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Bulletproof Backpack

By

ERIC COBLE

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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“*Bulletproof Backpack* was a world premiere co-commission from Florida Repertory Theatre, Fort Myers, Fla. (Greg Longenhagen, Artistic Director; John Martin, Executive Director; Kody C. Jones, Education Director), and Oregon Children’s Theatre, Portland, Ore. (Marci Crowson, Artistic Director). The script is based on interviews conducted by Florida Rep Education students and the Oregon Children’s Theatre Young Professionals Company.”

Bulletproof Backpack premiered at Florida Repertory Theatre, Fort Myers, Fla., on Aug. 11, 2021. It was conceived and directed by Kody C. Jones.

CAST:

Cloe Danica Murray
Yasmin Tatum Bates
Troy Wedler Lordeus
Nikki Elizabeth Fleetham
Andy Macy Magas
Sammy Keehnon J. Jackson
Dillard Bryce Hagen
Gabby Violet Mann
Mr. Holgate Zeke Bocklage, Gerritt VanderMeer
Officer Max Cantrella Canady

PRODUCTION:

Set/Lighting/Projection Design Rob Siler
Costumes Brooke Arthur
Sound Design Katie Lowe
Stage Manager Caycelynn Hoggard
Assistant Stage Managers Gaby Steinborn,
Chris Moeggenberg
Production Manager Tim Billman
Dramaturgy Dr. Laura Wright

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CHARACTERS

CLOE: A smart girl trying to do what's right, 17.

YASMIN: A smart girl who sees the dangers, 17.

TROY: a boy with confidence, Yasmin's boyfriend, 18.

NIKKI: A geeky girl who sees the possibilities, 17.

ANDY (ANDREA): A girl on edge, Cloe's younger sister, 15.

SAMMY: a sweet, simple boy who sees the good, Nikki's non-boyfriend, 16.

DILLARD: A smart, cynical boy, Sammy's cousin, 19.

GABRIELLA: A popular, cool girl with a whole new problem, 18.

MR. HOLGATE: a harried teacher trying to ride the waves, 30s.

OFFICER MAX: A savvy school security officer, 30s.

PLACE: Various rooms around a city.

TIME: Now.

PRODUCTION NOTE: All roles can be played by any gender or ethnicity. Names and pronouns may be changed accordingly.

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SETTING: *An open space representing various rooms around a city. There may be chairs, couches, a table for actors to flop on and around.*

AT RISE: CLOE, *her eyes flashing with worry, faces us, holding her cellphone.*

CLOE (*to us*). Here's the thing, you never know what you're gonna do. You can practice and plan it through and *think* you know ... but until it happens and you're in the middle of it ... you don't *know*.

(She speaks into her phone to YASMIN, who enters a separate area on her own phone. YASMIN is a bit more high-strung though rolling with the world at the moment. She is flipping through a notebook.)

YASMIN (*into phone*). Yello.

CLOE (*into phone*). Yaz?

YASMIN. Hey, Cloe, why you calling?

CLOE. I don't want to text. I need to ask you something.

YASMIN. If it's about the math portion, I was gonna call *you* for help—

CLOE. It's not about the tests—anyway tomorrow's just the English portion, I think—

YASMIN. But that math is coming, I can see the lights from that freight train coming straight for me ...

CLOE. It's not about the test.

YASMIN. Good, take my mind off it for a few minutes. And for the math stuff we should both kidnap Nikki anyway—force her to give us a study session.

CLOE. Listen, it's serious.

YASMIN. Oh. OK. Sorry.

CLOE. Or it might be serious. I don't know for sure, that's why I need your advice.

YASMIN. I'm here.

CLOE. OK. This afternoon. I was in history, working on my research paper, we were all, like, on the computers looking at bibliography stuff, and I looked over at the screen next to me, and this kid's, like, typing, but he's not doing research, he's just staring hard at the screen, and typing a list. Like a list of names. Like student names.

YASMIN. Like *our* students? Like our school?

CLOE. Yeah. I recognized a bunch of the names.

YASMIN. Was my name on it?

