

Running on Fire

By
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Story

When a Black college student has his property confiscated by the police in the park, it sets off a chain-reaction of events in a collegetown already struggling with the class and race tensions between the have's and have-nots. *Running on Fire* is a dramedy about American system of justice and college miseducation.

Characters

1. MARCUS/REGGIE - Black male, mid 20s
2. HANNAH/LL SCHOOL DAY - White female, mid to late 20s
3. JALEN/VOICE OF BLACK REASON/XDAWG - Black male, 20s
4. JADA/BLACK THEY- Black female, mid to late 20s
5. GARRETT/CAMPUS OFFICER/POLICE OFFICER/WHITE KNIGHT - White male, 20s

SETTING

Present. Collegetown, USA.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The use of social media, cellphones, and video play a prominent role in the world. Music, pictures, Twitter, video, flow in all facets of the piece. Some times when a character isn't talking they may take out their phone, send out a text, read their email. This isn't a commentary on the evils or benefits of cell phone use, but merely a sign of its omnipresence.

Electronica, trance, and house music should be used for runners and in transitions. Wordless, electronic music with beeps, chirps, bells, and whistles.

PROLOGUE

Park. Late Afternoon. The runners are dressed in track suits and warm-up outfits. Occasionally they snap selfies of themselves in preparation for their training.

MARCUS

You can run but you can't hide, because the time is now, the place is the elite Ivy walls and cherry blossoms of a college town, prep and prim, White gowns/ black town, with a campus clean, the students bubbly, the city deflated and depressed, abandoned for scraps, forgotten people and place, a story of polarities, a tale of two cities and one common ground, one common park, and with all this peace and prosperity the rebirth of a hobby of leisure, the sport of jogging, the rhythm of running, balance, and tranquility in preparation for a half-marathon for charity that has the entire college chirping and the town grumbling, celebrity coming to town, coming to college, coming to get his picture taken with us, so that we have our big moment and glory, so that there is no time to wait because the time is now, and no time for pauses because we're training, we're going to school, we're making things happen, we're paying \$40,000 a year, we're going into debt for a dream, yeah we're doing it, living the dream, the top 1% of privileges have been concentrated in us, 10,000 years of human evolution riding on us, running with us, pulsing in our chests, 6,000 years of human civilization and etiquette, 4,000 years of Western ideals, 2,000 years of Judeo-Christian values and concerns, 800 years of rational awareness, 200 years of American idealism, 50 years post-civil rights, 20 years into the online media age and we're making it happen, no hesitation cause everything is right now, mediated, ideated, technologically irrigated through phones, pads, laps, desks, moving like our feet, constantly running, training for the marathon of life, so I gotta stretch, I gotta warm-up, I gotta keep up, and so do you.

SCENE ONE

Garrett finishes his jog, checks his runner's time. He looks at Hannah who is stretching and listening to music on headphones.

GARRETT

Hannah, Hannah, Hannah...

HANNAH

I know I know. And don't start, Garrett. I'm not in the mood.

GARRETT

So glad you could show up...at sunset. Did you get my text?

HANNAH

I had to work late at the lab.

GARRETT

You're never going to catch up with the rest of us.

HANNAH

I'm fine trailing behind.

GARRETT

The leader is supposed to be upfront.

HANNAH

I lead better from behind.

GARRETT

Well you can't be behind in the planning. We only have a month left and there's still loose ends. I emailed you an hour ago about the permit-

HANNAH

-permit revision, I know. Pulled it all together at the last second before, we'll do it again.

GARRETT

Hannah, this isn't just some rinky-dink, 5K waddle-a-thon shit show for soccer moms. This is the biggest thing we've ever done. And a celebrity is coming here.

GARRETT

Semi-celebrity. Only runners know who the guy is.

GARRETT

Well I know and that's enough for me. And we don't want Haile to think all Americans are pale-faced, flabby, out-of-shape idiot losers.

HANNAH

Is that a comment about me?

GARRETT

I pulled a lot of strings to even get him here and I want to show that everyday American students can still keep up with-

HANNAH

Ethiopian men who run barefoot and cross-country, 20 miles a day since they were five. Sure, Garrett.

