

ABSTRACT

Lydia, Come Out!

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This thesis explores the stage of liberalism that America has reached and engages with the emptiness of continual freedom-seeking that comes at the expense of living a full life in community with God and others. The creative aspect of the piece follows a girl named Lydia through her first semester of college where she becomes involved in an activist movement while at the same time learning about Jesus. Through Lydia's journey, the reader learns the need to identify and prioritize what is truly important in one's life.

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LYDIA, COME OUT!

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the people who loved me from the time I was born until now. Of course, that would be God first, but that's also my parents and my two older brothers. I need to say a special thanks to my mom who deserves credit as an editor. We always joked you would edit the books I write, and here we are!

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CHAPTER ONE

Nikki

I knew her Move-In Day was a full day ahead of mine, but I was expecting boxes strewn around and half-decorated walls. Maybe some clothes stacked up on a chair and school supplies leveled around the room. My mind had created a scenario where I would accidentally knock into something to announce my presence and then I could say, “Oh, Hi!” and then we would talk about how we weren’t sure where everything should go, and then we would find stuff to laugh about.

There wasn’t even one cardboard moving box left.

Exactly half the room was completely done. It was almost as if she had drawn a line in Sharpie the way her black rug sliced exactly five feet into the middle of the ten-foot room. As if that wasn’t a divider enough, she had a gauzy curtain hanging underneath her bed. I guess it counted as an incredibly long bedskirt. I had to lift my head up to see the top of her bed. I wasn’t sure if it was even campus-legal to have your bed that high. I didn’t remember having an option for risers, but her bed was on the highest risers you could find. There was no way she could even sit upright in bed with how close to the ceiling it was. Tucked beneath the mattress and the bed frame was that gauzy curtain, completely hiding whatever was underneath her bed. What was weird about it, was that the curtain kept going in a straight line past the bed. Her bed wasn’t in the corner. There was a good foot or two between the head of the bed and the wall, but the curtain was command stripped to the wall, so I couldn’t see whatever was in that cubby area behind the bed.

Everything would have been vampire black if not for the white icicle lights hanging all around the perimeter of her bed, wrapping around the wall to the window that took up the middle wall furthest from me. Seriously, even the remaining wall that wasn't hidden by her bed or the curtain was covered in black fur wallpaper. She was living on the side of a macabre wolf.

The other half of the room, the whole right side, almost seemed more inviting with its bare walls and half-ripped mattress sitting askew on its bed frame. And the bed was a normal height. There was a 98% chance I could climb on it without inflicting bodily harm, either by falling to my death or impaling myself on a pulsing plastic icicle.

“You going to introduce yourself?” came a voice, I thought from behind me. I twisted around to look, but no one was there, so I started to walk back into the hallway to find out if I had just missed someone—I didn't want them to think I was rude.

“Where are you going?” the voice came back again. This time it was really coming from behind me, since my back was to the room.

I spun around, feeling my mouth go dry as my hands started to sweat, “Nikki?” I mentally barraged myself for letting my voice crack halfway through my roommate's name.

“Yeah, I'm Nikki,” the voice got clearer as a thin face, framed with jet-black, pixie-cut hair peeked out behind the gauzy curtain.

For a split second, I tried to figure out if her face was that white naturally or because of lack of sun exposure or because of several layers of stage makeup. Then I realized I missed my social cue by a beat, so I threw myself into talking, “Oh, yeah! Hey!

I didn't see you there! That's a pretty sick set-up you have going on there! Love the color scheme!"

"Your name?"

"Right! Lydia! Sorry about that. We're roommates. That's how come I knew your name. Because this is my room, and I figured if you were in this room, you were my roommate."

Nikki looked me up and down, "Are you one of those homeschooled kids or what?"

As a public-school kid, I guess I should have fired back that I wasn't homeschooled, but I didn't like how disgusted she sounded. Besides, I tutored a couple of homeschoolers a few years ago, and they were perfectly normal, mostly. Although really, I didn't respond immediately because I was too busy looking at my outfit trying to deduce where the homeschooler vibe was coming in. Blue jean shorts coupled with a floral blouse, fun tassels hanging down, a cute pair of brown sandals. I felt good about it. At least, I had a couple minutes ago.

"Lyddie! Found ya! Oh, and you must be Nikki! Lydia has been so excited to meet you! Oh wow, look at that, you already have your side of the room all made up! I hope we won't be too loud for you. We've got a few things to move around here, but, oh, that can wait. Nikki, while I get to have you here, you should tell me some more about yourself! Are your parents still around? We can all go—"

I'm not sure what else she had to say, but by the time she was planning our dual weddings, I was out of the dorm. I was thirty seconds into a relationship that was supposed to make-or-break my freshman year, and not only had I barely said my name, I

had acted like a complete social pariah. I could only hope my mother's bubbly entrance showed that I was redeemable somehow. Although, judging by the complete lack of pep in Nikki's tone, I doubted a bubbly mother was a glowing recommendation to her.

I looked up to figure out where my legs had taken me. Somehow, I had transported myself clear across the main quad. All of the dormitories on campus ring around a miniature park area called Hotman's Green. The girls' dorms ring around half of the rectangular area, and the boy's dorms complete the figure. While I couldn't quite remember how it all happened, my body had apparently decided to seek refuge in the park from all the bustling new freshmen moving in. I took a moment to congratulate the quick automatic thinking of my synapses.

There was tall shrubbery surrounding the entire area, so it felt like a secluded spot from the whole world. Someone had set up a tire swing on one of the trees in a way that you sat on top of the tire instead of inside of it. It was perfect. A slight breeze rocked it back and forth, and I could see myself a month from now reading a book on a random Saturday, taking a break from my room and from all my work, swinging back and forth on that tire swing. Looking at that swing, I figured this place really could be my home.

As I stared down the part of the chain furthest from me that was bolted into the tire, imagining the sound of birds in the early morning and the smell of some kind of aesthetic food, like croissants, I realized that there was something blue behind the tire. It wasn't flowers or the sky or anything that was supposed to be there. I tilted my head the smallest bit to the right, so the tire wasn't blocking my view of the base of the tree, and my body flashed with pinpricks while my face went red. What is actually wrong with me? Am I really that air-headed? I felt my face morph into a grimacing smile and my

hand twitch into a wave, and my feet went off for me and directed my body into a fast walk away.

That whole time I was zoned out looking at that swing, I bet that boy thought I was just ogling him or something. It's really his fault for sitting up against the tree like that *right* where I couldn't see him. I'm 0 for 2 now for meeting students.

The odds of me seeing that kid again were probably low any—

“HEY! Hey! Can you hear me?” I felt a quick tap on my shoulder. It was like he was trying to grab my shoulder and turn me around, but then decided against it the moment he touched me.

I couldn't help but jump and spin, and then stumble a solid foot backwards. He was supposed to stay under the tree while I escaped, but instead he managed to stop me before I had even made it to the shrubbery on the perimeter of the garden/park/whatever.

“So sorry! I didn't mean to spook you,” he was smiling really wide and kind of laughing a bit, “I guess I've freaked you out twice now. I'll try not to make it three times.”

Is this flirtation? Or is he being friendly? Or is he incredibly awkward? No, wait, I forgot—I'm the awkward one.

“No worries! I, uh, was just walking by—you didn't have to get up,” I stammered and waved my hands, hoping it would come off as politely dismissive, but knowing it looked aggressively confused.

As proof that he was invading my personal space at risk of life and limb, my waving hands knocked his right arm. Earlier he must've used his left hand to touch me,

because in his right was a water bottle. It dropped to the ground and a bit of water—no wait—red Gatorade, spurted out on impact.

I let out a curse and rubbed my eyes, upset with my spastic actions and my eyes for playing tricks on me, while he picked up his bottle.

Today was awful.

He stood up and started throwing the still fairly full bottle around, “Nice, I still have plenty in here; that’s so lucky! This was my friend’s attempt at making that powder Gatorade stuff, and I have to say it’s way better than what I made before that, so I’ve been drinking it nonstop. But, *anyway*,” he threw and caught the water bottle to emphasize the word, “I seriously didn’t mean to startle you, but I *did* have to get up. I called out to you, and you just kept walking, so I had to do something... I mean you looked like maybe you were lost, and if that’s the case, let me help you out! I remember I got lost when I was a freshman, too.”

Okay. So. Clearly, I look like a homeschooler *and* a freshman.

I need new clothes.

“Oh! Well that’s super nice and all, but I’m not lost. The campus is pretty small.”

He raised up his eyebrows, nodded his head, and made a popping noise with his mouth, “Yeah, you’re right—I’m just so directionally challenged, I feel like everyone else should be, too. Sorry to assume! I’ll let you get going! See ya!” He took a sidestep back, and then turned on his heels, heading back to the tire swing tree.

The whole situation felt really weird, and I felt like I had kicked a puppy or something, but I didn’t really know why. I hadn’t done anything wrong, and he didn’t

really look particularly wounded. Maybe a little pained about having to endure that conversation.

Maybe I should've giggled or something? Either way, that encounter made me feel like going back to Nikki's room wouldn't be that bad...

CHAPTER TWO

Maya

I fiddled with my name badge. The past couple of days have felt just like a summer camp. Everyone I saw at that point looked slightly familiar, but I wasn't sure if it was because I sat with them for food, or if I'd done one of those weird ice-breaker games with them, or if I'd just happened to have seen them around.

No matter the reason, I still didn't know anyone well enough to think that this was where I was supposed to be. Passing moments of 'belonging' did not count for anything. They were just precursors to prolonged periods of discomfort. I was supposed to be at home, with my parents, with Liam, with Phoebe. Those were the faces I knew the best, not these random ones sitting around me.

This was the last day of orientation, so we were all going into the final meetings before school started. We'd already done Title IX warnings, Alcohol chats, birds and the bees seminars, academic integrity lectures, and forced bonding activities. The past few minutes some lady had been droning on about reflecting well on our next session. I hadn't been listening well because I was still thinking about my parents leaving. They couldn't stay much longer, and the three days they did stay was already a stretch. Liam and Phoebe couldn't stay at their friends' houses forever, and my dad could only take so many days off from work. My mom probably could have stayed longer, especially since I'm sure this whole experience was great for her creative juices. Besides, with each day, there had been more and more meetings, so their staying around wouldn't really mean hanging out with me anyway. But...but it still felt wrong. They should be here. Or I

should be home. The one thing I knew, this whole thing was wrong. Whatever happened to family ideals? Why in the world did I go to school so far away? I don't even have a car to get home!

POP—someone messed with the microphone system to the disadvantage of all the operating ears in the auditorium hall. The woman on stage looked sheepish as all the glazed eyes focused back on her.

“Oh! It's definitely working,” her nervous chuckle made me want to hide; I couldn't imagine that happening to me, “Let's give a big round of applause to the professors!”

I felt my hands lazily slap together as I tried to remember what in the world the past hour of my life had consisted of. We had been sitting for so long staring at this panel of professors, that I had effectively tuned out.

“Alright, now, onto the next session! This will be the last one before school starts, so we gave all of you a choice of where to head to! Go wherever you feel you can learn the most. The various sessions are on the last page of your Orientation Guide. I look forward to seeing all your faces around campus!”

The lady walked offstage, and the professors sitting in the strange assortment of armchairs on stage started to talk amongst themselves. The students picked up the cue, and a loud buzz of voices rang around the room as students started to talk about which session they wanted to attend. Everyone around me was already talking with each other. The girl to my right was laughing with girls as if they'd known each other since forever, and the boy to my left was on the phone trying to direct one of his friends to his seat. I

sank down into my folding auditorium chair and glanced over the last page of the orientation pamphlet.

None of the sessions seemed all that interesting. I probably knew the least about the student organizations on campus, so that might be helpful, but if I had to sit through another “how to make friends” lecture I was going to switch schools, so that session was off the list.

Everyone else had someone to make this decision with, so I slid my phone out of my little drawstring bag I’ve been using since they gave it to me at the first orientation session. I texted a quick picture to Liam of the final sessions, asking what he found most interesting.

Some secret signal passed from student to student, and suddenly everyone was standing up and shuffling to the back exits to hunt down wherever Reed Academic Building was for the final session of their choice.

Do I go with them, or do I wait until I know where Liam wants me to go?

My moment of indecision coincided with a *ping* from my brother telling me to go to Room 425. Relief filled me as the need to make that decision faded away.

I got up and followed the crowd out of the auditorium doors and diagonally across the pedestrian road into Reed.

A mass of feet descended upon the stairs, but most of the crowd was gone by the fourth floor. I felt a little sweaty and decided to blame that fully on the stairs and not the thought in my head that I was in the wrong place, but then I heard a hub of voices. The fourth floor of the building had two massive rooms designed like an outdoor theater, but inside. The room to the right was buzzing with life. Everyone else had just gotten there

earlier somehow. I slid into the room, opening the door just enough for my body to slip in, but one of the drawstrings on my bag got caught on the door latch, so I had to stop and yank it out before I could get all the way into the room. I glanced up as I felt my body get covered in pinpricks. The whole room was staring at me.

Note to self, never, ever slide through a door again. Just walk in with confidence and stride in. I'm not a ninja. Anything I do to avoid drawing attention to myself will go horribly wrong. *Duly noted.*

I shuffled up the side stairs to go about three-quarters of the way to the top of the audience section where there was the first empty aisle seat. I still felt like everyone was tracking me as I moved through the room. Maybe it was just me, but I could have sworn the room was much louder before I walked in. Since the moment I looked up and saw all the eyes, I had glued my gaze to the shiny streak on my converses. Once I was seated and safe, I let my eyes look toward the front of the room, acting like I was going to find out who the professor leading this session was. It was a front so I could check how many eyes were on me. Not one pair of eyes were directed my way. The tension in my shoulders dropped, and my heartbeat finally started to slow down. Those stairs really got me, I guess. Really worked me up.

I jumped up a mile from my chair when I felt a hand nudge me. I swiveled my head to the right. There was a girl leaning over the empty seat between us. Half of her body was nearly in the seat next to me from how far over she was leaning, and it shocked me that I hadn't felt her moving in so close to me.

"My name's Maya," she whispered conspiratorially, as if trying to hide her name from the three dudes sitting behind us.

My mouth shot into a friendly smile.

“Whoa, you’ve got a pretty smile! Do you have a pretty name to go with it?”

“Uh, Lydia, thanks?”

“Uh, Lydia...you’re welcome,” she shot me a wink, and leaned in a little further which I didn’t know was physically possible, “So, tell me, Lydia, how’d you choose *this* orientation?”

She was staring at me right in the eyes, and I felt obligated to tell her step-by-step how I wound up sitting in this chair, starting from birth to the POP of the microphone in the auditorium room we came from, but before I could enlighten her, a voice from the front started speaking, and Maya winked (again) and retracted into her seat.

“Ladies and gentleman! You can call me Dr. Gladstone. So glad to see each and every single one of you! Not to mention that so many of you decided to choose this orientation, which, and you didn’t hear this from me, is the best one we have.”

So much energy was emanating from the woman talking that I felt like I was supposed to participate somehow. I’m not sure what that would have looked like, but a few other students in the seats took the lead and shouted random stuff like “yeah it is!” and “can’t wait!”

“Alright then, let’s get to it! I just want to take these first couple of minutes to fully appreciate the diversity we have on campus,” she clicked on a PowerPoint. The room quieted down instantly, and I looked around to see what had caused the energy shift.

“Exactly,” said Dr. Gladstone. I glanced back at her and the PowerPoint that showed a pie chart. It was about 75% filled blue with the last quarter divided into

different color blocks, the biggest one being red, then yellow, and then it was hard to quite tell the rest of the colors.

“Now, you think that I was being facetious when I said it was time to appreciate the diversity we have here at Encounter, but I truly was not. This pie chart I’m showing now demonstrates incredible growth on the part of our college and represents the current makeup of the entire student body. If we were to look at just your class alone, that pie chart would be even more promising! And if we were to look at that pie chart in comparison to *this* one,” she clicked to the next slide, “then we would all see how much progress we have made!”

The room broke into a few nods of approval and maybe a “yeah” or “whoa” here and there. The new pie chart was 95% blue.

Dr. Gladstone continued, “As you can see, Encounter has truly made strong steps toward its goal of diversity on campus. This pie chart shows the breakdown of students at Encounter only five years ago. While it is heartbreaking to see where we used to be, it is *beyond* encouraging to see the distance that we have come. And we all hope to take even stronger steps toward diversity with and within each year.”

The session reminded me a bit of a college recruitment session. I already decided to attend here, so I wasn’t sure why I was being hit with diversity stats. But it was crazy to think that 95% of campus used to all be the same race, especially since looking around the room...

That was when I realized that I was legitimately the only white person in the room.

There was no problem with being the only one, but it was just strange. I was never one who really thought too terribly much about diversity or race, at least not outside of, say, voter demographics. Around election times, my parents and I would monitor which demographics were voting for which candidates. But that was the only time that I thought about someone's race, and it was even less often that I thought about my own race. But, in that moment, I was really feeling the white. I felt like maybe I was in the wrong place. How was it that there was no one else in the room who looked like me? I mean, the pie chart earlier said that Encounter was 65% white, so statistically...what was going on?

Dr. Gladstone was still talking, and I was becoming concerned about my attention span, because I managed to have missed that we had moved on to a whole new slide.

“—believe in you! You *belong* here, and we are here to celebrate with you all of your successes and confront with you all the hardships here. It can be difficult to stand up and be yourselves in a world that has tried to stop that, but I stand before you today, saying you are loved, you are special, and you are wanted here. You are entering a community that loves you just the way you are, and a community that needs you here so that we can all grow and learn *from* you and *with* you. Many of us have been told that we aren't enough and that we aren't needed and that we don't belong. But those are lies, and everyone sitting here, right here at Encounter U, is a living example of the truth. We belong.”

It was startling how good it felt for someone to say that I belonged. It made me feel better sitting there in those seats. But I wasn't sure what everyone else was thinking about, because looking to my right, that Maya girl was smiling wide, with tears in her

eyes. My moment of feeling good morphed into feeling out of place again. The atmosphere was intense in a way that I didn't understand.

After a pregnant pause, students started clapping and hollering, making me jump a little and panic-clap.

“Alright, now, sitting here knowing that we belong here, while knowing that we will face obstacles that will try to make us feel like maybe we don't, I want all of you to pair and share. Talk about what you're worried about, and we'll come back together before I send you out.”

Dr. Gladstone walked off to her right and started speaking with a student who was sitting a bit apart from the rest of the crowd. The hesitant beginnings of about thirty conversations started to hum around me, and Maya spoke through the noise to me, “Lydia! Looks like me and you are pairin' and sharin'. You wanna go first or me?”

“You!” came out of my mouth.

“Alright! Let's dig right in then. Hm, I'm just worried that I won't be able to find a community that appreciates me for me, you know? I've grown up with my same girlfriends since forever, but now we're all spread out over everywhere, and I'm not sure how people here will see me. But, also, I know I'll be fine. I love people, and if I'm doing it right, people love me!”

I liked the way she said community. It felt like she was looking for a home in people, and that there was a home walking around her just waiting to be found.

“So, Lydia, tell me. You nervous about anything?”

Yes, I'm nervous about everything.

“Oh, not really. I mean uhm I just think that it will be okay. We’re here to go to school, and I like school, so it’ll be okay.”

Maya nodded her head like I had said something profound, letting out a low hum as she said, “That’s bull.”

I think I swallowed my tongue. Whatever happened, my whole face went red, and if I had tried to speak, it would have been a sputter if not some kind of squeaking.

“Come on; tell me what you’re actually worried about—none of this ‘it’ll be okay’ garbage.”

It was hard to tell if my feelings were more hurt for being called out in general or for how high her voice went when she mimicked me saying ‘it’ll be okay.’

My eyes were hot with tears because I was so uncomfortable, so I tried to solve the problem by being honest, and the words came out at five times the average speed a normal ear can hear, “I’m worried I’ll be alone and that no one will want to be my friend because I’m boring and the only people who like me are my parents and my siblings and I wish freshman were allowed to take more than 15 hours because then I would have something to do besides probably just be alone and I—”

“Whoa whoa whoa,” Maya cut me off, and I sat there breathing like I had just sprinted a mile while tears streamed down my face. I was crying mainly because I was crying. I was embarrassed when the first tears went out, and then they wouldn’t stop because I was so embarrassed.

“Lydia, I like you. Me and you, we’re gonna be friends, alright?”

“You’re just saying that cuz I’m crying!”

“I mean partially, yeah.”

And suddenly I was laughing.

“Okay, let’s be friends,” I said as I started wiping tears off my face.

Maya smiled, “Bet. Now, you need to answer my question from earlier. How’d you go about choosing this session?”

I was so relieved that we weren’t talking about me crying that I happily explained how my little brother directed me here, and then Maya was laughing.

“I think I like this Liam kid. Do you know the name of this session, Lydia?”

“Uh, no?”

“It’s called Power in Numbers: A Gathering before a Dispersing. It’s basically a meet and greet for minority students. Check your pamphlet.”

Grabbing the pamphlet from my handy drawstring bag, I rustled over to the list of sessions. There was Room 425, Power in Numbers. Underneath every session was a quick blurb to explain what was happening in the session. The blurb for this one was:

Welcome to Encounter! If you are a student of color, and you would like to gather to talk about coming to Encounter while hearing from our esteemed Dr. Gladstone (the first woman of color to receive Full Professor status at Encounter!), we invite you into this space!

“Oh no, I’m not supposed to be here! Maya, I’m so sorry!”

Maya started to cackle, “What are you apologizing to me for? This is hilarious. Although I guess sorry for assuming you were white; that would’ve been rough if you *did* identify as a person of color.”

Luckily, Dr. Gladstone called the session back together, because I truly did not have anything to say to that.

CHAPTER THREE

Creed

It was about three weeks into classes. It was the first weekend that wasn't filled with freshman activities to help us meet people. So, naturally, people were grouping up and figuring out things to do. Most of the freshmen were actually hibernating in order to prepare for the night. 12:30pm was too early to get going when the night was going to last into the next day.

For me, I was letting Maya do her own thing. She tried her best to stick me in a tight dress and introduce me to the town like an edgy debutante. But, when she realized that I would probably ruin all of her fun, she dismissed me, letting me go to bed early. That mercy left me the chance to wake up at 7am, power through most of my homework, and claim the tire swing I had been dreaming of using since I first saw it.