CLOE. Not that I saw.

YASMIN. Was yours?

CLOE. I don't think so.

YASMIN. Was it, like, all girls or all boys or something?

CLOE. It was a mix. Some names I don't know. But the only thing was that at the top of the list were the words "The It List."

YASMIN. "It List"? Like ... "Who's Hot List"?

CLOE. Maybe. Or like ... "Hit List."

(Pause.)

YASMIN. Ohhhh.

CLOE. Yeah.

YASMIN. Ohhhhhhhh no.

CLOE. Yeah. Maybe yeah.

YASMIN. Did he see you see the list?

CLOE. Yeah. Just for a second, he saw me looking and clicked the screen back to the website we were supposed to be looking at. But a few minutes later I saw him save something on his thumb drive.

YASMIN. Like the list.

CLOE. I don't know.

YASMIN. How did he act? When he saw you saw the list?

CLOE. Just, like, he didn't want me to see it, he didn't say anything, he just closed the window quick.

YASMIN. But he knows you know.

CLOE. But that's the question: "Know what?" It was just a list of names.

YASMIN. But it said "Hit List."

CLOE. It said "It List." I don't know what it means.

YASMIN. Did you talk to Mr. Clark?

CLOE. No!

YASMIN. Why not?

CLOE. I didn't tell anyone—you're the first person I've told.

YASMIN. This was during ...

CLOE. Eighth period. And we just came home right after, so ...

YASMIN. You gotta tell someone.

CLOE. Do I though?

YASMIN. Lives could be on the line, Cloe, you don't mess around with stuff like this—

CLOE. Exactly, if I tell anyone, this whole, like, earthquake of events will happen—

YASMIN. Which could save our lives.

CLOE. Or ruin his. What if this list is nothing, what if it's just some fantasy party list, what if we're totally reading into it?

YASMIN. Then they'll check it out, and he'll be OK.

CLOE. Or he won't. It happens all the time—there was a kid just last year posted a photo of himself looking weird and saying, “Our school is not even prepared for tomorrow,” and people freaked and the police searched his house and everybody's parents were called and he was expelled and it was all for nothing!

YASMIN. And if this is *not* nothing, if he shows up tomorrow or next week or at prom with an automatic rifle and that list—

CLOE. I understand, OK? That's why I called you.

YASMIN. No, you need to call Ms. Vasquez. She's the principal, it's her decision—

CLOE. But I don't think she'll have a decision. Any teacher or staff I call, I think they're legally obligated to call the police and start this whole big thing.

YASMIN. Then let 'em. That's their job.

CLOE. But it might be nothing!

YASMIN. You don't get to decide that. Who was it?

CLOE. What?

YASMIN. Who was making the list?

CLOE. ... a kid. I don't actually know him.

YASMIN. Tell me he's not one of our friends.

CLOE. No! I don't know him. I thought maybe I remembered his first name and I looked him up in last year's yearbook to get his last name.

YASMIN. Which is ... ?

CLOE. Look, I don't know him or I'd talk to him directly!

YASMIN. What's his name?

CLOE. I don't want to tell you.

YASMIN. Oh, come *on*, you *cannot* be serious.

CLOE. If I tell you, you're gonna call the police.

YASMIN. Of course I am, it's the right thing to do! "See something, say something!"

CLOE. But I don't know if I saw *anything*. I do not want to ruin someone's life because I made a mistake.

YASMIN. The mistake was him making a list, you do not make lists of students' names.

CLOE. Seriously? That's where we are now? I can't make a list of names without going to jail?

YASMIN. It's sad, but yeah, kinda.

CLOE. OK, I'm just gonna—I gotta go.

YASMIN. You called for my advice, I'm giving you my advice: This is *serious*, Cloe. Call it in.

CLOE. OKthankstalktoyoulaterbye.

(She hangs up. Both of them turn out to address us.)

CLOE *(cont'd, to us)*. I mean, I love Yasmin—

YASMIN *(to us)*. I love Cloe—

CLOE *(to us)*. She's just so ... nervous.

