make sense of it all as she figures out where she fits.



The mention of the cops murdering a kid refers back to Thomas's first book, [The Hate U Give](#), which takes place in the same fictional world. Readers familiar with the book will then be able to trace how an event like that can continue to shape, harm, and haunt a community, even a full year later. When the bouncers suggest that Bri is just carrying Lawless's torch, it shows that out in public and in the rap arena, people's conception of Bri is entirely wrapped up in their memories of Lawless.



DJ Hype calls the room to attention and announces the first battle: a young woman named Ms. Tique and a guy named M-Dot. He introduces the judges, and M-Dot starts. Bri thinks he's okay, but Ms. Tique is fantastic. Hype announces the rookie battle next and calls a boy named Milez. Milez is the son of Supreme, Lawless's old manager, and Pooh recognizes him as the kid responsible for the popular yet bad song "**Swaggerific**." Hype then calls her up, and Bri knows this means she has to win. Terrified, Bri introduces herself. When Hype asks, says she is Lawless's daughter. She finds this annoying, as her dad didn't even teach her to rap. Hype flips a coin, Bri wins, and she lets Milez go first.

Bri's annoyance at the fact that even DJ Hype only associates her with Lawless sets up the fact that she's chafing because of the way that people lump her in with her father, and it shows that she craves an identity that's all her own. Going up against Milez and the person responsible for Lawless's fame shows Bri basically going up against her dad's memory—now, she has the opportunity to prove that she's just as talented as he is and can stand on her own two feet.



CHAPTER 3

As the beat starts, Milez gets close to Bri and starts rapping. His lines are better than what's in "**Swaggerific**," but he raps about being a gangster and Bri knows he and Supreme live in the suburbs. Bri thinks about how to respond to this when Milez raps that he's going to "murder" Bri like someone murdered Lawless. Bri steps forward and shouts at Milez, but Pooh pulls her back and points out that the line was designed to rile her up. DJ Hype calms the crowd down—they're offended too—and then starts a beat for Bri. Bri hears the gunshots that killed her dad in her head and chokes up. Hype gives the first round to Milez and Supreme praises his son.

This event is the first indicator that in addition to dealing with the difficulties and the exhaustion of poverty in the present, Bri is also struggling to process major traumatic events from long ago. Her inability to rap during this traumatic flashback indicates that she hasn't had the opportunity to move on or heal from this loss, which would suggest that it's all still compounding and getting worse—which will later put Bri in a vulnerable position and make her susceptible to manipulation.



Bri thinks that she'd love to have more memories of Lawless than just of him being murdered. He and Jay were going out for a date night, but a minute after they left the house, Bri, Trey, and Pooh heard shots and Jay screaming. A Crown supposedly did it, as Lawless was involved with Garden Disciples. Bri tries to clear her mind as Milez starts rapping the second round. He raps about how girls love him, and Bri thinks that a good rapper would be hurling insults at her right now. This means that Milez's raps are prewritten—which isn't acceptable. When it's Bri's turn, she raps insults at Milez and the crowd goes wild. Hype plays the siren, which he only uses when he hears something amazing. She wins the round.

At this point, Bri thinks that DJ Hype is a respectable gatekeeper of good music, hence why she's so excited to get the siren for her work. Later events will make it clear that Bri's current conception of Hype is indicative of her youth and inexperience in the music world. It's also worth noting that since it is so obvious that Milez is using prewritten material, it's questionable that Hype doesn't say anything—which suggests that there's more to what's going on here than impartially refereeing a rap battle.



Milez goes first again, and though the beat is perfect for freestyling, his verses are boring. Bri plans out her verses and when it's her turn, compares Milez to "pop star" rappers like Vanilla Ice and accuses him of using prewritten lines. Again, the crowd goes crazy and the judges declare Bri the winner.

Bri's win seems to prove to her that someone who is genuine, talented, and ethical can experience success in the music world. This gives Bri the proof she needs to go on and chase her fame.



CHAPTER 4

Hours later, Bri dreams her recurring nightmare. In it, she's five. Lawless has been dead about a year. Jay puts Bri and Trey in the car and when Bri comments on the marks on Jay's arm, she says she's sick. Jay drives to Grandma and Granddaddy's house, at which point Trey begins to cry. Jay asks Trey to take Bri inside and says that she'll be back later. Jay kisses Bri and then drives away. Bri races into the street, screaming for Jay.

Bri jerks awake and finds Jay sitting next to her. She explains to the reader that the nightmare is a memory: Jay *did* leave her children, as she couldn't keep up with both them and drugs. Bri started calling her mom "Jay" a few months later, after seeing Jay in the park with terrifying, bloodshot eyes. Jay didn't get custody again until five years ago. Bri doesn't want Jay to know she has these dreams, as she knows it'll make Jay feel guilty. Satisfied that Bri is okay, Jay says she got an email from Mrs. Murray about Bri's performance. She reminds Bri that she needs to focus on her education.

Bri puts on her fake **Timbs** and notices that white cloth is showing through, so she takes a Sharpie to the spot. She's saving money to buy real Timbs and is about halfway there. She sells candy at school, which is against the rules. Bri races out to the bus and greets Mr. Watson. She explains to the reader that Midtown School of the Arts is in the nice neighborhood of Midtown. A few years ago, it started busing in students for a "diversity initiative." Bri heads for the back of the bus, sells Deon a candy bar, and is thrilled when he comments on her Ring performance. Now, rapping feels possible. Except for Curtis, an annoying kid, everyone on the bus compliments Bri.

Mr. Watson pulls up at Sonny and Malik's houses. Bri hopes that Malik might notice her lip gloss, and tells the reader that she's had feelings for Malik since they were ten. Sonny and Malik congratulate Bri, insult Milez, and make Star Wars references before starting to punch each other. They stop when Sonny gets a text. Bri notices his face light up but can't see the name on the screen. He refuses to tell her who it is, so Bri thinks it must be a guy. At a stoplight, everyone on the bus rolls down their windows to heckle the Garden High students on the sidewalk, but Bri accepts compliments from several of them.

This dream—a memory—makes it abundantly clear that poverty and drug use can easily tear families apart and cause innumerable problems for children. Being left like this certainly forces Bri to continually reevaluate whether she can trust Jay to be there for her, since Jay made the choice once to not care for Bri.



Bri's choice to begin calling her mom by her first name speaks to depth of the trauma that she experienced after being left. It's a reminder of how badly this event damaged Bri's relationship with her mom and in particular, her belief that she can trust her mom to care for her. Notice that Bri's nightmares haven't stopped, even though Bri has been living with her for five years and Jay seems to be doing well—these scars run deep.



Timbs—Timberland brand work boots—are often worn by New York hip-hop artists and for Bri, owning a pair will allow her to broadcast to the world that she's officially become one of them. Her plan to earn and save money to buy her own pair indicates that Bri has initiative and is able to make a plan and stick with it, something that speaks to her maturity. On the other hand, this focus on saving up for a single luxury item also shows her youth.



Everything that happens here between Bri, Sonny, and Malik reminds the reader that for all of Bri's struggles at home and with rapping, these are still three normal teenagers in the throes of adolescence. The inclusion of possible and unrequited romance like this makes it abundantly clear that this novel is about young people still figuring out who they are in the world.



When the bus gets to Midtown, Bri feels herself fade into the background. She doesn't attract attention for anything good. She notices boys dancing to "**Swagerific**" as Sonny says he's doing SAT prep at lunch, while Malik needs to edit his most recent film. Bri thinks that she just has to get through one more year. They line up to go through security and wonder if the guards Long and Tate are still on a power trip: last week, they gave Curtis extra screenings even though the metal detector didn't go off. Malik grumbles and Bri explains that since the riots, Malik has gotten into Civil Rights stuff and the Black Panthers.

Everyone goes through without an issue until Bri. Though the detectors don't go off, Long makes her go back through and then asks to search her bag. Bri panics: her candy stash is in there, and if they find it, she could be expelled. Malik starts to film as Bri snatches her backpack out of Long's reach. Long throws Bri to the ground and pulls her hands behind her, securing them with plastic wrap. He calls her a hoodlum and Bri says nothing. She's afraid and doesn't want to die.

CHAPTER 5

Bri sits and stares straight ahead in Dr. Rhodes's office while Ms. Clark calls Jay at work. Bri is confused when Ms. Clark says that Christ Temple Church told her Jay doesn't work there anymore. Bri realizes that this is what the Popkenchurch was about. Fifteen minutes later, Jay arrives wearing work clothes, worriedly looks Bri over, and angrily asks why Bri is handcuffed. Dr. Rhodes steps out of her office with Long, asks him to release Bri, and invites Bri and Jay into her office. Bri's backpack is open on Dr. Rhodes's desk, revealing her candy stash.

Dr. Rhodes tries to tell Jay that there was an "incident," and Bri mumbles that Long and Tate threw her on the floor. With a sigh, Dr. Rhodes says that Long and Tate will be investigated and disciplined, but Bri is in trouble too for selling candy. Bri argues with Dr. Rhodes that Long and Tate go after the black and Latinx kids, and Jay says that even Trey used to tell her that guards pick on certain kids. Calmly, Dr. Rhodes stands her ground, but says nothing when Jay asks if the guards throw all the kids on the floor. Dr. Rhodes says that Bri was "argumentative and aggressive," as usual.

As far as Bri is concerned, "Swagerific" represents how low the bar is for making it big in the hip-hop world—remember her saying that it's not a good song, it's just catchy. Though she's not there yet, this does suggest that there's more to being successful as an artist than just crafting good music—which Bri can do. Instead, "Swagerific" is likely the product of someone with power and influence pulling strings.



The fact that Bri's first thought is of not wanting to die makes it abundantly clear that people of color are unfairly targeted by police figures and face more extreme consequences when they are targeted, knowledge they live with at all times. It's also clear that Long and Tate's behavior is uncalled for in this situation, when simply sending her to the principal would do—Bri showed no signs of violence or anything that warrants handcuffs.



The discovery that Jay probably lost her job makes this whole thing even worse for Bri—given that the gas is already off at home, this means that Bri selling candy and possibly being expelled will be the least of their worries. That Dr. Rhodes allowed Bri to sit handcuffed in her office suggests that Dr. Rhodes is also not a person Bri can trust, since this would imply that she believes whatever Long is saying and assumes Bri to be an automatic threat.



Dr. Rhodes's behavior shows that she's far more interested in policing black students at school than she is in protecting them or giving them a safe space to learn. In particular, her unwillingness to truly listen and hear what Jay and Bri are saying shows that she's already made up her mind and sees this incident as merely annoying from a public relations standpoint, not something that exposes the racist elements of her leadership and should be fixed.



Bri thinks of all the times when she's said things to her teachers they don't like. She's asked teachers why they don't teach about black people outside of Black History Month, or why they teach boring books from the literary canon. Mrs. Murray is the only teacher who hasn't gotten upset with her—but she's also Bri's only black teacher. Dr. Rhodes says that she's suspending Bri for three days.

On the car ride home, Bri thinks about all the things that "hoodlum" rhymes with and looks at the destroyed storefronts left over from the riots. Jay comments that it seems nobody is fixing Garden Heights so the residents don't forget what happened. She reminds Bri that when things happen, she needs to think of her safety and let other people think they're powerful. Jay sighs and says that Bri has to play a different game at Midtown since she's black, and refuses to let Bri transfer to Garden High. She insists that Garden High is basically a prison and doesn't help anyone succeed.

Jay sighs that they don't have a lot of options right now, so Bri has to make Midtown work. Bri asks if Jay lost her job, and Jay admits she did. Since the church was damaged in the riots, they had to reallocate funds to fix damage and had to let Jay go. Bri knows that her family is in trouble now—they're already struggling to make rent and already don't have gas. Jay assures Bri that God will take care of them, which Bri finds questionable since a church laid her off. Jay says she's interviewing for jobs and has filed for unemployment. She admits that Trey knew about this and Bri pouts: Jay always seems to treat her like she's too young to handle hard things. Bri refuses to speak to Jay after this, and as soon as they get home, she jumps out of the car and walks off, feeling like she's drowning.

CHAPTER 6

Bri walks fifteen minutes west to the Maple Grove projects, which is a rougher neighborhood than hers. A man recognizes Bri as "Li'l Law" and shouts at her from a passing car, and Bri waves. Bri thinks that if Lawless had lived, he'd have gotten a record deal and they'd be fine. She thinks of all the other people who have power over her life: the dealer who sold Jay her first hit, and the cop who killed the boy, starting the riots. She vows to take back power as a young boy on a dirt bike, Jojo, stops inches from Bri. Bri sees that he has money pinned to his shirt and reasons that it must be his birthday. She gives him free skittles and asks him why he's not in school.

The literary canon—or what's considered literary classics, like works by Shakespeare or Charles Dickens—is overwhelmingly male and white. This suggests that Bri's school as a whole is unwilling to question if it's properly serving all of its students by not exposing them to a variety of experiences and viewpoints—some of which have the ability to make Bri feel like a valuable member of the school community.



While Jay's assessment of the two different available schools makes sense, it's also questionable whether or not Midtown also functions as a prison-like entity for someone like Bri, who isn't white and part of the majority. The idea that Garden Heights is still unfixed after the riots to send a message tells the black residents that they don't matter as much to government entities, showing again how black people are systematically targeted and put down.



Bri's pouting and sense of being kept in the dark is both understandable and indicative of her youth. It's worth giving Jay credit; she's doing everything she can to give Bri the opportunity to be a teenager without terrifying adult worries and responsibilities. She keeps things from her for this reason, but this also makes Bri feel like Jay doesn't trust her and thinks of her as a small, immature child when what Bri wants is to be treated like an intelligent young adult, capable of processing difficult things like this.



The choice to frame her life as being in the hands entirely of others (the drug dealer, the cop, Long and Tate) isn't entirely surprising given the horrible things that have happened to Bri. However, this way of thinking also conditions her to believe that she doesn't have much or any power over her own life, something that, going forward, will make Bri even more susceptible to manipulation by other powerful people.



Jojo follows Bri to the courtyard of Aunt Pooh's apartment building. Pooh and one of her closest friends, Scrap, sit on Pooh's car, surrounded by other Garden Disciples. Bri explains she got suspended and tells them everything. Pooh angrily says she'll take care of the guards, but Bri insists it's fine. Scrap tries to buy candy on credit, but Bri refuses and says it's against the "Ten Snack Commandments." Pooh excitedly announces that Bri rewrote the famous song "Ten Crack Commandments" and ask Bri to perform it. When Bri is done, a few of Pooh's friends bow and Jojo's mouth hangs open.

Aunt Pooh sends everyone away including Jojo, who wants desperately to become a Garden Disciple. After he leaves, Pooh looks at Bri with concern and asks if she's okay. Bri feels as though she has "hoodlum" branded on her forehead and says that Jay won't let her transfer to Garden High. She says she feels invisible, but Pooh encourages her to focus on the big things coming—especially after her Ring performance.

Pooh asks how Bri got home, and Bri explains how and why Jay got laid off. Bri admits she's not okay and Pooh promises to help. Bri knows Jay won't accept, since Pooh's money comes from drugs. Pooh assures Bri that they won't let this stop "the come up," which is their goal to get out of Garden Heights by rapping. Bri says she just doesn't want to be deadweight, since she's the only one at home not working. She says she wants to make the rap thing happen now, so she can make money and help Jay. Pooh says that they'll keep going back to the Ring and then says that she arranged for Bri to record a song with a local producer tomorrow. Bri is ecstatic. Scrap suggests Bri do something like "**Swagerific**"—even though it has no substance, it's catchy.

A skinny old man shouts at Pooh from across the courtyard. Pooh goes to him and sends him away with a little baggie. Bri doesn't know how Pooh can sell drugs when her own sister used to be addicted. She thinks that if the rap thing happens, Pooh will give up dealing. Scrap tells Bri that she has skills and she's good for the neighborhood. He says that Lawless was a big deal and gave everyone hope, and Bri can do the same thing. Bri wonders if it's true.

Pooh's desire to help Bri by getting back at Long and Tate illustrates how closely Bri is associated with the local gang activity, even if she's not a member herself—she's still someone that the Garden Disciples will protect, no questions asked. It's worth noting that Bri is by no means the first person to rewrite "Ten Crack Commandments"; this serves as a reminder of how integrated Bri is in the hip-hop world.



Feeling like "hoodlum" is branded on Bri's forehead builds on Bri's sense that other people are in control of her life. Being branded in this way isn't something that Bri can control or change, which makes Bri feel even more helpless and at risk.