GARRETT

Well, you're not going to jog now, are you?

HANNAH

Just a quick one so this flabby, pale-faced American loser doesn't embarrass you.

GARRETT

Hannah, the park is temporarily closed until further notice. A female jogger was attacked a few days ago.

HANNAH

Garrett, I'll go along the main roads where there's light.

GARRETT

Ask Marcus to come with you.

HANNAH

No, it's too much of a bother.

GARRETT

It's too much of a bother to protect his girlfriend?

HANNAH

Garrett, there are hundreds of joggers in the park every day. What are the odds?

GARRETT

It doesn't matter what the odds are. All it takes is one time. You're still going to go?

HANNAH

(thinking and stretching)

...I'll...be careful. I have my mace with me.

GARRETT

Well if you see any big, scary thugs, keep running.

HANNAH

What do you mean by big scary thugs?

GARRETT

I'm just telling you the police description.

HANNAH

In the police description it said 'big, scary thugs?'

GARRETT

Well...no. But the guy is said to be at least 6'5 and 220. That's scary.

HANNAH

So would this person happen to be...

GARRETT

Hannah girl, do not even go there.

HANNAH

I'm just saying, what would you do if he was 6'5 220, white and in a suit?

GARRETT

Honey, I'd probably ask him out on a date.

HANNAH

That's a little...

GARRETT

That's a little honest. Besides, what's scary about him is that he's a rapist. I don't care about that other stuff.

HANNAH

It's just that you don't see Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer described as big, scary thugs.

GARRETT

Okay, Miss ACLU. Stop waving the Constitution for a second and get back to the issue here, which is your safety.

HANNAH

Wrong, the issue is that I have to run so that I can keep up with Haile. And you are wasting my time. Bye Garrett.

Hannah jogs away.

GARRETT

Hannah, don't go down any side paths.

SCENE TWO

Home. MARCUS is on the phone with a Speedo salesperson while performing some strange thigh exercise.

MARCUS

...yeah, if I ordered now how soon could I get them? This is sort of an emergency. Haile Gebrselassie is going to host a half-marathon for our runner's group. Who is Haile Gebrselassie, who is Haile Gebrselassie? Do you live in a cave? Oh, you're a hockey fan. Well. Haile is like the Wayne Gretsky of running. Yeah...I think he could beat Gretsky in a fight...well, not on ice. I'm not looking to get into an argument. Haile Gebrselassie is coming to our block to do a charity run and I gotta look sharp. I'm looking for the boxcut, lycra jammer speedo with the moonbeam splice on the side? What colors do you have for the moonbeam? Okay, do you have anything in the colors of the Ethiopian flag...I don't know, I think it's green and yellow...yeah, sort of like the Jamaican flag, but slightly different.

HANNAH comes running in, out of breath.

MARCUS

Honey, do you know the colors of the Ethiopian flag?

HANNAH

Turn on the local news.

MARCUS

Local news has the colors of the Ethiopian flag?

HANNAH

No. I just saw something.

MARCUS

(to phone) I'm sorry I'm going to have to call you back...listen I don't want to get into this...he so could kick Gretsky ass it's not even funny. He grew up on a farm in Ethiopia. Does that sound like a wimp? He had to run 20 miles a day to school.

MARCUS (cont'd)

Barefoot. Did your precious Gretsky do that? Wayne Gretsky did not ice skate to school.

HANNAH

Marcus, I just saw something in the park.

MARCUS

My girl is calling, I gotta go. Look, if you love Gretsky so much why don't you marry him! (hangs up phone) Baby, what's wrong?

Hannah turns on the TV and watches the screen for a moment but doesn't see what she's looking for.

HANNAH

There was a bunch of police cars and an ambulance in the park. Can I use your phone? I can't find mine.

MARCUS

Sure, but did something happen?

Marcus hands Hannah his phone. She searches online.

HANNAH

Garrett told me that there had been an attack of a jogger in the park. And there was a suspect out on the loose. I wanted to just check if there were any alerts.

MARCUS

And?

HANNAH

I can't find anything.

MARCUS

Maybe because there isn't anything going on.