YASMIN *(to us)*. She's so *innocent*. Always trying to see the best in everybody, when frankly some people have no "best" to be seen.

CLOE *(to us)*. Even when we were little, we'd be, like, out walking in a park, and she'd be the one to get scared a passing car was slowing down to kidnap us—

YASMIN *(to us)*. We'd be coming back from Burger King or somewhere, and she'd be the one who'd give the rest of her

french fries to a guy on the street—which is beautiful, but sometimes—*especially* on something like this—you gotta look out for *yourself*.

CLOE (*to us*). That’s why I needed to call her, ’cause as weird as it is, sometimes I need to hear that “world is a scary place” mindset.

(*CLOE freezes as YASMIN dials her phone, and TROY trots on answering his cell, eating a sandwich. He is confident and a dude-bro, but a kind dude-bro.*)

TROY (*into phone, eating sandwich*). Hey, baby, what’s up?

YASMIN (*into phone*). Hey, Troy-boy, I just heard some weird news.

TROY. Aw, man, I was just *talking* to Francesca, she needed help getting her locker open, and I was there being friendly, it didn’t *mean* anything—

YASMIN. Wait, what?

TROY. Nikki saw me, like, talking to her, and I thought she might tell you something was going on.

YASMIN. No, but, like, why do you think I’d be suspicious about that?

TROY. No reason, that’s what I’m saying, nothing happened, there’s nothing there.

YASMIN. You’re, like, really defensive about this.

TROY. *You’re* really defensive about this.

YASMIN. This isn’t why I called!

TROY. That’s cool, I don’t want to talk about it.

YASMIN. I just got a call from Cloe.

TROY. Well, she wasn’t even there, so I wouldn’t—

YASMIN. She saw this list—some kid at school making a list.

(Pause. TROY chews.)

TROY. Uh-huh.

YASMIN. It looks like it could be a hit list.

TROY. Like people he's planning to kill?

YASMIN. Exactly.

TROY. Oh my God!

YASMIN. Exactly!

TROY. Did she call the cops?

YASMIN. No!

TROY. WHY??

YASMIN. She's not sure it means anything, she doesn't want to get him in trouble for nothing.

TROY (*pacing*). Oh man. Ohohohoho man.

YASMIN. I know, right?

TROY. Was there like a date or something, like when he was gonna do it?

YASMIN. Not that she said.

TROY. I bet it's tomorrow. Right? Big tests, everyone's focused, everyone's stressed out, the teachers are all distracted, I totally bet he's planning it for tomorrow.

YASMIN. You think so?

TROY. Who was it?

YASMIN. She won't tell me.

TROY. Was it someone we *know*??

YASMIN. I don't think so.

TROY. You know what, I know who it is.

YASMIN. Who?

TROY. It's that kid, that—Walter or something—the kid, he's always by himself at lunch, he's always got that big backpack.

YASMIN. I don't know who you mean.

TROY. He's—oh, what's his name? He's in my gym class, total psycho, it's gotta be him.

YASMIN. You should text Cloe, ask if it's him.

TROY. I will, I totally will.

YASMIN. 'Cause if she's not gonna do something, we have to.

TROY. Listen, listen, listen. I'm not gonna let anything happen to you. Knowledge is power, right? Now we got the knowledge, we can make a plan. Even if Cloe doesn't call the cops, we can be ready. I'm gonna take care of you.

YASMIN. I love you so much.

TROY. I love you too, I'll text you.

(He hangs up, YASMIN freezes. TROY turns to us.)

TROY *(cont'd, to us)*. Oh, *man!* It's like you're in a movie, you know, you spend all this time thinking, "What would I do" and then you're *in* it, you're *doing* it, you know? Oh, *man!*

(He freezes.)

Lights shift to CLOE, on her phone again, calling NIKKI, who enters on her own phone in a separate area. NIKKI is bubbly and geeky in all charming ways, scanning a textbook and notebook while on her phone.)

NIKKI *(into phone)*. Yes?