Bri's sense that she's deadweight to her family shows how poverty robs children of their ability to be children. Rather than seeing Jay's insistence that Bri dedicate herself to school as a gift, Bri sees it as a liability and not a smart choice. Then, Bri's insistence that she needs to make rapping professionally happen now reveals her weak spot. She wants to help her family, but her desperation to help out will make her extremely vulnerable and cloud her ability to make solid decisions.



Notice that Bri just thinks that it's a given that Pooh will stop dealing if she makes it as a rapper. This again shows how young and naïve Bri is. She wants to live in a more ideal world, and hasn't yet come to terms with the fact that she cannot control the people around her and make them change.



CHAPTER 7

Bri hears Trey's car long before he arrives. He looks straight at Bri and asks why she didn't answer her phone. Bri checks her phone and sees that it's still on Do Not Disturb mode from school. Pooh walks back from her drug deal and gives Trey a hard time about his pizza place uniform. Other Garden Disciples in the courtyard snigger too and suggest that Lawless is ashamed of his son, but Trey drags Bri to his car. Once they're out of the courtyard, Trey sighs and apologizes, but says that he and Jay were worried enough to consider calling Grandma and Granddaddy to help them look for her.

Trey says that Jay told him what happened and asks how Bri's feeling. She thinks that his degree in psychology is a blessing and a curse: he wants to help people, but he uses it to justify being nosy. When Bri says she's tired of being singled out, he tells her to stop giving people a reason to do so, and then says she has oppositional defiant disorder. He lists the reasons why he thinks this as Bri grumpily insists this isn't true. Laughing, Trey congratulates her on her Ring performance and says that Kayla—Ms. Tique, whom he works with—told him about it. Bri thinks that it's sad that someone as talented as Ms. Tique has to make pizzas. Bri says she idolizes Ms. Tique, notices Trey's smile, and asks if he likes her.

Trey changes the subject and asks how Bri feels about Jay being unemployed. Bri admits she's afraid, and Trey says he's been looking for a better job and is considering going to grad school. Grad school would mean that he'd have fewer hours to work, however, so he probably won't go. He assures Bri that they'll be okay, but Bri thinks it's sad he had to come back to Garden Heights anyway. He did everything right—so if he can't make it, Bri thinks, no one can.

CHAPTER 8

Bri wakes up at 8:00 the next morning after falling asleep listening to Lawless rapping. She spent most of the night poring through her notebook, trying to choose a song to record. Bri hears Jay shushing people—Jay hosts a support group for recovered drug addicts once per month, along with Aunt Gina and Aunt 'Chelle, Sonny and Malik's moms. Jay always makes sandwiches, and Bri can't decide if this generosity awes or annoys her when they barely have food for themselves. Bri heads for the kitchen.

To Bri, while it's sad and disappointing that Trey's only line of work is making pizzas, it's important and positive that he has a job at all to support his family. Trey is caught in a situation where, once again, he can't win: even when he gets a job like he's supposed to, his job isn't good enough, while working in his field isn't something available to him given the economy and the responsibility he feels to be present at home.



While Bri won't fully make the connection, it's telling that even Ms. Tique still has to work a food service job in order to make rapping work—this should warn Bri that even really good rappers don't just land record deals and get rich out of the blue. In short, the music business is more complex than Bri currently gives it credit for, which again sets Bri up to experience some rude awakenings as she continues to wade into the industry herself.



Trey is also trapped by poverty: for a variety of reasons, he can't afford to get the education that in the long run would make him more money. Bri's assessment shows that she's well aware of the bind that she and her family are in in this sense, which continues to make a record deal seem even more appealing.



Jay's generosity continues to develop her as someone with a huge sense of responsibility to her community, something she likely developed thanks to help that she did receive when she was getting clean (she did go to rehab and had her children to work for). Now, she's positioning herself as a mentor for these other recovering addicts in an attempt to break the cycle and help them achieve success.



Bri stops to listen to Jay speak about how Grandma and Granddaddy wouldn't let her see Bri and Trey after she got out of rehab, and says that she still feels like people punish her for her mistakes—once prospective employers find out she was on drugs, they never call. Aunt Gina rolls her eyes and points out that plenty of white people can get jobs after being on drugs. Jay spots Bri and pulls her into the kitchen and onto her lap. Bri tells the reader that she lets Jay do this because she wonders if Jay still sees her as a little girl in need of snuggles. Today, it feels like Jay needs the snuggles.

Aunt Pooh picks Bri up later. Bri tells Jay that she and Pooh are just hanging out, as she knows that Jay won't let her record until her grades improve. Scrap accompanies Pooh and Bri to the studio, and Bri sees why: it's a trap house and there's evidence of drug use everywhere. Pooh assures Bri that her friend, Doc, is cool and this will be great. Pooh knocks on the garage door and Doc opens it. The inside looks like a real studio. Pooh introduces Bri to Doc, and the other guys sitting with him tease Bri about rapping nursery rhymes. Bri insults them and then listens to the beat that Doc put together for her. It reminds her of being patted down, and Bri decides to write something new. She mutters, "you can't stop me on the come up."

Pooh is excited, but when her phone goes off, she announces that she needs to go. Bri follows her outside and insists that Pooh has to stay. She knows that Pooh is going to a drug deal and realizes that she only assumed that Pooh would stop dealing. Bri watches Pooh drive away and puts on a brave face. Doc encourages Bri and asks her what the world has done to her. Bri sits in the corner with her notebook, thinking of Long and Tate. She watches Scrap show Doc his gun and his silencer, and Bri thinks about how nobody hears the black residents of Garden Heights—they just blame them for any violence.

A half an hour later, Bri is ready. She puts on the headphones and thinks that if people are going to call her a hoodlum, she'll embrace the label. She raps about having a gun, being willing to play the role of a gangster, and about how the police unfairly target black people. Bri also mentions Lawless.

Bri's assessment of why Jay still snuggles her like this shows again that Bri and Jay haven't fully recovered from the trauma that both of them suffered when Jay left Bri and Trey with her in-laws. Jay still feels the need to make Bri feel loved in the same way she did when Bri was a child, and Bri's suspicion indicates that Jay may not be entirely comfortable with the fact that Bri is growing up and changing so fast.



The fact that this recording studio is in a "trap house" tells Bri that at this point, her music career is very tied up with the gang and drug activity of Garden Heights, whether Bri herself is involved or not. Scrap's presence also suggests that even if Pooh does assure Bri that this will be fine, there is a possibility of danger anyway. This in turn makes recording feel even more illicit for Bri, who's already going around Jay to do this in the first place.



The fact that Pooh leaves Bri to attend to drug business should flag for Bri that she can't actually rely on Pooh to be there for her as a manager or as an aunt—for Pooh, her work will take precedence (and given the danger inherent to her work, this is understandable). Giving the reader Bri's thought process provides insight into what the resulting song is actually about, which brings the reader onto Bri's side for the scuffles that follow.



Again, by telling the reader upfront that she's embracing a label that other people will put on her anyway, Bri encourages the reader to side with her and understand what her true intention is—to show how messed up all of it is, not to scare people into thinking she actually has a gun.



CHAPTER 9

On Sunday morning, Bri spends a long time in the bathroom thinking about how Pooh never came back to the recording session. Scrap walked Bri home after Doc polished the song and put it on a jump drive. Pooh sometimes disappears like this and then comes back like nothing happened, and though Bri knows it's for the best since Pooh does horrible things with the Garden Disciples, she's still upset that Pooh left. Bri wishes Pooh had been there to critique the lines and wishes she were here now to tell her what to do with the file. She thinks of a video she found online of Long and Tate pinning her down, and thinks that she already feels too exposed to post the song.

Trey pokes his head in to hurry Bri and they head outside to the car to go to church. Jay sternly tells them to ignore the people who will want to talk about how she lost her job and looks right at Bri as she does. They park and go inside. Jay greets Pastor Eldridge as though nothing is wrong, but neither Bri nor Trey allow him to hug them. They take their usual pew in the back and when Bri sees Deacon Turner, she flips him off. He isn't wearing his glasses and so waves in return. Sonny's family hasn't been to church since Deacon Turner said that hugging boys makes them gay.

Jay watches Grandma and her friends as Granddaddy comes to greet his family. Granddaddy gets a kiss from Bri and then insults Trey's haircut. He asks Jay how they're doing, and she and Trey insist they're handling it. Granddaddy insults Trey's job, and Bri tells the reader that Granddaddy is the sort to think the current generation doesn't want to work. He doesn't understand that Trey can't find anything but his current job. He gives Jay a few \$20 bills, insisting that Lawless would want Jay to take it.

Grandma appears and tells Jay to not waste the money, and Bri notes that Grandma is stuck-up. Grandma invites Bri to sit with her, and since Bri alternates weeks sitting with Jay and her grandparents to keep the peace, she agrees. In the second pew, Grandma insists that Bri looks tired and skinny, insulting Jay as she does so. She picks at Bri's braids, which she says are a mess, and tells Bri she can come home. Bri tells the reader that Grandma still acts like Bri is just visiting with Jay. Because Bri knows how hard Jay worked to get custody, Bri says she wants to stay with Jay.

Bri's monologue here shows clearly that she craves guidance and support from the adult figures in her life. This is important to keep in mind going forward, especially once Bri starts to strike out on her own and suffers for it. This suggests that Bri understands that given her age and her inexperience, she does need someone to help her figure out how to behave and what to do to make fame happen—anything Bri does by herself that works will be mostly by accident.



Flipping Deacon Turner off—while inarguably rude—shows that Bri is extremely loyal to her friends and in that regard, knows who she is and will speak out to support others also living life as they truly are. The way that Jay talks to Bri reminds the reader that Bri has a reputation for being mouthy and quick to anger, hence choosing to flip someone off in the middle of church.



The way that Granddaddy speaks to Trey suggests that Granddaddy is very far removed from current economic realities, in which a degree isn't a guarantee of a job—and as a young black man, Trey has things stacked against him even more than other young people. Granddaddy does show, however, that he's generous and does care about his family—he just doesn't always know how to show it verbally.



It's telling that Bri feels like she needs to alternate sitting with Jay and her grandparents specifically to keep the peace. This is a big responsibility for a child, even a teenager, and it reminds the reader that Bri already feels as though she has to take on far more than a teenager should in order to keep her family functioning smoothly. Grandma is mostly the one at fault here; her picking at Jay makes Bri feel like she has no choice but to stubbornly stand up for her mother.



Sister Daniels, Grandma's church enemy and Curtis's grandmother, walks over. The women hug and compliment each other, though they both know their compliments are insults. Sister Daniels asks Bri how she is and says she heard what happened at school. Bri glares at Curtis as Sister Daniels gives Grandma the basic strokes of the incident with Long and Tate and suggests that Bri was trying to help Jay by selling candy. Conspiratorially, Sister Daniels suggests that Pastor Eldridge let Jay go because she's back on drugs. Grandma doesn't seem surprised, but Bri insists that Jay isn't on drugs. Bri thinks about it for a moment and realizes it's possible, but thinks that Jay probably wouldn't do that.

When church is over four hours later, everyone files down to the basement to eat. Grandma is serving, so Bri is last in line. She hears Curtis's voice in her ear calling her "Princess" and asking if she got in trouble, and she rams her elbow back into his stomach. They insult each other and Curtis says he was being a good grandson by keeping Sister Daniels in the loop. When Bri asks him if he thinks what happened is funny, he stops smirking, says it's not funny, and says he's tired of Long and Tate assuming things about them. He says that they'll get revenge one day, but Bri points out that if something bad happens, things are going to get way worse for the black kids at school.

Curtis tells Bri that there's a rumor at school that Bri is selling drugs on campus. He tells her to remember that she didn't do anything wrong, which makes Bri laugh. She says it's funny that Curtis acts like he cares, but Curtis bites his lip and says he does care about her. Bri is shocked. Their eyes meet as he grabs a plate and Sister Daniels starts to serve salad.

CHAPTER 10

On Wednesday, Bri's first day back to school, she asks Sonny on the bus if Curtis is cute. Sonny is shocked and confused, but says that nobody is as good-looking as Michael B. Jordan from *Black Panther*. He amends this to say that Curtis is cute like rodents are cute. Bri has been thinking about whether or not Curtis is cute since Sunday, as he has the body type she likes but he's also obnoxious. Bri tells Sonny what happened at church, and Sonny points out that it's ridiculous that she suddenly likes Curtis now that he's started treating her like she's a real person.

When Bri recognizes that it's entirely possible that Jay could be back on drugs, it shows that she still doesn't entirely trust Jay to stay sober and in her life as a functioning parent. Again, this gives the reader the sense that Bri is juggling all sorts of anxieties and trying to stay afloat amidst all of it. She doesn't feel entirely safe and secure in her world because of that, which in turn makes it harder for Bri to concentrate in school and makes her even more desperate to gain independence by pursuing rapping.



Curtis shows here that he's more than just an obnoxious kid on the bus: he's also conscious of the ways in which he and other black kids have to work harder just to safely exist at school, and the weight of being conscious of that is hard for him to hold onto. While he does have a bit of an attitude when he insists he had to tell Sister Daniels about the incident, this does show that Curtis is loyal to his family members and wants to do what's necessary to care for them.



In this moment, Curtis becomes human to Bri in a way he hasn't been before, something that helps both of them begin to come of age. This shows Bri that she has more allies than she thought, and Curtis's mature behavior suggests he's leaving behind his less desirable habits.



While Sonny has a point—all people deserve to be treated with respect and listened to when they experience something like Bri did—his assessment of Curtis suggests that he still sees Curtis as an obnoxious classmate, not a viable romantic candidate for his best friend. Again, the fact that Bri is beginning to reevaluate her own assumptions shows that she's beginning to come of age.



Sonny asks Bri if she ended up recording her song, and he asks to listen to it. Bri hesitates, as she knows she's a different person when she raps, but she pulls "**On the Come Up**" up on her phone and gives it to him. She wonders how professional rappers get over the nervousness of sharing their work. Sonny nods along and praises Bri, and Deon joins in. Sonny turns the volume all the way up and dances, and everyone on the bus nods along. When they get to the line about Long and Tate and Bri confirms that it's about them, everyone goes wild.

Bri is ecstatic until they get to school. She knows that Long and Tate aren't working right now, but she's worried about the rumors and the stares. Bri takes Sonny's arm and notices how many kids look at her. Sonny admits that he's been talking to a guy online, which successfully distracts Bri. He says the guy's screen name is Rapid, and Bri immediately begins to look for his profiles. Sonny explains that Rapid follows Sonny's anonymous account where he posts pictures of his graffiti, and they've been talking for weeks. Worriedly, Sonny says they haven't exchanged pictures, but Bri says this is normal. Sonny says he'd like a relationship, but he has too much at stake with getting into college, where he won't have to worry about gangs and homophobia. Bri insists that Sonny can have a relationship too.

Bri and Sonny get in line for security. There are new guards, but Bri still feels sick and shaky. She doesn't want the guards to assume she has anything and stares at the spot where her face hit the ground. The guard waves Bri through and Sonny continues talking to Bri as though things are normal. Suddenly, a white boy shouts, "free Long and Tate." He and his friends laugh, Sonny insults them, and Bri pulls Sonny away. They meet up with Malik at Malik's locker, where Sonny says that Bri's **song** is awesome. Malik smiles at Bri, making her melt inside. She agrees that he can listen to the song at lunch and they decide to get pizza at Sal's together while Sonny attends SAT prep. Bri wonders if this is a date.

CHAPTER 11

Bri tries to figure out if Malik just asked her out. She thinks he did, but she also remembers Granddaddy saying that Bri jumps to conclusions faster than anyone else. She tries to focus on this conundrum instead of the stares in the hallway, and heads for Mrs. Murray's class. When Mrs. Murray looks unsure of what to say, Bri feels ready to be done with her day.

Keep in mind that everyone on the bus listening to Bri's song is black. The song is for them; they're the ones who experience the same kind of horrible things that Bri did and suffer at the hands of prejudiced white people, so they understand what Bri is talking about and get her point. This is important, as later, others will see very different things in Bri's song—but those people will be white.



Because of his sexuality, Sonny has more and different things to worry about than Bri does—though it's worth pushing back on Sonny's insistence that simply being in college will solve this problem for him. While it's true that he'll likely have access to more support and community and be in a more accepting environment, Sonny will always be at risk, no matter where he is. This offers up the possibility that all young Garden Heights residents who want to go to college idealize it to a degree, and the realities of college can't actually stand up to what the students expect.



This white boy makes it abundantly clear that there are vocally racist students at Bri's school. In particular, though nothing physical happens here, this can be read as an implicit threat of violence—or at the very least, that this boy expects that at some point, the black students will be "put in their place." This reminds the reader that school isn't a safe place for Bri or the other black students. They constantly have to be on guard for things like this that might compromise their safety or get them into trouble.