HANNAH

Marcus, there was 10 police cars and an ambulance. The whole place was lit up with emergency lights and there was police tape around the area on the north side of the park.

MARCUS

Why are you freaking out about some cop cars and lights?

HANNAH

Garrett told me that a female jogger had been attacked in the park a few days ago.

MARCUS

Garrett told you about an attack and you go jogging by yourself?

HANNAH

I wanted to prove that I wasn't scared.

MARCUS

That's the dumbest thing I ever heard. If there's a guy out there in this neighborhood beating up people in the park, you should be scared. Fear is a great defense against getting your ass kicked. Why didn't you come home?

HANNAH

Garrett implied that it was a big scary black man and...I don't know. I wanted to prove a point.

MARCUS

Oh, I see. You wanted to prove a point, as in you are a color-blind, fair-minded liberal woman and you were willing to get beaten up to prove it. That's dumb.

HANNAH

I thought you'd understand.

MARCUS

Dumb.

HANNAH

Thanks for your sensitivity. And don't call me dumb.

MARCUS

Honey, if anybody put you in danger, I'd be upset. But when you put yourself in danger for no reason, it's hard for me not to be angry at you.

HANNAH

You sound like my Dad.

MARCUS

I just don't want to see anything bad happen to you. And I don't care who it is, your safety comes first and politics last. And besides, I want you to be nice and healthy so I can whoop your ass in front of Haile.

HANNAH

Oh, really?

MARCUS

Yeah. I'm on that morning warpath while you're hitting the snooze button. I'm doing 800 repeats at a 5K pace. And with negative splits. My nipples are like two slices of chewed pepperoni.

HANNAH

(laughs)

I love it when you try to gross me out.

MARCUS

I lost another toenail today. Badge of honor! And I still finished with my PB. I'm a miracle.

HANNAH

A miracle, huh? More like a maybe. As in maybe he'll make the final mile, maybe he won't. Maybe he'll get around to his donations or maybe he won't.

MARCUS

The donations!

HANNAH

You forgot again, didn't you?

MARCUS

I came home after the run and was trying to order some compression shorts for the big event. I'll just go out and get it right now.

HANNAH

Are you sure? I mean, it can wait.

MARCUS

Professor Riley sent me a text this afternoon about picking up his donation. He got a huge refund from his water and gas audit and he's giving it to the cause. Grab the cash and be back for some Seinfeld and carb loading.

HANNAH

Can't they paypal you the money?

MARCUS

I said I would stop by...why are you so worried? You think I'm gonna get attacked in the park?

HANNAH

No, it's just...

MARCUS

You're so precious. I'm your damsel in distress.

HANNAH

No, you're supposed to be tapering off. And I know you, Mark. You're going to use this trip to get a little extra jog in when you should be relaxing. I don't want you to hit the wall. Extracurricular exercise isn't good for your form.

MARCUS

That doesn't stop us at night.

HANNAH

I can't help it. It's the pheromones and hormones from all this training.

MARCUS

I am not complaining. Order some pizza and pasta from our spot.
I'll be right back.

Marcus kisses her playfully.
Hannah exits.

Lights shift to the street. MARCUS rings a bell on Professor Riley's front porch and texts him. He gets a reply text and opens the mailbox and grabs the envelope. He's walking back, but he can't control the urge any longer. He looks around and re-laces his shoes. He is about to jog when A BELL RINGS. Marcus looks around. Seeing no one, he starts to run when the VOICE OF BLACK REASON jumps out. He's bent over and shuffles.

BLACK REASON

Howdy Negro!

MARCUS

Crap!! You scared...where did you come from?

BLACK REASON

Brotha, I came from the great darkness.

MARCUS

Who are you?

BLACK REASON

You know me. I'm the Black Voice of Reason in your head.

MARCUS

Oh. I thought I kept Morgan Freeman back there.

BLACK REASON

I'm filling in for him. I think he's off playing a cook with magical powers.

MARCUS

I thought he already did that movie last year.

BLACK REASON

No, he was playing a garbage man who's an angel in that one. Anyway...I came because I have a very important message: Negro you are in trouble.

MARCUS

What do you mean?

BLACK REASON

The worst thing in the world has happened: a white woman has been hurt. And guess who the suspect is?