Jane Eyre and I have been friends since middle school, and it was time to dig back in. I'm not sure what interested me about the book, especially when nowadays I tend to like reading more "childish" books like *Harry Potter*. Magic is cool, and it's those kinds of books that let me feel like there is Specialness out there. Jane doesn't really show that specialness at all, except maybe a specialness of character at the end, I don't know. Sitting on that swing, I think I was comforting myself that some fictional character like Jane Eyre, who honestly is overall boring, could still have a wonderful book written about her. That's like me. I'm not like Maya or like all the other people I met here. I'm not special.

“It’s you!” a male voice cut across the imaginary voice of Mr. Rochester that was playing in my head.

I glanced up to see who the guy was talking to and why anyone had to talk so close to the girl trying to *read*.

There was no one around, except the guy who spoke, charting a direct course toward me. He was already within the four-foot range, which, as I learned in my intro to communications class the other day, is about two feet out from officially being in my personal space.

There was a whole tree at my back, so it was unlikely someone had crawled up to sit behind me, but I turned my head anyway to check if there was someone there. The guy started chuckling and stopped moving forward. The nervous laughter triggered a memory. It was The Guy. From several weeks back when I first saw the tire swing.

“OH, it’s *you*,” my tone came out more accusatory than anything which confused both parties involved, so I tried to fix it, “Like I mean uh it’s you; you’re the dude from a couple weeks ago.”

He shot me the huge smile he had wielded last time we met, and I formally decided that I liked it.

He responded, saying, “Yeah! That was me! I’m still sorry for how awkward all of that was. I hadn’t spoken to anyone that day, and I was super in my head. I’ll have to remember that everyone walking through a park isn’t lost.”

If we were texting, I felt strongly that there would have been a wink thrown in at the end of that.

“Right,” I wasn’t sure if there was much more to say.

I also wasn't sure where to look so I just looked down.

“Hey, if we keep running into each other like this, then we should know each other's names! My name's Creed; what's yours?”

“Lydia.”

Creed shuffled his feet a bit, “Well it looks like we both were hoping to get some reading done today, huh? What are you reading?”

He bent his body sideways trying to look at the cover of my book, so I lifted it off of my lap so he could see it better.

“Ah, I see, Jane Eyre. My mom made me watch that movie. Not too bad really.”

“I've never seen it.”

I could see he was trying to think of what to say next, but I already had a question ready. After he had said that we were both reading, I had actually looked at something that wasn't my shoes or his face. He was wearing a kind of baggy, black shirt that had a white G and a bunch of almost finished white triangles on it, paired with gray shorts and all-white high tops. He didn't have anything else with him except a brown book in his right hand and a number two pencil he had been twirling around in his left. What I was focused on was the book.

“What are you reading?” I asked before he had to brainstorm too long on a response.

He turned the book toward me in a mimic of how I'd shown him my book instead of answering.

My eyebrows shot up, and I heard myself say, “Oh? The Bible? That's cool.”

“Yeah!” He started to flick his pencil against his leg, “Do you read the Bible or like have read any of it before?”

“No. I don’t really do the whole church thing.”

“Trust me neither did I for a bit there, but then I missed Jesus a lot, so I got back in the Word and started going to church again!”

I couldn’t help but glance back at my book and at him. Why was this happening right now? And what did this guy want from me?

“Uhm that’s really cool.”

I felt like it was the best move to say only a little. I didn’t want to offend this guy, but the Bible/church/Christianity thing had always been weird to me. Like...since when was it normal to just believe what someone says and not expect any proof that it’s real? This guy was really going to just believe something? Why? Because some book says to, or his parents say to? I bet he hasn’t *seen* Jesus or *seen* something like an actual healing. I mean, what do you even say to people who pray for healings that never happen. I knew my parents’ friends prayed for their kid to fight against leukemia and live, asking God to come down before their kid died and heal him. It never happened.

“Yeah! Well, anyway, I see you’re trying to read. Thanks for letting me know your name, Lydia! I’ll make sure to remember it for the next time we bump into each other.”

“We’re gonna bump into each other again?” I couldn’t help but ask because he sounded so confident.

“For sure! Small campus, remember?”

He shot me a smirk and started to walk away while I was trying to figure out what he was referring to.

It hit me, and I started to laugh. It was the kind of laughter I had at home sometimes, and I felt that homesickness that had hovered over me all month start to lift. He was making fun of what I had told him last time when he thought I was lost. I could hear him laughing at me as he walked away. Something about it made me want to call him back. But I had a book to read, so.... I let him go, but I held onto my smile for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kota

A grape smacked me in the face. My whole body jerked up, and I started sputtering.

“Lydia, I swear, you’re gonna make him hate me by association.”

“Huh? What? Who?” My brain was short-circuiting, and I didn’t know where I was.

“If you’re over here sleeping while I’m trying to make him our friend, he’s gonna think you’re rude or, worse, that I’m boring, and I think this kid could really work well with us. Round us out.”

I was starting to come back to my senses. The drone of voices surrounding me coupled with the mild moldy smell of aging pizza cheese reminded me that I was in the middle of the dining hall. My mouth felt stale, and I wondered how long I had slept on my hand, because my whole arm was tingly.

“Sorry, Maya...”

“No, I get it. I *know* I’m not boring, so it’s clearly a you-problem, but we don’t need Kota to know that yet.”

I checked my phone and deduced I had knocked out for about ten minutes. About thirty minutes ago, Maya had informed me that she had just gotten confirmation that this kid Kota was going to come and eat with us when he got out of class. Looking at the time, we had about two minutes before he was supposed to show up.

“Maya, I said I was sorry! I’m just...tired. But I’ll liven up, promise!”

“‘Liven up,’ that is the most *boring* way of saying that, try again.”

A sigh from the bottom of my soul came out, “I’ll spunk up?”

“Perfect! But, seriously, girl, you fell asleep for a *hot* minute. I let you sleep cuz I was hoping it’d help spice you up, but what have you been doing? You staying up late or what? If so, then next weekend, no excuses, you and me and the Fijis.”

“I’ve just not been sleeping well is all,” I shrugged it off.

I didn’t really see the point in telling her what’s been going down with Nikki. She’d just start dragging her through the mud, and after last night, I’m not sure if I want to insult Nikki or help her or what.

The past couple of weeks, Nikki’s been coming in at ungodly hours, waking up around five in the morning multiple times. Luckily, I’m someone who can fall back to sleep fairly quickly, so I let it pass.

Last night, I was excited to have a night of uninterrupted sleep because by midnight, Nikki was actually in bed. But, a couple hours after falling asleep, I woke up to full on bloody murder screams. It was terrifying. I shot out of bed and looked over at Nikki. She was scrunched up in the corner of her bed. I could see tears and snot glistening on her face in the dim lighting of her weird icicle things. But, more importantly, I felt like I could hear the sound of her throat tearing as shriek after shriek came out. I’m sure it had to have woken up other girls in the building. Especially when she started yelling, “No! Stop!”

I stood on my bed and tried to yell (soothingly), “Nikki! Nikki! It’s me! Lydia! It’s okay! Nikki! Nikki! Can you hear me? Are you okay? Nikki!”

She just kept screaming. Her eyes were open and staring straight through me.

I grabbed my phone and started googling to try and decide what to do, but Google was basically telling me to do nothing.

It went on for about three minutes, and then her voice gave out, but I could see her breathing heavily and trying to scream, and then suddenly everything stopped. After a couple minutes of legitimate horror movie B-roll, she was ‘normal Nikki’ asleep.

No one had ever just looked like pure fear the way she did. I lay awake wondering what she could have possibly been seeing.

In the morning, I asked her if she was alright. I knew that was breaking our tacit agreement of complete silence in the room, but I felt like it was necessary. She hoarsely responded by telling me to F-off. So. I figured none of that was going to be helpful to tell Maya.

“Lydia, tell it to me straight, it was Nikki *again*, right? I’m gonna really mess that girl up cuz she needs to be learnt–Kota!!! Hey! KOTA!”

Halfway through her sentence she spotted Kota and was waving him down in a classic Maya way.

I gave myself a mental pep talk so that I could help Maya look cool, repeating *you are fun, you are fun, you are fun* in my head.

Kota came bouncing up, “Maya! Hey! Thanks for letting me join in with you guys!”

“Of course! Now, Kota, this is Lydia, my friend I was telling you about! Y’all are gonna get along; I already know it.”

“Alright, that’s good to know. Hey, Lydia, excited to get along with ya!”

From the second he walked in to the last second we saw him that day, he was grinning from ear to ear, often accompanied with some sporadic laughter. Maya barely had to breathe, and suddenly Kota was laughing. He even laughed when I would try and make a joke, the kind Maya usually rolled her eyes at. It was nice. So, Maya was right. Again. She does that a lot; the whole being right thing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Travis Riley

“I CANNOT. I JUST CAN *NOT*. I CAN’T...THERE AREN’T EVEN WORDS; I CAN *NOT* WITH YOU.”

Maya was *upset*, and not in her usual “I’m upsetti spaghetti” way, where she isn’t actually upset but still acts like it because it’s fun. She was saying the same exact things she would say if she truly was not upset, but the tone was scary. It wasn’t exactly a screaming tone, but it was a tone that I was hearing in all capitals because it was so emphatically angry.

She suddenly chucked her phone against her fluffy pink comforter. Most things sink in that much fluff, but Maya had thrown it so vehemently, that the phone actually bounced back. And smacked her in the face.

I couldn’t help but laugh, and that was a severe mistake.

“OW, *ow*, Lydia, *ow*, OW, oh you,” and then she went off. I didn’t know Lydia Parker could have so many creative nicknames, but, luckily, she started to joke around by the end of it.

When she’d gotten everything out of her system, I got to ask, “So, what were you looking at on your phone earlier? Before you, you know, threw it?”

I had walked up to her room a while ago (she lives on the fourth floor, while I live on the second). She usually leaves her door cracked so I can come in and out whenever. Unlike me, she doesn’t have a roommate, so that was acceptable. She was in possession of what

she lovingly calls a “dingle,” a double room with only a single person living in it because the other roommate never showed up.

When I first got to the door, she was already mumbling to herself angrily, and then after I walked into the room, she just kept on getting angrier.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

“....but don’t remind you of what? I can’t not remind you of something if I don’t know what that something is....”

“You’re annoying. It’s just that guy coming to campus is really tweaking me.”

“Which guy?”

“The lunatic that Encounter decided was good to speak to us.”

“When? Who?”

“Seriously, Lydia. This is ridiculous. Please follow Encounter or even just one of my orgs, or even just me. Actually, yeah, let’s start there. Follow me; do it now.”

“But who is he?”

“I hate when you just ignore me, ugh. Fine, it’s that guy. Travis Riley.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is, Maya?”

“Yes.”

We sat in silence looking at each other.

“So, who is he?”

“Google is a wonderful thing, Lydia.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, grabbing my phone from my back pocket at the same time.

Maya started laughing either at me or at her phone, while I typed *Travis Riley* into Google.

News articles were the first thing to pop up. It looked like he went to several colleges to speak because there were some Ivy league names and even some community college names listed in the different link titles.

“Okay, so he’s a popular guy. Why?”

“Girl, can you google just a lil better? He’s not popular; he’s bad famous.”

“Like infamous?” I helpfully supplied.

“Whatever.”

I looked back at the titles of the news articles and realized that I was incredibly unobservant. Each one followed a similar pattern of:

[insert name of school] students protest [insert intense description of Travis Riley]

“Whoa what did he do wrong? And if everyone hates this guy so much, why are they inviting him to speak?”

“Right?!”

“No, I mean, there has to be a reason. Someone wants to hear him, right?”

“Only racists and bigots.”

“Ah...so what does he usually talk about?”

“It doesn’t matter what he talks about; this guy has done and said awful things. I can’t believe you haven’t heard of him. He’s blown up online cuz of how awful he is.”

At home, my parents had been disappointed at all the riots that were happening at schools whenever people would come to speak. They had appreciated Encounter because nothing like that had really happened here. Now, I was worried about my weekly Friday

call with them where they would inevitably bring it up and talk above my head like usual. I was grateful Maya had mentioned it because, otherwise, I would not have been prepared for that.

“Maya, you think he’s actually going to speak?”

“Are you joking? I refuse to stand still when my school is trying to support racism. If no one else is gonna be out there saying something, we will be!”

The word “we” echoed in my head for a second, and then it echoed out loud when I asked, “We?”

“Well, yeah, I can’t just go alone, right? Besides, it’s the right thing to do, you know that.”

“Right.”

I hadn’t really thought about what the right thing to do was, because I still wasn’t sure who this Travis Riley guy was.

I opened my mouth to ask some more questions, but Maya was dialing a number on her phone.

“KOTA! Did you see? Yes, exactly. Right? Yeah. Kota, so you’re down, right? Protest, signs, let’s do it all!”

After two minutes of quick conversation where I could only hear Maya’s side, she hung up and turned to me with a big smile, “Lydia, this is going to be a thing. And we’re gonna have our voices heard.”

“Okay, yeah.”

“You don’t sound all that excited.”

I hesitated, “Well, I don’t think I really get the whole Travis Riley thing.”

Maya rolled her eyes, “Alright let me lay it out for you. He’s part of this major lobbying firm, and he hosts a radio show. He’s always the one out front saying crazy things, and only the complete whack jobs on the Hill listen to anything he says. And, of course, some resident lunatics across the country. He *so* supports the idea that black people are dumber cuz of genetics, and he basically wants to go back to segregation days where you and me would have to go to separate schools. Could you imagine that?”

“Whoa, really? And people still let him speak?”

“Oh, Lydia, you just don’t even know the wild number of people who are racist and just can’t help themselves. You didn’t grow up with much diversity, did you?”

I could feel my face turning red, “No, I guess I grew up mainly with a bunch of white kids.”

“Yeah, so you never really saw white people interacting with everyone else. I mean, not you, of course. I’m not saying every white person is bad or anything like that, that’d be kinda racist, but if you just pay attention, you’ll see it. You and me? We’re treated differently.”

I tried thinking back to us being treated differently. We go to a few of the same classes, we do the same things, we talk with the same people. The only time I remembered feeling different from her was during that one orientation at the beginning of the year...

“Do you mean here at Encounter? Or in general?”

“Both, obviously. Everyone knows that in general persons of color are treated differently, but yeah, it happens at Encounter, too. Have you not noticed it?”

My mouth was getting drier and drier the longer this conversation went. I felt like a terrible friend. Were people treating Maya differently and hurting her feelings, while I just stood by?

In response to her question, I started to shake my head no.

“Lydia, lighten up. I get it. You don’t have to be on the lookout for this kind of stuff cuz it doesn’t affect you. My teacher in middle school explained it to me once like this. If you don’t have a nut allergy, then you don’t notice how many things have nuts in it. If you’re not a person of color, then you don’t notice how many people have racism in their hearts. It’s wild, but it makes sense.”

“But, Maya, I just...how did I not know? I can’t think of anything at all, except maybe the orientation...? What all have I missed? I’m so sorry; I’ll be a better friend.”

“The orientation? What? The one from the beginning of the year with Dr. Gladstone?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“That was awesome, no, yeah, it was separate from everyone else, if that’s the kinda thing you’re thinking about. I’m not talking about *that* kind of thing. I’m talking about the way people act all different around me than they do around you. Ya know, like the Look.”

“Look at what?”

“No. Lydia, I love ya, but you’re *thick* in the head. Capital L, the Look. The one where people size you up like you’re about to do something.”

“People do that to you?”

“C’mon, Lyd. Remember when me, you, and Kota went down to the Korner Kage to grab icees? The minute we walked in, they were tracking me.”

She was talking about the convenience store trip we had taken about a week ago. Maya had been on a mission to get an icee and had barreled into the place while Kota and I lagged behind.

“Oh? I didn’t notice. I didn’t really look at the woman behind the counter.”

“Yeah, that’s because you don’t have to. You have that privilege.”

I was getting kind of uncomfortable, and I could feel my ears burning, and I was getting a little sweaty, which was gross. I felt like I was doing something wrong, but I wasn’t sure why. Maybe I was still thrown that Maya had been treated differently without my noticing it, or maybe it was about the whole privilege thing. I mean, yeah, I felt incredibly privileged in a lot of ways. My parents and siblings are amazing, and I live a nice life. But what did she mean I had the privilege to....? To what exactly?

“Uh...right. Uhm...? I guess, yeah.”

“Whereas for me, I can’t just walk in anywhere and feel comfortable like you can.”

I felt pretty uncomfortable everywhere, but it was kind of nice hearing that “Maya the Confident” did not always feel comfortable, so I nodded my head.

Maya kept going, “So, like, at the Kage, I had to be on high alert. Just like if I get pulled over driving, I have to be on high alert. But, you don’t.”

“What?”

“Lydia, oh my gosh. See, this is why you’ve got to take some of the classes I’ve been taking so you can learn about this stuff. Actually, I’m surprised Encounter doesn’t

require them. Most colleges who know what's up already have some race and gender studies requirements.”

Oh, I knew about race and gender studies courses. My parents had been telling me to steer clear of them for the last couple of years. They told me that it's a way to make people feel bad about themselves. But Maya has been raving about them all semester. She usually talks about the gender stuff with me, and it sounds like they have been focusing more on that so far. Maya thinks it's because there are more males in the class than usual, but I didn't really see why curriculum should change depending on who was in the classroom.

“Alright, Lydia, listen. From now on, when I see something funky where people are treating me different, I'll point it out to you. It'll be like our own program of race studies. This'll be fun! Be ready, though, I'd bet a lot of things I won't even realize until later. That's how it's happened in a lot of the talks we've had with Dr. Piken when we spoke about gender. Like, remember how I was telling you about how all the boys sat in the back of the class, and that was a part of their ingrained seeking out of power. Cuz the seat in a room where you can see everyone and all the exits has the most power, so the front looking out is the most powerful, but that's for the prof, so the boys naturally went to the back and claimed that. I didn't even realize that the boys were all back there until we got to that section in class.”

“Right, yes, I remember you telling me about that.”

“Right, so I'll make sure to keep you on the up and up with that, and I'll try to catch everything, so you can see it, too! Dr. Piken says that the best way to reach equality is for everyone to see the world the same, so this'll be the first step to that! Me and you

will see the same stuff from now on. But, for now, we've gotta organize. I'll text in my groupme for Dr. Piken's class and see who all wants to help. Kota's texting his multicultural affairs gm, so we're all set. I mean, unless...do you have anyone you could reach out to? You know, to help?"

"Uh..."

"Nah, probably not. It's okay. Not everyone's willing to help out with a cause that doesn't affect them as much like you are. I really appreciate ya; you're so ready to listen and learn. More people should be like you! That'd be one way to shut down all the Travis Rileys out there."

Maya had a way of making me feel like I really did something even when I did literally nothing. She made me feel confident by proxy all the time, and I had never had a friend like her.

So, the next couple of weeks, whenever we had free time, Maya, Kota, and I all worked on making flyers and cardboard signs. Luckily, Maya and Kota's friends were gung-ho about putting the flyers up, so we emailed those away to them, and they posted the flyers all around campus. It was kind of neat walking from class to class and seeing flyers that I watched get made have people pointing at them.

Everyone who wanted to come to the actual protest agreed to make their own signs, and the three of us made our own along with several extra. Maya said that, once, she and her mom had joined in on a civil rights march, and it had been super easy to join because the campaign had made extra signs to just hand out to people who looked interested. She said we could do that same thing, so that's what we did.

CHAPTER SIX

Pressure

“Lydia, you can do this. Use those chicken noodle arms for a higher purpose.”

“Kota, I am terrified, and I don’t want to do this.”

There was a long pause as I hung about three centimeters off the ground, one foot on the lowest possible rock on the rock wall, one foot kicking in the air, and both of my hands hanging on for dear life on a rock about eye level.

“Kota, say something more encouraging than chicken noodle arms.”

“Tomato soup arms?”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Yeah, you’re right. You’ve got more of a tomato soup face going on right now.”

I gave up and slammed as hard as I could back onto the ground. It was pointless because I was basically on the ground already, and the mat beneath me was squishy.

“Lydia, seriously. This is pathetic.”

“I’m sorry I can’t just spider monkey up the freaking wall.”

“Ooo, Lydia Angry.”

I inhaled and thought maybe I could just hold my breath until I passed out.

We were all stressed because the protest was happening tomorrow, and Kota had said that it was *actually* because I didn’t work out enough. He said that I carried too much stress in my shoulders, and then basically gave a rundown of my physical insufficiencies. His solution was the rock wall, which Maya immediately summoned other plans to get out of.

Seeing as I only had two friends on campus, it was either make up somebody else to have plans with or go to the stupid rock wall.

I chose the rock wall, and now I wish I had just made somebody up. Or...that Creed kid popped into my head. Sometimes I wondered about him, and maybe if I had said I was meeting someone on the Green, Creed would've shown up, and I could have found out more about him, rather than being insulted at the rock wall.

“Kota, just climb the wall, alright?”

“Bet!”

Kota hurdled up the rock wall, going way faster than the automatic belayer. Kota's whole family was super sporty. They all rode on dirt bikes, went hiking, and apparently climbed rock walls. My family was more into chess.

“How fast?!?!” Kota yelled at me from the top.

“Was I supposed to be timing that?”

“What?! Yes! Lydia!”

“It was about as fast as it would have taken me to get out my phone to time it. You can time me doing that, and you'll have the time it would have taken.”

“What? I can't hear you?”

“I don't know!”

I could hear his exasperated sigh from the ground.

He kicked off the wall and landed next to me, sinking into criss cross apple sauce while still on belay.

“Lydia, try again!”

“No.”

“Lydia...”

“Kota...”

“You need to have more fun, Lydia. Just a little more fun.”

I rolled my eyes and started stripping off my harness.

Kota pouted at me. I started putting back on my harness. He smiled like a kid in a candy store.

“Alright, we’re gonna try this again, Lydia. It’ll be good! Just be less meh and more YEAH, alright?”

“You need to learn how to speak in normal English.”

“Watch it, Lyd,” and then he went off speaking in Japanese.

Kota grew up speaking Japanese and English at home, which I find incredible. I always wished I could speak another language, but I never took the time to actually try to learn. Even in high school where language was a requirement, I managed to slip into the class that ended up having only one year of required language. So, I took French and learned nothing.

“Okay, okay, okay, just tell me what to do in a way I understand.”

I liked hanging out with Kota because everything felt lighter. Sometimes, he would say things that would hurt my feelings, but if I just laughed at it, it didn’t hurt for long, and soon we would both be laughing again, and I would forget that what he said had cut a little.