Knowing that Bri jumps to conclusions makes it easier for the reader to suspect that Malik probably didn't ask her out, especially since Bri later notes that going to Sal's isn't anything special. Bri is still prone to making immature leaps like this—especially when she's influenced by a childhood crush.



Bri races to her locker before lunch. She checks her hair in her phone—Jay braided it over the weekend—and sees Malik coming toward her, talking to someone. It's Shana, a dancer from the bus, and Bri ascertains that Shana is coming with them for lunch. She feels like she's being punched when Shana jokingly hits Malik, and she thinks she didn't realize that Shana and Malik were this close.

Bri gives the reader the rules for going places around Midtown, which amount to not giving store employees a reason to suspect that their black clientele is up to anything illegal. Sal's is the only place where this doesn't hold true. Big Sal, the owner, teases Malik about Shana and takes their order. Bri is aghast when Shana adds Canadian bacon to their pizza and Malik insists on paying. They go to their favorite corner booth, where Malik puts his arm across the back of the booth—technically around Shana's shoulders. Bri ignores this and refuses to let Malik listen to her **song**, even when he recites some of his favorite parts of Bri's other raps back to her.

Malik asks again and says he knows it'll be great, but asks that Bri not ignore him when she gets famous—he's known her since she was afraid of Big Bird as a little kid. Shana howls with laughter, but Bri doesn't find this funny at all. She pulls out her phone and plays her **song**. Malik looks troubled throughout, but praises Bri. When Bri pushes, he says that she hasn't done half the things she rapped about, and while he knows that she's talking about the things *others* expect her to do, he thinks that most people won't understand that. He's especially worried about her talk of guns.

After a few minutes, Shana says that she wants to talk to Bri: she and a few others have been talking about how Long and Tate target black and brown kids. Her wording is clunky, but Malik puts a hand on hers. Bri stares at it, trying not to cry. Shana says that since the riots, she's wanted to do something. They formed an unofficial black and Latinx student coalition, which wants to publicize the fact that kids of color are being targeted—and specifically, what happened to Bri. Bri says she doesn't want to be the poster child, but Malik says he filmed the entire incident and with it, can prove that Bri didn't deserve what happened. Shana says that since parents heard Bri was selling drugs, plenty of them want Long and Tate back.

The way that Shana and Malik behave suggests that they're in a relationship or are soon to be. For Bri, this makes her feel as though Malik is abandoning her, especially since he hasn't expressed any interest in Shana up to this point. This, coupled with Sonny's confession that he hadn't told Bri about Rapid, compounds Bri's sense of being alone.



Sharing the "rules" again reminds readers, especially those who aren't black, that Bri must behave in a very particular way when she's in a predominately white area in order to not attract negative and potentially dangerous attention. The fact that Malik pays makes it clear to Bri that his relationship with Shana is more than just friendly, which continues to make Bri feel isolated among people she expects to feel safe with.



Malik's assessment of Bri's song shows that he's able to think about it from the perspective of a black person and a white person—he can see how Bri's lyrics could come across as being extremely dangerous and confrontational to someone who doesn't know Bri or understand her lived experience.



There's nothing especially wrong with what Shana says; Shana's only crime is that she's possibly dating Malik, which is upsetting for Bri. Bri's refusal to help out illustrates how heightened emotions for any reason can make it far more difficult to create positive change or work together, an idea that Malik will return to again and again over the course of the novel.



Malik asks in a hopeful tone what could happen if he posts the video. Bri knows what will happen: she'd end up on the news and on social media, but she'll be forgotten as soon as some other black person has something awful happen to them. She refuses to let Malik post it. Malik accuses Bri of being a sellout for rapping about guns instead of speaking out, and says that she knew it was just a surefire way to make money. Bri spits that until Malik understands what it's like to live without heat, he needs to stop. Malik's eyes widen and he starts to apologize, but Bri storms out.

Bri suggests here that the video of Long and Tate assaulting her will experience the same brief moment in the spotlight that others like it have (especially given the rise in footage from police body cams), and then fade into obscurity—without doing anything. Though Bri takes offense to Malik's suggestion that she just wants to make money, this is exactly what Supreme will tell Bri later: being a "hoodlum" sells.



CHAPTER 12

Bri and Malik ignore each other all day, and Malik sits with Shana on the bus home. Sonny moans that it sucks when Bri and Malik fight, but Bri refuses to let it go until Malik apologizes. Over the weekend, Bri discovers that the fridge is nearly empty. It's also covered in new, unpaid bills. Jay chose heat instead of food, since it's supposed to snow later. Jay enters the kitchen and says she's going to a food giveaway at the community center. She brushes off Trey's suggestion that she go to the welfare office, saying that she can't get food stamps as a college student unless she's employed.

Jay's choice to pay for heat instead of food illustrates the tough decisions that she has to make because of their financial situation. She understands that she can get food from other sources, but with snow coming, heat isn't negotiable. The mention that she can't get food stamps while in college shows another way that people are forced to remain in poverty—getting the degree will allow her to make more money, but she can't get the degree if she doesn't have food.



Jay tells Bri to come to the giveaway with her. Even though it's not even 8:00 in the morning, the line stretches out the door. Bri notices a news van and worries what will happen if her classmates see her, but Jay encourages her to not pay any attention. Bri looks at the other people in line and stares at her shoes when she sees the news camera panning in her direction. Jay strikes up a conversation with a woman in a housecoat and hair rollers, and by the time they get to the front of the line, Jay has made note of all the churches that distribute food.

Compiling a list of other food sources suggests that Jay suspects they'll have to live this way for a while. Bri's shame adds another layer of awfulness to living in poverty, as because she's so ashamed, she'll be less likely to ask for help and therefore, more willing to take drastic measures on her own to try to fix this situation.



Jay accepts a box from a volunteer as Bri notices that there's a black Santa and a boy wearing a "Mr. **Swaggerific**" sweatshirt—Supreme and Milez—giving candy to kids. Jay tells Bri to ignore them and heads to the table with canned goods. Bri wants to scream when one lady looks at her with pity. Bri leaves Jay to walk around. She heads for the shoe table and finds an almost-new pair of **Timbs** in her size. Bri deliberates about whether to take the shoes. The soles of her shoes are almost gone, but someone else might not have shoes at all. Bri also doesn't want to accept charity. She tries not to cry.

These new Timbs simultaneously represent everything Bri wants and everything she emphatically doesn't: while she wants the boots, she wants them to be a symbol of having made it, not a symbol of getting lucky at a charity event. In this moment, the Timbs tell Bri that she isn't making it and that making it might not be possible, given how difficult things are at home.



Supreme comes up behind Bri, calls her Li'l Law, and tells her to try the **Timbs** on. Bri refuses and tells the reader that she needs to be on guard: Supreme is certainly still sore that she beat Milez at the Ring. With a laugh, Supreme says that Bri is just like Lawless—upset over a line and ready to fight. He says knowingly that Bri needs the boots, but Bri lies and says she doesn't. Supreme goes on and says she shouldn't be ashamed. When he learns that this is Bri's first giveaway, he says she'll get used to the sympathetic looks. He then changes the subject and compliments Bri for how she performed in the Ring. He says that Bri has "It" and that Lawless would be proud. Bri is shocked to get this compliment.

Supreme says he's disappointed that Bri isn't doing anything with her talent; he saw she doesn't have music online. When he learns that Aunt Pooh is Bri's manager, he laughs and says that Pooh probably heard about Dee-Nice's deal and thinks that keeping Bri at the Ring will get her one too. This is true, but Bri ignores him. Supreme says that she needs to do more—he's Dee-Nice's manager, and Dee-Nice did more. He says she needs to get the right song out there. He gives Bri a business card and then starts to walk away. Bri says she has a **song** and pulls out her phone. She awkwardly asks him to listen to it, thinking that if he can do amazing things for Dee-Nice, Milez, and Lawless, maybe he can help her too.

Supreme listens with no emotion, but when the **song** is over, he says it's a hit. He tells Bri to put it online and text him the link, and he'll send it around. Jay walks over and greets Supreme coolly. He tells her that he and Miles are here to give back and he wants Miles to know how fortunate he is. Bri thinks that her situation shouldn't be an "after-school special." Supreme starts to offer Jay help, but Jay cuts him off and leads Bri away. Outside, volunteers tell people still lined up that the giveaway is over.

Bri feels awful walking past them with a box of food. Jay puts it in the trunk and makes a *Forrest Gump* reference. Bri tells the reader that *Forrest Gump* is her second favorite movie, as she loves the idea that a guy like Forrest could see and do so much. Everything happened to him because of luck, and Bri wonders if she just had a lucky moment with Supreme.

Jay asks what Bri and Supreme were talking about. Bri doesn't mention the **song**, but says that Supreme said she has "It" and could be a star. Jay says that's obvious; she saw it in the battle video. She says that Bri has been performing since she was a baby, and Lawless used to say that their "miracle" was going to be a superstar. Bri asks why they called her a miracle, and Jay explains that she had four miscarriages before having Bri. Jay blinks back tears.

Bri's sense that she should be on guard around Supreme indicates that she has good instincts which, if properly developed, could make her a shrewd businessperson in the music industry. However, it's also important to keep in mind the power dynamic at play. Remember that Supreme was Lawless's manager and is currently managing a very successful rapper—in Bri's mind, he's a successful person with power in the industry. Because Bri has mostly talent and instinct, she doesn't have the wherewithal to see Supreme as the threat he is.



In this moment, Bri shows Supreme all her cards and gives him even more power. After listening to her song, Supreme will know exactly how talented Bri is and what she's capable of producing, even in a less-than-ideal studio setting and with a less-than-ideal home situation. This makes her a potentially valuable asset for him, especially given that Bri desperately wants to make this work. As far as she's concerned, this is her only chance to make it big—an idea that while understandable, isn't necessarily true.



Supreme's explanation for why he and Miles are here and specifically, Bri's reaction, shows Bri that Supreme is willing to capitalize on the misfortune of others in order to make himself feel (and look) good. This should be a warning for Bri, as it suggests that she shouldn't trust Supreme with anything.



In deciding to think of her moment with Supreme as a possible lucky break, Bri disregards the fact that moments ago she wondered if she could even trust him. This shows how badly Bri wants to make it big.



It's worth noting that according to Jay, Lawless wasn't necessarily attributing Bri's future stardom to the fact that he's a star—he was letting her stand on her own two feet, even as a toddler. This suggests that were he alive, Lawless would encourage Bri to form her own identity and fame, separate from his.



CHAPTER 13

Thanks to the giveaway, Christmas feels like Christmas. Bri's family doesn't go to church even though Christmas falls on a Sunday. There aren't any presents, but Bri is fine with this. While Jay calls distant relatives, Trey and Bri play a Michael Jackson game on their Wii. Trey loses and mutters their traditional concession speech. Jay appears with the phone, asks Bri and Trey to say hi to an ancient uncle, and then hangs up. She has a box with her and explains that it contains things that belonged to Lawless. Quietly, she says she hid it from Grandma and from herself—she would've sold some of it when she was sick.

Bri carefully opens the box and pulls out a green bucket hat. She puts it on as Jay explains that Lawless insisted on wearing a hat at all times. Bri then digs out a sweatshirt and notebooks. The handwriting in them is sloppy, like hers. At the bottom of the box, Bri finds a gold **chain** in the shape of a crown, with "Law" written in diamonds underneath. Jay says it's real, and that Lawless bought it with his first big check. Bri knows it's valuable and Trey does too: he suggests they sell it. Jay insists that Bri have it, and Trey angrily shuts himself in his room. Bri tells the reader that Trey isn't a fan of Lawless, as he thinks that he died because of stupid things.

Jay starts making dinner while Bri admires the **chain**. Aunt Pooh and Lena arrive, and when Bri asks where Pooh has been, Lena tells Bri that it's hopeless. Jay returns to the living room and also asks Pooh where she's been, but Pooh refuses to tell. Lena offers to help cook and follows Jay into the kitchen. Pooh notices the chain and tells Bri to not wear it, but refuses to say why. She also brushes off Bri's anger that Pooh abandoned her at the studio and asks to hear the **song**. Bri sighs and tosses Pooh her phone.

Aunt Pooh plugs in earbuds and dances to the **song** until suddenly, she stops. She angrily pulls out the earbuds and quietly says that Bri isn't a gangster. Bri is shocked that Pooh feels this way, when Pooh carries a gun and disappears to deal drugs regularly. Bri tries to defend herself by saying that she's not saying she's a gangster—she's talking about stereotypes. Pooh hisses that nobody's going to listen for a deeper meaning. She asks why Bri brought up the Crowns. Bri is confused—the line Pooh refers to, in Bri's opinion, means that she's not involved with either gang—but Pooh insists that the Crowns will take it the wrong way. Pooh asks if Bri wants people to think that she shoots people, but Bri asks the same question of Pooh.

The fact that Bri is okay without presents shows that she's had to grow up and become mature at a very young age. While Christmas certainly doesn't have to be about gifts, the fact that Bri feels the need to mention this suggests that she's very aware that her family isn't celebrating in an especially traditional way. In this way, Bri feels even more conspicuously different from her peers.



For Trey (and for Bri and Jay, but to a lesser degree), the chain represents something that could make life easier, at least for a while, if they sold it. Jay's choice to give it to Bri is something that Bri should take note of as she says that Jay treats her like a child—the chain is extremely valuable, and entrusting it to Bri is a way for Jay to say that she trusts Bri and is willing to treat her more like an adult.



Though Pooh and Bri are closer in age, it's telling here that Pooh treats Bri like a much younger child. While a generous reading could see that Pooh is trying to protect Bri from any unsavory or illegal things she was doing while she was gone, it nevertheless makes Bri feel unloved, abandoned, and as though she can't trust Pooh to be there for her.



It's telling that Pooh says much the same thing that Malik did when it comes to Bri's song. The fact that this interpretation is coming from a number of sources, all of which Bri (in theory) trusts, should tell Bri that her song will be risky for her if she expects people to look for the deeper meaning and not just take it at face value. While it is on the listener to go for the deeper meaning and engage with music that way, the fact that Bri has to think about this mirrors the way she has to temper herself as a black woman in society.



After a moment of silence, Pooh hisses in Bri's face to delete the **song** and says they'll make a new one. Thinking of Supreme, Bri asks how Pooh is going to promote the new song. Pooh says they can upload it and see what happens, but Bri says this isn't enough—they need money. Pooh says she's also in trouble and doesn't want to deal drugs forever. When Bri tells her to stop dealing, she insists it's not that simple. They argue more about whether Pooh is doing enough for Bri and her music, and Pooh ends the conversation by telling Bri to delete the song. Bri goes to her room, uploads her song to Dat Cloud, and texts Supreme the link. He responds that Bri is going to get big.

At this point, when it feels like nobody in Bri's life supports her song or Bri by extension, Supreme seems like the only person she can turn to—he's the only one telling her that her song is a hit and that she can make money off of it. That Bri doesn't take her friends and family's concerns seriously illustrates the fine line that adults in her life need to walk as they guide her, and specifically, the need for them to show up and prove to Bri that she should trust them.



CHAPTER 14

On the first day of school after Christmas break, Bri, Jay, and Trey wake up to loud banging on their front door. It's Ms. Lewis, the landlady, asking for rent money. Both Trey and Bri join Jay at the door as Jay asks for more time, but Ms. Lewis insists that rent is more than a week late and Jay hasn't even paid last month yet. She mentions Jay's "begging ass," offending Bri and Trey, but Jay calmly asks for more time, and only snaps when Ms. Lewis asks if Jay can't pay because she's back on drugs. After Jay closes the door, she seems to slump. Trey offers to go to a check advance place, but Jay tells him not to. Bri wants to know what'll happen if they end up homeless, but Jay assures her that everything will work out.

Though Jay certainly intends her response to Bri to be comforting, all it does is make Bri feel even more that she's been treated like a child who can't handle the realities of living in poverty—especially when those realities come knocking on the door and conduct themselves right in front of Bri. In other words, Jay's attempts to shelter Bri are backfiring and are only making Bri more desperate and afraid.



Bri feels sick of adults refusing to tell her about this sort of thing. In the car on the way to school she offers to get a job, but Jay shuts this down. Bri thinks that Lawless was working two jobs and rapping when he was sixteen and Trey was born, but she knows that he did it so they wouldn't end up like this today. Bri tells Jay that she'd rather work and have to grow up too fast than end up homeless. She stares at the **chain** and suggests they pawn it, but Jay shoots this down too.

Bri's family has existed in poverty for (at least) two generations—Lawless was doing his best to pull his family out, just as Jay is now. This shows how families like Bri's can be kept in the cycle, given that there are few resources (and few items like the chain to sell) to help people get back on their feet, and accessing the ones that exist can be very difficult.



