

When Bullying goes too Far

Written and Illustrated by Christopher Francis
Teacher's Guide by Nicole Hamel and Holly Moniz

Chapter One: Simon Partridge

The first time

I ever saw a ghost was when Coach Mackleby caught me skipping class out by the bleachers. The weather was blistering hot that day, and the last place I wanted to be was cooped up inside some boring classroom. I remember sitting with Brandon Westberry when I got caught. I tried my best to listen to Mackleby lecture us on the importance of getting a good education and how we shouldn't take it for granted. While forcing myself to focus, giving the coach eye contact and the occasional nod of agreement, I couldn't help but notice a boy standing in the middle of the football field. His face was grey and blurry, but his eyes were as clear as day. I couldn't tell you what he was wearing, but his body was still, like a bronze statue. For a second or two, I thought the kid was lost, maybe a runaway from the detention center up the road or something, but when the sun filtered out through the clouds, his body somehow slipped away into the shadows. He just vanished.

That was when I knew.

I asked Brandon later that day if he saw the strange kid on the football field, but he just spit on the ground like he always does and shook his head.

That was last year when I was in the seventh grade.

That was also the year Simon Partridge transferred to our school.

"Okay Eights, we are almost at Lake Stoneway, I'm going to ask you again to please stay seated until we have completely stopped." Coach Mackleby stood at the front of the school bus with his clipboard. His golden brown



muscular arms gripped tightly onto the seat in front of him as the bus swayed from side to side along the bumpy road.

Two bus-loads of grade eights had already spent four hours sitting inside the sweaty old yellow school buses with no air conditioning travelling north up the 400. I was pretty sure every single boy and girl couldn't wait to get into their

bathing suits and dive into the water.

Everyone that is, except Simon.

Simon Partridge had dirty fingernails and always smelled like bon-fire smoke. He lived in the foster home by the old church. He always kept to himself, playing on his guitar with one string missing. The only time I ever spoke to the guy was the day I saw that ghost. He must have overheard me talking to Brandon and felt compelled to strike up a conversation with me about it. I wasn't supposed to talk to him because he didn't hang out in our circle of friends, at least that was what Brandon said. The truth was, Brandon just didn't like the guy.

"Please make sure you have picked up all your garbage from the floor and haven't left anything under your seat." The coach slipped off his sunglasses and wedged it into the curls of his thick blonde hair. "This bus won't be coming back until Friday, so if you leave something behind, you'll have to make do without it."

Sitting on the bus that September afternoon, watching the trail of dust rocket up into the giant maple trees and evergreens, I couldn't help but think about Simon. I didn't understand why the guy would want to go on a four

day trip with a bunch of kids who hated him, especially Brandon. Maybe his new foster parents wanted him to make friends or learn some social skills.

Or better yet, swim in Lake Stoneway so that he could finally have a wash.

I had to admit, the idea of this school trip made my feet sweat. It wasn't because of Simon or the fact I was going to be away from home for the longest time in my short thirteen years, I was nervous because we were going to Stoneway.

"Is that the lake? Is that where it happened?" Markus Trent stood up and leaned his head out the window. Sparkles of light bounced off a large body of water along the right side of the bus. "That's where it happened, I think. Right at the point."

Ever since our class learned about this big trip, the gossip spread like wildfire about Riley Grayson. Story had it, he drowned in Lake Stoneway a couple years back and people have reported seeing his ghost rise out of the water. As much as we all talked tough, and joked about the story, I knew there was some kind of 'uneasiness' inside every kid on that bus.

I looked over at Simon Partridge, sitting by himself a couple seats ahead of me. His guitar was tucked in beside him. His snotty-nose stuck to the window, leaving streaks of slime along the glass. I wondered if he was thinking about the ghost we saw the year before.

I wonder if he tried telling anyone about it.

Part of me wanted to ask him more questions that day, but somehow, just looking at him would probably set Brandon off. Our group of friends were really tight, and I enjoyed being with them at the top of the food chain. I was proud to admit I was one of the most popular and coolest kids at Ravensdale Public School. At least we felt like we were.

"Hey Simon," Brandon shouted, standing up over the seat beside me. "Did you bring some soap? There's a giant outdoor bathtub over there, just for you." He pointed out to the lake and laughed.

Simon pulled away from the window and wiped his hands over the dirty streaks. Long black strands of hair drooped over his eyes. Turning to the front, he yanked his hood back over his head and then covered in the seat.

Brandon's comment wasn't funny at all, and I don't think it was supposed to be, but a ripple of awkward giggles and laughter spread through the back of the bus anyway. I knew why Brandon did it, I mean, he knew it gave him the power over his classmates. No one dared to make hurtful comments like he did, but then again no one dared to say

anything to him either. But he had a reason, a pretty good reason for being mean to Simon, so he claimed. Although none of us really knew what it was. Personally, I figured he just wanted an excuse to pick on someone to make himself look good.

"Hey Wesley, check this out." Brandon nudged me before standing up and sliding over to Simon's seat. He looked at Markus and me for a second and grinned. All I could see was the back of Simon's pale blue hood, but I knew he must have been trembling. I watched as Brandon turned his large frame in the seat, and faced Simon straight on. He stared at the kid, clenching his jaw, holding back the urge to laugh. Brandon slowly lifted his giant hands up to Simon's face, hovering his fingers inches away from him. Brandon held still for a few seconds and then pounced forward. "Boo!"

Simon launched his body back, bumping his head on the window.

Brandon stood up and laughed, high-fiving Markus Trent and Clay Dogson.

"That was epic!" Markus shouted. "The kid almost jumped through the glass."

I sat at the back, feeling the blood pump through my veins. My chest tightened. Simon ducked down in his seat and disappeared from my view behind the back rest. Brandon stepped along the aisle of the bus and sat down beside me again. "Whadya think? He knows who runs the show around here eh Wes?"

A million thoughts rushed through my mind. I wanted to tell him exactly what I thought of his egotistical act of stupidity. But I also knew this year was about survival. *Eat or be eaten*, Brandon would say.

But what he did to Simon sometimes, was just too hard to swallow. I mean, there was taunting and teasing, which I guess I could tolerate, but I couldn't help but think there was going to be a time where Brandon Westberry was going to take things a little too far.

I just hoped it wasn't going to happen on this trip.