“Alright. We will go slowly. So slow that *even you* will get it.”

By the end of it all, I made it halfway up the wall, cried only a little, and was rewarded with an ice cream sandwich from the concessions bar in the corner of our student union building.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Anaphylaxis

I didn't think everybody would be so angry. I thought it was going to be more of a...well I guess I'm not sure. In my head I was picturing a kind of MLK Jr. approach, where we're all stoically taking abuse. But it felt more like we were the aggressors. At least, just a bit. Although, I've always been a little quiet, so I figured that was just me overreacting again.

Suddenly there was hot breath in my ear, and I freaked out. It happened every five minutes or so since there was a thick crowd of students standing around me in front of the auditorium hall. We were all shoved up together even though there was plenty of room to spread out if we were to just step off of the stairs. Maya said that it was crucial that we looked like a united front and that we blocked the whole stairway. She said it was about optics, but I was confused why we were just blocking one entrance. If we wanted to make sure this Travis guy wasn't going to speak, then we should be spread out everywhere. As it was, there were about four other entrances that Travis Riley could use to walk in. Somehow, I was pushed into the very middle, so there was a body touching me on all sides, and it was *hot*. I could feel sweat in places I didn't know I could sweat, like my wrists and shins. I clutched my sign reading "Stop the Dissemination of Racism" like it was a lifeline, but it kept slipping a bit, making cardboard dig damply into my hands. Stupid sign.

I had argued a bit with Maya over it. She wanted me to have something more like her sign, which said “If You Aren’t Anti-Racist; You’re Complicit.” But I didn’t think that was specific enough to what we were protesting.

I’m more of a one-step-at-a-time kind of person, so it made sense to just start with Travis. Maya’s more of an all-or-nothing-immediately kind of person, so she was trying to target the bystanders already. To me, the more pressing concern was Travis. To Maya, I was missing “the Vision.”

Well, actually, at that exact moment, the more pressing concern was the fact that I could not breathe. The group started to chant, “Are we too diverse for your universe?” Which I think was something that came out of Kota’s mouth when we were painting signs, and some random person was nudging me and telling me to chant. My chest started to tighten up, and I felt like I was breathing through a wet cloth. Everything around me was moving. My eyes darted around without me really trying to direct them, and I realized my body was looking for a way out.

Suddenly, I knew that if I could just get out of the crowd and dart into Hotman’s Green right across the road, I would be okay. Once that idea crossed my mind, I kept repeating in my head *the green, the green, the green*. A part of me was comforted by it, while the other part of me felt like I was freaking out even more than before.

The sign I was holding hit the ground. I didn’t realize I had let go. My knees hit the ground next, and before I knew it, I was crawling over Converse, Reebok, and Vans, headed left on the steps. I popped out of the crowd on my hands and knees.

The green, the green, the green still rang in my head, but at this point I didn’t think I was going to make it.

I felt like I was going to die. My heart wasn't acting normal. It was glitching like one of Liam's video games.

The green, the green, the green.

Tears were wetting my cheeks, and without truly deciding to, I started crawling over to the green.

As I got closer, my body started to shut down more and more. I got to the entrance and just curled into a ball right there, unable to move without thinking I would vomit.

I don't know how long I was like that. I remember just being stuck in an endless feeling of *not good*. Once I made it to the green, it was like my last resort for help disappeared and everything else was crashing over me in waves.

Although I don't remember how long I was lying there, I *do* remember how the *not good* feeling finally stopped. At the time, I wasn't entirely sure that it actually happened, but I found out later that it truly did happen the way I remembered. Mostly.

Words hovered over me. That's the first thing I remember. It was like a blanket of words. Someone was murmuring, and I felt the heat of hands on the arm I was using to pathetically cover my face from the sunlight. I remember it happening, but in the moment, it was like a fever dream, where all of these things were only happening in my head, so there was no need to respond (not that I could if I wanted to).

“Okay, Lydia. You can do it. Stand up and walk.”

Out of all the murmuring, that last bit was the only part that I could hear. I wanted to laugh at the voice and say “no, you.” But, instead, something clicked inside me, and I realized I was not dying, and I *could* stand up and walk. So, I did.

I didn't do it terribly well. The same hot hands grabbed my shoulders and steadied me after I had taken a few steps. Everything was so dizzying to look at that I had to close my eyes the second I stood up.

The owner of the hot hands spoke to me, "Alright, okay. Yeah, keep your eyes closed. Can you hear me breathing?"

Sounds of exaggerated breathing started up.

"Yes, I can hear it," I mumbled.

"Perfect, I want you to match it. I'm breathing in for five seconds, and out for five. Just gently breathe, you can do it. Once you get a rhythm, just keep focusing on your own breathing."

I'm not sure how long we stood there just breathing. For a while, it was like the most subtle game of Simon-says, where my cue to act was his inhale and exhale. But, slowly, it became my own breathing that directed me. When that happened, I realized I could open my eyes.

I saw blue.

He was wearing the same blue shirt that he'd worn when I first saw him behind the tire swing and ran away. It was just plain blue, nothing on it. In fact, there was a lot of blue going on, with his shirt, his jeans, and his eyes.

"Creed."

"Hey, you remembered! Yeah, that's me. Lydia, are you doing alright? Do you remember what happened before right now?"

His hands were still on my shoulders, so I was not at liberty to speak anymore. I could feel myself getting flustered, but as I started to think about running, he removed his hands and took a step back.

“You think you can walk on your own?”

To test it out, I walked in a little circle around Creed and nodded my head. He watched me with a smile, and then asked again if I remembered what had happened to me.

“I got really hot. Like it was *hot*. And then I dropped my sign, and then I had to get here.”

He nodded his head and scrunched up his face like he was thinking. I felt like what I said was pretty clear, though.

“Okay...so you were over at the protest, then?”

“Right.”

A beat, and then I remembered, and sent a few Maya-worthy curses into the air, “I’m supposed to be there I can’t believe this—this is awful I need to go immediately oh no Maya is going to kill me how long have I even been out here the literal one day I have something I can do—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what? I didn’t get any of that. Are you okay? How can I help? What’s wrong? Take it slow; you were on the ground like two minutes ago.”

I took a quick breath.

“Sorry. Okay. So, I need to *go*. I promised my friend I would help at the protest, and now I’m not even there.”

“Okay, I see how that is an issue. But, if you look behind me, you’ll see they kind of disbanded.”

“What? *What?* What time is it?”

“It’s 5:37”

“But...we were supposed to be out there until 6:30. He was scheduled to start speaking at 5:30. In fact, he was about to arrive. I remember that.”

I started to remember the chanting that people had started up right before I lost it entirely...maybe he had been walking up then.

“Do you want to go hear him speak?”

“Hear him speak? What? No, that was the whole point of the protest; to *keep* him from speaking.”

“Oh? I thought it was just to show y’all disagreed with him. Wouldn’t you be able to argue against him better at the end of his talk, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Encounter has a policy where any speaker who comes to campus must be willing to answer questions by students at the end of their talk. It’s their way of making sure students’ voices are heard. The last twenty minutes are always scheduled with a kind of “debate” time.”

“Oh...well...that’s really neat.”

“Yeah! Since you couldn’t stay for the protest, maybe you could help your people out by going to the speaker himself and asking him questions that will show where he’s wrong, and maybe even help the people who agree with him see things differently. Or maybe even change his view!”

“But...I’m not sure I can do that.”

“What? Why not?”

“Well, I just don’t really know enough.”

“Know enough?”

“Yeah, I mean, I just...I mean...and besides I can’t talk in front of people...”

“That’s fair. Do you think maybe your friends would want to know about the ingrained debate time?”

“...yeah. Yeah, that’s a good idea. Yeah. Okay.”

“But, Lydia, all that aside...are you sure you’re okay? You seem alright,” he gave me a bit of a once-over, which was mildly unsettling. Was he making sure I was okay? Or was he checking me out? Do guys actually do that?

“Uhm, yeah. Thank you,” I mumbled, wondering if I should ask Maya. She would know. But, then again, she would tell Kota, and then they would laugh at me.

Creed’s voice snapped me back to the present as he continued to verify my wellbeing, “You sure? I know you have to deal with Travis Riley and all that, but do you think you need food or anything?”

“No, no. I have to find Maya. Thanks again, but I have to go. Bye!”

I shuffled around him and walked in the direction of the auditorium hall, which was just a straight shot across the pedestrian street.

Halfway there, I glanced back over my shoulder, and there was Creed, standing at the entrance of Hotman’s Green, watching me, his arms crossed in front of his chest like he was restraining himself. When he saw me looking back, he sent a wave and turned, walking deeper into the Green.

Like the first time I saw him, it made me sad that he walked away. It was a weird feeling. So, in the name of having something more important to attend to, I shrugged it off and started to plan out how to hunt Maya down.

Remembering that I lived in the digital age, I grabbed my phone out of my back pocket. I had managed to turn off my ringer at some point during the day, so I was greeted with five missed phone calls—two from Kota and three from Maya.

My phone dialed Maya up while I sat on the steps leading into the auditorium hall.

“LYDIA. Why is it that I’ve gotta always be trackin’ you down. Where did you even *go*?”

“Hey, sorry, I uh had to step out.”

“Step out? We were outside, you weirdo.”

“I know but it was just a lot of people.”

“What? Are you agor...agrari...whatever, you scared of crowds?”

“Agoraphobic?”

“You need to stop reading books.”

“Okay, but Maya—”

“Seriously, Lydia, I called you ages ago. Today is *not* the day for this. Come over to the dining hall. We’re waiting for reporters to come, so we’re eatin’ like old people, before 6 and all.”

Then she hung up.

Next up was Kota. I stretched my legs out in front of me, noting the darkness on my knees. I couldn't tell if it was dirt or the beginnings of bruises. I leaned my back against the stairs feeling the ridges of the second step bear into my spine.

“Lydia, what the—”

“Huh? Maya?”

“You can't just ignore me telling you to get yourself up over here and then go off and call Kota when he's sitting *right* next to me.”

“But—”

“Uh no, Lydia. I'm hanging up and you can talk to us in *person*; you're invested or you're not.”

“Can I—”

She hung up again.

I got a text from Kota. It read “sorry dude.” I started to hope for something more helpful when I saw Kota's texting bubbles pop up again, but his follow up text only said, “and yeah, you do read too much.”

Frustration started to bubble up in my chest, and then my phone rang.

It was Liam.

“Liam! Hi!”

I could hear only breathing on the line.

“Liam?”

“Lydia...do you...do you think I'm weird?” His voice cracked and shook the same way it did when he'd been the only one in his class who didn't get into honors band and he asked me if he should give up playing flute altogether.

“What? No! Liam, you’re amazing! You’re like my best friend in the world!”

“That’s cuz you’re my sister, though, right?”

“No, c’mon, do you see me saying that to Phoebe? You’re funny and smart and clever and well I guess if you’re weird, then I’m weird, too, because, well, I like you a lot!”

“Okay...”

“Liam what’s going on? Are you okay?”

“It’s just...Braden again.”

“Liam, I thought you were going to stop hanging out with him.”

“Me too. But they paired me up with him in badminton in P.E.”

“Coach Ryklin should know better than that. We’ve talked about it every year, by the third year, he should know. I’ll talk to the school.”

“...no, no, nah that’s okay. I’m just being a wuss.”

“Liam.”

“Yeah, but if I could *not* see him, that’d be good, too.”

“Alright. We can fix this,” my life might be an insecure wreck, but I could always pull it together for Liam. Someone had to.

“I miss you, Lyddie.”

“Miss you too, Li.”

And we hung up.

I wished that there was something more I could do right then. But, it was already 5:50. So, that’s past the school office hours. I would have to call the next day.

5:50.

Going off what Creed said, it would probably be around 6:10 when the debate time would open up. That gave me twenty minutes to get Maya out here. She could do what she wanted to do. If she would just listen...

I stood up and brushed the back of my shorts off and headed over to the closest dining hall that we always went to. If they were at a different one, then I was just going to go back to my dorm and hang out with Nikki.

Well.

I would go back to my dorm.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bystanding

“*There* you are. Lydia, honestly, a little more pep in the step. That took forever.”

“I timed her. Five whole minutes. That’s devastatingly long,” Kota chimed in, talking in a dramatic lady voice on the last sentence, his hand clutching at his chest.

Maya laughed and hit him.

The two of them were sitting on the end bench seats across from one another, while a lot of their club friends were chatting down the benches. I stood at the head of the table waiting for them to listen.

“Aight, Lydia. Are you ready? Reporters are gonna be here soon, and we need to have some reactions prepared. My first thing will be about how you can always tell someone’s ideas are flawed because they’re cowards when it comes time to defend them.”

“What’s that have to do with Travis Riley?”

“Right, you wouldn’t know cuz you disappeared. Kota, tell her.”

“Crazy, yeah. Travis didn’t even try to come talk to us. He snuck into the hall a different way before his speech started and just hung out there. We had a scout in the hall just looking around seeing what was up, and he *saw* Travis Riley already in there. We were going to stay to try and talk people out of going to listen, but then Maya’s friend Reyna told us that reporters were willing to meet with us at 6 o’clock. We would have less than half an hour to prepare, and I was also hungry, so we decided to kill two birds

with one food-shaped stone...I wonder if that could be like a scone or something? Doesn't matter, anyway, we're eating and plotting."

"Does *everybody* have to speak to the reporter?" I asked.

Maya rolled her eyes and placed her fingertips on her temples, "Lydia, if you're gonna be a wet blanket, then no."

I started rubbing my neck and backed up a little, "Uhm okay. But, I was just trying to say that if you want to confront Travis, then—"

"Oh, you've got another idea?"

I stared at the shiny spot on my shoe for a second, pretended like I was breathing with Creed again, and then I looked Maya in the eyes.

"20 minutes of debate time. Travis Riley will answer questions for twenty minutes. 6:10-6:30. If you want to talk with him, that's your chance. Do you want to do that? Because if you want to, then it's already 6:05 and who knows how long the line is. But also, you want to speak to reporters, but we have thirty people here. That's more than enough people for only a handful of interviews that they tend to show."

"Whoa, debate time? That's sick, Lydia! Good intel! Man, I should've had you as the scout instead of Miles!" Kota beamed at me.

Maya pursed her lips, sliding her fingers down her face until she reached her jaw, where she curled her fingers into fists and rested her chin on them.

"HMMMMMM...."

"We could ask the whole group what they want to do?" Kota tapped on Maya's arm from across the table.

"Right. Lil democracy never killed nobody," Maya kind of hummed.

She turned toward the table, and I sank as quickly as I could into the two inches of exposed bench to Kota's right. Kota grumbled under his breath as he slid over to make room so more of my body could fit on the bench.

Maya clapped her hands twice and shouted, "Hey! Y'all! Party people!"

The table turned toward her along with a few other tables in the dining hall. I maneuvered as best as I could to hide entirely behind Kota.

Maya leaned forward and spoke in the loudest conspiratorial whisper known to man.

"Alright! Guess what I just found out?" dramatic pause, "Travis Riley wants to talk with us."

Eyebrows raised up and down the benches.

"Exactly. He must've felt his own cowardliness."

A handful of chuckles responded.

"So, now the question is...who all should do the interviews and who all should go speak with our good friend Travis? And...who will talk to the interviewers long enough for the ones of us who speak with Travis to have a chance to come back and expose what happened to the interviewers. We've got just about two minutes to decide. It doesn't have to be even-steven; in fact, it might be best to have fewer people go to Travis. We still want a crowd on TV and in the newspapers!"

The benches of people started to talk amongst themselves, deciding who would do what.

Kota leaned forward toward Maya, "Yo, Maya. Shouldn't you be the one to talk with him? You set all this up; it's only right. Plus, you were the most tweaked that he

didn't even try to speak with us to begin with. *And* I'd bet you have some points you really wanna press him on."

I nodded my head in quiet agreement, but I'm not sure anyone noticed.

"Truth, Kota, truth," Maya had a peaceful face that morphed into a smile as she turned to one of her club friends to ask about where she wanted to go.

"Where are you going to go, Kota?" I tapped him on the arm to make sure he knew I was speaking.

"Not sure. I have a wide array of talents that could be put to use at a moment's notice," he kind of wiggled his eyebrows at me, "*but*, someone has to go with Maya. I bet the rest of my curly fries that no one else is gonna wanna go because I mean 'debate time' sounds a little scary, and most of these goons only know how to speak with a PowerPoint or a written speech."

"So...does that mean you're going to go with Maya?"

"Nope," He popped the *p*, "but you should."

"Wh-why me? Why not you? You said yourself; you're talented at everything, Kota! You should go and help her!"

"I'd love to, but if both Maya and I leave, this party would fall apart. That's why you have to go with her. You're a big help to whoever you're around, but we need a leader in both groups, get it?"

"Right. Yeah, that makes sense. So...I can go as moral support for Maya? I wouldn't have to speak or anything?"

"Correct. But, hey, you've had a lot of good input this whole time. If you do have questions you wanna ask him, you should go ahead and shoot."

I shook my head so hard that I felt my brain move, “Nah, Maya will have it covered.”

“Lydia,” Maya was talking to me, “So, me and you are gonna go, along with anyone else who wants to tag along. Kota, you good here?”

Kota sent me a knowing smile, almost like he already knew exactly what Maya was thinking, and just roped me along so that I would be primed to go along with what Maya said. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

“I’m good all the time, no matter where or when,” Kota replied.

“Perfect,” Maya got everyone’s attention again, “Raise your hand if you wanna go to the debate time.”

Not a single soul had the courage to raise a hand.

“What? *No one*? Come on, y’all!”

“Well, Maya, we figured you’d go!” one of the clubbies said, and a few other voices chimed in saying the same thing.

“Oh, if that’s what’s best. Yeah, I am good to go.”

“*Yeah* you are!” shouted a hype man in the corner.

Maya laughed, “Alright, so Kota will lead up in the beginning of the news interview. I’m off,” she threw both her hands on the table and sprang up. She caught my eye and jerked her head toward the exit, like I wasn’t going to follow her anyway.

CHAPTER NINE

Impasse

There was a surprising number of people in the auditorium.

“Isn’t it awful?” Maya whispered into my ear.

I nodded my head, but I was hoping there were a lot of people who were like us; waiting for the question section to start up so they could prove him wrong. Because otherwise...Maya had been right. There were a lot of people holding some hard to swallow beliefs at our school.

We slid into the back row of seats and sat a little more anxious than most of the group.

The guy on stage looked fairly unassuming. Imagine a senator pitching himself to you on a major news network, and you would have Travis Riley perfectly. Hair just-so, smile handy, and a voice that could convince you the sky was violet. I could see why people would have a hard time seeing past all the polish that masked his twisted ideas. “...but you have to listen first, right? I spent the past half hour making my case to you, and you have all listened. I appreciate that. Today, it’s rare to have a group of people willing to sit and listen.”

“Yeah, no wonder, with the garbage that comes out of his mouth,” Maya whispered to me.

I nodded and kept listening, intrigued. I had thought there would be some passionate yelling and maybe a bit of waxing poetic and then a call to arms. But this guy,

the more I looked at him, seemed less polished and more tired. Like he was reaching the end of a long journey.

He took a deep breath, “Now, I’m opening the floor for questions. Ask me about anything you thought of while I was speaking earlier, and I’ll do my best to answer. The wonderful staff at Encounter has already put microphones in the middle of the aisles, you just need to walk forward and speak. I ask that you stay at the mic until I’ve finished answering in case there needs to be a clarifying question or what-have-you.”

“You’ve got this, Maya!”

“Imma wipe that cocky grin off his face.”

That was probably not the moment to point out that the man onstage wasn’t smiling, so I didn’t.

Maya stepped over me and walked to the front. She had her head up, shoulders back, and she walked like she was wearing a pantsuit. I almost felt like she *was* wearing one, even though she was clearly wearing a plain white shirt and cut-off jeans. That’s just how cool and confident she was.

“Hello, young lady. Can you, and everyone else who comes up, start off with your name?” Travis Riley ordered more than anything as Maya stepped up to the mic.

She cleared her throat into the mic.

“Maya. Maya Thomas. I’ve got a question for you.”

“I should hope so,” Travis Riley tried to quip, but that kind of thing makes Maya mad. It was like that time she came back from one of her classes peeved because her professor had made a joke while she handed in her assignment. I don’t remember what it

was, but I remember being confused why Maya took it so personally. But I've come to realize that Maya will be Maya.

Maya, being herself, kind of snorted into the mic, and then asked, "Why didn't you even try to talk to the protestors out front?"

Oh? Not the angle I thought we were going with.

Travis Riley cocked his head, "I don't tend to run into protestors who actually want to talk. If you had a whole group of people who don't want you to speak, would you seek them out to talk?"

"Yes. Because if I knew my stuff, I could hold my own in a conversation."

Maya could hold her own in any conversation known to man. She was a natural speaker and kind of an entertainer. But she seemed a little off. In fact, she'd kind of been seeming off a lot lately.

"Okay. That is a respectable approach. For me, it's less about holding my own and more about the setting. I think the exchange of ideas between people is important. The whole concept I mentioned earlier about the marketplace of ideas can only happen if there is a place to discuss. A discussion never really happens between a group and one man. That's either a lecture or a mob, depending on who has control of the room."

"Can I ask another question?"

"Please, go ahead."

"How can you stand up there and talk to me like we could have a conversation when you don't respect me?"

It was silent.

I felt like I was supposed to go up and stand next to Maya to show that she wasn't alone, and that her voice mattered, even though Travis Riley was looking at her like she was a kid stamping her foot...like something he could laugh off and not take seriously.

“Maya, right?”

Maya nodded her head and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Well, Maya. I don't believe we've met apart from a couple seconds ago when you said your name into that mic. I'm grateful to talk with you, because this isn't in the slightest what I expected from a Q&A session, so it's a nice change of pace for me. However, I feel like we can't go on until you inform me how I have treated you with disrespect, seeing as we've never had an encounter until now, and *this* encounter I thought was going rather cordially.”

“It's not about you and me. It's about how your thoughts and policies affect me negatively. And how they affect me negatively because of my skin color. That's messed up. People can only really talk if there's two-way respect.”

The auditorium was still dead silent. Everyone was enthralled by the exchanges, and I could not believe how confident Maya was. I wish I had the ability to just stand up and talk boldly like that. My awe was getting the better of me, because I wasn't really processing what they were actually saying to each other. It was like watching a ping-pong match with no concept of the score.