At school, Bri leaps up the steps to meet Sonny. He comments on the **chain** and asks about Malik. Bri hasn't spoken to Malik since lunch at Sal's, but she's not willing to admit that she's angry because Malik isn't romantically interested in her. Sonny finally shows Bri the reason he wanted to talk: he got a message from Rapid asking if they can meet up. Bri asks why Sonny hasn't responded. Sonny says he's worried that Rapid might be an old man in a basement, and Rapid is also a distraction. He says that Malik is trying to figure out who Rapid is, which hurts Bri's feelings—it seems like their trio is breaking up.

Sonny's fears that Rapid might not actually be another sixteen-year-old kid are entirely legitimate. More broadly, this fear speaks to the way that a person's image, especially online, can be easily manipulated. Just as it's not that difficult for someone to impersonate a teenager, it's also not difficult for Bri's song to make her out to be someone she's not, once it ends up online thanks to Supreme.



The new security guards are still at Midtown, so Bri and Sonny get through security smoothly. They see Malik at Bri's locker and Bri approaches while Sonny leaves to talk to a teacher. Malik doesn't believe Bri when she insists that things are fine between them, and he grabs her arm. This is even worse for Bri, and she tells herself that Shana's boyfriend is touching her. As Malik asks Bri what all this is really about, Bri hears Curtis yelling for her and coming toward them. Bri turns to him, exasperated, but Curtis says that Bri's a big deal now. He asks if she's seen the post on *Blackout*, a black gossip blog, and pulls up the page.

The headline refers to Bri as Lawless's daughter and doesn't use her name, but she decides to ignore this. She sees that the embedded Dat Cloud link for her **song** shows twenty thousand streams. She starts shouting in surprise, attracting attention from her classmates and Dr. Rhodes. Curtis congratulates Bri, while Malik halfheartedly does the same and then disappears. Curtis comments on Malik's strange behavior, and Bri explains that Malik doesn't like that the song talks about guns. Curtis points out that even if Bri doesn't carry a gun, people are going to think she does, and she should make money off of that assumption if she can. This shocks Bri, but the conversation descends into an insult battle and Bri suddenly experiences the urge to kiss Curtis. She's saved when the bell rings. The rest of the day passes like a dream, and even Mrs. Murray is happy for Bri.

CHAPTER 15

Two weeks later, Bri walks out to Aunt Pooh's car to go to another battle in the Ring. She doesn't think that Jay or Trey have heard her **song**, though it's becoming increasingly popular on the internet. Scrap lets Bri into the backseat while reciting some of Bri's lyrics. Pooh doesn't look at Bri; they haven't spoken since Bri told her about *Blackout* posting her song. Bri wonders if Pooh's anger matters if they get famous.

Scrap notices Bri's **chain**, but Pooh nastily reminds Bri that she shouldn't be wearing it. Bri assures Pooh that security will be tight and they'll be fine. In the parking lot, Bri hears cars blasting her **song** and lots of people call out to her. They skip the line and head for the door as usual, but a Crown member shouts at them to get in line. When the Crown and his friends catch sight of the chain, their eyes light up and they ask if Bri is Lawless's daughter. They know that "On the Come Up" is Bri's song. The Crown asks about the lyrics and threatens Bri. Both the Crown and Pooh reach for their guns, but Frank and Reggie push them apart and tell Bri she can't come in—they don't allow gang activity on the property.

*Structurally, having Curtis butt in here to show Bri that she's getting famous offers another indicator that Bri's coming fame is going to get in the way of and harm her relationships with her family and friends. She's not able to have a very necessary conversation with Malik because of the *Blackout* post, something that doesn't seem like a huge deal to Bri now but will become a problem as she gets more famous.*



While it's nice that Curtis is trying to support Bri, his choice to stand up for her song and to tell her specifically that she should profit off of people's assumptions if possible suggests that he too has an inexperienced and naïve view of fame. What neither Bri nor Curtis realize is that getting famous for this song and the lyrics has the potential to trap Bri in an identity that she really doesn't want—but one that, nonetheless, is profitable. Bri's desire to kiss Curtis also shows that she's still growing up and learning to see more people as human and worthy of her time and attention.



Bri's sense that her family members don't know about her song suggests that Bri is trying to build up a sense of safety and security around it. She knows that neither of them will like the song, which suggests that Bri is also aware and has thought about the criticisms from Pooh and Malik.



Bri's sense of security at the Ring suggests that she trusts her community at large to look out for her, even if Pooh or Jay might not. This gets turned upside down when the Crowns harass Bri and Pooh. Their appearance in the flesh makes it very apparent to Bri that there's danger involved in messing with the gangs, and it makes Lawless's death even more real for her—these are the people who killed him. This begins to show Bri that her fame may not be all it's cracked up to be.



The Crown and his crew leave, but Bri asks Frank and Reggie to let her in. They refuse, and Bri's temper gets the better of her. Someone starts playing "**On the Come Up**." Bri and the crowd perform a call-and-response with Bri's lyrics and people congratulate her. Pooh glares at Bri and strides to the parking lot. She spits that Bri shouldn't have released the song, but Bri points out that Pooh was the one who started to draw her gun on the Crowns. Bri doesn't understand why this is her fault when everyone clearly loves the song and the Crowns are just jealous. She refuses to get in the car with Pooh, and Pooh drives off.

Supreme approaches Bri and offers her a ride. He opens the passenger door of his Hummer, snaps his fingers at Milez, and tells him to get in the back. Milez moves back and then, at Supreme's prodding, introduces himself as Miles without the "z" and apologizes for what he said about Lawless during their battle. Bri is shocked that Miles sounds straight out of the suburbs, and she forgives him. They discuss their shared love of female rappers like Nicki Minaj and Cardi B until Supreme says, "boy," and then Miles turns his attention to his phone.

Supreme asks Bri what happened with Pooh, and compliments Bri for how she worked the crowd. He says that the publicity will be great since everyone filmed the standoff, and says she'll look like a "ghetto rapper." Bri says she was just standing up for herself, and Supreme replies that it's important she play the role—it's what will make her money. He says that the biggest hip-hop consumers are "white kids in the suburbs," and if Bri can scare those kids' parents, she'll go viral. Bri can sort of see the logic in this, but she says that's not who she is.

Supreme says that it doesn't matter who Bri is as long as she's getting paid. He says that someone should be booking shows and getting Bri on other people's songs. When he learns that Pooh isn't doing that, he asks if she's the best choice to manage Bri. He asks if Pooh is a Garden Disciple, and says that the gangs are a major distraction. He tells Bri to not let Pooh drag her down if she's a lost cause. Bri thinks this is wrong: once Bri makes it big, Pooh will give up the gang life.

It's interesting that despite Bri's very real fear of the Crowns when they were in front of her, she's still willing to say that they're just jealous and minimize the situation like this. This shows that Bri doesn't fully grasp the gravity of the situation. Pooh likely does, which is why she's so tense and upset—though it should be noted that Pooh is failing miserably as a guardian by leaving Bri here when the Crowns are out to get her.



This short conversation with Miles allows Bri to see that he might, like Curtis, be another person who's actually worth getting to know—they have a lot in common, and he doesn't seem like a jerk in person. The way that Miles reacts to his dad's warning suggests that Supreme isn't one to mess with, which should serve as a warning to Bri. It also implies that Supreme doesn't approve of Miles favoring female rappers—he has a very specific idea of the kind of hyper-masculine man he wants his son to be.



Finally, Supreme lays out his business model: poverty and the "ghetto" life are exotic, scary, and therefore, sell really well to young white people. If a person can embody that stereotype and get evidence of that online, even if it's not who they are, there's a potential to make money. In his world, the surface meaning of Bri's song is the most important one, as it plays into the stereotypes and will therefore be a hit.



Again, Bri has no evidence that Pooh will give up dealing or the Garden Disciples, especially since Pooh walked out on Bri while she was recording. Bri's insistence that Pooh will get out of this world shows how optimistic Bri is and how badly she wants to escape poverty and the lifestyle that Pooh has to lead to make ends meet.



CHAPTER 16

The next morning, Bri realizes that Supreme was right about the altercation at the Ring being good for publicity. People call Bri all sorts of things like "ghetto, ratchet, [and] a hood rat." She wonders if he's right about Aunt Pooh too, though she feels guilty for thinking it. As Jay gives Bri a pancake made with the last of their flour and says that Pooh will bring groceries later, Bri thinks that she can't drop Pooh, since Pooh feeds her. Trey sighs about Pooh's drug money saving them. Bri thinks that it's messed up that Trey is getting nowhere doing everything right, while Pooh is doing everything wrong and supports them.

Jay comforts Trey and suggests he look at grad school. Trey admits he already applied and got in, but he can't leave. Jay puts a platter of pancakes on the table, wishes Trey luck on his interview, and shuts herself in her room. Bri starts to panic: this is what Jay did when she used drugs. Trey assures Bri that Jay isn't on drugs and says she just needs a minute. Bri congratulates Trey on getting accepted and tells him he'll get to go soon. He asks if that's because of Bri's **song**, and says he knows about the Ring—Kayla texted him links immediately after it happened. He reminds Bri to not involve herself with Pooh's mess.

Glumly, Bri says that both she and Pooh were just defending themselves, but Trey says this isn't the way to do it. He also says that he's listened to Bri's **song**. He admits that there are some good lines, but people aren't going to look deeply at it. He points out that Bri certainly doesn't know what a clip on a gun is, and says this is a distraction from school. Trey rolls his eyes when Bri says this could be their way out of poverty. He reminds Bri that getting famous doesn't mean she'll be instantly rich, and asks her to consider what getting rich might cost.

When Bri gets on the bus, Deon immediately starts asking Bri if she really got kicked out of the Ring and if she's a member of the Garden Disciples. Curtis stands up for Bri. Bri thanks Curtis, thinking he's way more tolerable now. She asks why he's already on the bus, and he says he spent the night with his dad. Bri knows that her face betrays that she had no idea he *had* a dad. Curtis says his dad is a truck driver, which is why he lives with Sister Daniels. Bri asks Curtis if he ever gets to see his mom in prison, and Curtis says that he used to see her weekly but hasn't visited in a while. He explains that she stabbed an ex-boyfriend who beat her, but it wasn't self-defense.

The way that Bri sees things working out for Trey and Pooh respectively continues to make it clear to her that getting bigger with her song and doing what Supreme says is the best way to get her family out of this mess. Bri's sense of loyalty toward Pooh reminds the reader again that Bri cares deeply for her friends and family and wants them to be happy, healthy, and safe. At times, she is willing to sacrifice her own success for them.



Because of Bri and Trey's close relationship, Trey is able to level with Bri in a way that nobody else can. He's been there for her throughout her life and hasn't abandoned her like Jay and Pooh have. This also means that he has a great deal of responsibility, since there are so few adults that Bri trusts to be there for her no matter what.



Trey definitely has a point: getting a record deal doesn't necessarily mean that Bri will walk away with a big check with which to solve all of her problems. This begins to show that Bri's idea of what fame means and how it's going to benefit her is fundamentally flawed and simplistic; she doesn't understand that there's more to it and that her manager will also want a cut.



The truth about Curtis's mom shows again how living in poverty and in abusive situations can harm more people than just the victim. Because she's in jail, Curtis is mostly on his own; he's lucky to have a grandparent around willing and able to care for him. Bri's desire to find out about Curtis's life, combined with Curtis's willingness to share this personal information with her, shows that both of them understand that being vulnerable and trusting each other is the best way to form a relationship.



Bri asks why Curtis doesn't see his mom, and he says that she's "a shell of herself." Bri offers that she saw Jay like that when Jay was on drugs, and it was a terrifying and also strangely happy experience. Bri assures Curtis that his mom would love to see him. Curtis changes the subject and asks about Bri's favorite rappers. Bri is thrilled to not be asked about Lawless. She introduces Curtis to one of her favorites, Rakim, who she insists is the Dumbledore of hip-hop. Curtis is impressed with Bri's knowledge and tells her she looks cute. They flirt, and Bri blushes. When Curtis says he's growing out his hair for locs or cornrows, Bri offers to do them for him.

When Sonny and Malik get on the bus, they raise their eyebrows. Malik sits next to Shana and Sonny sits down in front of Bri and wiggles his eyebrows. Bri gets off the bus and meets up with Sonny. He teases her about naming her kids with Curtis after him, but stops when Bri suggests that Sonny and Rapid give their kids ridiculous names. Sonny admits that he ghosted on Rapid after he wasn't able to focus on a practice SAT test. Bri sees him starting to panic and tells him to breathe. He says that he and Malik also found out that Rapid isn't from Garden Heights. They notice that the crowd at school seems thicker than usual. When they reach Malik, he says that Long and Tate are back.

CHAPTER 17

Bri and Sonny are flabbergasted as they watch Long and Tate wave kids through security. Malik glares at Bri and says that nobody made enough of a fuss. Bri doesn't know what to do, but she doesn't want to be a poster child. Malik starts a chant, but Curtis shouts over him and starts chanting the lines from Bri's song about Long and Tate cuffing her. Most of the crowd joins in, including Bri. She realizes that this is a "call to war." Long appears with a bullhorn and threatens to suspend students, but the students continue to chant. Then, someone punches Long and several boys, including Curtis, descend on Long and Tate. Malik tries to drag Bri away, but she runs to Curtis, tells him, "cops," and Curtis follows her.

Bri, Malik, Shana, Sonny, and Curtis run until they can't hear the sirens. Malik shoves Curtis and asks why he started a riot, but Bri defends Curtis. Shana and Sonny try to calm Malik down. After they see two cop cars zoom by, Malik darkly says they can go to his house. Within an hour, most black and Latinx students from Midtown are there too. Students share that ten cop cars and a news van came. They arrested the boys, including Zane, who jumped Long and Tate, and the guards were taken away in ambulances. Parents were told to retrieve their children, and Bri calls Jay to tell her what happened.

Bri's happiness at not being asked about Lawless shows again that carrying around his identity in addition to her own is exhausting and difficult. At this age, what Bri wants is an identity that's entirely her own, which she can begin to experiment with by sharing these things that she loves with Curtis, and sharing things about herself—like that she can braid hair.



Sonny's panic attack makes it even clearer how desperately he wants to get out of Garden Heights and how afraid he is of all the things that might keep him from doing so. Like Bri, he feels like he has to be constantly on guard so that he can stay safe and on the college-bound track, two things that he knows could be jeopardized by beginning a relationship with anyone, let alone someone on the internet who may or may not be who he says he is.



While Malik may be right that nobody made enough noise about Long and Tate, it's unfair of him to blame this on Bri. This suggests that Malik, like Bri, is also getting so caught up in his emotions and other activities that his friends are beginning to fall by the wayside. Curtis joining the fray adds more nuance to his character, as it suggests that he's one of the angriest students at Midtown—or at least feels strongly about protecting Bri.



While Malik makes a good point that violently tackling Long and Tate wasn't a good move, making a scene with Curtis in public puts this entire group in danger given that there are police on high alert because of the rally. This shows that Malik isn't the paragon of proper protest, as much as he'd like to be. Calling Jay is a way for Bri to show that she loves and respects her, and that she doesn't want her to worry.



Malik paces while everyone else eats, saying that this isn't going to help the coalition achieve their goals. He says they'll get real cops as security now, and Shana concurs. She says that Long and Tate were probably back because parents believed Bri was dealing, and now, white parents will think *all* the black students are threats. Curtis says he was just standing up for himself, but Malik retorts that he's just as angry about what happened to Bri but knows this isn't how to protest. Bri is touched. Malik says that now, Dr. Rhodes won't listen to them, and they'll have to go to the school board. Shana stares at Bri and says they need to publicize the video of Long and Tate throwing Bri to the ground. Bri refuses.

Shana asks why Bri is okay with the videos of her "acting ratchet" at the Ring getting out, but not this one. Angrily, Bri says she didn't have control over the Ring video getting out, that she was also standing up for herself, and that she doesn't need a reason to want to keep this video private. Sonny suggests that Shana has a point, which makes Bri stand up to leave. Shana asks Bri again for help, but Bri screams that she doesn't want to give people more ammunition to make assumptions about her. She knows that people will bring up this incident all the time and they'll use it to justify punishing Bri for everything else. Bri leaves.

At home, Bri finds Jay sprawled on the sofa watching soap operas. She thinks that Jay is faking enthusiasm for the soap, so she says brightly that the meeting at Malik's house was good. Jay says she's calling the superintendent's office and heads for the kitchen. The afternoon news starts and the top story is the rally at Midtown. Bri turns up the volume as the newscaster gives a basic rundown of what happened. She then mentions Bri's **song** and plays bits and pieces—but only the most violent parts. Jay incredulously drops a loaf of bread.