MARCUS

A black guy.

BLACK REASON

Bingo.

MARCUS

Listen...uh, Brother Reason, people know me in these parts.

BLACK REASON

What are you doing?

MARCUS

I'm just going to take a shortcut through the park. Maybe get a quick extra jog in. Gotta get ready for Haile.

BLACK REASON

The only thing you're getting ready for is an ass whooping if you think you can just go around jogging.

MARCUS

Look, I'm a third-year grad student. Been all over the city and campus. People know me around these parts. I probably don't look anything like this guy.

CAMPUS OFFICER

Hey, you!

MARCUS

...and this is all silly sensational pabulum served to...

CAMPUS OFFICER

Hey! I'm talking to you!

BLACK REASON

Damnit, I told yo' black ass!

MARCUS

Oh. Hey, what's going on?

CAMPUS OFFICER

(mocking him)

'Oh, Hey,' what are you doing?

MARCUS

Who are you?

CAMPUS OFFICER

Campus police.

MARCUS

Oh, wow. I've never seen you guys out from behind a desk. Nice, they even gave you guys badges and walkie talkies.

CAMPUS OFFICER

What are you doing around here?

MARCUS

I go to school here and live in this apartment complex.

CAMPUS OFFICER

Here?

MARCUS

Yes.

POLICE OFFICER

School ID?

MARCUS

I left my wallet inside.

CAMPUS OFFICER

Uh-huh.

BLACK REASON

You left your wallet inside? Negro, what were you thinking?

MARCUS

I was just in the park going for a run.

BLACK REASON

(jets off)

Well I'm not sticking around for an ass whooping. Peace!

MARCUS

I can go inside and grab my ID. I'm right here at 421.

CAMPUS OFFICER

I don't think so. Sir, empty your pockets.

Marcus takes out envelope and hands the items over. Officer waves the envelope around.

CAMPUS OFFICER

What is this?

MARCUS

It's money.

CAMPUS

You usually go jogging with an envelope of...over \$500.

MARCUS

It's \$524 and it's donated money for a marathon I'm running in at the end of the month. My professor gave me half of it and the other half came from donors.

CAMPUS OFFICER

And you are walking around at night in a dangerous park with cash for a marathon you're going to run in?

MARCUS

I have my registration on my email. I can show it to you.

CAMPUS OFFICER

I'm going to have to take this.

MARCUS

Excuse me?

CAMPUS OFFICER

I'm confiscating this property out of probable suspicion.

MARCUS

What suspicion? I just told you the purpose of the money, where it came from, and can show you proof of my registration in a marathon.

CAMPUS OFFICER

We can get that settled once we go to the station.

MARCUS

What station?

CAMPUS

You don't have ID so I'm gonna have to take you in, run your-

MARCUS

-You're not taking me anywhere. Who do you think you are? Who the fuck-

CAMPUS OFFICER

-I'm the guy with the badge. What we're trying to figure out is who you are.

MARCUS

Well I don't believe that is any of your business.

CAMPUS OFFICER

We can do this two ways.

JADA enters in with her phone in hand, recording the exchange.

MARCUS

I'm not going anywhere with you. So...what do we do now? Do you want to get on your Fisher Price radio and call for tricycle back-up or are you going to take me to Candyland jail?

CAMPUS OFFICER

You've got a big mouth.

MARCUS

Listen, I'm not some baggy pants, teenage ghetto-

JADA

-Officer, what seems to be the problem here?

CAMPUS OFFICER

Nothing, just move along.

JADA

Bill, is there something wrong?

MARCUS

Bill? Oh, yes...Hannah. This officer seems to think I don't go to school here.

JADA

That's ridiculous, of course he goes to school here. This is my fiancé

MARCUS

..umm...

CAMPUS OFFICER

Yeah right.

JADA

Sir, what's your badge number?

CAMPUS OFFICER

Are you threatening me?

JADA

No sir, it's just that when a campus police officer stops my fiance in front of our building unnecessarily and then has the nerve to insinuate that a Black couple couldn't go to a nice school, why I start to get curious as to who his manager is and where he received his orders from.

CAMPUS OFFICER

I'm just trying to be safe.