“Maya, you put me in a predicament. Here I am, willing to talk with you, but using your logic, I can only speak with you once you respect me. That puts us at an impasse.”

I predicted that Maya's knee jerk reaction would be saying that she respected him just fine. But Maya didn't say that.

She dropped her arms to her side, and I watched as her fingers curled slowly into fists. I could imagine the way her nostrils flared coupled with her slow blink and long inhale/exhale combination. It's how she looked when I had accidentally stepped on her history project after she had warned me not to five times.

I thought she was about to let the man really have it. But right when she opened her mouth to say whatever it may have been, Travis Riley spoke again.

"Listen, that wasn't very conducive for a conversation. I apologize, Maya. Let me try again. I apologize if you have perceived my policy stances as offensive to you, personally. But my ideas aren't designed to disrespect you or any member of any race. But, if the consequence of any of my proposed policies is that there is unfair discrimination, then please help me to see it. Which of my policies specifically would you like to discuss?" he paused for a second and addressed the audience, "Of course, we could also go over this at a scheduled dinner or some other venue, in case there are others with questions?"

No one in the audience moved. They wanted to hear Maya speak.

Because of Travis Riley's interlude, Maya had time to relax. Her fingers had uncurled and, though I couldn't see it, I was confident that her face was blank. It was how she always looked whenever she was seriously considering something, like when she weighed the pros and cons of running for student body president.

“Okay, Mr. Riley. I want to talk about your stance on schooling. Your whole thing is that you want school-aged kids to go on a voucher system, yeah? People can just choose where to go? You can’t just do that without hurting me and my family.”

“How so, Maya?”

I could feel Maya wanting to say something like “don’t patronize me,” but she held it in.

“*Because,*” Maya shifted, putting her weight on her left foot, “well because—take the schools around me and my mom. We live in a poor neighborhood among poor neighborhoods. There are people who are better off, of course. You give us all vouchers to pay for whatever school we want, and the better off people can afford the gas and the train tickets and the whatever to get to the school they want, while the poorer people can’t. They’re stuck with their low-ranked school. And guess who the poorer people are in my area? Minorities. The better off people are white. It’s from generational poverty.” “Everything you’re saying is fair Maya, but you have to think a little bit past that.”

Travis Riley was talking so slowly it was ridiculous.

“After people can pick whichever school, let’s think about what would happen when all the schools in your district are competing to have more students come to their school. They will try to have better teachers and better facilities to attract more students than the other schools. Because how much money they have depends on how many vouchers they get. Over time, each and every school will get better and better because they have to in order to remain open. In the meantime, for the students who can’t go to another school than the one they already attend, their situation hasn’t gotten worse. It just remained constant.”

“But it’s unfair. Not everyone will benefit, and the people who are already ahead will just get even more ahead.”

“Does someone ‘being ahead’ change your standing at all?”

“What?”

“If you’re in a race, and you’re thirty yards down the course, it doesn’t matter if someone is only one yard or a hundred yards ahead of you. You’re still at thirty yards.”

“What’s that have to do with anything? I’m trying to talk about facts, not philosophy.”

“What I’m trying to tell you is a fact, Maya. When other people succeed, it doesn’t make everything unfair. It’s unfair if they do it at your expense. Like say in that race, you were at thirty yards because the guy a hundred yards ahead of you, tripped you. That’s unfair.”

“I’ve been tripped for centuries, Mr. Riley.”

The audience got completely quiet again, and Travis Riley paused for a pregnant moment.

“What would you do, Maya?”

“About the schools?”

“Sure, about the schools or about how to make up for you feeling tripped for centuries.”

“I would start with having more people ask me that question. It’d be nice if someone asked what I want, or what any minority group wants.”

It was strange. I don’t think anyone else in the audience would have known it, but Maya was getting a little emotional. It wasn’t anything in her voice, but if you watched

her shoulders, they were pulled back so far it had to be uncomfortable. That was the “I am not about to cry right now” Maya stance. I made a mental note to ask her about it later. I had only ever seen it once before, when Kota accidentally elbowed Maya directly in the nose. He had been a little too involved in his retelling of climbing a tree he found.

Then she kept going, “But, if I were to talk about a policy, I’d figure giving the same amount of money to every public school would be my first step.”

“Okay, for how long? Do we continue to give the same amount of money to a school that succeeds as a school that is irresponsible in their use of money?”

Maya had spoken to me numerous times about how awful other peoples’ policies were, but it never occurred to me that she might have her own substitute plan. If I’m being honest, I often tore her down in my head for being so quick to drag someone’s policy when she didn’t have her own. Maybe I could’ve asked, and I would have known she *did* have her own kind of plan going.

“Taking away money from a school punishes the students more than any teacher. The first teachers to go are arts teachers, then gym teachers. Those were the teachers who actually cared about me before they got cut from my school. Because of how rotten my main curriculum teachers were. If you punish a bad school by taking away its funding, it’s just going to get worse. Instead of hacking out a failing school’s funds, they gotta send someone in to fix it.”

“Who? The Federal Government?”

“Yeah, who else?”

“What about the local school boards and their say? Public schools are run locally and funded locally and through the states. The federal government pays less than 10% of the costs of running public schools.”

“I know, and that’s twisted. If we want our schools to all compete on the same level, then they all need to be held to the same standard. The Fed is made up of people from all the states, so it’s not tyranny.”

A twitchy young man stuck his head out stage right and whispered something across to Travis Riley, who nodded his head back.

“Maya, this has been intriguing. I would love to continue this conversation. If you would come on backstage, I would love to chat with you. As for now, I’ve been directed to answer at least one other question. I hope this suits you?”

“Yes, it does.”

Maya turned and strutted back to where I was sitting. She grabbed my arm and whispered that we had to hustle if we were going to make the interview at all and then get back in time to talk with “Mr. Riley.” It was weird not hearing her say in a sneer sing-song, “*Travis Riley*” or “*Terror Really.*”

CHAPTER TEN

News

“.....*Why?*”

I was reading *A Tale of Two Cities* for the heck of it, while rain pattered against my dorm window. My Saturday plan of hanging in the Green was ruined by that pitter patter, but I wasn't about to complain. I loved the sound it made on glass. Even if it meant there was no shot of running into Creed.

Something smacked me in the face.

I sat up from my comfy armchair pillow thing, and started cursing, looking around for the source.

It shouldn't have shocked me so much to see my own roommate looking at me. Out of all the students at Encounter, she would technically be the most likely person to be in my room. But...she was looking at me. That hadn't happened since day one basically.

“Answer the question.”

“What question?”

“You were reading, not blaring music. Answer the question.”

The Maya influence in me wanted to raise an eyebrow and slowly pick my book up to keep reading. There were three issues with that though. First, I didn't know how to move my eyebrows separately from each other. Second, I had spazzed enough that my book was on the ground, and there was no way that my groping around on the ground for it would have any kind of cool factor. Third, I was Lydia Parker, not Maya Thomas.

“I’m sorry, Nikki. I should’ve heard you, I guess. I just didn’t know I should listen out for someone talking to me. I’ll answer your question, just repeat it for me...please?”

“Don’t grovel. Pick up the newspaper, it’s in front of you. Why are you on it?”

I realized the paper must’ve been what had smacked me earlier. Out of all the pictures, I don’t know why the editor or whoever was in charge of the photos would use the one with me mid-pass out. They had plenty of normal shots of the group when we spoke to the school news reporters. I had thought we had some actual local news reporters or something from the way Maya was talking, but it had only been the *Encounter Dispatch*. Either way, Maya had made me sprint across campus to make the photo shoot after she met with Travis Riley backstage.

The picture that *Encounter Dispatch* decided to run was our group protesting in front of where Travis Riley spoke. If you didn’t know that point three seconds later I was on the ground, you would think I was aggressively shouting instead of sucking in what had felt like my dying breaths.

“Frick man. I wish I wasn’t anywhere in this paper. I look like death.”

“You said you’d answer the question.”

“Right, uh. Well, I was there. And they took a picture of it, and now it’s in the newspaper.”

Thinking over the words that came out of my mouth, I’m surprised Nikki didn’t find something else to throw at me, but she could probably hear the flustered panic animating my response, so she didn’t even try to read sarcasm into it.

“Everything you do and say is irritating. And what is a white girl doing talking against racism anyway.”

“What... do you want me to support it?”

“I want people to stop freaking out over everything. And now I get to live with someone who clearly freaks out over everything. I bet you didn’t even listen to Travis Riley.”

“Yeah, I did!”

“Liar. I watched you and that friend you attached yourself to walk in when he was basically done.”

I felt my stomach knot. Did Maya feel like I had attached myself to her? Like a parasite?

“You were there?” I asked, rescheduling the unannounced meeting with my insecurities to later that night before bed.

“Yes. Travis Riley is a leading mind, who has a lot of good thoughts, if people would calm down enough to freaking hear them.”

“I didn’t realize you liked politics.”

“I’m a poli sci major, idiot.”

“Okay.”

She turned and started to leave the room. It was only around noon, so it was a little startling. I wondered if she would turn to stone or disintegrate if she went outside this early on a weekend.

She stopped in the doorway and turned a little back to me, “Did Maya actually meet up with him like he said they would afterward?”

“They actually arranged to meet up next month.”

“Invite me.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’ll be sorry if you don’t listen. My God. Invite me.”

“Uhm, you’re invited?”

“Good. Remember that.”

“Wait! They’re meeting over in the district, though. Is that cool?”

“I don’t care if they’re meeting over at Chuck E. Freaking Cheese. I’m going.”

She turned all the way toward the door, and left, slamming it behind her.

Almost on cue my phone rang.

It was my parents. I hadn’t been able to call them yesterday like I usually do, so they were making up for it today.

“Lyddie!” Came the voice of Phoebe and my mother, harmonizing on some weird happy plane that juxtaposed the dark cloud that just left my room.

“Hey Phobes, Ma!”

“Guess where we are! Guess, guess, guess!” She was nine but had the energy of a six-year-old on too much apple juice.

“Uhm, the park?”

“OH CLOSE, but no, guess again!”

“Disney?” I threw out there to see if that would make her just tell me.

“No, silly! We would have had to bring Dad and LiLi if we went there!”

“Uhm the nail salon?”

“NO, I’ll just tell you. Ma and I are in Hollywood!”

“Oh?” It kind of stung that they went to a whole new state and didn’t even tell me.

My mom’s voice took over the line, “Lydia, you would *not* believe the past 48 hours. We were called the other day at home. They had seen Phoebe playing Annie, and decided she was darling, and they flew us out, incredible.”

Oh yeah, Phoebe’s play was last week. I’d forgotten about it.

“Incredible! Phoebe, that is so cool!”

“THANKS!”

I heard some microphone crackling in the back, and Phoebe making excited noises, and my mom told me she’d fill me in more later as the line dropped.

It felt weird to not be terribly excited for my sister, but it was tiresome to constantly be putting on the hype-up-Phoebe charade.

But, at least the call reminded me that I could call Liam.

“Yo, Li!”

“Lyddie! Thanks for calling, I was about to get demolished by Teddy in Warzone, but you saved me.”

“Always. Hey, I called yesterday about Braden, and we should be set.”

“Really?! Thank you, you saved my life. And you didn’t tell the ‘rents, yeah?”

“Have I ever?”

“Nah, you right. Wanna hear the latest?”

“Absolutely.”

For the next hour-and-a-half, I got a run down on his different animes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Silence

I just had to get past this one week of exams, and then we were all driving out to D.C. Maya had confirmed three different times that we were meeting with Travis Riley at this small hole in the wall restaurant.

It was going to be Maya, Nikki, Kota, and me. It sounded like chaos.

We were going to meet with him on Saturday at 6, which Maya was gushing over. Apparently, in the late morning or early afternoon, there was going to be a protest forming against police brutality.

In the past couple of weeks, there had been a huge uptick in people talking about it. I'd never really heard the term before, but apparently black people across the nation were being targeted by police. It was all anyone could talk about. It was hard for me because, personally, I really liked police officers. When I was little, I had wanted to be a cop because an officer had found me when I was lost in the mall. That day, I told my parents that I wanted to be someone who could find lost kids, too. But now, even the campus security guys have been getting some serious side eyes. Although, it is highly likely most of those eyes were coming from me as I was trying to deduce if the guards were comfortable or felt like people were watching them.

I was a little worried about the car ride into the district with Maya and Nikki. Two weeks ago, Maya had been handing out informational fliers about the people who had recently been brutalized by the police, and Nikki had gone up to her, mockingly read the flier in front of her, and then spat out an alternate storyline, concluding with a directive

for Maya to learn her facts. I wasn't there for it, but how Maya explained it all was that some people chose to victim-blame instead of dealing with their own racism.

All I know is that everything just makes me feel sick. People hating people; people hurting people. It all feels so wrong, and I still don't know what my exact role is supposed to be.

But, since that day, Nikki spoke to me more than ever before. Every night she would tell me what "really happened," which ran at a weird parallel to what Maya would say "really happened." It was like listening to two people who live in different dimensions, seeing the same events happen, but the events are warped differently on each plane. Luckily, all I had to do was listen. If someone asked my opinion, I would probably just vomit on the spot.

My concern, though, was test week. Maya told me I was cold-hearted for being able to focus on schoolwork in "times like these," but I couldn't just ignore what I was being asked to do by my professors and by my parents. The former wanted me to do assignments, and the latter wanted me to graduate. Combine the two together, and that resulted in me really needing to do homework and to study. Every week couldn't involve me passing out with a protest sign in my hand. Call me what you want, but I called myself a student for a reason.

Being the student I was, I was burying myself eyeballs deep into *Night* by Elie Wiesel so I could have some hope of passing my 20th Century English class—a mix of American grammar, European novels, and political diatribes put on by my professor. *Night* had to be the most interesting story that we had though. It also made me feel sick. I can't believe the Holocaust happened. I can't believe a lot of the awful things I have

learned about. What was weird about all of it though, was that I started to wonder about the whole God thing. It was just heartbreaking to see the agony that Eliezer went through in the book trying to talk to some God, and it made me think of Creed and the Bible he carried. What good was talking to a God that let stuff like the Holocaust, stuff like police brutality, stuff like...well anything bad happen? If there was a God, He should step up and do something.

Maybe that was it; why I had been feeling so cold recently. I still hurt for people and what I was seeing. But what was the point in trying to stand up to all of it? Not only did bad things happen every day, but it's been like that for centuries and centuries. No one has changed anything about it. So, it was best to focus on my own life and do the best I could. Be successful and make people around me happy. And really hope I never got attacked or singled out or something awful. There was no real point to any of this living stuff other than just doing that.

“LYYYDIA!”

The silence of the library was completely broken. I felt my face flash red hot, and I couldn't help but stare daggers at Kota. That guy should not be allowed within a hundred feet of any library, *especially* the quiet section.

The angry eyes of fifty undergrads dug into my skin, but Kota bounced over to me like it was normal to scream on the top floor—the only floor where whispering is criminal.

I stood up and shoved all my things into my backpack and walked as quickly as I could to the stairs, brushing past Kota like I didn't know him or that Lydia girl he was yelling at.

I was two steps down when Kota grabbed my arm.

“Heyo! Slow down, yeah?” Kota somewhat attempted to whisper.

“Don’t talk to me until we’re out of here.”

We sped-walk in silence until we were standing outside, the sun attempting to beat down on us despite the cloud cover and the slight hint of a winter chill in the breeze.

Kota swung in front of me and started walking backward on the pavement, until he couldn’t help but fill the silence, saying, “So, can we talk now? Does this count as out of the library if we are on the library sidewalk?”

Anger boiled up and out of my mouth, and I used a tone that I had only ever used before on Phoebe when she used to sing Broadway songs in grocery stores at the top of her little human lungs.

“Kota, please stop embarrassing me like that.”

“Dang, Lydster, you don’t need to take it so serious!”

“I’m not messing around! I’m being serious because the rules are serious. People are trying to study...I was trying to study, and you just ignored that. It’s rude. If you were my friend, you’d care about what I care about!”

“Dang, Lydia. Like I get it, you’ve been off for the past few days, but you don’t need to take it out on me!”

“What do you mean ‘take it out on you?’ What do you mean ‘been off?’ I feel fine, and I’ve been the same as always.”

“No, you really haven’t been.”

And that’s when I started sobbing.

I’m not really an emotional person. I think I would describe myself as shy and mildly boring. That tidbit being fully noted, I usually only cry when I’m super

uncomfortable, so it was shocking to feel myself full-on crying my eyes out when I didn't feel uncomfortable or even that embarrassed.

I just felt sad.

Kota patted my head which made me cry more because it was annoying. I reverted to my preteen years, yelled leave me alone, and ran away.

Too many people on that campus have seen me sprinting around, and I have no idea who they are because I was always too busy sprinting to notice or care.

I checked behind me, and Kota wasn't there. Feeling a little better, probably from the endorphin flow to my brain, I jogged into a walk. My body had done some excellent navigating, and I was at one of the entrances to the Green. It truly was my happy place, just like I had imagined it would be on that first day here.

My back was doused in sweat, and I was sure my baby hairs were plastered to the sides of my face. Because I was already gross, that meant I could fall on the grass and have no regrets. I swung my backpack to the ground and planted my whole body next to it, stretching out like I was about to make a snow angel. I breathed in and out, remembering the last time I had seen Creed, summarily distracting myself from whatever it was that made me cry a couple minutes earlier.

“I had a feeling the girl on the ground would be you.”

The voice came from behind my head, so I jutted my chin forward and pushed my eyes back as far as I could to see who was speaking. Not that I really had to look. By now, I knew how to recognize Creed's voice. He has the slightest of southern accents, and you can hear his smile in every syllable.

I opened my mouth to say something. It was probably going to be really smooth and witty, knowing me. But, as I did, my stomach grumbled louder than it had in years. I swear the squirrels in the trees turned to me, curious why thunder was coming from below instead of from above.

I curled into the fetal position. The day had been too much. Hours of studying, a solid minute of sobbing, a decently fast sprint, and a monster emerging from my midsection was too much.

Creed was belly laughing. At least my life had entertainment value. So much for trying to become successful and help others. I should switch my life goals and venture into the comedic field.

A little baggie of goldfish snacks smacked me on the cheek.

I kind of whined, but sat up and crossed my legs, tore open the Ziploc sandwich bag and began to eat while he sat down next to me.

I stopped halfway through and glanced at Creed and kind of offered him the bag reluctantly, in case he wanted any. He shined his sunshine smile on me and shook his head.

“No worries, Lydia. Those are all for you. I have eleven more of those baggies if you want more. We had a lot extra, which was wild because we thought we didn’t have enough!”

“Who’s we?” I spoke through my hand in an attempt to cover my goldfish-infested mouth.

“My youth group that I help lead sometimes! We went to help teach some Bible stories over at the private school down the street. We were talking about some of Jesus’ miracles.”

“Have you read *Night* by Elie Wiesel?” I ignored all norms of conversation and just went with what was in my head, making a mental note to try and remember to circle back to the whole youth group and miracles thing.

He cocked his head a little, “Yeah. I read it in high school. It was pretty heavy stuff.”

“And you still believe in God?”

“Did you believe in God before you read *Night*?”

“Uhm. No. I’m reading it for class right now, and I don’t think it makes sense to believe in a God who watched the Holocaust happen. Or a God that’s watching the awful stuff that’s happening now happen.”

“That’s fair.”

“That’s it?”

“Well. I mean...I have a lot of thoughts, but I wasn’t sure if you wanted to hear it because...well because you look kind of sad, and maybe a bit like you’ve been crying, maybe. And I wanted to ask you how you were doing?”

He was staring into my soul. Maya says that about everyone all the time, but I swear this time it was true. I didn’t know I believed in souls until that very moment when I felt him looking at mine.

“I don’t think I’m doing so good.”

“Will you please tell me about it?”

He actually wanted to know.

I looked at my hands, I looked at the grass, I looked at the tree, I looked at his jeans where his knees were going to start wearing a hole soon, I looked back at the grass a little more intently, and then I looked at the empty sandwich bag I had tucked under my left shoe to keep it from flying away. I kept my eyes there and started talking.

Out of nowhere, I told him about how much I missed Liam, how much I felt pushed around by Maya and Kota, how much I wanted to do well on the exams coming up, how much I felt too small to do anything about all the big stuff Maya talks about, how evil I felt when I didn't want to know what Phoebe was doing, how lonely I felt most of the time, and on and on. It was like I'd decided he had already seen my soul, so he might as well hear it, too.

By the end, I had only broken into tears three times.

The whole time, Creed watched me. I could feel it. Sometimes he would nod or shift a bit or ask me to keep going. But mainly, he just sat still next to me.

When I had fully run out of things that were on my mind, including stuff that I had no idea I was feeling (especially the things about Maya and Kota), I finally dragged my eyes away from the little green and purple stripes at the top of the Ziploc baggie, and I looked Creed in the eyes.

His lips turned up a fraction into a hint of a smile.

“Thank you for telling me, Lydia. I'm sorry you've been feeling so much inside and haven't found a place to talk it out. You said a few times that it wasn't important what you're feeling, but I think it is. And the people closest to you need to hear it, too.

That's what real community is. It's people walking hand in hand with each other through the hard things."

"But I'm not really going through anything that hard."

"It's hard enough that you felt like crying, right?"

"Well, yeah, but that's because I'm spoiled and don't have anything else to be upset about."

"That's a lie. And I don't mean that you're lying to me, Lydia, I know you believe what you're saying. But the way I've seen it, sometimes we're told lies and we learn to believe them. Those lies keep us from living the way we're supposed to."

"No one's told me what I told you. That's just what I believe."

"Can I tell you something that I believe?"

"Yeah."

"I believe in spiritual warfare. That sounds crazy to a lot of people but hear me out. I believe that God is a good God who loves us and wants what's best for us, but I also believe that we, humans, want what's most fun for us, even when it's not the best for us or others. It's like how as kids, we want to eat a bunch of cookies, but our parents don't let us because that's not what's best for us, even though it's less fun. But you know when you would think in your head that it wouldn't be that bad to eat another cookie when your parents aren't looking? That's a lie that you believe. Another lie would be if you thought your parents would hate you forever for disobeying. Those lies could come from just us being human and messing up, but I also think sometimes those lies are prompted by Satan, who wants nothing more than to bring us away from what's actually good for us."

“That’s a lot.”

“Yeah...but I just wanted to say that your being upset is totally valid. Emotions are important because they can be used for good or for evil, and you have to recognize what you’re feeling so you can use them correctly. When they’re used for good, then that’s amazing, but when they’re used for evil, it causes strife and division.”