CHAPTER 18

The newscaster says that the **song** encouraged students to behave violently toward Long and Tate. Bri is flabbergasted. Jay turns off the TV and asks if the song is Bri's. Bri admits it is, and Jay starts yelling for Bri to show her the guns she rapped about. Bri tries to explain herself, but Jay accuses Bri of "rapping like a thug." Jay says that Bri kept the song a secret because she knew she shouldn't be saying the kinds of things she did, and she says that people will use this to jump to conclusions, no matter what Bri's intent was. Bri asks if this is why people keep asking Jay if she's on drugs.

One thing that nobody in this room realizes is that there are more options than just keeping the video private or putting it up on YouTube for the entire internet to see. The coalition, with Bri's permission, could show the video to Dr. Rhodes or the school board without making it public, something that could help bring about the same kind of change without throwing Bri into the spotlight. Their inability to come up with a middle ground solution speaks to their youth and the way they think about fame as being just good or just bad.



It's worth noting that at the Ring, Bri was able to take control of the situation in a way that she wasn't in the video of the incident with Long and Tate. In that scene, she's entirely a victim—and that's one of the things that makes Bri so unwilling to let the video out. While Bri was out of control in other ways at the Ring (her temper definitely got the better of her), it at least can be read as though Bri was the one running the show.



Bri's sense that Jay is faking her feelings about the soap operas suggests that the struggle of being unemployed is starting to wear on Jay, but she doesn't want to show Bri that that's true. The way that the newscaster presents Bri's song shows Bri that anyone can make her song mean anything by cutting and presenting it a certain way—once it's out in the world, she can't control how people interact with it.



Asking Jay if people think she's on drugs because she has a history is a low blow on Bri's part, but for Bri, Jay's attack feels just as unfair. However, Jay also knows more and better what people will think of Bri's song and the danger that it might put Bri in, both in terms of jeopardizing a future at college and because of the gang affiliated lines, which could cause problems at home.



This silences Jay for a moment. She concedes that people will always assume things, but says she's not giving people reasons to assume she's on drugs since she doesn't talk or brag about drugs. Bri makes one more attempt to tell Jay that the **song** is about playing into stereotypes and assumptions, but Jay shouts that they never get the luxury of playing at any of this. She forbids Bri from rapping anymore and points out that Lawless died because he played the "rapping gangsta" part.

When Supreme texts Bri later and asks to meet, Bri agrees. They meet at the Fish Hut the next morning. As Bri pedals, she notices that the street where the Fish Hut is located looks like a warzone after the riots. In Aunt Pooh's opinion, the Fish Hut is only standing because Mr. Barry put a "black owned" sign on the door during the riots. Bri thinks she hasn't heard from Pooh in days.

Bri takes her bike inside, which Mr. Barry allows because Bri is Lawless's daughter. She takes a seat with Supreme. Supreme congratulates Bri on "**On the Come Up**" rising to number one on Dat Cloud and gives her a gift. Bri is shocked to unwrap a box of brand-new **Timbs**. She thinks of how she's been working for months to buy a pair, but she has to refuse this—Granddaddy always told her that big gifts for no reason usually come with strings attached. She says they're too expensive, which makes Supreme laugh and say he spends more on sunglasses. Bri feels like she must look stupid for thinking that \$150 is a lot of money. Supreme assures her it's okay, and Bri agrees to keep them after noticing that the soles on her own shoes are coming off.

Supreme compliments Bri on what happened at Midtown. Confused, Bri points out that people aren't saying nice things about her, but Supreme says that *all* publicity is good. Bri explains that the rally started because of something that happened to her. Supreme says that Bri is in good company—lots of hip-hop songs and artists have been blamed for violence. He adds that Bri needs a "real manager" who can spin things to work in her favor.

Jay's insistence that "they"—black people more broadly—don't get to pretend and play around with stereotypes tells the reader that Bri is messing with something much bigger than she is, and something that's far beyond her control. Bringing up Lawless shows Bri that acting as though she can ignore it is a dangerous proposition.



Bri's train of thought shows that she feels as though she's drowning in things she has no control over. Pooh is childishy ignoring her, and Bri is in a position where, simply by living in Garden Heights, she has to answer for the damage of the riots every day—all things that make Bri feel smaller and less in control.



It's telling that in situations like this, Bri almost always flashes on something that Granddaddy tells her. This suggests that even though Bri spends time with her grandparents just to keep the peace, Granddaddy is enough of a trusted mentor figure to factor prominently in Bri's conscience. At this point, these new Timbs make it clear to Bri that she's not making it. She wasn't able to do the work herself to buy them, and it feels questionable that Supreme is giving them to her and inadvertently making her feel bad by doing so.



Supreme's insistence that all publicity is good is questionable. While it may be true if a person doesn't care about constructing a particular reputation for themselves, insisting that an event like this is good for Bri suggests that he doesn't care about her personally, but only about her profitability.



Dee-Nice enters and joins Bri and Supreme. Bri is star struck, especially when Dee-Nice compliments her. She starts talking about a rap battle from years ago and suddenly realizes that all of this is a setup to lure her away from Aunt Pooh. Bri thinks that she knew this was going to happen and wonders if she's a horrible niece. Supreme says that he'd be able to do great things for Bri, just like he's done for Miles and Dee-Nice, and Dee-Nice tells Bri that he's able to care for his whole family. Swallowing, Bri asks Supreme if he can promise her that her family will be okay. They shake on it, and Supreme howls that they're going to make money. He says he needs to speak to Jay, but Bri insists on waiting. Supreme agrees.

In particular, what Dee-Nice says about being able to take care of his family with his record deal shows that Supreme is using Bri's poverty to his advantage. He knows full well that Jay wouldn't be thrilled about this and that Bri isn't convinced that this is the kind of image she wants for herself. Instead, Supreme is thinking about himself and sees Bri as an object to be used. By agreeing to work with him, Bri unwittingly agrees to this and in doing so, loses control over her fame and her reputation.



CHAPTER 19

When Bri gets home, she finds Jay putting away bags of groceries. She puts her backpack with the **Timbs** in in her room and tries to be excited for herself, but she's nervous to fire Pooh and about what Jay will say. Bri returns to the kitchen and Jay explains that she bought the food with food stamps. She withdrew from school to get them and believes it's worth it. Bri's chest aches, but Jay tells her it's temporary. Jay mentions that she listened to Bri's **song** and she gets it, which makes Bri feel warm and happy. Bri admits that she understands why Jay is concerned about it. Jay asks Bri to not respond to people, in person or online, or make another scene. She confiscates Bri's phone and sends her to study for the ACT.

Both Bri and Jay are willing to put aside their differences and see the other person's point of view, which offers some hope that they'll be able to come to an agreement about how Bri's career should proceed. Dropping out of school to qualify for food stamps illustrates how dark Bri's family's financial situation is, as quitting school will mean that Jay will have an even harder time getting ahead later—even if food in the short term is extremely and undeniably important.



Four hours later, Jay brings Bri her phone. Bri deletes texts from Sonny and Malik, since she's still angry with them, and then looks through her Dat Cloud notifications. Several of her messages from strangers include a link, but Bri doesn't click on it until Sonny texts it to her and asks if she's okay. It leads to an article in the local paper calling for "**On the Come Up**" to be taken off of Dat Cloud, and saying the song led to violence. The author, Emily Taylor, takes offense to the "antipolice sentiment." Taylor embedded videos of Bri in the Ring parking lot and describes Bri as a "gang-affiliated, unruly teen." The article ends with a link to a petition to Dat Cloud, asking the site to take the song down to "protect our children." Bri knows that she's not one of the children Emily Taylor wants to protect.

Supreme is correct; plenty of rap artists (and for that matter, artists in other genres) have been blamed for inciting violence or promoting questionable ideas and values. However, this doesn't make it any less traumatizing for Bri to be attacked like this online and specifically spoken about as though she's out of control and a horrifically stereotypical "ghetto" teen. The fact that Bri finds out about this from followers on Dat Cloud (via Sonny) reminds her that Supreme is right about other things too: no matter how things play out, this is still boosting Bri's fame.



Bri clicks on Emily Taylor's profile. She finds pictures of Taylor's husband and son. They're white, they hunt, and Bri finds another of Taylor's articles insisting that gun control is wrong. Bri knows that Taylor only takes issue with her rapping about guns because she's black, and she thinks it's like that at school too—white girls who talk back don't get in trouble. Bri closes her door and goes live on Instagram. Within seconds, she has 100 people watching and commenting. When someone comments "fuck censorship," Bri says her **song** isn't for white people and she's not sorry for making them uncomfortable, since she's uncomfortable all the time. She lifts her middle finger and says it's for people who want to censor her. Bri has 500 viewers when she's done.

Bri will later admit that going live on Instagram was a questionable decision, but it's important to give her credit for speaking the truth about several things. She didn't write the song to appeal to white listeners; she wrote it for people who live in Garden Heights and live through the kind of profiling and violence that she talks about in their daily lives. Because of the prejudice and violence she faces, Bri is uncomfortable all the time.



CHAPTER 20

The next morning, Bri feels like she has an "Instagram hangover," as she regrets what she said and knows that her viewers probably shared her livestream. She hopes that Jay won't see it. Jay is so sad and preoccupied that she decides they won't go to church. While Jay stays in her room, Bri and Trey watch Netflix. Trey assures Bri that Jay is fine and then asks about her livestream. Bri is shocked that Trey has an Instagram account, but teases him when he says that Kayla made him get one. He points out that the video will look bad to future employers, but Bri admits she's more concerned about Jay. He encourages her to leave people like Emily Taylor alone and says he's not going to tell Jay, but that she will find out.

Again, because Bri trusts Trey to be there for her and understand where she's coming from, Trey is in a unique position to give her advice when none of the other adults in Bri's life can. By doing this, he can help Bri understand the greater issues with her livestream and in doing so, come up with better strategies in the future for dealing with racist aggravations like Emily Taylor's petition.



The doorbell rings. Trey ignores Bri and lets Sonny and Malik in. They all watch TV for a minute and then Trey asks if Bri is going to ignore her friends. When she says she is, he makes her sit up and talk to Malik and Sonny. They invite her to play video games, but Bri ignores them until Trey farts near her face. She agrees to go, but she's silent as they walk, and she focuses on her **chain**.

Trey also has the ability to point out to Bri that she's being immature by continuing to ignore her friends like this. Resorting to something as childish as farting at her shows that Trey knows exactly how to get the right reaction out of Bri, and though he's a mentor, he's not stuffy.



Malik compliments Bri on her new **Timbs**. She refuses to say where or how she got them, which makes Sonny and Malik apologize for not standing up for her and for things being so different. Malik points out that Bri is different now too—especially her rap persona. They both saw her Instagram stream and though Sonny gets it, he and Malik agree that it was a lot. Malik starts to say that Bri is different at school, but Bri interrupts and says that they're the ones who refuse to hang out with her. Sonny insists they researched Rapid alone because they didn't want to give Bri more to worry about, but Bri asks if this is actually about them not wanting to be associated with her. She tells the reader that she's been insecure about this for a long time.

In this moment, Bri finally admits that she's afraid and insecure—something that, because of her strong relationships with Sonny and Malik, will help them all learn to deal with these changes and accept each other as they are. That she's ready to take this step and reach out suggests that she's feeling even more unmoored and out of control when it comes to her song and her fame. She desperately desires something familiar and trustworthy, like time with her friends that love her.



Sonny is incredulous and lists all the things they've been through together, including a debate about *Black Panther*. They briefly argue about it before performing their handshake and heading for Malik's house to play *Mario Kart*. Sonny mentions that the superintendent is going to meet with parents on Friday. Bri looks away from the TV for a second and loses, which makes Malik scream with laughter. Sonny says that the school is hiring cops to work as security and they want student and parent input. Bri sighs that it probably won't do much.

As Sonny rifles through Malik's food, Malik asks Bri if she'd be willing to release the video on her terms. He suggests that they use Bri's **song**, which talks about what Long and Tate did, to show people what happened in music video form. Bri starts to get excited, not least because Malik is saying that he gets her song. He says that after he saw how people at school reacted to it, he understands that she was just speaking up and it's not her fault if people don't get it.

CHAPTER 21

Several hours later, Malik, Sonny, and Bri are done putting together a music video using newspaper headlines and footage that Malik recorded. Bri thinks that it probably won't change the mind of someone like Emily Taylor, but she reasons that the Emilys of the world don't want to understand someone like her anyway. Aunt Gina texts Sonny and asks him to come home and babysit his little sisters. He offhandedly mentions talking to Rapid, blushes, and tells Bri that Malik talked him into calling Rapid. They talked on the phone for a long time and though they didn't exchange names, Sonny feels as though he knows Rapid's voice. Sonny asks if Malik and Bri will come with him to meet Rapid in case Rapid is a serial killer. Bri and Malik agree as Sonny leaves.

Malik offers to cook something for Bri and tells her she can hang out, but Bri insists she should go home and check on Jay. She says that everything seems to be getting to Jay, and she's spending time in her bedroom like she did when she was using drugs. To make Bri feel better, Malik puts on a Michael Jackson song, dances horribly, and gets Bri to dance and lip-synch with him. When the song ends, he hugs Bri, rests his chin on her head, and tells her he'd do anything to cheer her up. Then he kisses Bri. She expects to feel fireworks, but instead it's awkward and uncomfortable. They step back and Malik offers to walk Bri home. They walk silently.

Hiring real police officers as security would make Midtown feel much more like a prison—which is what Jay says Garden Heights is like. In her understanding, this means that Midtown will be even less able to help Bri and other students of color succeed. Bri's sense that speaking out won't fix things shows how defeated she feels about all of this, something that's certainly affected by the negative attention she's gotten for her song.



Bri's willingness to allow Malik to do this with the video and her song shows that what she really wanted was to be seen and heard by her friends. This will be a moment that shows Bri that her relationships are the most important things in her life, and she should do whatever she can to not lose sight of them.



At this point, Bri begins to realize that she can't please everyone with her music or her persona. Especially as a black person and as a woman, Bri will face obstruction and possible harassment everywhere—but that doesn't mean that she shouldn't take pride in who she is and the music she produces. Sonny's happiness about talking with Rapid suggests that he's choosing to take a chance, something that, whether he realizes it or not, will help him grow up and become a more well-rounded individual.



Bri and Malik's sub-par kiss encourages Bri to reconsider her expectations in general. Remember that she's wanted this for a while; it's certainly a shock to not have it be everything she wanted it to be. This then becomes a significant moment for Bri as she grows up, as it encourages her to look elsewhere (like to Curtis, who looks totally different to her than he used to) as she begins to exercise her maturity like this.



Finally, Malik asks what happened, and Bri reminds him of Shana. Malik insists the kiss "just happened," which Bri says is silly. She thinks that there's something between them, but she wonders if they're not supposed to be together. As a gray Camaro passes, Malik admits he likes Bri and says that she doesn't need to make him jealous by flirting with Curtis. Bri incredulously says that that has nothing to do with Malik—he's just jealous that she likes someone else. Malik is shocked that Bri actually likes Curtis.

The Camaro turns around and stops right next to Bri and Malik. The Crown steps out with a gun and tells Bri to hand over Lawless's **chain**. Bri can barely think. She sees her future flash before her and refuses. At this, the Crown punches Malik and cocks his gun. Bri starts to cry, thinking that Jay could've sold the chain and paid bills by now. The Crown talks about the "disrespectful shit" on Bri's **song** and points the gun at her face. She stares into his eyes and gives him the chain. He speeds away.

CHAPTER 22

Bri sits with Malik and calls Aunt Pooh. Pooh arrives a few minutes later with Scrap. They both have their guns out and look angry. Bri explains it was the Crown who heckled them at the Ring. At this, Malik looks even more upset. Pooh's fury intensifies when she learns that they took Lawless's **chain**—which Scrap says the Crowns have wanted for years—and that the Crown pointed a gun at Bri. Pooh starts to lead them all to her car, but Malik says he'll walk the few blocks home. He's furious when Bri asks him to not tell Aunt 'Chelle about this, especially when he guesses that Bri and Pooh are going to pursue the Crown. Bri is too focused on the chain to care.

Pooh and Scrap discuss the Crown and Bri figures they're all going to where they know he hangs out, but Pooh stops at Bri's house and tells her to lay low. She refuses to let Bri come with her, pointing out that Bri might get shot or arrested. It hits Bri that Pooh could be shot or arrested, and she immediately regrets involving her. She tries to convince Pooh to leave this alone and asks Pooh to not kill the Crown, but Pooh points out that Bri called *her* instead of Jay, Trey, or the cops for a reason. Pooh drives away and Bri realizes that she called Pooh because she needs Pooh, not because she needed Pooh to handle this.