CLOE *(into phone)*. Hey, Nikki, I—

NIKKI *(into phone)*. "In the following sentence, what verb does the adverb modify: 'The ballot issue had been quietly sidelined by the Senate.'"

CLOE. I don't, um, I need to ask you something.

NIKKI. Cool. Disrupting study patterns with new variables can increase retention by 25%.

CLOE. Cool.

NIKKI. I just made that up, I hope it's true. Did you want to get you and me and Yasmin online to do some cramming together?

CLOE. No—or maybe—I just talked to Yaz, that's why I need to talk to you—

NIKKI. Hit me with your rhythm stick, baby.

CLOE. Are you OK?

NIKKI. I've had three Red Bulls I'm reading two pages simultaneously and I think I can see through time. I'm fine.

CLOE. OK, this is serious. Or it might be serious.

NIKKI. So am I.

CLOE (*to us*). And I tell her the whole thing, the same way I told it to Yasmin.

NIKKI (*into phone*). Whoa.

CLOE (*into phone*). I know.

NIKKI. That's some serious tonnage baby.

CLOE. Yeah, so should I tell my mom, or some teacher, or let it ride—

NIKKI. Let's game it out: You don't tell anyone, and he shows up with a gun—Bad News.

CLOE. Right.

NIKKI. That one's simple. Or you tell someone, and he's planning a shooting—you save people, hooray. Simple.

CLOE. I guess, yeah.

NIKKI. Or you tell people, and he's totally innocent. He and his parents or guardians get dragged into an Orwellian bureaucratic nightmare for who knows how long—

CLOE. I think so, yeah.

NIKKI. So here's the gray area, the No Man's Land—is it possible to get more data, reach out to him, check in and see if you can get a feel for his brain-set?

CLOE. I don't know him.

NIKKI. But you have a name.

CLOE. I do.

NIKKI. So you *could* reach him, there are ways of finding his phone number and address.

CLOE. But can we do that? Is that smart?

NIKKI. Well, A) yes, I could do that, but B) you'd be the one to talk to him. You could just, like, be casual, be like, "Hey, you looked a little stressed out today, I'm wondering if you wanted a study partner for the tests this week?"

CLOE. But I don't want to be his study partner.

NIKKI. It's a way of opening the door. Poking around.

CLOE. But what if he, like, *is* planning a shooting and now he knows I'm onto him and now *my* name goes on that list?

NIKKI. Fair. Fair.

CLOE (*looks at her phone*). Wait, I got a text.

NIKKI. From HIM??

CLOE. No, from Troy. (*Reading.*) "Is it that Walter kid with the backpack?"

NIKKI. What Walter kid?

CLOE. Oh, shoot, Yasmin must have told him.

NIKKI. Walter, Walter, Walter ...

CLOE. Hang on.

(She dials TROY, adding him into the call with NIKKI. TROY answers his phone.)

TROY (*into phone*). I'm right, aren't I?

CLOE (*into phone*). No! You're totally wrong!

NIKKI (*into phone*). I don't think there's even anyone named Walter in our school.

TROY. Nikki?

CLOE. She's on the other line. Listen, you can't text me!

TROY. Why not?

CLOE. 'Cause then there's, like, a record, a specific record of what we talked about!

TROY. So?

NIKKI. Are you just trying to protect yourself, Cloe?

CLOE. I'm protecting all of us—

TROY. How?

NIKKI. She's thinking if something bad *does* go down, there's no text proof that we knew about it beforehand. That's pretty cold and calculating, babe.

TROY. Pretty smart, you mean.

CLOE. I just don't want anyone knowing our business until I decide what to do.

TROY. Well, you've decided, right? You're telling the cops.

NIKKI. Not necessarily. She might hang back and keep an eye on him.

TROY. Dude, if he knows you know about the list, he's gonna launch—he's gonna, like, do it tomorrow!

CLOE. We don't know that he's going to do *anything*.

TROY. Just give me his name. I'll call it in, you don't have to do anything.

CLOE. Ughh. I wish Yaz hadn't told you.

TROY. But she did, 'cause she's smart. Now you gotta be smart.