“So, you think my emotions are evil?” I felt my eyes start to water again as I asked what I knew was a dumb question even as a part of me started to genuinely believe that Creed thought my emotions were Satan-spawn.

“NO! No! I just think that your emotions make sense, and you could either respond to them by sharing what you’re going through with your friends and family, or you could let them divide you from your friends and family. It is good to be in community with others, but it is not good and easily twisted to bad, or evil, when you separate yourself from community.”

What he said kind of made sense, but also everything felt like an out-of-body experience. How did I end up on the grass next to a cute boy trying to convert me?

Creed watched my face and kind of grimaced, “Am I freaking you out?”

“Not really. It’s just all so weird. Not you weird. Just weird. Like today is weird. You know?”

“I feel like that shouldn’t have made sense, but I got it.”

We smiled at each other, and I wasn’t sure what we were supposed to do next.

Creed checked his watch and let me know it was 4:30. He asked if there was anywhere I had to be or anything I had to do, since he figured me showing up on the Green for the past hour wasn’t part of my scheduled day.

The only thing I had planned for the day was studying. Creed had similar plans. We both had our backpacks with us, so we just studied there on the Green in silence until it was too dark to see. Then we just said bye and went our separate ways. It was oddly peaceful, but I'm sure if I tried to explain it to anyone else, they would call it incredibly weird.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Road Trip

I officially made it through test week. The entire five days, Maya treated Friday as the best incentive to push through the tests. I pushed through all the tests, and then Friday ended up being more of a punishment than a reward. Unless death is a reward somehow.

Nikki's driving was a back-to-back slideshow of what not to do. Stop signs were suggestions, yellow lights meant speed up, and other cars were basically imaginary. I've never seen someone so unlimited by the posted speed limit, and I was actively seeking out police cars because getting pulled over seemed like our only chance of surviving.

If blunt force trauma or complete ejection from a vehicle wasn't going to be my end, spontaneous brain combustion from the decibel level of the music was going to do me in for sure. It's like Nikki read a manual on how to secrete teenage angst and decided to emulate it on this one drive. Who actually listens to heavy metal? And I swear she was wearing even more black clothes than usual.

Inexplicably, Maya and Kota were both passed out in the back seat despite all the sound, speed, and swerves.

Maybe I should have been grateful for the rage music. That saved me from speaking with Nikki. It was too loud for any communication, for one, but more importantly, Nikki was too absorbed in mumbling the few coherent lyrics hidden within the music blaring out of the speakers to bother with me.

To pass the time, I started to imagine what the next couple of days would look like. The funniest mind picture was sleeping in the hotel. Maya had been in charge of the

arrangements. Unlike my parents, Maya's parents never instilled in her the principle that boys and girls shouldn't sleep in the same room together. So, she booked one room. My mind wanderings conjured up the image of Nikki and Kota sharing a bed. I could see Kota clinging to the far corner of the bed shivering, while Nikki burritoed up in all the covers, managing to take up three-quarters of the bed despite her miniature size.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when my ears suddenly had the potential of hearing something again, if the ringing ever calmed down. Nikki had cut the music.

"Be useful, yeah?"

I blinked at her, which prompted her to stare daggers at me, disregarding the road in front of her.

"Just because I'm driving doesn't mean I know where the bloody—"

"Oh, you want me to navigate?"

"I asked you to pull that up twice already. It's like you're trying to annoy me."

"I'm sorry, Nikki, I couldn't hear you over the music."

"I should've known you weren't listening; you were sitting over there smiling like an idiot."

"Oh, uhm—"

"Whoa! We're here!" Kota's voice came from behind me, shortly joined by Maya excitedly pointing out every restaurant we passed. I was glad they had chosen that moment to wake up. Mainly. Although, a part of me had thought for a second that Kota was sticking up for me, and I felt a little disappointed that he actually hadn't been. But it wasn't his fault, or Maya's. They had been asleep anyway, at least that's what I told myself.

For the rest of the ride, I quietly gave Nikki the Google map instructions as she weaved through the tight streets toward our hotel. We had all chipped in to pay for the room, so we managed to afford one of those places that does valet parking. We pulled in, grabbed our stuff, waved bye to the car, checked in, and went to our room.

Maya hummed a happy tune to herself as she slid the hotel key in the door slot, but the hum got cut short when Nikki jostled past her and fast-walked into the room ahead of all of us. She threw her suitcase at the foot of the closest bed and flung her body onto the coverlet, spread-eagle.

“Wake me up if...no wait. Just don’t wake me up,” she murmured face-down and then didn’t move.

Maya strutted up to the bed and started to reach for Nikki’s ankles. Kota ran between Maya’s reaching hands and Nikki’s legs on his way to superman leap onto the other bed, mimicking Nikki’s posture and yelled, “ME TOO!”

Then he started to fake snore and twitch like a dog.

Maya found it funny; Nikki still didn’t move.

I was starting to wonder why I was there again.

“So, where *will* Kota sleep, anyway?” I asked, confused about the dynamics.

“Worry, worry, worry. That’s all you do. No need. I have it cuh-vered,” Maya marched over to the couch, threw the cushions aside, and yanked out the fold-out bed. Panting a little, she continued, “The lady at the front desk said there was a pillow and stuff in the closet. Am I amazing or what?”

“So, I get to sleep here, and you two get the roll-out sofa. Awesome! Sounds like a plan! I appreciate your generosity!”

To continue his ramble, I'm pretty sure Kota started saying thank you in Japanese, but before he could, Maya turned her grabby hands on his ankles and started to yank. It was quite a scene to take in, so I rolled my eyes and went to help. For the first time in a while, I laughed for real with them. Not even Nikki's corpse-like presence dampened my mood for those few hours in the hotel.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Remember

I woke up grateful for years of sleepover experience. It seemed like every time I had to share a bed with somebody, I always wound up freezing cold. The other girl always got the blankets. So, by the time the end of junior high rolled around, I always brought my own blanket, just in case. Usually, I wouldn't bust out the emergency blanket unless I woke up in the middle of the night, fears of cover-stealing confirmed. But, with the looming unknown of the next day, I had decided to sleep in the blanket from the start, avoiding the midnight shivers and the subsequent midnight fumble-through-the-dark-find-a-blanket-and-probably-wake-someone-up fiasco. By morning, I was basically in a burrito sandwich. Next to me on my right was Maya fully wrapped up, and in the bed to my left was Nikki, a mini-Maya replica burrito. I lifted my head up and took note of Kota, sleeping nearly at the foot of our bed. Throughout the night, he had somehow twisted to lay diagonally across the cot, his legs crookedly bent as if in the middle of a run.

Maya's rainforest alarm went off, and she rolled around yelling, "UP! UP! LET'S GO!"

Kota groaned, and I just watched as Maya started rolling out instructions and yelling pep left and right, while still fairly wrapped up in her cover tortilla.

After nearly an hour, all of us, minus Nikki, were seated at the complimentary breakfast. I was surprised equally by both Nikki's sleeping through Maya's shrieking and

by Maya's actually letting Nikki sleep. I thought for sure Maya would try and drag Nikki out of bed, and Nikki would go berserk on her. In fact, Nikki was full of surprises. She didn't scream or make any noise while she slept. It was the best night's sleep that both of us had had in a while.

“So, are you both prepared now?”

Kota nodded like he was responding to a cue card, and I blinked at Maya, thinking maybe there was some merit to Nikki's irritation with me yesterday. I really don't pay attention well when people speak to me, apparently.

Maya chucked what was basically half of her continental meal at me. The two grapes bounced off my shoulder, and I nearly threw myself on the ground trying to pick them up while they were still rolling within eyesight.

Kota sniggered, saying, “Does that count as prepared?”

Once I snagged them and put them on my plate, I answered, “I don't think I'm ever prepared for anything we do...but also, what, uhm, what were you saying?”

Kota tried so hard not to laugh that the laughter turned into hiccups.

My mouth was squirming around trying not to smile, because then Maya would have thrown her literal plate at me.

Maya closed her eyes and breathed in like she was meditating and said, “Screw it, let's go.”

We all pushed back from the table and started our five-block journey to where Maya said the protest was going to start.

I had been to the district plenty of times growing up since my family has lived in Maryland since both sets of my grandparents moved there. But, still, when I imagined

going into D.C. for the first time as a college student, I figured I would have been wearing a cute outfit, sporting some attempt at makeup, and surrounding myself with even better-dressed and better-looking friends.

Instead, there I was at the Washington Monument looking like a tag-along in some half-attempt at a spy squad. Maya had told us to bring dark clothes, and Kota and I own a lot of bright clothes. We were rocking some light gray shirts and black shorts, while Maya was decked out in all black. When we got up to the meeting point with the other protestors, I saw that the dark clothing was some kind of code for “I am here to protest” because right when we walked up, Maya immediately was handed a sign while Kota and I had to kind of ask for one.

Maya and Kota were analyzing the quality of the signs and bragging about the superior signs we had had at our mini demonstration, while I was trying to figure out why my sign said, “Defund the police.”

“Hey, uhm, Maya...”

“Hey, uhm, Lydia?”

I rolled my eyes at that and kept going, kind of proud of myself for not instantly saying never mind, “I thought we were protesting police brutality not the police in general, right?”

“You really don’t pay attention to the news...or me now that I think about it.”

Kota threw his elbow on my shoulder and made a shooing motion at Maya, “I’ve got this one, General. Alright, Lydster, crash course with *The* Kota Goto. Police have Messed up, capital M. But it’s not really their fault. The system sets them up to fail. So, we have to change the system. We keep asking the police to be everything in

communities, from crime responders to basically therapists. Why should the same dude respond to shots fired and domestic disputes? Those are so different. So, if we didn't spend so much money on the police, we could hire fewer of them and just funnel that money into more caseworkers. So defunding is more like refunding appropriately, ya feel?"

I had some reservations on that take on police...mainly like what happens when domestic disputes turn into shots fired? But I was impressed by how smart Kota sounded. He was always smart, but his frenetic energy makes him seem kidlike and a little dumb, so I wanted to positive reinforce this policy-minded Kota.

“Oh, okay! That makes a lot of sense! Thanks, Kota!”

“Alright now that he just recapped what I *literally just said earlier*, let's see where we should go.”

In classic Maya language, that meant she was going to go find out, and we should stay put. So, Kota and I fidgeted alone while Maya walked around the small, close standing mass of people. As of then, we had about thirty people or so gathered in a group in the shadow of the Washington Monument. There were two different groups of middle schoolers running around us on all sides on some kind of school trip, their lanyards flapping in the wind and one slapping my arm as one of the kids ran by too close to me as I hung on the fringe of our group trying to listen to the conversation flowing toward me.

One petite girl who had to have been a highschooler was talking loudly on the phone explaining how upset she was that there were not more people out protesting. She was lamenting the state of our nation like an old woman who had seen much better days.

There was a handsy couple standing past Kota who were whispering to each other like they were in a movie and about to scale the sandstone skyscraper behind them.

There was an older man smiling at the whole group looking grateful for any turnout at all. He was talking to a younger man probably in his thirties mentioning that this was perfect if “all the pods are like this.”

There was a young mom with her two tween kids explaining the importance of standing up for what’s right.

In the middle of my covert people-watching and Kota’s absentminded Twitter scrolling, Maya came back to us and told us that we were good to stay where we were. In a couple of minutes, they were going to start announcing. Apparently, this protest was different from a lot of others Maya had been to with her mom. Usually, there were speeches and a rally-like feel, but they wanted the feel of this protest to be more grassroots, and we’d see what they meant by that soon enough.

Maya was brimming over with excitement, which infected Kota with energy, so he was circling us, fiddling with his sign.

“Guys. We’re *doing* it. We’re makin’ a difference. And we don’t need adults for it. Look at us! We got here by ourselves and through our own convictions and we’re doing *good*. We *can* change the world—I feel it. You two feel it, don’t ya?”

“Yes, Maya! I. Am. Feeling. *It*. That’s just right! We knew we had to do something and here we are doing it!” Kota started circling us even faster.

I nodded my head and felt a yearning in my gut to be filled with that kind of purpose. But I didn’t see the point in most of this. Forty people standing around with signs didn’t seem that earth-shattering to me. But, still, Maya’s words started to kindle a

bit of an eagerness to march. I had been feeling so heavy with all the things I can't do to help and feeling so guilty for the apathy I carried within me, that it was a relief to actually do something that seemed meaningful and impactful, even if it wasn't.

A woman's mechanical voice buzzed over the gathering, drawing my attention to the speaker who stood on the other side of a black chain fence separating the monument from the grassy area we were all on. It made her take a slightly uphill position on us so we could see her. She was wearing a black bandana and looked like she could run for a whole day and still beat me in a sprint directly afterward.

She started to shout into her megaphone, which seemed redundant, but it did grab our attention, "It's time! Time to stand up for the people who have been hurt, brutalized, and misused. We will not sit by while our nation rewards police for continued oppression against our people, will we?"

"No!" came the crowd's response.

"I *said* WILL WE?"

"NO!"

"Alright, then let's start marching. It's a mile to our destination, and every single step we take is toward that *Dream* that was articulated there now *decades* ago. Let's change this nightmare of a nation into the dream we can all see—where the hurting, poor, and broken are taken care of and helped instead of mauled and incarcerated. Join ranks with your brothers and sisters in defiance of oppression. March On!"

She pumped her fist, leaped over the black chain fence, and started walking toward the Lincoln Memorial, keeping her fist proudly in the air.

We all shouted in approval. I heard my own voice shouting, and suddenly we were all saying “March On” together like we had planned it.

As we walked, peeling in from the different entrances to the mall came more and more groups to join our walk. I figured some people must have started over at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, and I had watched as more people joined us from the World War II Memorial and the Korean War Veterans Memorial. We started off as thirty, but as we finished our walk along the reflecting pool, we were a group of at least 100. On the other side of the reflecting pool, there was a fairly large group, too. It was maybe a bit smaller, but they were trekking toward Lincoln in a distant lockstep with us. There were maybe ten different people with megaphones shouting out different encouraging things or leading different chants on both sides of the water. As we were shouting some of the dying words of one of the latest people who had been killed, I felt Maya grab my hand and hold it tight. I looked at her, and she was staring straight ahead, tears streaming down the side of her face I could see, and she shouted like she could speak to the whole world. I felt tears come to my own eyes, squeezed her hand tight, and shouted louder than I ever had before.

We *were* doing something.

The press of bodies against me, the occasional trip over someone’s foot, and the noise, battered into me and made me think of the last time I had held a protest sign and tried to chant. A part of me felt pushed to the edge of falling and crawling, but the other part of me heard my own breathing louder than anything else, and I knew I was okay.

After we climbed up the handful of steps to the flat area that sat below the massive staircase leading to the feet of Lincoln, one of the megaphone holders ran ahead and turned, holding his hands up to stop us.

We came to a pulsing stop, bodies undulating and shifting and swaying, barely restraining our energy from bursting forward. Our goal was in sight, and we were ready for whatever was ahead.

The megaphone man started yelling name after name after name. After each name, the other megaphone holders yelled REMEMBER, so we all joined in the spoken name, remember pattern. The milling tourists who were around looked at us while those closest to us joined in. As we got louder and louder, the megaphone man in front turned and led us on.

Roaring and unstoppable, we moved forward toward the large steps, and came face-to-face with a line of police officers and their riot shields, presumably they had stood there this whole time, but I hadn't looked beyond the man with the megaphone until then.

We rolled up to that line and stood yelling name after name, echoing out "remember," "remember," "remember."

The police stood there and looked at us.

I felt Maya's hand slip away from mine. I reached for her, but she was already gone from my side. I stood on tiptoes and watched as she threaded her way through the crowd, shoulders bunched and fingers curled.

She got to the front of the line, but I wasn't sure what she was doing. If she was still chanting, just looking, or what. I felt that tug I had often felt to follow in her wake. I

looked to my right to see what Kota was doing, and he was nowhere to be found. Strangers pushed into me shouting, drowning out the sound of the breaths I was taking. My eyes started to dart in an uncomfortable way, seeking an exit.

Because they were twitching so much, I ended up seeing something I wouldn't have otherwise.

In that small space of fear and disgust and hesitance between the protestors and the police, was a short, goth-looking girl. She was standing in no-man's land holding a sign that said, "I stand with the police."

The rage directed at the police was being funneled in toward that one small human.

I hadn't realized it, but I couldn't hear my breathing because the shouts had gotten even louder, and they weren't organized chants anymore. They were insults and threats and just anger materialized in the form of words.

The girl just stood. Standing only an inch in front of the police line, taking on verbal assault.

For some reason, the thought that I had was "what would Creed do?"

I knew what he would do.

I felt my heart panicking in my chest, as I once again let a protest sign slide from my hands.

Weaving through the protestors in Maya's wake, I edged up to the front and started to break out from the crowd. Our original megaphone lady grabbed my arm and said not to touch the police even though I was mad. I shook her off and let her see my clear-eyed expression and went to stand next to the goth girl.

So, there I was.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with my psycho roommate.

Me and Nikki against Kota, Maya, and the protestors.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Withstanding

That feeling of *doing* something grew tremendously within me as I stood there. The same hand that had held onto Maya for a quarter mile, now held onto the pale, black-nail clad hand of the girl standing next to me. But the feeling wasn't spurred on by the people yelling around me, nor was it tainted by my inability to think politically. It was just *right*. Evil works to separate people from community. And Nikki was all alone. The police she stood in front of couldn't stand with her. They were there to make sure no one got hurt, not to take sides or to react to us.

The protest from this side looked less like people who were doing something and more like people who were at a loss for what to do.

Defunding the police or protecting the police was not what drove my actions. There was something else, but I couldn't name it. There was something missing, and I wanted that missing something to be there. Any yearning for a purpose I had felt earlier was overshadowed by a greater void. I needed that missing piece, whatever it was, to come and fill the empty space where I found myself standing.

As far as purpose went, it seemed like mine was to keep Nikki's right hand from quivering. Her face was stone. I'm sure mine was as well because I wasn't actively feeling anything, I was just receiving the yelling and the pain. It was getting trapped inside of me, and I didn't know what to do with it. But I knew that I would stand there as long as Nikki did.

I tried my best to keep my eyes up and above everyone, worried what would happen if I met eyes with Kota, or worse, Maya.

As I was standing there, looking out past the protesters, past the befuddled tourists, and out toward the water of the reflecting pool, I felt a certain calmness amidst the sounds and the smells affronting my senses. The still water reflected the few clouds in the sky.

It was all going to be okay.

It was the strangest moment of clarity I had ever felt, and that I have never quite felt since.

With that feeling of peace, I let my eyes drag slowly over the crowd. A part of me wanted to just hold everyone's hand, and I wondered if I was about to flower-power my whole life and become a hippie.

Then my eyes met Maya's. I knew in my gut that she had been staring me down the whole time I had been soul-journeying next to Nikki.

She didn't move. Her unblinking eyes stayed locked on mine. Her lips didn't move, her fingers didn't shift, and not even her hair was moved by the muggy breeze. She was a statue. But I saw in her eyes everything she wasn't doing. It was as if she had squinted her eyes and yelled the words at me, with clenched fists and a wind of rage swirling around her. I felt the silent words in her hit me harder with each second of eye contact.

You racist.

You bigot.

You traitor.

It was that last unspoken condemnation that made my eyes water. The first two were from anger alone, but the last one carried years of baggage I didn't even know about.

I had done it.

I had truly hurt Maya.

I didn't just say something irritating or misunderstand some important point. I had stabbed her in the back and was continuing the assault, straight to her face, as she watched.

It feels dramatic to write it down like this, but it didn't feel dramatic in the moment.

It felt real.

It felt *bad*.

But it also felt necessary.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Limbo

I don't know how long I stood receiving the onslaught of noiseless outrage, but eventually I realized that the protestors and the police were gone, and I was merely staring at an afterimage of Maya's wrath.

I was brought out of my trance from something brushing against my left thigh. I looked down and saw it was my left hand. It had fallen out of Nikki's death grip, and it had lost all feeling.

My fingers groaned as I stretched them out.

"We better still be invited to dinner with Travis Riley."

Nikki spoke as if we had just bumped into each other randomly, so it was only polite to talk about something.

"I guess they can't stop us from going. We told him that there were going to be four of us, and the reservations were made awhile back. But do you really think we should go?"

"I don't care what you do. I'm going."

Then Nikki just walked away. No goodbye, no explanation of what she was going to do next.

As she was halfway toward the little grouping of steps that the protest group had climbed together not too long ago, she stopped and turned her head the slightest bit. I couldn't see her mouth or any part of her face except a little bit of her right cheekbone,

and she was several feet away, so I'm not sure this happened. That being said, I could've sworn I heard her say thank you.

Then she was gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lost

I had nothing better to do than sit on the Lincoln Memorial steps, the really big marble ones that would have made me come to terms with my lack of stamina had I chosen to climb them.

Not much was going through my head, and a large part of me wanted to tell Creed everything, but I didn't even have the kid's number. Plus, I wasn't sure if we were on that level. A smaller part of me was wondering if I needed to book Nikki and me another place to stay for the night. But, also, I didn't want to ask my parents to pay for that. That conversation would go like this:

Me: Hi, yeah, uhm, so I think Maya is mad at me because we stared at each other, and I held Nikki's hand, and, because of that, I need a new hotel room.

Mom and Dad: Why are you this way?

Me: Hahaha, never mind!

Mom and Dad: ...okay?

Me: *hangs up*

In the middle of my imaginary phone conversation, I noticed a few businesspeople making a beeline for me. They were already five feet away.

I butt-scoted over so I wouldn't block their way. There were plenty of other places to ascend the stairs, so I thought it was a little rude that they had to go up where I was sitting. The principle of it wasn't worth getting stepped on, though.

As I scooted, they course-corrected and kept coming my way, so I started reverse-scooting, thinking they had been planning on going around me, and I should have just stayed where I was. When they were still walking my way and looking me dead in the face, I realized maybe they wanted to talk to me, and I should stop scoot-shining the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial.

“Hey!” said the girl leading the triangle formation of well-dressed young professionals. I wondered how old they were, because closeup, they didn’t look too much older than me. Their nice clothes made me feel like I was fourteen and they were all thirty, but, in the face, they looked twenty-two at the absolute oldest.

“...hey?”