Saying that the kiss "just happened" allows Malik to shirk responsibility, something that reminds the reader that he too is still young and unwilling to act like an adult at all times. Discovering that Bri actually likes Curtis impresses upon Malik that all of them are coming of age sexually, and none of them are doing so in ways they expected—their friendship will have to adapt if they want to keep it.



For Bri, the chain is more than just a connection to her dad. It represents hope that her family will be okay when all evidence suggests that things won't be, and losing it makes Bri feel like her world is caving in. This moment also represents Bri's true entry into the world of the rival gangs, as the conflict is now about her, not just other people.



Though Bri has every right to be scared, confused, and focused on the loss of the chain, it's a major blow to Malik that Bri doesn't seem to care much that they could've died (and that Malik himself got punched)—and furthermore, that Bri seems more than ready to follow Pooh on a mission to kill the Crown. In Malik's eyes, this version of Bri looks like all of the worst parts of her song, and it's a Bri that he doesn't know and for that matter, doesn't want to know.



When Bri realizes that she needed Pooh, not the Garden Disciples and the associated violence, it impresses upon Bri and the reader how alone she feels right now. Pooh heading off to get the Crown makes Bri feel even more isolated, as now she's inadvertently put Pooh in danger, something she never intended to do. All of this also impresses upon Bri that her words do matter. They're not just words; she can't always control what people do with them.



Bri steps inside and is relieved when Jay doesn't look around the corner at her, as she knows Jay would know something is up. Bri calls out that she ate at Malik's and shuts herself in her room. She thinks that she did want the Crown dead, but now, she understands that the Crown will die just like Lawless did. The Crown's wife and parents will cry like Jay, Grandma, and Granddaddy did, and his children will suffer. The neighborhood will treat him like a heroic martyr and Pooh will become the murderous villain. Bri will lose Pooh. Bri sobs into her hands.

Bri barely sleeps all night. She thinks of what she asked Pooh to do and texts Pooh if she's okay. Pooh never responds. Bri snaps awake in the morning to find Jay sitting with her. Jay says that Bri has been tossing all night. Bri is shocked when Jay asks if Bri is upset about Emily Taylor's petition. Bri starts to wonder if Taylor was right and her words *are* dangerous. Jay leads Bri to the kitchen and offers to make French toast, but when Bri opens the fridge, it's warm and dark. Jay flips switches but nothing happens. Trey wakes up and Jay says the power is off. She moans that the food she bought will spoil, and Bri regrets not selling the **chain**.

CHAPTER 23

Bri has cereal for breakfast and rides the bus with Sonny. Malik is home sick and Bri guesses that he didn't tell Aunt 'Chelle what happened. Bri feels responsible, but thinks it's a good thing that Malik isn't at school: there are four armed cops serving as security guards. Bri thinks that Shana was right about this, and she's happy to go home at the end of the day despite not having electricity. She continues to think through all the horrible things that have happened and thinks that it's been 20 hours since she spoke to Pooh. Jay tries to lighten the mood by pulling out the Uno deck after dinner. Bri, Trey, and Jay play until they hear a knock on the door.

Bri jumps, hoping it's not about Pooh, but it's Grandma and Granddaddy. Grandma imperiously sniffs and peeks into rooms, presumably looking for drugs, but Granddaddy comes into the kitchen to ask why they weren't at church yesterday. Jay explains that they decided to stay home. Grandma asks about Bri's "vulgar" song and stirring up the gossips at church. Granddaddy, unperturbed, fiddles with the clock on the oven and asks why it's not working. Grandma shrieks when Jay says that the electricity got turned off. She and Granddaddy refuse to listen when Trey says he has things under control.

By thinking of the Crown's potential death as being a lot like Lawless's, Bri is able to see that gang violence doesn't do anyone any favors—even if it might feel like revenge for Pooh, she'll still end up in jail and won't be around to protect Bri from the escalation that may come from something like this. In humanizing the Crown's family, Bri begins to see them as truly human, not just an evil "other."



One of the ways that Jay makes Bri feel safer and more secure is by checking on her often at night. It's one of the many ways that she attempts to make up for leaving Bri. Discovering that the electricity is off—and that it's not off because Jay consciously decided not to pay it, like with the gas—suggests that financially, Jay and the family are totally out of control. At this point, it doesn't even matter that Jay bought food if she can't cook it or safely store it.



Note how on edge Bri feels at school with armed police officers acting as security. To her, someone who has more to fear from the police than a white student, their presence tells her clearly that the school thinks that she and others who look like her are dangerous threats, and are willing to do anything to make themselves feel safe. That it's preferable to be home without electricity only adds to the sense that school is no longer comfortable for Bri.



Given the way that Grandma and Granddaddy treat Jay, they care way more about their grandchildren living without electricity than they do about Jay not having electricity—they probably haven't fully forgiven her for leaving Bri and Trey, so this situation makes it look like Jay is even more of an unfit parent. Refusing to listen to Trey shows that Granddaddy doesn't think that Trey is a competent adult either.



Grandma announces that Bri and Trey will come home with her. Trey refuses, and Grandma says he doesn't need to "suffer." At this, Jay emotionally tells Grandma that she's just poor, not a bad mother. Trey refuses again to go, and Granddaddy says that Bri's also old enough to decide where she lives. Even though Bri wants electricity and food, she sees the fear in Jay's eyes and says she wants to stay. Granddaddy pulls out his wallet and gives Jay money for the electricity bill as Grandma storms out, crying. Granddaddy sighs that Grandma holds onto Trey and Bri because they remind her of Lawless. He leaves.

Trey suggests that Bri take their phones out to his car to charge them, which is his way of saying that Jay needs a minute. Just as Bri plugs the phones in, Supreme calls her. She tries to sound upbeat, thinking he can't help Pooh. He says that DJ Hype wants Bri to come on his radio show, which plays live all over the U.S. He runs through the things that Hype will want to talk about, including the "creative" "li'l" music video that Bri made. This offends Bri, but Supreme brushes off her protests. Though Bri feels unable to commit with Pooh missing, she agrees.

CHAPTER 24

Four days later, Bri still hasn't heard from Aunt Pooh. Bri doesn't know what to do—telling Jay or the cops would be like snitching and feels even worse since Pooh may have killed someone on Bri's order. Bri tries to focus on the upside: the lights are on. At school, Malik ignores Bri. On the night of the PTA meeting with the superintendent, Bri vows to try to talk to Malik. She arrives with Sonny, Jay, Aunt 'Chelle, and Aunt Gina. Malik stands with Shana, holding protest posters.

David Rodriguez, the president of the Midtown PTA, introduces himself and then Dr. Cook, the superintendent. Dr. Cook is an older white man who talks about how great Midtown is because of its diversity and high graduation rates. He says the district is committed to student safety and then invites attendees to ask questions. While many parents asks how the incident happened and why there are now police officers manning security, Dr. Cook says that he can't answer because of the investigation.

Though Granddaddy has made a number of missteps over the course of the novel, particularly when it comes to Trey, he shows here that he's one of the only adults in Bri's life who is willing to treat her like an adult in control of her own decisions. With this, he continues to leave the door open for Bri to feel safe and comfortable going to him for help or advice.



The way that Supreme talks about Bri and Malik's music video suggests that he sees it as more of an aspirational school project in the worst way, not a method of storytelling that allows Bri to add more meaning to her experience. This again should tell Bri that Supreme isn't someone she wants to work with, but Bri's desire to not have to take money from her grandparents means that she agrees anyway.



Bri's sense of being lost and alone continues to show how her growing fame at this point is isolating her. She's already on thin ice with Jay, and telling Jay about the Crown and the robbery would bring with it an implicit recognition from Bri that she can't do this alone. Because of this, Bri's trauma continues to compound and she feels increasingly alone.



It's hard to say if Dr. Cook truly believes what he's saying or if he simply understands that mentioning diversity and graduation rates will make the parents feel good about the school. This begins to show that anti-racism policies can be great talking points for political reasons, but that doesn't mean they function in practice.



Shana speaks. She says that black and Latinx students were consistently targeted by Long and Tate and now, students of color fear for their lives. She asks if students of color are human beings or just grant money in the school district's eyes, and asks why Long and Tate were allowed to return to work. Again, Dr. Cook says he can't speak about the incident. A white woman introduces herself as Karen Pittman, a parent of a sophomore. She says that when her oldest child was at Midtown, before the diversity initiatives, there weren't security guards—and says that Midtown was right to increase security once it started busing in students from "certain communities." She mentions gang activity and drug dealers at school, and says that she supports the petition to get Bri's "vulgar, violent" **song** taken offline, since it incites violence.

Jay steps up to the mic. She notes that Dr. Cook hasn't returned her phone calls, explains who Bri is, and says that Bri was selling candy, not drugs. Jay says that she's concerned for Bri's safety all the time, but she shouldn't have to worry at school. Jay insists that putting Long and Tate back on the job says that the school values the safety of some students rather than the safety of all of them. Dr. Cook gives Jay a non-apology, which Jay calls out. For the rest of the meeting, Dr. Cook refuses to say anything concrete about the incident or what he's going to do.

After the meeting, a police officer leads Dr. Cook through the parents. Jay grabs Bri, chases Dr. Cook, and asks for a word. He leads them into a private room and Jay introduces him to Bri. Jay asks Dr. Cook to look at Bri and see that she's a child. She asks Dr. Cook to pull Bri's records and see that Bri is unfairly targeted because of her skin color. Jay ends by saying that her only options are to enroll Bri at Midtown or Garden High, and Garden High doesn't help students succeed. She asks what Dr. Cook is going to do to help. Quietly, Dr. Cook apologizes and tells Jay that he'll get back to her, but it'll take a while.

Jay confirms that this is because Dr. Cook currently doesn't have a secretary. She pulls out one of her resumes, says she has secretarial experience, and explains that her employment gap is because of drug addiction, but she's been sober for eight years. Dr. Cook compliments her on this achievement and admits that he was an alcoholic, but has been sober for 30 years. Jay seems taken aback, and Bri is too. Dr. Cook pockets Jay's resume and promises to get in touch. In the parking lot, Jay tells Aunt 'Chelle and Aunt Gina about it, and they suggest going out for dinner. Bri and Sonny refuse to go unless they get their own table, as their moms are horrible restaurant patrons. Malik leaves to hang out with Shana, but Bri feels like he's walking away from her.

That Karen Pittman is able to say what she does right after Shana's complaint shows that Ms. Pittman isn't just potentially blind to the ways that society discriminates against people of color—she's also unwilling to listen, even when there are people right in front of her telling her about their lives. For her, it's easier to hold onto her racist ideas that as far as she's concerned, keep her children safe than it is to accept that all children deserve to be safe at school—something that Jay would suggest can't happen at Garden High.



Dr. Cook's unwillingness to say anything of substance suggests that the entire meeting was more a formality than a good-faith attempt to solicit opinions from the parent community. This way, he can say that they asked for people to give input without actually having to address any of their very real concerns. Given that the school is predominately white, doing this keeps him in power.



Forcing this one-on-one meeting allows Jay to impress upon Dr. Cook that Bri is a person—and a child at that—not some exotic or scary "other" that he needs to protect other students from. His apology suggests that Jay got through to him, which offers some hope that he'll actually use his power to make some positive changes at Midtown.



Being able to have this individual meeting also allows Jay and Dr. Cook the opportunity to see each other as fellow humans who share a history of addiction. Dr. Cook's willingness to congratulate Jay on this accomplishment shows that he certainly has the potential and the willingness to humanize people he comes in contact with, especially when he can find something in common with them. In a broader sense, this, the novel suggests, is one of the most effective ways to combat racism on an individual level.



CHAPTER 25

Ten days after Pooh disappeared, Bri gets a text from her asking to meet up after school. She gets off the bus with Curtis, who lives in Pooh's apartment complex. Bri is wearing the fake **Timbs** since Jay was up this morning and she hasn't talked to Jay about Supreme yet. The soles are almost gone. Curtis teases Bri about "stalking" him, but then seriously says he went to visit his mom over the weekend. He thanks her for convincing him to go.

A group of small kids, along with Jojo, race up to Bri and Curtis. The little kids ask for autographs and Curtis walks away, laughing. Bri starts to sign and confirms for the kids that she and Jojo are friends—assuming Jojo has been going to school. He says he has. A set of twin girls squeakily recite some of Bri's lines about being "strapped" and having "clips on her hips," which makes Bri stop short. Jojo says that he's told the kids that Bri shoots gangsters. Pooh calls for Bri before Bri can refute this. Bri wonders if she's done something bad by getting kids to rap about guns.

Bri joins Pooh on top of her car. As usual, Pooh refuses to say where she's been, but she says she didn't kill the Crown or get the **chain** back. Bri is still worried, as she knows Pooh started something bad and it's all her fault. Pooh apologizes for not getting the chain back, but Bri says she'd rather have Pooh than the chain. Mockingly, Pooh says the chain was a great excuse to go after the Crowns, which she's wanted to do since they killed Lawless. She admits that she joined the Garden Disciples to get revenge for Lawless's death. Bri didn't know this. Meanwhile Pooh starts staring at a nearby black car with dark windows. She says that Lawless was her mentor, and it was devastating when he died. She turned to the Garden Disciples, since she felt like she had nobody. Bri points out that Pooh has her.

Pooh says that Bri has annoyed lots of people with her song. Bri mentions the invite to go on DJ Hype's show and guiltily says that Supreme set it up. Pooh seems surprisingly okay that Supreme is Bri's manager. She admits that she understands that she doesn't know enough to be much help and has too much other stuff going on. She says she can still help Bri write songs, and pulls Bri across her lap, kissing her on the cheek. The black car stops, facing Pooh. Seriously, Pooh asks Bri to promise her that she's going to get out of Garden Heights. Bri is confused, but promises. Pooh tells Bri to go home as two SWAT vans pull in and armed officers spill out of them.

For Curtis, choosing to go see his mom in jail shows that he's taking Bri's advice to heart and is using it to form a more adult and meaningful relationship with his mom. It's important that the advice to see her did come from Bri—Bri can be mature and has a clear view of how relationships work, and Curtis also respects and listens to her.



Hearing these small kids rapping her song makes Bri understand the consequences of a song like hers, especially since these kids clearly don't understand the deeper meaning. For them, the song glorifies gang activity and violence, something that, when put in this form and those terms, Bri does realize she has a problem with. This helps her see that she has a responsibility to her community, as her song can do harm just as it can do good.



Leveling with Bri like this allows Bri to humanize Pooh to a degree that she hasn't been able to before. She's able to see that Pooh was lonely and isolated as a young person, and that isolation led directly to choosing to get involved with the Garden Disciples. This shows Bri that if she wants to avoid having to sell drugs and join the Garden Disciples like Pooh, she needs to make sure that she builds a community around herself.



While it's clear that Pooh does care for Bri, it seems to come as almost a relief to her that someone else is taking over managerial duties. This offers more evidence to support that Pooh is just as inexperienced as Bri is when it comes to managing fame—but since she was a manager, not the artist, it's much easier for Pooh to take a step back and abdicate the responsibility.



CHAPTER 26

Aunt Pooh yells at Bri to go as the SWAT team chases down Garden Disciples. Bri doesn't know where to go, but Curtis grabs Bri and drags her into Sister Daniels's apartment. Bri feels one of her **Timbs** do something weird and has to limp to follow him. She looks out the window and sees Pooh being patted down. The officer pulls out a baggie of cocaine and Bri feels as though she can't breathe. Curtis talks Bri through her panic attack and Bri gasps that everyone leaves her. Curtis leans Bri's head on his shoulder and says that she's not alone.

Bri closes her eyes until she can breathe again and thanks Curtis for helping her. He explains that he waters Sister Daniels's plants while she's at work. Bri looks around at all the plants as Curtis notices something wrong with her **Timb**. Bri sees that one entire heel is gone. Curtis comforts Bri and then puts his own Nikes on Bri's feet, brushing off her concerns. He gets Bri a glass of water and sits on the sofa with her. Bri comments on his Spiderman socks, which she's surprised to see. She has the same pair.

They hear the SWAT officers closing a van door and Curtis offers condolences for Pooh. They sit in silence until Bri again thanks Curtis. They joke about Bri writing a song about him in thanks. He brushes tears off Bri's face and then kisses her, and Bri pulls him down on top of her.