JADA

Funny because I don't feel very safe right now. Baby, could you open the front door to our building? (MARCUS opens the door.) There? Are you happy?

CAMPUS OFFICER

That's all you had to do.

JADA

Then why didn't you ask him?

Campus Officer walks away. JADA
stares at him.

MARCUS

You are good.

JADA

And you are quite welcome. I'm Jada.

MARCUS

I'm Marcus but I also go by Mark... Fuck!

JADA

That's quite a name.

MARCUS

No...I forgot to get the money back. I had some cash on me for a charity event. And he jacked me. Wait, you were taping us, right? Did you get that part?

JADA

No, I came in when he was saying 'we can do this two ways.'

Jada shows the video on her phone to him.

MARCUS

I can't believe he just stole my money like a fucking street hood. What the hell is going on?

JADA

Civil Forfeiture. That is what's going on. They've busting a lot of Black and Latinos on the streets the last few weeks because of a crime wave. Arresting people, taking their money, throwing them in jail and claiming they resisted arrest for just asking questions.

MARCUS

Then why are you out here? Aren't afraid of being arrested?

JADA

Me and a few others are in the parks at night, filming cop activity. Building a case for the city to get involved before things get out of hand.

MARCUS

Civil forfeiture. How come I haven't heard of this?

JADA

How would you when you're stuck behind those ivory walls? The cops are stepping up their patrols because someone got beat up in the park. But really it's just an excuse to harass us.

MARCUS

You live around here?

JADA

A few block up. And I'm guessing this is where you stay.

MARCUS

Why, of course. I thought me and you were engaged.

JADA

Don't tempt me, Bill.

MARCUS

I'll try not to, Hannah. So what are you, like some sista' angel that goes around rescuing Black men from the police?

JADA

I'm a criminal justice major at the community college who just happens to have an eye for racist cops and lost brothers.

MARCUS

What makes you think I'm lost?

JADA

Any Black man who goes to this Ivory tower university, and goes jogging without his wallet while a black suspect is on the loose is a little lost.

MARCUS

I can't jog with a wallet, it ruins the feel.

JADA

And jogging with handcuffs doesn't?

MARCUS

You got a point. I'm preparing for the Fire Run half-marathon for Wings and Soar.

JADA

So you're the charity that's stealing all the money from us po' folk in the community. Nice to meet one of you in person.

MARCUS

Who are you with?

JADA

Angel Heart. A grassroots collective that works with local kids-

MARCUS

-yes, at-risk youth.

JADA

We don't call them that.

MARCUS

Sure, sure. We know you guys. You do such great work.

JADA

On no money.

MARCUS

Well now I'm gonna see how that feel with this charity event.

JADA

Can't you borrow the money?

MARCUS

I shouldn't have to borrow to replace money that was stolen from me by someone carrying a badge. It's the principle.

JADA

A man with principles. I like that.

MARCUS

Forget liking, can you help?

JADA

Perhaps. I've always had a soft spot for the fly drowning in the buttermilk.

MARCUS

I'm going to ignore that little dig. Because you promised to help me.

JADA

Maybe we can help each other.

MARCUS

With what? I don't have any money.

JADA

You have something to share with others. Stop by and tutor some of the kids or talk to them. These kids live in that black ring outside the gates that your college seems to forget. We can't accept that.

MARCUS

I don't accept but-

JADA

The big corporate colleges in this country live in apartheid. They're billion dollar industrial complexes for the privileged and most of them are surrounded by the servants, janitors, and maid quarters of the city. And you're behind the gilded gates looking out on your people.

MARCUS

(done with her and this conversation)
Well I should be going. Thanks for your offer of help-

JADA

Whoa, whoa, look I'm sorry. Some times I get worked up.

MARCUS

Nothing wrong with that.

JADA

Apparently it is if I turn off the people I'm trying to reach.

MARCUS

And you're trying to reach me for...

JADA

For the community.

MARCUS

Is that all you're trying to reach out to me for?

JADA

...Angel Heart has an office at the community center...in the actual community that this city is comprised of and not this. Here is my low-budget, Vista print card. Hint hint. Come and see me. Fly outside the buttermilk.