“No shot you were here earlier during the protest?” asked the girl. I don’t know what part of me came alive, but I could feel myself fangirling over her. She exuded confidence. She stood with one foot pointed toward me, and the other pointed to her two friends. One hand was thrown casually on her hip, and she was wearing a deep red shade of lipstick that made me notice how white her teeth were. I wanted to ask if she was a model for the professional world because her outfit looked high-dollar with clean black lines and perfect pops of color in her blouse with an ascot-looking thing around her neck. The two boys who were with her probably looked really nice, too, but guys just have to wear suits. This girl was wearing a carefully crafted outfit.

I didn’t even own something I could wear into a nice bank, much less did I have the ability to pick out clothes in a store that looked good together.

“Who are you?” I sounded like a little boy talking to an older boy who can dunk.

“Oh, that’s probably a better place to start! My name’s Kaitlyn, but everyone calls me Kat. These guys over here are Marcus and Nolan. We all work in Senator Lin’s office. We get updates in our emails when there are protests. This was the first one that happened out-of-session and around our lunch time, so we thought we might be able to catch it, but it looks like we missed it. What’s your name?”

“Lydia.”

“Lydia! I’ve never met a person named Lydia before! It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lydia.”

Marcus and Nolan nodded in the background. I wondered if they felt like side characters around Kat or if things were different when they were around people they knew.

“Nice to meet you all, too,” I was looking at Marcus and Nolan, and could feel my tone tack on an “I guess” to the end of my sentence.

“That’s kind of you to say,” Kat took it in stride and smiled at me like I really had said something kind, “Now that we all know each other a little bit better, can I ask about the protest? Did you hear anything about it?”

“Oh, uhm, yeah, I was here for it, actually.”

Marcus spoke up, and his voice surprised me with how deep it was, and I couldn’t help but notice the shiny whiteness of his teeth as well, “That’s so lucky for us. We have been wanting to see one in D.C. We all come from smaller towns but got internships through our colleges. The point being that none of us has seen a big demonstration before. Although I’m sad we couldn’t see it with our own eyes, it would be nice to hear more about it from you.”

He spoke like he should be in front of a podium. My hands twitched with the impulse to applaud him like he had just said something impressive in a speech.

Why were these people so cool?

“Oh, yeah, yeah, that, uh, makes sense. I was definitely here for the whole thing. But, like, I’m not the best at talking– or uh story-telling, I guess? So, I don’t know how lucky you are.”

Next semester, I was signing up for a public speaking class.

Kat smiled rays of sunshine and said, “That’s okay, Lydia, if it’s alright by you, we’d love to sit and talk with you about what you saw!”

So, I sat there on the steps with these two incredibly well-spoken, well-dressed, well-behaved, and somehow visibly kind people. And Nolan was there, too.

The three of them listened as I stumbled my way through what the protest was like.

Nolan spoke up at the end, “So, you all came together to protest against each other?”

“Uhm, well, no. I don’t know what we thought Nikki was going to be doing, but I was...well, I was supposed to protest with Maya and Kota?”

The three of them kind of looked at me. The longer we had sat there, the more and more Kat’s head had cocked to the side.

Kat followed up and asked, “So, what exactly is your opinion on all of this, Lydia?”

I felt immediate nausea.

No one had asked me that in a long while, especially since I somehow became a pseudo-activist.

I shrugged in response and looked at my hands folded together, watching my thumb rub the pointer finger of my other hand.

Nolan spoke up again, incredulous, “You mean you’ve got no opinion on any of this?”

Kat looked disapprovingly at Nolan, and he raised his palms up, the equivalent of saying, “Did you have a *different* question?”

Marcus cleared his throat in a way that drew my gaze to him, “Lydia, it’s okay not to know what to think. I feel like that a lot, and so do Nolan and Kat,” Kat nodded along while Nolan scrunched his face like he disagreed, but Marcus continued speaking, “But, usually, when I don’t know what to think, I try not to take a side. What made you want to protest to begin with?”

It was like some counseling session from on High.

I shrugged my shoulders again.

Nolan stood up, looking at his watch, “So, should we talk to anyone else? It’s about time to start heading back, and we didn’t even grab lunch.”

Kat stood up, too, “Oh, I didn’t notice the time. Good catch, Nolan. We should probably grab some food from the food trucks really quickly and head back, if we don’t want to be late again.”

Then, she pivoted to me, “It was nice to meet you, Lydia. I think it was a blessing to be able to meet you, and I’m going to be praying for you.”

Then she turned and walked away, Nolan trailing after.

Marcus hesitated next to me.

“Why’s she praying for me?” I asked Marcus. I’d never had someone say that to me.

“Because you seem a little lost, and that makes Kat sad.”

“Lost?”

“Yeah, just a little bit. But a lot of people are really lost.”

“Is that because I can’t come up with my own opinion on all this—this stuff that’s happening?”

“I don’t know what all goes through Kat’s head, but I can tell you that I think you’re looking hard for direction and you’re having a hard time finding it. I was like that for a long time. Kat has always loved Jesus, but me? I’m still trying to figure it all out. I’m not sure what I believe a lot of the time, from religious things to political things. But, I have confidence that there is a plan.”

“I feel like this is super random. Why’d you hang back?” I was proud of myself for the boldness that appeared out of nowhere. I hadn’t even stuttered a little bit. Marcus looked at me for a second, “That’s a good question. It’s just...you ever feel like it’s just...*right*...to do something?”

I thought about Nikki and nodded.

“Right, so it felt *right* to talk to you for a second. For me, that’s the Holy Spirit telling me what to do. I don’t really know what else I’m supposed to do, but I think it’s time for me to go catch up with Kat and Nolan. Thank you for being willing to talk with us; I know we are a little strange. But, hey, ‘in the world’ not ‘of it!’”

With that he smiled, and pushed himself up from the stairs, then he went and followed after Kat and Nolan.

“Today is weird,” I spoke out into the empty space around me.

What was with boys trying to convert me?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Disconnected

After a couple of minutes, I got up and started to walk. I wasn't sure where to go, but I knew I was hungry. It seemed as if it was just going to be me and D.C. for a little bit. It was only 1 o'clock. Dinner wasn't until 6, so I figured I should wait until 4:30 to start reaching out to Kota to figure out if I was excommunicated.

Aimlessly wandering was a bit fun. A large part of my confidence came from the phone in my hand. If I got tired of wandering, I could navigate anywhere. I had 70% battery life, so I was set to do whatever for however long I wanted. At least, until I hit 40%.

My distracted walking landed me in this sketchy area. There were a few restaurants that looked like they were either shut down or open despite severe health code violations. There was a person lying on the sidewalk, passed out and covered in a makeshift blanket of tied together plastic bags. There were two men standing outside a store that seemed to just be called Liquor, and they just watched me and smiled as I passed by.

I was a little scared, but I reminded myself that it was still daytime, and I was probably just tired and being weird.

I kept myself from looking at my phone. In the back of my head, I heard my mom telling me that it was okay to go out on your own, but, as a girl, to do it safely. Just let

people know where you are and pay attention. Out of all that, I could at least pay attention to where I was.

Creeping past the man asleep on the sidewalk, I tried to remain small and inconspicuous.

The man lifted his head up and reached out his hand to me asking for money. I shook my head and sped away.

The men across the street called over at me asking where I was going.

It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Bad things don't happen until nighttime.

I kept on walking, pretending like I was deaf, and got onto a slightly less dead street, from the appearance of the restaurants and townhouses. There was a woman outside of a small bar scrubbing down the storefront windows.

I looked closer and saw that she was scrubbing off a graffitied #BLM.

I slowed down wondering if she owned the restaurant, if someone else had spray painted that on her window, and if maybe she was just switching out designs. The Starbucks over by where we were staying had cool murals about the Black Lives Matter movement all over it in window paint. I figured the hashtag might not have been the owner's idea because as I got closer, I saw there were explicit doodles around it.

She saw me slow down. She turned, bracing herself like we were about to go at it.

"What? You tryna stop me, too? You little white girls think you know it all, and we get blamed for it."

I was so startled. I just looked at her with my mouth open, and my hands waving in front of my body trying to say a mixture of, "Who me?", "No I'm not stopping you!", and "I'm just passing by!" all at once.

She kind of grunted and turned back to scrubbing.

I wasn't sure what else to do, so I kept walking. Right after I passed, I heard the woman's voice again. I turned my head. She was talking with some man, and they were arguing. The man kept pointing at the window, and then he took the sponge out of her hand and threw it. He got in her face and started yelling. She yelled back.

I was scared, and I didn't know what to do.

Across the street in the townhouses, I saw a few heads pop into windows at the commotion. One person was on the phone.

After a minute of louder and louder yelling, a police car came cruising by. The man spit at the car and walked away. The woman nodded at the cop, and I noticed the person who had been on the phone hurriedly close her blinds.

I wasn't sure what I'd just seen, but I decided it was time to navigate back to the hotel.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rumination

I got back to the hotel and went to the one place where I knew I would be safe from Nikki, Maya, and Kota—the gym.

Nikki was skinny-fit, Maya was sweat-phobic, and Kota believed in “real activities” which do not include “running nowhere and lifting without purpose.”

So, there I sat for around an hour and a half on a yoga ball just thinking. No matter how hard I try, I can’t remember what all was going through my head. But it felt kind of like I was talking to somebody. Like I was just sharing everything that happened. Except, I was all alone.

It was nearly 4:30 when I diagnosed myself as a legitimate crazy person, and I cut my reverie off by reaching for my phone.

No messages.

I opened my texts with Kota, grimacing when I realized he hadn’t responded to my last three messages from two days ago asking how his tests were going.

I typed out a quick “Are we good?” text, hit send, and realized I was *so* not going to get a response.

Then my phone rang.

“Kota! I am so—”

“Kota...like the weird kid who keeps leaving me audio messages whenever you leave your phone open around him? That Kota?”

“Liam?”

“Uhm yeah?”

“Oh, hi.”

“You won’t believe it.”

“What?”

“Are you sitting down?”

“Do you count sitting on a yoga ball as sitting down or sitting up?”

Liam sighed into the phone, “Now’s not the time for you to try to be funny, but I respect it. Listen, Phoebe got the part!”

It took a lot of willpower not to repeat “the part?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Oh?!” was a good substitute.

“You don’t know what I’m talking about. Lyddie, you can’t say “oh” every time you’re not sure what’s going on because then we all—”

“Alright, alright, remind me.”

And for the next hour I got to hear about how Phoebe had been auditioning in Hollywood to be a little girl on some new TV show. It was kind of out-of-body. I knew they had gone to Hollywood, but I thought it was for some quick meet-and-greet or something. I had no idea it was this big of a deal. I mean it was just...Phoebe. Was she about to be some kind of star or something?

“Honestly, it’s annoying, but also, it is kind of cool. Even Braden thinks it’s cool!”

“You told Braden? Why were you even talking to that punk kid?”

“No, I didn’t! Everyone just knows. It’s like how everyone just knows where celebrities are. People just know that Phoebe will be moving over Christmas, and people just know that I’m her brother, and people just know that I’m CBA.”

“What?”

“Cool by association, Lyd. C’mon, you’re not that out of it.”

“No, I mean—wait, Liam, that is not what CBA means, but that’s not the point. What do you mean moving? Phoebe is moving? Why is only she moving?”

“Oh yeah that did sound like that. I meant we’re all moving.”

“We’re doing *what*?”

“Well, you aren’t. You’re in college.”

“Liam what the—”

“Mom! Hi! Yeah! Coming!”

The punk saved me from cursing in front of my mother, but also, he hung up right when he finally told me something of value. Not that Phoebe being a TV star wasn’t valuable, but that didn’t affect me as much as a family relocation.

I decided to shove that whole conversation in the very back of my mind as I checked to see if Kota, by some miracle, had actually responded.

Nope. Saw that one coming.

It was 5:30.

As I bounced on the yoga ball trying to decide what to do, I got a call from a number I didn’t have in my phone. I answered it anyway.

“Hey idiot. We have to go.”

“Oh, hi, Nikki.”

“Are you deaf? Let’s. Go.”

“Uhm...you think we’re still—”

“The only way we get uninvited is if we don’t go. Your need to get your head out of your—”

She hung up after a mini tirade telling me all about different locations of my body and where to put them. I felt a little self-reflection hit me as I thought about how I speak to Liam—but that was too close to the Moving Issue that I was trying to avoid. So, I moved all of my body parts to Nikki’s car, which was waiting for me out front.

As I got in, I tried to ask if we should maybe, potentially, possibly call Kota and Maya to see if they still wanted to ride together. But, apparently, “the Metro exists for a reason.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Platitudes

We walked into this nice Italian restaurant right at 6 o'clock in a two-story townhouse that the owners converted into a restaurant. I was nervous that the four of us might all arrive at the same time. There would be that moment when we all looked at each other. Then, Maya would get herself evicted from the restaurant for improper behavior, never sit down with Travis Riley, and *then* truly hate me forever and ever and ever.

And ever.

But, instead, when we walked in and asked for Travis Riley, we were directed upstairs to a smaller seating area where Mr. Riley had just stood up to shake hands with Kota and Maya. It was perfect. Maya was mid-handshake with the man, so she couldn't throw punches. She was trying her best to maintain professional eye contact, so she couldn't shoot me daggers, either. It was the luckiest thing that had happened all day.

Nikki and I went to introduce ourselves, and Travis Riley snagged the server aside so that we could take a group photo. Nikki used the seconds after the photo as we were all getting out of the tense group shot to steal Kota's chair next to Mr. Riley. So, it was Nikki and Maya sandwiching Travis Riley, with me in between Kota and Maya.

Maya turned her chair so that it was angled mildly away from me and mainly toward Mr. Riley.

“Alright, to start, please call me Travis,” he genuinely implored. It was like he was used to saying that and being completely ignored.

“So, Mr. Riley, tell me what your guiding principles are, and let’s go from there,” Maya came in strong.

And going from there, it was a long night. We spoke about every issue imaginable, but by we, I mainly mean Mr. Riley and Maya, but they were talking past each other. I couldn’t tell who was the one making it difficult to communicate, but I winced at everything Maya said and wanted to shake my head at what Mr. Riley would say in response. As we got toward the end of the conversation, Mr. Riley folded up his cloth napkin and chucked it on the remains of his cedar plank salmon.

“I don’t know how else to explain it, Maya. I just can’t agree with someone who decides that ruling by their flighty emotions is the way to go about anything.”

Nikki chimed in, yelling, “Exactly!”

Maya gritted her teeth, and I could hear them grind against each other the way Phoebe used to when she would sleep in car rides, “*I don’t know how else to explain it to you!* You aren’t listening to me! Emotions are important but—”

“I never said that emotions are unimportant; I’m saying they can’t be the motivation for everything we do.”

“What else would be the motivation, huh? Emotions lead to action. I take one look at the little children who lost their big brothers to police brutality, one look at the mothers who have been raped and have to see the product of that every single day, one look at the old men who are out on the streets because they can’t get unemployment benefits. I take that one little look, and it makes me feel something. So, I gotta act!”

“Would you please stop yelling. This is a conversation.”

“I am not yelling!” Maya’s voice did technically go up a notch, but I had to agree she just sounded emphatic. I knew what Maya yelling sounded like, and it was verifiably much louder.

“I told you twenty minutes ago that the next time that happened, we were done here. And, while I like to be a man of my word, I would regret leaving.”

Maya breathed in heavily, and I thought we were done for. If Mr. Riley wanted to hear yelling, he’d annoyed Maya just enough to get what he wanted.

But surprisingly, Maya just continued in an intensely soft voice, “You can’t just hold off on helping people who need help.”

“I hear you, Maya,” Mr. Riley’s voice dropped to her level, “But, what I’m trying to tell you is plans take time, and the best plans are evidence-based. That takes data, and data takes time. Rushing to help? It only hurts. Take ‘one look’ at beggars on the street. The fast reaction would be to give them money, but, most times, that money just goes to a needle in the arm. You’re hurting more than you’re helping.”

“I get that. Again, that isn’t what I’m saying. What I’m saying is when we have an emotional response, we know that we need to act. We’ve seen problems for years and we still haven’t had any action. That’s a problem.”

“Listen, doing something now would look like throwing money at the problem. Doing something good would take time.”

Maya rolled her eyes, “I don’t need a talking point. What’s all this time done? You’ve been talking about the same issues on your radio show for years. What have you done?”

“I’ve raised awareness. We live in a democracy, so I’m getting We the People to elect people who have plans that will work, according to the evidence.”

“So, just, screw everyone else in the meantime, huh?” Maya raised her eyebrows. I saw Kota shift in his seat. He’d been doing that off and on. Nikki just stared at Travis like he was her own personal movie.

“I wouldn’t say that’s necessarily true,” Mr. Riley replied after a pause.

Nikki grinned like we were finally getting to the good part, “Tell her your plan!”

Mr. Riley shrugged, “I think there are a lot of various solutions to all the different issues from policing to education to poverty, and I could let you know each of them. But before we go and mandate my proposed solutions to everyone, I want each state to have the freedom to be able to try what they think is best. If they do that, then we can take the state that has the best results and replicate their programming. That’s one of the reasons for federalism, really.”

“Translation being that you don’t have a plan, and you want to wait an unknown number of years before we have one, letting people just fall through the cracks in the meantime,” Maya retorted.

Nikki found it appropriate to chime in again, “That isn’t what he said, you sorry excuse—”

“Nikki,” Travis sounded like my dad for one terrifying second.

Nikki wilted and mumbled, “Sorry, Travis.”

“People need to be seen *now*, not in thirty years. We don’t need to sit around suckin’ our thumbs waiting for a perfect plan.”

“Yes, but—”

“Stop,” Kota spoke for the first time, making the whole table look at him, even Nikki, “You two are saying the same thing. Maya just wants it on a federal scale immediately. I’m tired of listening to this. We’ve been here for literal hours, and all I know is that there are a lot of people who need help, but the people who can help are too busy talking to do anything. Why bother with all this jargon anyway, pretending like we care so much? I was with you, Maya, as we walked downtown. You didn’t even look at the homeless people on the street. I watched you completely ignore them. I’m not saying you’re a bad person. I’m just saying you’re so mad about people not caring about people, when you don’t always care 100% either. And, Travis, you act all calm and collected, but I can tell you’re frustrated. You don’t have all the answers, but you wish you did so much that you’re willing to talk in circles until someone latches onto something you say and supports it, like Nikki has. Neither of you is even in charge of making these decisions. What’s it matter if you two agree when no one else does?”

“I was excited for tonight ‘cause I thought it’d end with Maya being less upset and me having a plan I could tell other people about. But, instead, you guys are talking about general principles. It’s annoying. If I wanted to talk about general principles, I would’ve spent the weekend with the Mathletes again. But at least they would eventually talk about a specific problem. I don’t even get why we needed to all meet up. What was the point of this? Seriously, Mr. Riley, why meet with us if you didn’t want to sell us on a plan, even just an education one since that’s where this all started?”

Travis looked at his hands, “In the name of civil discourse. Our democracy is built on the free-flowing marketplace of ideas. Sometimes we have to talk in generals so we can get specific, and I wanted to make sure that I could hear Maya out.”

“You spent most of the night cutting me off before I could get my full on thought out to you,” Maya accused.

Mr. Riley checked his watch and let us know that he had a train to catch.

“I’ve already paid for the bill, so you can leave whenever you would like. Again, thank you for speaking with me. I’m sorry we couldn’t see eye-to-eye, Maya, but I hope you see now that I do want to hear you out.”

Then he got up and left.

Maya watched him go, her mouth popped open like he had just said something offensive.

Nikki’s devoted stare had started to crack, and now she looked a little perturbed, and she kept glancing between Kota and the top of the stairs where Mr. Riley left.

Kota’s face was stone.

Maya shoved her chair back and stalked into the restroom that was around the corner behind our table.

“I didn’t know you could talk without sounding like an idiot,” Nikki decided to say to Kota.

He just crossed his arms and looked at the table.

As the silence coagulated, Nikki got up and nearly ran down the stairs, calling out Mr. Riley’s name.

That left just Kota and me at the table.

Kota sank back into his chair a little and let out a huge breath like he had been holding it in for a while.

“I’m sorry I didn’t text you, Lydster,” Kota looked at me through his lashes, like his eyes were fighting his head, which was pulling down and away from me. His whole body looked deflated, and his voice was equally void of air to the point that I barely heard him.

“Everything feels wrong, Kota.”

“Yeah, I’m feeling that.”

“No, but I mean *everything*. I feel...well, do you...I mean...”

“Lydia, you can say whatever it is.”

“Well, I just sometimes feel like I’m missing something. Like it’s not...Like *I’m* not right. There’s something wrong, and it’s okay you didn’t text me because I’m messed up and would just mess up anything. But also, a part of me felt...*not* messed up, you know? When I went and stood with Nikki.”

“So, you feel like standing with her was the right thing to do?”

I felt like I was trying to say more than that, but I couldn’t figure it out, so I just nodded.

“On some level, Lyd, I feel that, too. It wasn’t good what was happening. We were there to talk about a cause and point out injustice, not to create more injustice. And, I heard some really rough stuff said toward Nikki and toward the police, even the POC policemen, and I don’t think that’s what most of us were there to do. It’s just that those voices were louder than our signs and our thoughts.”

“That was waxing poetic there, Kota.”

“Wax?” Kota responded, playfully picking up the candle in the middle of the table like I was referring to that in some way.

I rolled my eyes, grateful for the second of somewhat forced normalcy with Kota, but still feeling like there was something more to be said. Before I could think further on it, a cold, wet hand slapped down on my shoulder.

“EEP!”

“Oh, shut up, Lydia. It’s just me. Travis ditched but gave me some money. He said it was for an uber. I’ve got my car parked, so...here.”

She gave me the twenty bucks, which I looked at in confusion wondering if Uber took cash, and then she started to turn herself around, accompanied by a squeak from her combat boots.

“Where are you gonna go?” asked Kota before I could.

“Nonya,” she immediately responded, but she froze mid-turn and waited.

“Listen. How about the three of you go off and take the hotel for the night. I’m going anywhere but there with anyone but you,” Maya had materialized at our table. None of us saw her coming since Nikki’s back was turned to her, and Kota and I were facing Nikki’s back.

“Maya, c’mon—” Kota started.

“Kota, you know how I feel about them. And right now, I don’t think I can even look at you. This was *our* chance. *I* was making progress and then *you* went off and basically ended our conversation. I could’ve gotten him to see my side.”

“You said earlier today there wasn’t a ‘your side’ and a ‘their side,’ just the right and the wrong side.”