CHAPTER 27

By the time Sister Daniels gets home, Bri and Curtis are just watching TV. Curtis drives Bri home and Bri knows that this information will get back to Grandma. Curtis holds Bri's hand as he drives and assures her it'll be okay when they get to Bri's house. They kiss and Bri goes inside. Bri shakily tells Jay that Aunt Pooh was arrested in a drug bust. Jay immediately calls the police station, Trey, and Lena, who's sobbing. Scrap's phone goes to voicemail. Jay goes to her room and cries all night, and Bri fears that with Pooh gone, the Crowns will come after her.

Jay stays in her room for days. She's still there when Bri meets Supreme to drive downtown for her interview with DJ Hype. Bri barely listens to Supreme and thinks that though this is a big deal, it won't save Pooh. Supreme calls Bri "Li'l Law" and asks if she's okay, but Bri asks him to use her name. He chuckles that Bri wants to be independent, but Bri thinks she *has* to be independent.

The SWAT raid is something that Bri cannot control at all. Because of this, it makes her feel even more vulnerable and alone—especially since they're arresting Aunt Pooh, one of Bri's closest friends and mentors. This becomes yet another traumatizing experience that makes Bri feel unsafe and unmoored in her community, though Curtis acts as a silver lining here.



The missing heel on Bri's fake Timb symbolizes for Bri that her world is falling apart. Though she was faking it with these Timbs to begin with, it's now clear that Bri is failing at this endeavor. Curtis's tenderness helps Bri to see that while there may be a number of horrible things outside of her control, she still has people to lean on and take comfort from.



This kiss with Curtis is a major counterpoint to Bri's kiss with Malik—in this one, Bri is actually into it, which suggests that she needed something to jolt her out of her funk with Malik so she could open herself up to new romantic possibilities.



In this situation, Bri can't protect Jay from the horrific realities of the outside world—Jay has to face them, just like Bri does. While it's perfectly understandable that Jay needs to care for herself and grieve for her sister, it's also important to note that in doing this, she leaves Bri alone to process the trauma of the drug bust—and in this way, abandons Bri again.



Now that Bri has experienced more awful things in real life, Supreme seems even more surreal to her—and even less interesting. In other words, as Bri becomes more independent and more aware of the space she inhabits, she becomes increasingly aware of how contrived Supreme's show is.



Bri and Supreme enter the skyscraper. The walls are lined with framed photos of DJs with hip-hop stars, and she can hear Hype recording in his studio. When he cuts to commercial, Bri and Supreme enter. Hype greets Bri, congratulates her on her Ring performance, and asks her to not curse when they're live. Supreme quietly tells Bri to beware: Hype will try to bait her, but she needs to just say what she feels. Bri thinks that Supreme must have no idea what she's feeling.

Hype introduces Bri as Lawless's daughter. He asks Bri what she has to say about the controversy surrounding her **song** and asks if her violent lyrics incited the riot at Midtown. Bri asks about all the other rap songs that Hype plays and asks if they incite violence. She says that her song is a convenient scapegoat for people who don't want to question what's actually going on. Hype suggests that Bri's lyrics are "a bit much" and mentions her lines about killing cops. Bri says that wasn't her intent. She breaks down her lyrics and says that it's about the community having her back.

Hype admits that it caught him off guard to hear a sixteen-year-old girl rapping about guns. When Bri asks, however, he says that hearing Lawless rap about guns at age sixteen didn't bother him. He says it's different, but Bri notes that she knows girls who had to use guns at that age to survive. Hype then accuses Bri of using a ghostwriter, since she can't possibly have guns. Bri takes off her headphones and says she's done. She yells at Hype when he calls her Li'l Law, and Supreme has to drag her out. Hype makes "jokes" about Bri PMSing. Supreme laughs and says that Bri did exactly what he told her to and played the role of a "ratchet hood rat." Bri immediately regrets her behavior: millions heard her, and they'll think she's an angry black girl for no reason.

CHAPTER 28

Bri asks Supreme to take her to Sal's. He's ecstatic the entire time, but Bri fixates on being called a "ratchet hood rat." Big Sal lets Bri in and sends her to Trey in the back. Trey is mopping while Kayla watches. Kayla seems tinier in real life and takes issue with Trey's mopping. They flirt and kiss. Bri is transfixed, as she hasn't seen Trey so happy in a long time. They finally notice Bri and Trey's demeanor changes. Kayla goes out front and Trey ignores Bri. He curtly says that Jay is still in her room and there's no new information on Aunt Pooh. Bri realizes that Trey heard the interview. He angrily asks what's wrong with Bri since she's making a fool of herself in public. Bri feels betrayed, but Trey says she's ruining any chance of making it big by behaving like this.

It's true, Supreme probably doesn't know exactly what Bri's feeling—there's no indication he knows about the drug bust and Pooh's arrest. However, he also is certainly aware that Bri is on edge, which makes it way more likely that Bri is going to lose her temper. For Supreme, this means she's going to do something stupid and make him money.



Knowing that DJ Hype's entire goal is to push Bri's buttons makes it easier to see that he's shirking any possible responsibility for the perception of rap music and putting it all on Bri, since hers is the big bad song of the moment. Bri does deserve credit for how she's conducted herself thus far, and it's important to note that getting the true meaning behind her song out there is important—it will give Bri more credibility.



It's likely that DJ Hype knew exactly what he was doing and figured that bringing gendered issues into this was going to make Bri angry—and therefore, more interesting for viewers and the butt of all of his jokes. Supreme's glee at Bri's behavior reminds the reader of how he feels is the best way to make money: making scenes and getting in trouble, and that all publicity is good. Bri, however, now understands that she doesn't want to be the "ratchet hood rat" and that she has to stop behaving like this if she wants to repair her reputation.



What Trey sees is that Bri has the potential to become one of the many stars who have one hit, get embroiled in scandal, and then fall off the radar. What he doesn't necessarily understand about Bri is that she feels so desperate and overwhelmed by the family's poverty as well—which combined, makes her far more likely to lash out like she did in the interview. Put another way, Bri is responding in a pretty unsurprising manner given the circumstances; Trey just doesn't know how scared Bri is.



Bri says that she's just trying to save them. At this, Trey wraps Bri in a hug. Bri admits that she's tired of feeling scared. She cries as Trey leads her to a corner where they can sit down. Bri apologizes for being a burden, thinking of how Trey fed her, read her stories, and comforted her when she was little. Trey says that Bri was a gift, which makes Bri cry harder. He sloppily kisses her on the cheek and says that Bri kept him from following in Aunt Pooh's footsteps. Bri hasn't considered this possibility and wonders if Pooh has to save herself. Trey reminds Bri that Pooh made choices. Kayla calls Trey to the front, and he makes Bri swear to not do any more interviews.

This moment shows Bri at her most vulnerable: she feels as though it's imperative to pay back Trey and her mom for caring for her by making it big as a rapper. Feeling like a burden, however, keeps Bri from being able to recognize the important role she plays in their lives too. Jay has already implied that she got off drugs so she could be there for Bri and Trey, which would give Bri another reason to not think of herself as a burden.



CHAPTER 29

On Monday morning, Bri knocks and lets herself into Jay's room. She sniffs but doesn't smell crack. Jay calls Bri over, comments that Bri needs new braids, and makes sure that Bri has eaten. Bri doesn't know how to tell Jay that she's afraid and needs Jay to feel better, but Jay seems to read Bri's mind. She tells Bri that she'll be okay and sits up. Jay invites Bri to come with her to visit Aunt Pooh tomorrow and says that she hasn't heard from Dr. Cook. Bri feels like she's five as she asks if Jay will actually be okay. Jay promises. As Bri leaves for the bus, Jay gets up.

It's a major step in maturity for Bri to work up the courage to ask Jay if she's going to be okay. Though Bri doesn't say everything on her mind or admit she's afraid in so many words, she still makes it clear to Jay that she needs her to be there for her. After the interview with DJ Hype, Bri is beginning to understand that she needs people like Jay to be supportive, as they help her feel secure and not act out.



Bri listens to a J. Cole song and feels as though a song has never spoken to her like this before. She gets a call from Supreme and picks up. He tells her he has something big: record executives want to meet her. Bri almost drops her phone. He says they want to see her this afternoon and see her record a song, which will land her a contract. Bri agrees. As soon as she gets on the bus, she flips through her notebook, trying to decide what to record. Curtis startles her when he gets on the bus. They shyly talk about their kiss.

That Bri so quickly agrees to go along with Supreme's plan shows that she still believes that this is her only chance, even if she already has evidence that Supreme isn't the right person to be managing her career. With this, Bri shows that she hasn't yet learned to think of fame as something she can control.



Bri mentions her interview with DJ Hype and says that she's not invisible anymore. Curtis is confused and says that she wasn't invisible before all of this—she just seemed too caught up in Malik and Sonny to hang out with anyone else. Bri admits that she thought no one else wanted to hang out with her. Curtis asks Bri to go out with him for Valentine's Day tomorrow. She takes offense to his language and says that she's seeing Pooh. As the bus stops at Sonny and Malik's houses, Curtis stands on the seat and loudly asks Bri to go on a date with him. Blushing, Bri says yes.

Being asked out by Curtis in such a public way begins to change the way that other students perceive Bri at school—and similarly, the way that Bri thinks she's perceived by her peers. Curtis's admission that Bri just seemed too involved with her friends suggests that the way Bri sees herself isn't necessarily how others see her. She'll need to let people in to come to a more accurate understanding of how she looks to others.



When the bus gets to school, Curtis gets off ahead of Bri and Bri puts in headphones so she can ignore Sonny. On the sidewalk, Shana stops Bri and asks her to attend the coalition's meeting with Dr. Cook after school today. Dr. Cook apparently saw Bri's music video, and Shana thanks Bri for making it. She tells Bri they have a petition to get the armed officers removed. Bri says she already has plans, but signs the petition. As Bri walks away, Shana says that DJ Hype was a jerk to her, and that she and Malik are there for Bri. Malik stares at his phone through all of this, and Bri thinks it still hurts that she's losing him.

CHAPTER 30

Supreme takes Bri to a real studio in Midtown. She looks around at the lavish reception area and thinks it doesn't feel right to be here without Pooh, though she's also uneasy because she lied to Jay about where she was going. Bri reasons that it won't matter if she gets a record deal. Supreme leads Bri to a studio, and before they enter, tells her to follow his lead on "other stuff." A white man, James Irving, introduces himself as the CEO of the record label and calls Supreme "Clarence." Supreme inexplicably speaks like a gangster as they discuss Bri's fame.

James mentions that Supreme is a genius for the way he manipulates Bri, just like he did with Lawless. He says that Lawless could've been great if he'd taken James's advice and just *acted* like a hoodlum instead of getting so involved. Bri spits that her dad wasn't a hoodlum, and Supreme tries to smooth over the situation. Dee-Nice arrives and asks Bri if she's ready to do a song. Bri thinks they're going to do a song together in addition to her own and asks for some time to get her song together. Supreme laughs and says that Dee-Nice wrote the song for her. When Bri insists she writes her own music, Supreme brushes her off. Bri accepts the folder and reads the lyrics. They're extremely violent and sexist, and Bri can't stomach the idea of kids reciting them. She refuses to record it.

Bri's desire to make up with Malik shows that even as she's beginning to embrace some of these changes, she still wants the safety and the comfort of her longtime relationships with her best friends. Losing Malik is quickly becoming one of Bri's many painful experiences, and Shana's pledge of support shows Bri that simply gaining more allies doesn't make losing Malik hurt less.



Supreme's affect when talking to James suggests that he's learned that speaking in this way to someone like James is a good way to earn money. This fits neatly in with Supreme's assessment of how rap artists can and should earn money by being controversial and associating with gang activity; by affecting some of the gang habits himself, he can make himself look cool for the person with the actual money. It's also possible that Supreme is playing up a stereotype to make the white executive feel superior to him, so that Supreme can in fact better manipulate him.



The way that James speaks about Bri and Lawless in front of her like this suggests that like Supreme, James doesn't see Bri as a real person with thoughts, feelings, and very real personal traumas in her past—he sees her as a way to make money. Bri understands that the song that Dee-Nice wrote for her is like her song in many ways—it looks very violent on the surface—but unlike hers, it doesn't have any deeper meaning. Because of this, Bri knows that it's meant to make her look gangster, not to speak about the struggles of the black community.



Supreme and James laugh and James says he loves "sassy black-girl shit." Bri starts to lose her temper, but Supreme leads her into the hall. He lifts up his sunglasses—the first time Bri has ever seen his eyes—and growls at her to follow his lead. He says they're dealing with the music business and it's not about what Bri wants anymore. Bri continues to refuse and says the song isn't her. Angrily, Supreme says that he can make the song look real, just like he did for Lawless—Lawless wasn't a gangster when Supreme started working with him; Supreme encouraged him to look "authentic" by getting involved with the Garden Disciples. He tells Bri that she's smarter than Lawless, and that "they" can do everything he and Lawless couldn't. Bri realizes that to Supreme, she's a do-over of her dad. She agrees to record the song.

When Bri is in the recording booth, she flashes to a memory of going to the zoo. Her family ended up reaching exhibits at the same time as another family whose kids tried to get the animals to make noise or move. Bri remembers feeling bad for the animals and thinks that now, she's just like those animals.

CHAPTER 31

The next afternoon when Jay picks Bri up to go see Aunt Pooh, she asks if Bri's okay. Bri thinks of the song she did. She hates it, but James still wants to see her perform before signing her. Supreme is booking her a performance at the Ring. Bri can't figure out how to tell Jay, and vows to figure it out alone. At the jail, they find Scrap sitting on the curb. He says he wasn't around when SWAT arrived, but that he's here to see Pooh with Jay and Bri. Bri thinks that Scrap seems oddly tense.

Security leads them to a windowless room. Twenty minutes later, a guard brings Pooh in. She greets Scrap and then envelops Bri in a hug. When they all sit down, Jay says that Pooh will be arraigned next week. Pooh smiles and says that after that, she can handle "that fool" from Bri's interview. Bri stares straight ahead as Pooh tells Jay that Bri interviewed with DJ Hype. She can feel Jay's stare burning into her. Pooh changes the subject and asks Scrap about "that other thing"—getting back at the Crowns for stealing Lawless's **chain**. When Jay ascertains that Bri was robbed, she shrieks. Scrap says that he has new Garden Disciples ready to take on the Crowns when Bri gives them the go-ahead. Bri's stomach drops.

Learning this information about Lawless allows Bri to piece together parts of her dad's history that she's never heard before. The realization that he wasn't a gangster until Supreme pushed him into it shows Bri that one of the biggest reasons that her family is currently living in poverty is because of the pressures of the music industry. Especially since Pooh also got drawn in, it's now impossible for Lawless's children to truly get out of the mess they're now in without taking drastic action of some sort.



Now, Bri sees that she's nothing more than a pawn for these powerful men, which completes the process of Bri losing control of her fame. Now, her challenge will be to get it back.



It's important to keep in mind that Jay is the one person who isn't aware that Bri is somewhat famous right now. This means Bri believes she'll be able to control how her fame looks to Jay, something that, given Jay's past reactions to learning about Bri's song, is a nice idea but probably won't play out that way in practice.



Finding out that the Crowns robbed Bri at gunpoint like this makes Jay feel even more like she's failing as a parent to protect her child—though in her eyes, Bri isn't setting her up for success by choosing to also keep things like the interview with DJ Hype a secret. This is the final moment in which Bri's fame spirals out of her control and becomes something much bigger than what she can handle alone. She needs the help of someone like Jay to guide her, and without that guidance, Bri has ended up in deep trouble.



Jay closes her eyes as Pooh nastily says that the Crowns told on the Garden Disciples, so now it's war. Pooh tells Jay that this is about respect, but Jay reminds Pooh that she's in jail. She says she doesn't care about the **chain** and notes that it sounds like Pooh *should* be in jail. When this surprises Pooh, Jay shouts and asks what money she's supposed to use to bail Pooh out—and says that bailing her out isn't going to get Pooh to stop dealing. Jay stands and asks Bri to come with her. Pooh tries to get Bri to stand up for her, but Jay says that Pooh has to fix herself. Angrily, Pooh asks if Jay is going to abandon her again like she did when she started drugs. Bri tries to defend Jay, but Jay cuts her off and tells Pooh that she can only blame outside circumstances for so long.

Outside the jail, Bri asks if Jay really isn't going to bail Pooh out. Jay says she can't when they have bills and when Pooh will just start dealing again. Bri tries to plead that Pooh will change, but Jay says that Pooh has to believe that before anything will happen. She says that Pooh is more worried about the **chain** than her own wellbeing. Bri apologizes for the chain being stolen. Jay says she doesn't care, but asks what's going on with Bri's behavior and the DJ Hype interview. Bri stares at her new **Timbs** and says that Supreme is her manager and is working on a record deal. She swears that she was going to tell Jay after everything was settled so that she could save them.

