

Bill Spring - Writing Sample

Sample chapter for proposed Young Adult (YA) thriller for a literary packaging agency

Birdie counted the different places where she felt the fear. Her stomach, to start. Her chest. Her throat. That spot right between her eyes. And it was like she'd completely forgotten how to breathe. She needed air, but had no idea how to get it. It was like, body limbo. That thing that happens to you right before you break into dry-heaving sobs.

But she couldn't allow herself to lose control. Not here, not now, no way. She pushed down the panic and tried to find the dull, distant calm that would keep her from breaking apart. No such luck there, but she did find a little flaming ball of anger, and decided to hold onto that. Maybe that would do the trick.

Her chair was metal, bolted to the floor. A pair of silver handcuffs dangled by her leg, one cuff closed around the arm of the chair where it met the seat and the other open, waiting for a wrist to imprison. Maybe hers.

Two FBI agents, a man and a woman, sat in folding chairs opposite. They stared at Birdie and said nothing. The man was wide and not very tall, with spiky gray hair. The woman was curvy, almost plump, with curly red-blonde hair and too much lipstick. Birdie saw all this with a fleeting glance as she swept her eyes around the room, and then resumed staring at her own hands. She was fairly sure that these two hadn't been among the people at her house, but she hated them all the same, and she wasn't going to risk looking them in the eyes until she knew she could hold it together.

She wasn't going to be the first one to speak, either. She was damn sure of that. All thought of "cooperating" had evaporated when she saw how violently the men had shoved her parents, with their hands cuffed behind their backs, into the black SUV in her driveway.

The table between Birdie and the two agents was solid but cheap: brittle, dark brown veneer covering a thick slab of particleboard. Scratches and scribbles of blue ballpoint ink filled the patches of yellow wood, and for some reason Birdie thought of Noa's fingernails, permanently stained with ink and paint, and ragged from chewing.

She should have listened to Noa. She should have stayed in the car; she never should have run to the house. But how could she not? All those cars in the driveway, all those men in dark jackets and baseball caps, standing on the front porch. Like a scene from a police drama on TV. And her first thought had been of tragedy, some accident. Her parents were hurt or dead.

But Noa had known better. In her life, in her experience, the authorities did not show up at your door to help. Their appearance meant trouble, not assistance. She'd told Birdie to duck down; she'd keep on driving past the house and they'd find a place to crash, maybe at Christopher's, while they figured this all out. But Birdie wouldn't listen. She needed to know.

And now she was here, and she still knew exactly nothing. She picked at the edge of the table with a thumbnail, pulling away tiny flecks of sawdust. Her eyes focused on the ballpoint scrawl, and she saw that someone had written tiny words, each letter a fraction of an inch tall: "Play it cool, man." Birdie's mouth curled up in the smallest possible smile. A message, just for her, written a week ago, a year ago, ten years ago, by some poor bastard in her exact situation. Okay then.

"Something funny?" It was the man.

Birdie looked up, finally meeting his eyes. She shook her head slowly but firmly, her mouth a thin line. The man just stared back and squinched his shoulders as if his navy blue suit was a size too small. Her father had a suit just like it. He'd bought it for a funeral because he was color blind and had thought it was black. Birdie and her mom teased him every time he wore it, calling him "The Man in Black," and singing Johnny Cash songs. Her father always pretended to laugh, but it clearly needed him.

The silence returned to the room for a minute, and then the woman, mercifully, decided they'd all had enough. "I'm Agent Wright," she said. "This is Agent Dixon."

"Am I under arrest?" Birdie asked, keeping her voice as emotionless as she could manage.

The two agents answered simultaneously, with Wright choosing a comforting "No," and Dixon a firm "Not yet." They shared an awkward glance, and Birdie felt the tiny smirk return, just for a second.

"I want to see my parents," she said. "I'm sixteen. A minor. I know you can't talk to me unless my parents are with me."

"That doesn't work when the parents are the ones who are under arrest," growled Agent Dixon.

"For what?"

"We'll get to the specifics later," said Agent Wright. "Right now, we just--"

Birdie cut her off. "A lawyer then. My friend's father...you can call him. He'll come."

"You're not getting how this works!" barked Agent Dixon. "You don't get to ask for things. There aren't any rules here except the ones we make. You remember Nine-Eleven?"

Birdie swallowed, willed herself to stay calm against flashing images of news reports: Guantonomo Bay, bearded men rounded up and caged, drone strikes in desert villages. She struggled to roll the fear back into that neat little anger ball. "Well, I was three years old when that stuff happened. But we read about it in Social Studies."

Agent Dixon slapped both his hands down on the table and leaned in close to her, his jaw clenched tight.