“You know what I meant! Why are you trying to attack me right now?”

“I’m not—”

“Kota, I’ve had enough. I can’t believe I came here with you people.”

The evil part of me wanted to say that she had just hit us with a microaggression, but something stopped me from making that awful mistake.

As Maya stomped down the stairs, I stood up next to Nikki, and so did Kota.

“What should we do?” Kota asked. He looked all empty again.

“We should follow her,” Nikki said.

My eyebrows shoot into my hairline, partly because I rarely think the same thing that Nikki does, and partly because I didn’t think Nikki cared enough about Maya to be worried about her being alone at night.

We all started down the steps together.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Shadows

After a couple of minutes of following Maya, I became concerned for her utter lack of awareness. She bulldozed her way through anyone who dared cross her path on the sidewalk, and she had no idea there were three whole people shadowing her. All the worse, it had just stopped raining when we first followed her, so the sound of our shoes splashing in puddles and our clothes wetly rubbing together really should have given us away.

I knew for certain she had no idea about her tails when she got to a small alley between two buildings and started to sob.

Maya doesn't cry. That's her rule.

Nikki's hands shot out and pushed Kota and me back. Both of us had moved forward at the same time.

Nikki whispered as low as she could, "Listen, she won't talk to us if we catch her like that. She'll be embarrassed. Let's wait until we can't hear her, and then start calling her name like we're looking for her, okay? I'll cue when."

I was surprised that Nikki knew so much about Maya already, and I was also a little confused why Kota was looking at Nikki in a kind of sad way.

The three of us leaned against the brick building behind us, listening to Maya cry. After a minute or so, the crying turned to broken singing. Maya was singing that Big Girls Don't Cry song by Fergie.

Kota chuckled low, and I just shook my head. Classic Maya.

Nikki's head was bowed low, so I couldn't see her face, but I heard her sniff a little. I couldn't tell if she was having a moment or was gearing up to sneeze.

She seemed fine, though, since her voice came out strong, yelling, "MAYA!"

I jumped and assumed that must be our cue.

"Maya!" Kota and I started to yell, pushing off the wall at the same time and wandering around the sidewalk.

"What the—" Maya started to speak as she edged out of the alleyway, but Kota was already hugging her to death.

When Maya was allowed to breathe again, she looked from me to Nikki and asked, "Why are you here?"

I felt my chin pop up. This was one thing I could do to show Maya I never meant to hurt her.

"Maya, you're my best friend. I have to be here. You can't be out here alone at night. That's dangerous. Even *your* mom would kill you for that."

Maya rolled her eyes like that still wasn't a reason for me to be there. As they stopped rolling, her eyes landed back on Nikki, silently asking her reason for joining the search party.

"I can do what I want. Buzz off."

"I tried to, but you followed me, idiot."

"Touché."

It felt like a glint of grudging respect passed between Nikki and Maya for that split second.

Then, it was just kind of awkwardly silent. As we leaned up in a row against the siding of some random brick building, I started picking at my hangnail, and by the time Maya spoke again, my thumb was bleeding.

“So...” Maya started. She looked almost relieved when we heard yelling come from up the street.

I jumped and slid behind Kota out of pure cowardly instinct. Nikki stepped forward and squared her shoulders, and Maya and Kota just cocked their heads, waiting to see what was about to happen.

The street started to get brighter. Beams of light reflected off of windows and puddles, briefly blinding me over and over again. The hollering got closer, and I started to realize the crazy, strobing lights came from flashlights as people ran. It was a massive group of people, and I was scared.

“It’s a protest!” Maya shouted.

They were finally close enough for us to see that some people had big crowbars, and still others had guns. Kota shoved me into the alleyway Maya had been crying in, and then both he and Nikki grabbed one of Maya’s arms and started pulling her back. Maya was saying that she wanted to join in. She jerked her head toward the person in the very front of the charge. In the flashing light, I could just make out a black bandana on the woman’s forehead, and I had the nagging feeling I was supposed to know her from somewhere.

Kota looked like he was going to either cry or straight up hit Maya as he pleaded with her to hide. Nikki shrugged and walked into the alleyway with me and told Kota to

let Maya make her own decisions. Kota slunk into the shadow of the alley but stood right next to me so we could both just barely see Maya.

She ran up to the crowd yelling REMEMBER and several people cheered back. Someone threw her a hammer and she raised it like a fist and fell into the section of people jogging right behind the forerunners. After those first two groups cleared, there were a couple more groups that ran past. The final group that passed announced their arrival by the sound of windows smashing.

I could see Kota's eyes widen as he turned and looked at me and Nikki.

"Hide. Better."

He whispered the words, but he punched them out like our lives depended on it. My whole body was shaking even though it was probably about 70 degrees outside. Kota grabbed my shoulders and tried to push me down the wall. He wanted me to sit, like Nikki had done on my other side.

"Hey, what are you doin' with her?" Came a low voice from the entrance of the alley.

"What do you want?" Kota asked, more harshly than I had ever heard him speak.

"To see what we're working with," and then he shined a light first in Kota's face and then in mine. The stranger's face was entirely in shadow.

"Come on, baby, I'll protect you from this guy," and he smiled at me while lowering his flashlight. My eyes adjusted just in time to see his teeth in the low light. It looked like he had taken a big bite of a caramel brownie that was as hard as a brick, breaking off parts of his teeth and leaving brown gunk behind.

I heard my own hyperventilation, and Kota turned to face the man, letting go of my shoulders. I sunk to the ground the way I should have done two minutes earlier. I hadn't seen that in the man's other hand, he was holding a piece of broken wood, but I saw it as the man cracked it against the side of Kota's head before Kota could even try to dodge. Kota flopped to the ground sideways and didn't move.

The moment his head hit the cement ground, I felt my breath catch in my throat. My eyes were frozen on his head and the bit of blood that I saw leaking to the ground. I couldn't help but gasp for breath when the man leaned down and grabbed both my wrists, yanking me up so I stood with him face to face. I tried to turn my face away because of the stench coming from him, and because, this close, I could see open sores on his face. Right when I tried to do that, he forced my hands above my head and started pushing and rubbing them into the brick.

"Look at me," he whispered, and he bent into my ear, his lips tracing my ear lobe as he said, "look at me the whole time. And enjoy it."

I felt tears rolling down my face, but I couldn't move. I couldn't scream.

I heard a low grunt and the man's head hit my neck while he dropped my wrists as he hunched over. I saw black nailed hands on his shoulders as he groaned. Nikki brought her knee down to the ground and pushed the man over while he was still groaning. She picked up the broken wood piece from earlier. This time, I saw it was a table leg, and she marched over to the man and raised it up over her head, ready to swing down.

"Nikki!" I squeaked.

I saw her whole body tighten, and then she quickly turned and lowered the table leg and sprinted to Kota.

“Help!” She snapped at me.

By some superhuman strength, I removed my eyes from the man, who was quickly recovering from Nikki’s knee to the groin, and helped Nikki pick Kota off the ground. Kota started to come to, and Nikki asked him to run. He nodded, and the three of us sprinted out of the alleyway, following Nikki blindly through the streets of D.C.

Some miracle kept us from running into anyone else. The random streets that Nikki chose to zig zag through were vacant, and I stopped trying to keep up with where we might be as the different letters of the alphabet started to get mixed in my head with states. They needed normal street names in this city.

We stopped running for just a second when Kota started puking. Nikki took that moment to drop her death grip on the wooden table leg, letting it clatter to the ground as she pulled up google maps’ walking directions. We needed to go back to the Italian restaurant where she had left her car.

We were only a couple of minutes away. Somehow our random serpentine had managed to keep us in the right vicinity.

As we approached the parking area tucked in next to the restaurant, we heard shouts. They were different from earlier. They lacked the frenetic edge and instead were more panicky. That’s when I saw the fire raging from the top windows of the restaurant. I had been so busy staring at the ground to make sure I didn’t trip in the dim light, that I hadn’t noticed it before. There was a group of waiters and chefs standing and gaping. We

had no way of knowing how long ago the fire had started, but it probably hadn't been going on for too long ago because there weren't any firetrucks yet.

We didn't confer about it, but we all moved closer to the fire watch party and stood in somber solidarity. I overheard someone on the phone asking where the firemen were, and that they had been waiting for over ten minutes, and that the fire might spread to the rest of the townhouses connected to it at this rate. The man on the phone hung up and said into the air, "They're trying to get them through the roadblocks. And protestors are blocking the streets. Places are burning up and down these blocks."

It felt like I was in a different country or a different life or something. Firefighters are fast. They're there when you need them. But not tonight. Just like there wasn't a police officer standing between me and that man in the alleyway.

I stood there feeling unequipped.

Then I heard Maya's voice.

She was standing at the front of the crowd, looking at the building.

"Can't we stop it? Can't we get water buckets? Can't we do something?"

She started to move toward the building like she was going to go inside, but the elderly couple standing next to her both put a hand on either of her shoulders. The couple seemed to be the only ones apart from my friends who didn't work there because they weren't wearing any aprons or uniforms. They were dressed in that nice way the older generation always seems to dress.

The old man spoke in a voice loud enough that I knew it was intended to be heard by everyone, "Young lady, this is my and my wife's legacy. But we'd much rather it burn

all the way down than risk anyone's life for it. It'll be hard on us and everyone here who needs it for a job, but no one's going to die just for a restaurant."

I saw his wife's head nodding in agreement, the fire making the gray in her Bantu knots stand out.

Maya took a step back with her head bowed. I was going over the merits of walking up to her when Kota grabbed my wrist. I jumped and looked at him. He then lowered himself to the ground, using me as a stabilizer. Then, he sat with his head between his knees. I could hear him murmuring in Japanese. I heard the word kami or something like that several times over.

After a couple more minutes, the firemen arrived.

Nikki and I helped Kota stand up. Maya finally turned away from the fire to look around her in that way where you could tell she was trying to decide on her next move. That's when she saw us. Her eyes got wide when she saw Kota.

He was looking a little green, and he had nearly dried blood on both sides of his head, barely covering large red spots that would surely turn into bruises in the coming hours.

She came over and took Nikki's spot holding up Kota. Maya's height difference with Nikki was noticeable in the sudden weight off my shoulders. Nikki walked ahead to where I could see the outline of her car. My breathing started to slow for the first time as I saw that it was still there and completely intact. She started the car and opened the back door closest to us. Maya and I helped ease Kota into the passenger seat, and we got into the back. I closed the door as quickly as I could to shut out the terror of the night.

By the time we got to the hotel and we each lay in bed about to sleep, I realized that we hadn't said a word the whole time. Kota, Nikki, and I hadn't said anything since leaving the alley, and Maya hadn't spoken since we left the burning restaurant behind. And yet, I never felt like I had communicated more with a group of people.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Shockwaves

I woke up with a gasp, blinking away the sight of broken teeth and oozing sores. I didn't remember moving, but I was sitting up in bed, my back pushed into the headboard and my arms gripping my pillow like a life preserver. I realized that I could see Maya standing next to the light switch on the wall closest to the cot she was sleeping on. Maya had wordlessly taken the cot last night, while Kota took Nikki's bed, and Nikki and I slept in the other bed. Now, Maya was looking between me and Nikki, eyes as wide as when she had seen Kota last night.

I glanced over at Nikki at the same time Nikki glanced at me. We were both in more or less the same position. She looked the same as I was used to seeing her, night after night when she woke up screaming.

Nikki cleared her throat, threw her pillow on the ground in an oddly perfunctory way and then went to the bathroom. I stayed how I was.

"Lydia, are you okay?"

I nodded. Wondering if the rotten smell in my nose was just left over from the dream or if that man's scent was still on me somehow.

Nikki reappeared and slid into bed, her short hair spiking in every direction that I knew she kind of liked, otherwise she would've patted it down in the bathroom.

"Maya, don't ask stupid questions, okay? Just go to bed and leave us alone like you did last night."

I bit my lip, worried this was not the time for going over events. It was the middle of the night, and we were all going through some severe adrenaline withdrawal, and Kota needed to sleep.

I stopped on that last thought.

I stood up with a curse and risked my own life by crawling over Nikki to get to Kota's bed. Nikki was taken by surprise, so she didn't have time to kill me instantaneously, and I started saying Kota's name.

Nikki stood up next to me and started to do the same thing, even venturing to poke him a few times.

Maya walked over and grabbed Nikki's hand.

"What in the world do you think you're doing? Let the boy sleep!"

"He might be concussed," Nikki said, slapping Maya's hand away.

"Oh, you want to fight?" Maya genuinely started to square up.

Kota chose that moment to groggily respond to us saying, "Huh? What?"

Maya laughed a bit, "So you wake up to a fight but not to two girls screaming their lungs out? That's messed up."

Nikki and I both looked at each other. My look was out of embarrassment, but hers seemed to be out of concern...or something. Maybe I'm just not good at reading people. But I also thought that maybe I should stop thinking so many harsh thoughts about her. Either way, I turned back to Kota.

"Hey...uhm...Kota...did you want to go to the doctor?"

I felt like an idiot for not thinking about it before. The man might have had a fractured skull for all we knew.

Looking at him now, he had a raised chunk of scabbing over skin on both sides of his head with bruises surrounding it, and his eyes could barely focus on us. But to be fair, I couldn't tell if his haziness was because of his hits to the head or because we woke him up.

"Hurts," he said as he started to open and close his mouth, smacking around like he was tasting something dry.

He gingerly touched the sides of his head and grunted.

"Let's take him to the hospital," Nikki said as she moved to get her boots. I admired the immediacy as she ignored how odd that looked with her pajama bottoms.

Kota waved his hands back and forth instead of shaking his head, "Nawnawnaw. No doc. And don't wake me up. I need sleep."

I started to speak up, "But you could be concussed so—"

"Lydster, I am always grateful you didn't decide to do pre-med. Stick with your liberal arts. Listen, that's old news. You don't wake up a concussed person. A brain bleed happens in the first six hours, and it's definitely been longer than that now."

"Is he pre-med?" Nikki whispered to no one in particular.

"Heck yeah, I am!" And he grinned like a doofus.

Maya rolled her eyes, "I say he's just fine."

"Incredible," Nikki was looking at Kota the same way people look at little children who can belt out the National Anthem.

Kota closed his eyes and visibly sunk deeper into the bed and mumbled pathetically about the bright lights blinding him, so Maya shut off the overhead light, and we all climbed back into our sleeping spots and went back to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Distortions

In the morning, I grabbed my phone while I waited for Maya to finish up in the bathroom so I could go next. I fully expected some calls and texts from my parents, who knew I was in D.C. and were probably freaked out by the protests that happened. For a brief moment, I nearly chuckled wondering why they would think I would get mixed up in anything like that. Then, I remembered that I had been completely involved and had nearly been tallied into the crime rate of last night. That made me dry swallow a bit and rush to turn my phone on to let them know I was okay.

I only had one message. It was from Mom, wishing me a good conversation with Mr. Riley.

Maybe they did have a little confidence in my ability to stay out of a mess? Kota was still trying to sleep, but I wanted to ask him if his parents had said anything. Nikki was also still conked out, but I didn't want to entertain the idea of waking her up, much less asking a question about parents she may or may not even have, considering how little I knew about her personal life.

Asking Maya seemed weird. I wasn't sure where we were on the whole friend thing, and besides, her mother would be more upset about not being in the thick of things with us than the fact that we were in the thick of things.

I texted Mom back letting her know it hadn't gone terribly well, and I was excited to go back to campus. She responded fairly quickly wishing me safe travels.

I decided to let the Kota in me say kudos to her for not worrying, and I got up to get ready right as Maya left the bathroom.

From there, I heard fragments of Maya's attempt to wake up Nikki. By the time I was done and walked out of the bathroom, I was surprised to see them both alive and unhurt. Nikki stormed into the bathroom, brushing past me, and I told Maya that I would wake up Kota.

When we were all ready to leave with our suitcases packed, we headed downstairs, all of us intent on the complimentary breakfast.

We sat down in a row at the high table in the middle of the eating area. Kota was loading up on blueberry muffins and waffles. Nikki was drinking black coffee with no food. Maya was going to town on the bacon and eggs, which she had been too pent up to eat yesterday. I was enjoying my bagels and yogurt. It felt nice. We all just sat in silence, but it wasn't overly tense.

The word "protest" caught my ear, along with the ears of my friends. We simultaneously turned our heads to the TV mounted on the wall to my left. They were talking about the protest that happened last night. I decided I didn't want to re-experience it, so I tuned out the reporter and became very interested in the small chunks of peach hidden in my Yoplait.

I only looked up again when I heard Nikki grumbling, "That's ridiculous."

"Huh?" Kota said. He had left to get more muffins instead of listening to the report but came back just in time to hear Nikki.

"They're calling it a peaceful protest."

“Which protest?” Kota looked like a cartoon of a confused person with his head cocked, his eyebrows scrunched, and his lips pursed.

“The protest from last night. Idiot.”

“I don’t think I like that word.”

“Moron.”

“Hm, not that one either.”

“Imbecile.”

“That’s getting there.”

Maya pushed her chair back to make it squeak, “Sorry. Or at least that’s what I woulda said if either of you were sayin’ something important.”

“Harsh,” Kota whispered and shot the same pout to Nikki that a little kid shoots to his friend when his mom tells him they can’t stay up an hour later at night.

“Why would they call it a peaceful protest? The firemen were late last night partly because of all the fires from the protestors...that’s not peaceful,” I said, bringing the conversation back in a way I could participate in. Banter was beyond me.

“Yeah, that seems not all the way right,” Kota agreed.

Maya just bit her bottom lip.

Nikki rolled her eyes, “It’s because they agree with the movement, so they don’t want to make it look bad.”

At that Maya looked up, “Hey, the movement isn’t bad.”

“Did I say that?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“You hear things.”

I interrupted again, feeling proud that my body didn't even react to possibly cutting off someone like Nikki or Maya, "But, it's the news, they can't do that."

"Technically they can, Lyd. Free country."

"Free," both Maya and Nikki scoffed at the same time, and then glared at each other. I felt like they must have very different concerns when it came to where we were lacking in freedoms.

"Whelp. Peaceful protest. That explains my parents not freaking out," Kota ruminated aloud.

I guess I had to take back my kudos on the not-worrying front to my parents. According to the news, there really hadn't been much to worry about anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Reality

We got back to campus with a fair bit of light left in the day. Nikki dropped Maya and me off at the dorm and then went to park her car. I was unclear on whether or not Nikki was dropping Kota off before she did that or not, but Kota didn't seem concerned about sitting in the car and finding out, so I let it be.

Maya told me she had to call her mom. She rolled her suitcase to the closest outdoor bench and started dialing. I shrugged it off and went to my room, dead set on grabbing a book and running to the Green. I wanted to soak in the last rays of sun and forget everything with a book. Or run into Creed. Either option was good.

I stood in front of my bookshelf trying to decide what to read. I narrowed it down to two books. There was a manga that Liam had given to me, and I knew he'd be happy if I read it, and then there was *Twilight*. I felt like Bella a lot, and even though I knew I wouldn't run into some intense vampire who wanted to hang out with me even more than he wanted to suck my blood, the idea was nice.

I held the manga in my left hand and *Twilight* in my right, weighing them, hoping that would help me choose.

Closing my eyes, I pictured myself reading them on the Green. Naturally, Creed also popped into my head, and then I was imagining Creed walking up on me reading a manga, and I tossed it back into my bookshelf. I started to turn for the door when my brain did me the pleasure of imagining Creed walking up on me reading *Twilight*. I tossed

that back on the shelf and grabbed *Metamorphoses*. I had no idea what it was about, but I had bought it from the bookstore last week for my ‘Classics in Brief’ class. If the book was weird, that would reflect on my professor and not on me. Besides, I had to read the first two books in it before Wednesday, and judging by how thick it was, that might not be physically possible. A part of me wanted to snag *The Great Gatsby* instead because that was due Friday for my 20th Century Literature class, and I knew I liked that book. But that part of me was dumb and lazy, so I left with Ovid and left F. Scott Fitzgerald behind.

I was worried about running into Maya on the way over to the Green, but she wasn’t on the bench outside the dorm anymore. My way into the Green was clear, and I figured I had about two hours left of sun to make a dent in the reading. I sincerely hoped it was interesting.

Settling into the tire swing felt like coming home. I opened the book and smelled the inside of it. New book smell can either be nasty like dried glue or oddly relaxing like sandalwood. This one was a solid whiff of dried glue. I coughed a bit and started to read.

It was kind of fun, but as I got to Phoebus chasing after Daphne, I started to get incredibly uncomfortable, and then my hands spazzed and dropped the book when I got to the part about Jove and Io. I didn’t want to read about the gross gods anymore. I let the book just sit in the dirt as I felt waves of nausea. My eyes were seeing rotten teeth again and my wrists felt the ghostly clamp of a stranger’s hands.

“Looks like you dropped something there,” called a voice from a couple feet away.

I looked up and tried to see past the vision of last night, knowing that if I did, I would see Creed walking toward me.

I pushed my hands over my face, starting up from my chin and ending with smoothing my hair. By the time I had done that, Creed was right in front of me, squatting to pick up the fallen book. At least, that's why I had assumed he was squatting. Instead of looking at the book, he was staring at my hands which had come to rest on my knees.

"Lydia, oh my gosh, what happened to your hands?"

I glanced quickly at the back of my hands and moved them from my knees to the chains of the tire swing so that Creed wasn't looking at the dark red scabs that striped back and forth on my hands.

"What are you doing out here today?" I swiftly asked instead, smoothly changing the subject.

"Lydia. I would love to talk about that with you, but if you want to talk about what happened to your hands, I would also be really interested."

I dug the toes of my shoes into the dirt and moved the tire swing around a bit.

"They just got scraped up."

"I haven't seen scrapes like that on somebody's hands before. Especially the back of them. If you fell, the scrapes should be on your palms or something."

I brought my hands back to the front and looked at them. I had been ignoring them since last night. When I showered, I had felt burning on my hands and the water had run red into the tub. I tried my best to clean them out by rubbing over them even though it hurt a lot. I managed to get little pieces of brick out of the wounds. They looked pretty

clean, and as long as I didn't look at them or move them too much, I forgot they were there. It was getting a little bit harder to ignore with the skin feeling like it was being tugged every time I turned a page or moved my fingers too much. Scabs were just annoying like that. The more I thought about it, the more the scabs started to itch, so I put my hands back on the tire chains, ignoring the tug of my skin.