Jay closes her eyes and says she's not doing her job as a parent if Bri feels like she has to save them. Bri assures Jay that she and Trey are doing so much and admits that she's trying, but she keeps messing up like she did in the DJ Hype interview. She says that Supreme is thrilled that Bri is acting like a "ratchet hood rat." This doesn't surprise Jay; she says this is why Supreme and Lawless didn't get along. She asks what Supreme used to bait Bri. Bri admits that he bought her the **Timbs**. She confesses that her old boots fell apart, but she didn't say anything because she didn't want to make Jay feel bad.

Jay sighs and says that because Bri has been lying, this must stop. Bri desperately fights this until Jay asks Bri if she knows what Pooh's biggest problem is. She says that Pooh's problem is that she doesn't know who she is and what she's worth. Jay asks Bri who she is, but Bri can't answer. They get in the car and as Jay backs out, her phone rings. Bri answers the unfamiliar number and drops the phone when Dr. Cook asks for Jay. Jay pulls over. When she hangs up, says that she has an interview with fingerprints and a background check next week.

In Jay's opinion, while Pooh has a lot to be angry and upset about, Pooh has also made a number of questionable decisions that led her to ending up in jail on a possession charge—and she can't ignore her own choices when she tries to lay blame. In this way, Jay suggests that part of growing up (which she seems to imply that Pooh hasn't done fully yet) is choosing to accept responsibility for one's actions and make the best out of difficult situations, something that Pooh has struggled to do throughout her life.



Here, Jay suggests that the chain isn't actually something that Bri or Pooh should put so much stock in—while valuable and meaningful, it's just an object. In particular, Jay wants Bri to know that people are more important than objects, an idea that Bri has struggled with throughout the novel.



When Jay isn't surprised at Supreme's behavior, it shows Bri that Jay could've been a massive help had she let her in—in which case, Bri might not be in such big trouble. Jay's sense that she's failing as a parent because Bri feels compelled to go behind her back suggests that Jay is still treating Bri like a child, not a young woman aware of the family's difficulties.



The fact that Bri can't answer proves Jay's point: Bri doesn't yet have the personal self-esteem and understanding to make good choices and handle fame in a responsible way. Because Bri is lacking in this area, she has also undersold her worth. Supreme may be right that Bri is a born performer and can be a star, but Jay implies that Bri will be more successful rapping as the Bri she knows and loves than the Bri who pretends to be someone she's not.



CHAPTER 32

On Saturday morning, Sonny texts Bri and asks her to meet him at the park. When she gets there, she finds Malik there too. Sonny says that Rapid is on the way and he needs bodyguards in case Rapid is an old man. Bri and Malik tease Sonny, tell him it'll be fine, and straighten his shirt. When they see a black Mercedes pull in, Sonny hisses for Bri and Malik to hide. They run behind a big oak tree and peer around it. Miles steps out of the car. Bri, Sonny, and Malik are all shocked. Malik and Bri snigger and imitate Sonny's shock at having been talking to the "Swagerific" guy.

Malik tells Bri that he's missed her, and says that it is Bri's fault they haven't spoken—she cared too much about the **chain** to care about the fact that he was hurt. Bri sees the point, but explains that she needed the chain to potentially pawn it. Malik snaps that Bri only cares about money, but he awkwardly stares at his shoes when Bri says that she hasn't had food and electricity at several points over the last month. He apologizes for not being there for her and for kissing her. They decide that though things are different, they can still be friends.

Sonny and Miles approach Bri and Malik. Sonny introduces Miles as "Miles, without a z," and Malik immediately calls Miles out for insulting Lawless. Miles apologizes again and says that Supreme wanted him to say that—Milez the character is a jerk. Bri asks if Supreme knows that Miles is gay. Miles says that Supreme ignores it and makes Miles pretend to be straight, as girls are supposed to love Milez. Miles says in real life, he hates rapping and is gay. Sonny asks why Miles came today at all. Miles says he wanted to meet Sonny, and he's done being Milez. Bri asks if he's giving up his rap career, and Miles says it doesn't even feel like his, since he's not being himself.

CHAPTER 33

Bri thinks about what Miles said about being himself as she arrives at church the next day. Kayla is with Trey, as he recently introduced her to Jay as his girlfriend. Bri finds the church ladies obnoxious and sits down when Jay stops her from yelling at one of them. Sister Daniels and Curtis arrive and Bri sits up straight. Curtis heads right for Bri and compliments how she looks. He suggests they leave school and get lunch for their date. Bri feels someone watching her and sees Jay and Trey staring. She realizes she doesn't care about the teasing. Curtis kisses her cheek.

The revelation that Miles is gay shows Bri that she truly cannot judge people on first impressions—Miles clearly isn't the same person he portrays in "Swagerific" and when he's participating in rap battles. The fact that Malik and Bri are able to put their differences aside to support Sonny shows that these three will be able to patch things up if they focus on showing up for each other.



Though Bri is absolutely not required to share her family's hardships with anybody, it's worth noting that if she had mentioned to Malik or Sonny how dire things had gotten, they certainly would've stepped in to help in some way—and at the very least, Malik would've been more understanding of why Bri was so upset about losing the chain.



Miles offers a damning character reference for Supreme: in short, that Supreme doesn't actually care about the people he represents. Instead, Supreme cares about their ability to play a role and make money, something that Supreme hasn't yet realized—even after losing Lawless, Miles, and probably several others—isn't a tenable situation long-term. Though Supreme may know how to make a quick dollar, he doesn't know how to help artists create lasting fame.



Hearing Miles say that Supreme is bad news is very different from hearing it from Jay or even Trey. Miles is a peer, which means that he's in the exact same place developmentally as Bri is and is therefore more relatable for her. He's also Supreme's son, which gives him an insider's perspective.



Bri heads over to Jay, Trey, and Kayla, smiling so hard it hurts. They take their seats in the pews and Grandma and Granddaddy come over. Bri and Trey are surprised to learn that there's a family dinner at their grandparents' house after church. Bri realizes that Grandma isn't glaring or being rude to Jay, and asks if Granddaddy is dying.

Bri still has no idea what's going on when they arrive at Grandma and Granddaddy's house. She almost feels the way she did when Jay left her years ago. Jay promises that they're going to talk about good things with Grandma and Granddaddy. Bri hates that she still feels like a scared five-year-old inside, even though she knows Jay isn't going to leave her. Softly, Jay says that leaving Bri and Trey was the hardest day of her life, and she still hears their screams. She apologizes again to Bri, both for leaving and for Bri's nightmares, which she knows about because Bri talks in her sleep. Bri tries to apologize, but Jay cuts her off and says that she promises to be here for Bri.

Bri thinks that she'll never know why Jay chose drugs over her, but she does know that Jay will always love her. She calls Jay, "Mom." Jay's eyes get wet, but she kisses Bri and leads her inside. Granddaddy is in the backyard working on a pickup truck and Grandma is in the kitchen. Grandma allows "Mom" to help with the cooking—making Bri wonder if Grandma is an alien—though Bri isn't allowed to help. Kayla and Trey arrive. Trey goes to talk with Granddaddy, and Grandma refuses to let Kayla help cook.

Bri slips away and goes to her old room. It's filled with Tweety Bird stuff. Bri throws herself on the bed and thinks that she's spent lots of time here with Malik, Sonny, Trey, and her grandparents, but none with Mom. Mom and Trey knock and come in, and Mom looks around at the stuffed Tweety Birds. She says that she hasn't been in this room since it was Lawless's, and Trey gives Mom a hard time about having had sex in this room. Bri squeals.

Mom calls Bri and Trey to attention, but before she can begin, Trey asks why Mom and Grandma aren't fighting. Mom says they spoke and are willing to set their differences aside for Bri and Trey. She announces that they're going to move in with Grandma and Granddaddy until she can get back on her feet, and she tells Trey that he doesn't need to support them anymore—he can go to grad school. Trey argues, but Mom tells him to go after his dream. Bri's chest aches; she wants to chase her dreams too. Trey tells Mom that she has to let Bri go after her rap dreams. Mom says that she can't let Supreme manipulate Bri so that she ends up like Lawless. Bri looks up and says that she's not Lawless.

Remember that Bri has a bad habit of jumping to conclusions. This suggests that what's going on here rings all of Bri's alarm bells, as it reminds her of bad things that have happened in the past—another way that Bri has to constantly battle with her demons.



The admission that she still feels as though she's five years old and about to be left makes it abundantly clear that Bri is still struggling to remind herself that the trauma she experienced is in the past and isn't likely to happen again. Learning that Jay knew about the nightmares shows Bri that she doesn't need to do so much to take care of Jay, as Jay is able to circumvent these attempts and care for Bri anyway.



Calling Jay "Mom" shows that Bri is now ready to reaffirm her relationship with Jay and begin to truly heal from her past trauma. Grandma allowing Jay to help in the kitchen suggests that she's decided to do the same thing in her relationship with Jay, something that will benefit everyone.



In this moment, Bri acknowledges the time and the experiences that she missed out on with her mom. While it's true that Jay (now referred to as Mom) missed out on innumerable important moments with her daughter, Bri and Mom are also at a point where they can move forward and focus on the moments to come, not the missed ones of the past.



The choice to put aside differences with her in-laws shows that everyone involved in this decision has decided to be an adult and act like it—remember that Grandma is known for behaving rudely and insinuating that Mom is an unfit mother. Like Bri, Mom will have to work to let go of this part of their past and look forward to the future, but being willing to work on it will offer the entire family hope as they move forward into the future.



Bri admits that she doesn't like what Supreme wants her to do and be, but she wants to try to make it. Trey supports Bri and says that it doesn't matter what happened to Lawless: Bri is "smarter than that." Mom agrees with this, and Bri softly asks Mom if she'd act like it, then, since nobody else does. Mom closes her eyes and says that Bri can perform at the Ring, but she's done if she acts like a fool, and Supreme can't be her manager. Bri agrees. Granddaddy calls them for dinner. Bri stays in her room and thinks that she might be okay.

Grandma tells the table everything she learned about Kayla while Bri, Trey, and Mom were upstairs. Kayla is rapping and studying marketing. Grandma latches onto Kayla saying she's independent, but doesn't understand what that means in the music world. As Bri banter with Granddaddy, she thinks that she's starting to know who she is. She sees bits of herself in all of her family members.

CHAPTER 34

Trey chaperones Bri to the Ring on Thursday, per Mom's request. He blasts Bri's song and does a poor job of singing along, which makes Sonny and Malik snicker. Embarrassed, Bri thinks that Aunt Pooh would try to hype her up the same way. It's still weird that Pooh is gone, but Bri is trying to do what Pooh would've wanted her to do. They pull into the parking lot and whoop when they see Bri's name in lights. Bri feels like she's a part of Garden Heights.

Jojo skids to a stop in front of Bri and excitedly announces that he's here to see Bri perform. He insists he's not by himself—he's with Bri and her friends. Bri agrees to let Jojo come with them, and Trey asks for his mom's number. Jojo says that he's almost grown up, which makes Bri and Trey laugh. Bri gets a text from Curtis wishing her luck. Bri's group skips the line as usual, but Bri's heart stops when she sees Crowns staring at her. Frank and Reggie greet Bri and ask if she's "carrying the torch" for Lawless, but agree when Bri says she's carrying her own torch.

As Bri turns to head inside, one of the Crowns shouts about Bri getting to skip the line. Jojo steps forward and defends Bri, which makes her feel sick. Malik drags Jojo inside and Trey walks Bri in. Bri is nervous, but says she has to perform—the Crowns stopped Lawless, and she won't let them stop her. She flags down Supreme. Sonny narrows his eyes at Supreme as they head to a greenroom. Trey stays out front with Jojo. Bri tells Supreme that she's ready to get her contract, but she's not sure. Supreme leaves and joins James. Bri, Malik, and Sonny discuss the Crowns and their own "gangster" phases, but Bri thinks that Jojo is taking it to another level.

Bri's ability to say that she's not Lawless and won't make the same mistakes shows her finally coming of age as an individual. Now that she is starting to know who she is, she sees that she's not a repeat of her dad. She can be and do better by relying on the trusted people around her, as well as by remembering that she has important things to say—things she can't say with Supreme.



By refocusing her identity on how she relates to her family, Bri begins to see herself as part of this larger family unit instead of someone who has to keep the peace by trading weeks with each faction at church. Though it likely won't be easy, Bri will hopefully now be better able to draw on people who love her to help her.



Note how much more relaxed Bri seems now that she's going to the Ring with the people she loves most. This reminds her that the act of being famous in public is much easier when she's surrounded by people who know her and love her—and won't let her get away with questionable behavior.



Frank and Reggie's reaction to Bri insisting that she's here for herself suggests that if Bri had been willing to assert her individual identity sooner, the Garden Heights community would've followed her lead—in other words, Bri may have been making a bigger deal out of being attached to her dad's fame than she needed to.



Bri sees Pooh in Jojo: he's uninterested in school and is extremely interested in joining the Garden Disciples and standing up for the people he loves and cares about. Through Jojo, Bri sees how gang activity and violence can rob children of their childhoods. Though Jojo's confidence is humorous on one level, when faced with a number of dangerous, adult Crowns, it shows Bri that Jojo has grown up in some ways long before he should've.



Scrap knocks on the door and gives Bri his phone. Pooh is on the line. Pooh gives Bri a pep talk and says that she might get out on the minimum sentence. When Supreme returns to tell Bri it's time, Bri hangs up and follows him out. Supreme whispers to Bri and asks if she's acting "authentic" by hanging out with Garden Disciples like Scrap, but Bri says she doesn't do that. Bri climbs into the ring when DJ Hype announces her. She realizes how corny he is as she looks out and sees her friends and family in the crowd. Behind them, she sees a bunch of Crowns holding the **chain** aloft. Scrap notices and gives Bri a look that asks if he should deal with them. Bri freezes.

DJ Hype calls Bri's attention and then starts the beat for her new song. She looks at Supreme and James and thinks that people treat her like Lawless's clone. She formulates some rhymes in her head and asks Hype to stop the music. She announces that she's going to freestyle and raps that that she refuses to play along and be a sellout. She raps about how people blame hip-hop for violence and includes a note to the Crowns, saying that they're making things worse in Garden Heights and they can't stop her from rapping. People cheer and chant Bri's name. James leaves and Supreme follows. Bri knows she's done with them, and thinks that she's where she's supposed to be.

EPILOGUE

Bri and Curtis are in Bri's room, studying for the ACT. Bri suggests they take a break and Curtis kisses her. From the doorway, Trey points out that they're not studying, and says that he'll drive home from grad school to beat up Curtis if need be. Bri reminds Trey that he's late to pick up Jojo for a basketball game, and Trey leaves. Bri and Curtis kiss again, but Mom interrupts them. She asks Bri for her opinion on which outfit to wear on her first day as Dr. Cook's secretary. Bri tells the reader that he wants her to spearhead finding new security and organize meetings with the Black and Latinx Coalition.

Bri gets a call from Sonny and puts him on speaker. Miles is there too. Sonny tells Bri to get on Twitter; someone big posted her freestyle video. Bri sees that she has over 100 notifications and people keep retweeting one tweet. Bri stares at the photo and the name. The tweet reads that Bri is the future of hip-hop, and invites her to collaborate on a song. Mom looks over Bri's shoulder and asks if she wants to do it. Bri says she does, as long as she can do it on her terms.

Supreme's comment about Bri being "authentic" by associating with Scrap shows that Supreme doesn't even see the value in having relationships with people who are associated with gangs—he just sees them as a moneymaking and image-building opportunity. The Crowns' taunting of Bri gives her the opportunity to declare who she is and decide that she's going to rise above and make her own future, not follow in Lawless's footsteps.



In this moment, Bri tells the world who she is: an independent young woman who wants to use her voice to speak up for her community and call out the issues she sees in it, not someone who's going to play by someone else's rules. With this, she shows Supreme that she's unwilling to play the role he wants her to and instead, she's willing to sacrifice her record deal for blazing her own trail. It is worth noting, however, that Bri only feels comfortable doing this because her poverty and trauma have been somewhat alleviated, giving her a stronger foundation to build on.



The fact that both Bri and Curtis are studying suggests that Curtis is also college-bound—and it indicates that Bri is at least trying to apply herself to her studies like Jay wants her to do. Dr. Cook's first orders of business for Jay show that there's going to be positive change at Midtown, hopefully making the school safer for all students and especially the students of color.



Leaving out the name of this famous rapper at the end allows readers to insert whichever artist they want, which helps the novel remain relevant and feel current going forward. Being approached like this shows Bri that she can make fame work on her own terms if she stays true to herself and lets her family and friends in to help her.





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