"That attitude will not help you, missy. Not in here." His voice was strained, the volume just below a shout. Birdie could smell his breath: mouthwash and cigarettes. *Gross*. A little American Flag pin, edged in gold, was stuck in his suit lapel. The overhead fluorescent lights made the white stars and stripes glow a freaky green.

"You have to understand that the Patriot Act gives us a lot of leeway here," agent Wright said, calmly. "Being a minor does give you some protection."

"But not as much as you'd think," finished Dixon. "You know the term 'in the system?' This is not a system you want to be in. Try imagining what happens when you use that smart mouth to talk back to the kind of man who went to the career fair and said 'I want to be a guard at a jail for teenage girls!' I could tell you some stories that--"

"Ron!" barked Agent Wright. "You need a break. Go get a cup of coffee, okay?"

Agent Dixon looked at his partner, his fists clenched. He opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it again. Finally, he muttered, "Yeah, okay. Sure." He hit the metal door with the flat of his palm, making it swing wide with a sudden bang, and then stalked out.

Birdie shifted in her seat, straightening her back and rubbing her neck where it had gotten stiff.

"You want something to drink?" asked Agent Wright. "Something from the vending machine?"

Birdie snorted. "I'm supposed to trust you because you're nicer than he is, right? He gets me scared, and then you come in with a hug and a shoulder to cry on, and I just spill my whole life story? That's how this game works?"

Agent Wright let out a long sigh, and slumped back in her chair.

"Oh, Birdie," she said, shaking her head slowly. "Please don't think of this as a game. This is deadly, deadly serious. And believe me when I say that Agent Dixon, as cranky as he is, is a teddy bear compared to the men who are now questioning your parents."

Images assaulted Birdie's head, images of her mom and dad in some room far worse than this one, enduring God only knew what. Needles? Scalpels? No... it couldn't be as bad as that. Not here. Not in America. They were safe here. This was their home.

And that was it. A simple thought of "home" sent Birdie over the edge she'd been fighting to stay away from. With a creaking sound like something inside her giving way, tears burst from her eyes. She lowered her head to her hands, moaning. Her body shuddered with sobs and teardrops fell on darkened the pulpy wood around the words of her unknown ally. *Play it cool*. Ha.

"What do you want?" she begged, hating the sound of surrender in her voice. "What is this about? Please?"

"We just want to ask you some questions. And we want you to give us honest, truthful answers." Agent Wright took a little travel pack of tissues from her purse, and slid them across the table. Birdie grabbed them up greedily to dam up the flow from her eyes and nose, and nodded her compliance.

"If you do that," the agent promised, "We will let you go. Take you to a friend's house."

Birdie nodded again, defeated.

"John and Melinda Howard are your parents," Agent Wright began.

It wasn't a question, but Birdie answered it anyway. "Yes."

"Do you know them by any other names? Have they used other names for themselves, to your knowledge?"

"You mean nicknames?" Birdie asked, confused.

"No. Real names. Foreign names."

Foreign names? What the hell? “Uh, no. Never. Why would--”

“Have you ever heard your parents, or anyone else, use the names Mikhail Guryev or Elana Semenko?”

Birdie blinked. Nothing was making sense. This woman was talking about an Olympic figure skating pair, right? The question was almost hilarious...so why did she feel suddenly so disoriented, like once again she had no idea how breathing happens. She managed to shake her head in answer, but she couldn't speak.

“Have you ever heard your parents, or anyone they were with, speaking a foreign language? Something that sounded like Russian?” Agent Wright was looking Birdie directly in the eyes, her expression neither hard nor soft. Just serious. “Think carefully now.”

Birdie tried to think carefully through the swirling, dizzying mush that her mind was becoming. She hadn't anticipated something like this. She thought this might be about taxes, or something to do with her dad's job, and a real estate deal that had gone bad a few years back. But Russian names? Russian language? And that other agent, talking to her about Nine-Eleven...the terrorist attacks. That did not belong here. Right?

“No,” she finally replied, finding her voice but hearing how weak it sounded. “Nothing like that.”

“How about something written down?” asked Wright. “Do you know what the Russian alphabet looks like? With backwards letters, like backwards R's and N's? Ever see writing like that on a paper, or on something else?”

There was a moment of nearly total silence, when all Birdie could hear or feel was the blood rushing through her temples. And then it hit her, with all the force of a storm-tossed ocean wave.

“Backwards letters...like backwards Rs and Ns...”

One night, when Birdie was nine or ten, she came downstairs to find her father sitting in the darkened kitchen, working late. She snuck up from behind to surprise him, and ended up giving him a far bigger scare than she'd intended. He jumped in his seat, his arms instinctively covering a pile of objects on the table.

He whirled on her, angry, and then just as quickly rearranged his face into a smile. “Hey pumpkin,” he said. What are you doing up so late?”

“Can't get to sleep,” she said, and climbed into her father's lap.

Birdie looked at the kitchen table. The things her father had been trying to hide were packs of cigarettes. He had smoked for years, since long before Birdie was born, and he always said he was trying to quit. Out of respect for his wife and daughter, he mostly only smoked out on the porch.

"What are you doing?" Birdie asked. On the table sat a half dozen cartons of cigarettes, a large pile of open packs, and even a handful of loose, individual cigarettes.

"Well, Daddy buys cheap cigarettes, to save some money. But I don't want to look like a cheapskate in front of the people I work with."

"Why?"

"Some of them are big shots. Lots of money. They wouldn't understand. So I take the cheap cigarettes and put them in these expensive packs." He held up a red flip-top box, with fancy gold lettering and a picture of a cowboy.

"Where did you get those?" Syke asked.

"I saved them. I use them over and over."

"That's smart!" Birdie chirped.

"It is, isn't it?" said her father with a sideways smile. "Do you want to help me?"

And so Birdie sat there for nearly a half hour, carefully arranging cigarettes, twenty at a time, in her father's boxes. It was easy and fun, and reminded her of boxing up her crayons. But she was fascinated by the writing on the "cheap" cartons. It looked weird. It looked wrong.

"Why is the N backwards, Daddy?"

"Well... that's a printing mistake. A goof-up. That's why I can get them so cheap."

The answer made sense, and so she asked nothing more. But when they'd finished with the repacking, her father gave her a serious look.

"Listen up, Birdie," he said, his voice slow and even. "This has to stay a secret, okay? I could lose my job if people thought I was a skinflint... a cheap guy. Understand? You can't talk to anyone about funny cigarettes or backwards letters, got it?"

"Got it." It made her feel proud, that her father trusted her. She held up her pinkie for a pinkie promise, and her dad had hugged her tight before carrying her back to bed.

The next day Birdie heard her mother and father arguing, and watched as her father burned all the empty cigarette cartons and packs in the fireplace. A few weeks after that, he stopped smoking for good. Birdie forgot all about the strange lettering on those cigarette packs, the backwards N's...

...until now. Now, sitting here, under the green fluorescents, on this metal chair, in front of this battered fake wood table and this woman with the smeared red lipstick and the world turned upside down.

Birdie looked at Agent Wright and almost said, "I think my father smoked Russian cigarettes." But the words would not leave her mouth. She knew it was what the woman wanted, but she couldn't do it.

Instead she said, "I don't think so. I don't remember anything like that."

Birdie needed to get out of this room more than she had needed anything else in her life. But there had to be a way to do it without betraying her parents. Whatever had brought the three of them to this place, whatever the FBI thought they did, or were, it would turn out to be a mistake. She was sure of it. Mostly sure. Sort-of sure...

But whatever the truth was, whatever was going on here, she knew in her heart that she would have to piece it together herself. Agent Wright, Dixon, all those men who were at the house -- they were professional liars. Their job was to confuse and control. She would get no help from them, and so they would get none from her.

Her father bought foreign cigarettes. So what? The Russian bodegas downtown sold anything you could ever want from cheap vodka to old Soviet fur hats; it wasn't against the law.

Agent Wright sighed again, reached down to a briefcase by her chair, and brought out a dark brown folder. "Okay, Birdie," she said, "I'm going to show you some photos. I want you to tell--"

Bang! Bang!

Gunshots. In the building. *Close.* Agent Wright bolted straight up, knocking over her folding chair. Birdie winced as if struck, her hands reflexively covering her ears.

"Stay here! Don't move." Agent Wright shouted, and ran from the room. As the door swung open and shut, Birdie saw commotion in the hallway beyond, many people running in the same direction.

And she did not fail to notice that, when the door to the room stopped moving, it was a few inches ajar. In her haste, Agent Wright hadn't remembered to secure the door.

Birdie got up, walked to the door, and peered out. There were loud noises and shouting somewhere a ways off, but the corridor before her was empty and quiet. And at the end of it, just twenty yards away, was an exit sign. Bright and red and beautiful. Birdie walked out of the room noiselessly, with smooth even steps. *Play it cool*, she thought. Just get outside and then take it from there...

"Hey! Stop!"

A guy, a big guy in a suit, at the other end of the hall. It was Agent Dixon, running towards her.

Birdie broke into a run, crashed through the exit door, and nearly toppled down a set of metal stairs. At the bottom was another door. She pushed through it, out into the dark night, just as Dixon came charging through the one above, shouting into his phone.

Birdie didn't look back and she didn't slow down. She just ran. And as she ran, the tears came again. She didn't bother wiping them, but let the air dry them as she sprinted through the darkness.

"Daddy," she thought to herself. "What was the secret? What was the real secret?"