"I'm getting kind of worried...are you okay? Did...did somebody do that to you?" Creed looked incredibly uncomfortable and then he kept going, "Sorry, I don't mean to pry. I just...sorry it's your business, I guess. But also, if you want to talk, I'm here. I just don't know what to do to help. And sometimes that means I should stop trying to help."

It sounded like he was repeating words that someone else had told him. I had the feeling that if I didn't say something, he would just keep talking, so I spoke up.

"Creed...I...I just...I didn't mean to make it look so sketchy. I just didn't know how to explain it. Plus, I'm tired of always being in a crisis whenever I get to talk to you," I got a little red on that part. I hadn't meant to say "get to."

"Hey, no one should go through any crisis alone. I want to say that you're not always in some kind of crisis...but it has sort of happened that way. But that makes sense. You come here to retreat from crises, and I guess I come here looking for one."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I come here to pray. I've been asking God to give me clear people that I can share Him with and for Him to use me for His will. Pretty much every time I've prayed that, you've appeared. That's why...well that's why I feel like something more is going on with your hands there. Did you...did you do that to yourself?"

I looked at him in shock and shook my head aggressively.

“Okay. I believe you. I’ve had a friend in the past who struggled with that, and I wasn’t there for him, and I never tried to ask. So, it’s better safe than sorry.”

“Someone did it to me.”

His eyes opened wide, “Why?”

“Well, I think the scrapes on the hand part wasn’t exactly intentional.”

Creed looked at me, waiting, with a puzzled look trying to figure out how somebody could accidentally mangle someone else’s hands. He knelt on his knees patiently.

Just like I had when I ran into Creed the last time, I word-vomited everything about the trip, from standing with Nikki against my friends to sitting with Travis Riley to running from the crackhead in the alley. I ended with saying we all made it back to campus several hours ago and that hopefully Kota was still okay and not in a coma somewhere.

“That is a lot to happen in just a couple days, jeez.”

“Yeah, it was a lot.”

“What’s the part that stands out to you the most?”

“Uhm...the one that freaks me out the most is what could have happened in the alley...but the thing that I keep thinking about is how it felt standing next to Nikki. Like everything in me didn’t want to do it, but there was this one part that knew it was right. That feeling has me so confused and thinking about that helps me forget about the scarier stuff that happened.”

“Yeah, I’m glad that’s the part you’re thinking about.”

“Why?”

“Well, because it sounds like that’s where God was in your story.”

I liked Creed, but there was something mildly annoying about him going all Evangelical all the time.

“Creed, it’s not always about God.”

At that, Creed stood up and shoved his hands deep in his pockets, his shoulders creeping up toward his ears.

“I want to say sorry, but I’m not going to apologize for speaking the truth. That moment where everything felt scary and hard, but it still felt like the right thing to do? That’s the feeling I get when I’m listening to the Holy Spirit—to God telling me what to do. It sounds like God gave you a nudge, and you went with it. That’s awesome! And I can’t help but point it out. But I understand how it can be annoying to hear me talk about God all the time, but He saved me and if there’s ever a day that you also believe in Jesus, you’ll understand how hard it is *not* to talk about Him, especially when you see Him working.”

The passion in his words and the way each word seemed to come directly from his heart made me forget that I was annoyed.

Sure, it was still a little weird to hear him talk about this stuff, but I could appreciate that it was something he really believed. And besides, whatever he believed, he was the only person who had even asked me about my hands, so I was going to talk with him whether he pelted me with some Holy Scripture or not.

“Okay...can I ask you an unrelated question?”

He nodded and walked back closer to me, looking a little relieved, like he had thought I was going to storm off or something.

“Well...I was wondering what your take on the Travis Riley stuff was?”

“Politics isn’t really my thing. I think you can probably guess where most of my fiscal thinking lies based on my being a Southern Baptist,” he smiled like I was supposed to understand what that meant, “but honestly, that’s not what I care about. People make politics such an important thing, and it’s important to an extent. But the biggest problem I see in the world isn’t the tax rate or even wars and stuff like that. The problem I see is that people don’t know Jesus!

“Yes, I would love to fix the school system, to prevent crimes, to end poverty, to do all these things that politicians talk about. But say we fix every political problem on Earth, what then? Will that end loneliness? Will that end suffering? Will that end sin? No. You could fix every structural problem ever in a broken system, but you still can’t fix a broken person. And that’s what we are. We’re broken.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t try to change the world. I mean, the Bible talks all the time about helping the widows and the orphans and those in need, but if that’s all we focus on, we miss the point. The point isn’t about saving this world. The point is that God loves us and wants us to be in relationship with Him so He sent Jesus to die for our sins and heal us so that we might live in this world with Him and go on to live with Him forever when we die or when Jesus comes back again. So, part of what it means to live in relationship with Him is to care for the people He loves.”

I never thought about what would happen if we fixed “the system” that Maya always spoke about. I just thought everything would be better. But, as I thought about all

the different things that had made me suffer in some way, some of it couldn't really be fixed by fixing the system. There was stuff that happened in my own head, like my thoughts and feelings, and then there was interacting with the people around me. Solving the problems of the world probably wouldn't make me socially adept and beautiful, nor would it make me feel less alone and less incompetent. What would it look like to focus on just...people?

For a brief moment, I remembered the woman scrubbing her shop window while that man yelled at her and spit at the cop. I wasn't sure what that had to do with anything, and I brought my brain back to the conversation at hand. A part of me felt like I needed to defend politics and protests in some way, so I did.

"Maybe it wouldn't fix everything, but at the protest, I mean not the scary one, well not the *scariest* one, but the first one, before I stood with Nikki, I could see that the people around me felt like they were really doing something! There was something good about what we were doing on some level, I just know it."

"That's fair. I'm not trying to say that there was nothing good in it. I just think that people sometimes get into the mindset that once they fix one specific major issue *then* they can be happy. But that's not how it works. If you can't be happy in some way in the circumstance that you're in right now, then you're not going to be happy even in the best of circumstances. I know it. I came from an amazing family, and I was still unhappy. I had issues and didn't see any need for Jesus. It wasn't until after I gave my life to Jesus that I could really be happy, and that was in the middle of some really rough stuff."

"Rough how?"

“It’s along the lines of what I was telling you earlier.”

“What, like, when we were talking about my hands?”

“Yeah...I lost my best friend. I didn’t know he was feeling the way that he was, and I didn’t know how important just listening to someone can be. But I have a lot of confidence that God will make all things right in the end. I suffered a lot in that time, but, back then, and right now, I still have a lot of hope. That can sound cheesy to you, but it’s the truth.”

“I’m sorry for your...loss,” I wasn’t sure what else to say. Even if I wanted to bring everything back to politics that would probably seem pretty crass. And, also, it didn’t seem that important to talk about anymore.

“Thanks for asking about it! It can be hard to ask questions about tough stuff.”

“I mainly did it because that’s what you would do.”

“I only do it because that’s what Jesus would do.”

It was silent after that.

I got a little fidgety on the tire swing after a little bit and started to subtly twirl around. Creed had sat down a couple of seconds before, leaning against the tree. He started to chuckle at me, and he asked me if I’d ever tried standing up on the swing. I informed him of my perpetual proclivity toward participating in solely non-sport activities like sitting and standing and mild swaying. Standing on top of a tire swing sounded like a recipe for disaster, or at the very least, for a broken arm.

“Let me show you how it’s done, and you’ll see it’s not scary! There’s a very low chance of injury, trust me,” Creed sounded excited, and it occurred to me that he and Kota would probably get along.

I did my boot-scoot, leg-hug, back-bend, overall painful-to-watch self-extraction from the tire swing while Creed pointedly looked away. I would have, too.

After I was recovering my breath on the ground, Creed crawled into the middle of the tire, stood up, grabbed the main chain and pulled himself up so he stood with his legs on opposite sides of the tire, his feet planted between the two little rings that held the tire up. He started doing some weird dance to make the tire start to swing back and forth. He managed to make it look almost cool, a feat I could never dream of.

He was laughing and shimmying, and I couldn't help but start to laugh, too. Creed was always seconds away from a laugh when he wasn't staring me down and asking me to bare my feelings.

"Alright, come on!" He beckoned at me and started to swing around even faster. It hadn't really been too windy, but just at that moment the breeze picked up to help his momentum.

"That looks a little rough to me...I'll stay here!"

"Don't be afraid!"

I just shook my head and wished he would get down so he could stand next to me. It was like he read my thoughts because as I thought it, he immediately hopped off the swing and stood on solid ground with me, and out of nowhere gave me a hug.

He let go before I had a chance to think about hugging him back. He stepped back and tried to ruin the moment, laughing uncomfortably and saying, "Sorry! I just was grateful, and I don't want you to think I—"

My phone rang, cutting him off. I thought about ignoring it but was too interested in finding out why Nikki of all people would call me. The only reason I even had her

number was from when she called me the other day while I was panicking on a yoga ball.

Does this mean we called each other now?

“Lydia.”

“Nikki?”

“Where are you?”

“At the Green?”

“Okay. I guess I didn’t need to know that,” she started to curse instead of just saying uhm like a normal person, “okay. Here’s what you need to know. Kota and I are at the closest hospital that pulled up on my GPS. He kind of blacked out for a few seconds in the car, and then when I tried to drop him off at his dorm, he took a few steps, stumbled, puked, and then looked at me like he didn’t know who I was. So, I shoved him in the car and drove him over here. They’re taking him in now. I don’t have his parents’ numbers and who the frick knows if he can even remember their names much less their numbers.”

I was so busy trying to understand what she wanted from me that I didn’t even have a chance to freak out over what was happening to Kota. After a brief pause of my brain working overtime, it finally clicked.

“So, you want me to figure out how to reach his parents?”

“Yeah that.”

“I can do that.”

“Okay. I’ll be here,” as she fumbled to hang up, I could hear Nikki mumble, “how do I even get mixed up in this garbage?”

Creed didn’t ask any questions and waited while I started dialing up Maya’s mom.

My parents don't speak to other parents. But even they had somehow started talking to Maya's mom, and that was only a week into me knowing Maya. Maya's mother had even ventured to call me a few times. Her mentality is "a friend of Maya's is a friend of mine along with any of that person's family members."

On the second ring, Mrs. Thomas picked up. I had to mentally prepare myself to call her Jasmine the way she insisted.

"Jasmine!"

"Lydia, hello."

Her tone was incredibly unhappy and not at all what I expected. Every other time I spoke with her or heard Maya speak to her, she had some interesting way to start the conversation, like making me describe my day in five words.

"Hi, uh, sorry to disturb, it's about—"

"If you have a problem with my daughter, then—"

"Kota. It's a problem with Kota. He's in the hospital. We need to reach his parents."

"Oh," there were a couple of beats, "What happened?"

"He got hit in the head."

"Do you want his mother's number? Or for me to call?"

"I-uh, I mean, whatever seems—"

"Oh, please. I'll call. It'll be more efficient."

Then, she hung up.

I turned to Creed, who asked how he could help and what I wanted to do.

I picked up my book and asked him to take me to the hospital.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Visitation

Several hours later, I was walking into the ICU to see Kota. Somehow or another, Kota's parents were able to communicate about Kota's health with the doctors and let me and Nikki know what had happened. The blow to the head, and the subsequent knock on the cement, had created two places of pressure. Usually, doctors would wait a couple of days before thinking about surgery to reduce the swelling because it could go down on its own, but Kota's head had already swelled significantly, to the point they needed to do surgery immediately. Apparently, Kota could have been seriously messed up if Nikki hadn't manhandled him into the hospital. His parents were beside themselves, and there was a high possibility at least one of them was already on a flight here.

For now, though, it was just me and Nikki walking up to see Kota lying in bed with tubes sticking out of him and white gauze wrapped all the way around his head. He was sedated to high heaven and wasn't conscious when we walked in.

"Aren't you going to talk to him or some crap like that?" Nikki jabbed me in the side.

"Hey! I don't know. Am I supposed to?"

"You're his friend; I don't know."

A nurse popped in for a second and told us visiting hours were done in two minutes.

"Jerks. Take forever to let us back here and then try to yank us out before we can even do anything helpful," Nikki oozed aggression.

I walked up to Kota. Movies always showed people talking to and holding hands with the tubed-up person, so I figured I would try that.

Instead of holding hands, since that seemed odd, I placed my fingertips in his and did a little mini hand hug and said thanks for protecting Nikki and me. Then Nikki and I left. I had told Creed to just drop me off because Nikki could drive me home, and so that night, Nikki and I actually went to bed at the same time in our rooms, both falling asleep, and neither of us making it all the way through the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Awakening

Early the next morning, Nikki and I made our way over to the hospital. Visiting hours were at 6, and Nikki threw a pillow at my head promptly at 5:30. In the morning. Even though she was the one who forced us to be up so early, she kept glaring at me whenever we hit a red light on the way to the hospital, like I had not only awakened her to drive me, but had also made sure to contact the people in charge of the stoplight system to ensure my success in ruining her whole day.

An idea passed through my mind that made me start to gnaw at my lip. It seemed scary and wrong. But, right.

I peeked back to see if Nikki was still dead-eyeing me, and she was.

Instead of looking away, I took a deep breath and asked, “Hey, Nikki, are you feeling okay? How are you doing?” And I tried my best to really mean it. To just really want to know if she was okay.

Her angry mask lifted for one second as she blinked really quickly. The light turned green and she punched the gas, jerking my head back into the headrest. I watched as her hands tightened on the wheel, and her eyes darted to every mirror even though we were driving straight on a two-lane.

“Whatever,” she finally said.

“I don’t know what that means,” I said as matter-of-factly as I could, but it still came out pretty much in question form.

“What do you care? ‘How are you doing?’ What kind of question even is that? How am I doing? Who the frick cares?” With each question, Nikki’s tone of voice got lower and lower. The last part I was pretty confident I wasn’t supposed to hear.

A part of me just kind of asked somebody for help. Because I felt like this was good, but it also felt like water that was too deep for me. I needed someone to help. With nothing clear to say, I just kept looking at Nikki.

She kept sliding back in her seat and then scooting forward, and then switching back and forth from 10 and 2 on the steering wheel to 7 and 5.

“Would you stop looking at me? It’s weird. You’re weird.”

My eyes immediately drifted away, and just caught Nikki turning the ticker on so we could pull into the hospital parking lot.

There were more cars than I expected with it being so early in the day, but not nearly as many as there were the other night.

We walked up to the receptionist and tried to go see Kota, but she said it was best to wait until we got called back because he was resting. I wasn’t even sure hospitals could just do that, but then I heard a woman’s voice saying my name, and I turned around.

“Yes! Lydia!” A relieved looking woman appeared. I recognized her from the lockscreen of Kota’s phone where he had a picture of him with his parents on top of a mountain they climbed. Judging from the pure sport that emanated off of this woman alone, I would have thought it was his mother.

“Mrs. Goto!” I said and tried to think if I should hug her or give her a handshake or what.

Out of nowhere, Nikki stepped forward, “Mrs. Goto, my name’s Nikki. Your son is great. I am so sorry you have to worry about him. He’s going to be okay.”

And then she hugged the woman.

My brain could not process what the heck just happened.

Mrs. Goto patted Nikki on the back then guided us over to sit with her. We tried to talk the best we could, but it didn’t feel right to chit chat, and it was a little difficult to communicate well with Kota’s mom because she was better at understanding English than she was at speaking it. So, when she would speak, Nikki and I would have to do some guesswork and ask her to rephrase sometimes. I got the sense that Mrs. Goto just wanted to not be alone; she didn’t need entertainment or small talk.

After about twenty minutes, the nurse came and told us that Kota was waking up and seemed to be functioning well. They were hopeful for release the next day.

It was such a relief.

The nurse was very reluctant to let us all in, but Mrs. Goto held our hands and just kept walking, acting like she either didn’t hear or didn’t understand what the nurse was saying. The nurse let it go, and then we were in.

Kota looked a lot better with no tubes except for an IV. The white gauze wasn’t wrapped around his head, instead there were two heavy duty bandages on either side of his head.

“I’m aliiiiiiiive!” He called in a stage whisper of what might have been some *Frankenstein* reference. I wasn’t sure, so I laughed just in case.

“If you weren’t hospitalized, I’d hit you,” Nikki said.

His mom just smiled.

I felt like maybe Nikki and I should have let Mrs. Goto have a moment with her son, but it seemed fine. She just sat down and held his hand, and they started to talk in Japanese.

Nikki whispered to me, “He speaks Japanese?”

“I mean, yes?” I wasn’t sure what she expected me to say. No?

That’s when my phone alarm went off. Nikki and I both had class on Monday. Although my class was an hour and a half ahead of Nikki’s, she had agreed to drive me back anyway.

We hugged Mrs. Goto, and Kota gave us both fist bumps. As we were about to head out the door, he asked where Maya was.

Kota stared me down waiting.

“Uhm. Well. I thought. Well, I’m pretty sure...fairly confident...it would be weird if not, but I think she knows you’re here. I told her mom. It would make sense for her to know. But, I guess, I can’t say that I actually fully know if she knows that you’re...you know.”

“Lydia. I have a brain injury. Please speak in a language I understand more easily than whatever that was.”

Nikki interjected, “She might know. Not sure. But, she’s not here. We don’t need her anyway.”

Kota and I looked at Nikki. I wasn’t sure where the whole ‘we’ thing was coming from, but Kota seemed fixed on the Maya not knowing part.

“Guys, Maya would probably want to know. I’m not a hospital diva or anything, I don't need the whole school to turn out, or even you guys, but I think she’d be hurt that you didn’t tell her.”

I felt...chastened.

Nikki rolled her eyes and produced her phone. She started to type on it then stopped. She rolled her eyes again and shoved her phone in her back pocket and crossed her arms.

“You do it,” she muttered.

“Huh?”

“You are dense. Call Maya. I don’t have her number.”

“Oh, okay, alright. Yeah.”

It felt like too much pressure to call and talk in front of everyone, so I turned to leave. Nikki took that as our exit, so we both walked out, leaving Kota and his mom to catch up.

I got out my phone and dialed. It was an eternity as the phone kept ringing and ringing. It went to voicemail and I tried to explain about Kota being in the hospital, but that he was mainly okay. The success rate of my message getting across coherently was low to start with, so I didn’t even regret how disjointed it was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Connection

I made it through Monday and Tuesday classes, excited to go to the hospital as part of Kota's welcome-out-of-the-hospital entourage.

Maya still hadn't called me back, but Kota had texted to let me know that she had swung by and hung out with him. So, there was that.

I hadn't seen Nikki too much but it had been less hostile in the room, and I was almost 30% confident she kind of smiled at me in the morning. That's 30% more confident than I have ever been that she has even remotely looked in my direction with an absence of dislike. It made me feel less claustrophobic as I got in her car to drive over to the hospital. When we got in to start heading over to the hospital, she blasted her music. But, technically, if I spoke louder than usual, she would be able to hear me. Progress!

We got to the hospital right as Mrs. Goto wheeled Kota out. He stood up from the mandatory wheelchair, gave it a curtsy, hugged his mom, then stole my passenger seat. His mom waved us off.

Nikki and Kota bantered the whole way back to campus about hospital food and fainting princesses and random things that I couldn't follow. They were laughing before I could even decipher the references they were making.

It was kind of nice. It was good to see Nikki actually laugh. And not sardonically. Although, it wouldn't have hurt if they had said something I could understand.

When we pulled up to Kota's dorm, we saw Maya sitting on a bench. I saw Nikki's face reclaim its cloud while Kota slowly climbed out of the car and started to walk over to Maya.

I debated the merits of hiding in the car, but then Nikki got out and opened my door and demanded I get out.

So, I got out.

We walked over as Kota sat on the bench next to Maya.

"Lazy. You've been laying around for days," Nikki joked.

Kota smiled and stretched, "You mean proactive. Here I am sitting, after days laying around. I am a miracle."

Maya laughed at that, "Yeah, you're a miracle, alright, being the way you are and still havin' friends."

That got me to laugh, and I felt my stomach tighten. Just a few days ago the three of us laughed all night long in a hotel room, and now here I was unsure if I was allowed to laugh at all.

"You're right though," Kota said, suddenly serious.

We all looked at him a little confused, Maya pulling her knee up to her chin and cocking her head, Nikki crossing her arms and raising her eyebrows, and me saying, "oh?"

"Yeah. I just had a lot of time to think about things. And, I want to be someone who deserves to have good friends. But, I have to be a good friend first. We've been doing a friendship series in my Bible study the past month, and I think we could be great friends. That includes you, Nikki."

Nikki had started to hug her arms tighter and just look overall uncomfortable.

Maya spoke up, “You’ve been doing a series in a Bible study? What?”

“Yeah...one of my multicultural affairs buddies plugged me in. I used to love going to church and stuff, but stopped in high school. But, anyway, I just want to live differently. And, I know I’m fine right now, but I just, I had some real clarity, okay? I think you guys are great, and I want to be a real friend to you guys, but I haven’t invested. Can you forgive me?”

This was weird.

Nikki’s whole face scrunched up, “Forgive you?”

“Yeah. This is me telling all three of you that I want to be your friend. A real friend. Forgive me for not being real about it sooner and for not investing.”

“I barely know you,” Nikki said with a stubborn edge in her voice as her usual destroy-whatever-anyone-else-says attitude came back in full swing.

“Well, can I get to know you?”

Nikki started to blink a lot like she had in the car, “Whatever.”

“I’ll take that as a yes! And you’re right to be a little confused about the forgive me stuff, that was mainly for Lydster and Maya.”

“I-” Maya and I started at the same time.

I stopped speaking and Maya continued, “I think I might be the one who should be going on and asking for forgiveness. I shouldn’t have left you that night. If I had been there, I would have made sure you didn’t go and get yourself hurt.”

I hadn’t thought about that take on everything. Maybe it would have happened differently if she hadn’t run off.

“What? So we’re the losers who let him get nearly clocked to death? That’s rich,” Nikki had a talent for finding the hidden incendiary note.

“Well, I don’t see either one of you with any bruises or scars or hospital bracelets,” Maya retorted.

“Yeah? Look at Lydia’s hands and tell me that again,” Nikki was seething. I hadn’t seen her like this before. She wasn’t just being contrary; she was genuinely outraged.

Kota and Maya both looked at me surprised. I held up my hands with my palms facing them like I was trying to claim innocence.

“Turn them around,” Nikki said, but with no anger. She was just firm and looking at me expectantly. Obediently, I flipped my hands to face Maya and Kota. They both started to ask me what happened. Looking at them again, it really did look bad. It was a bunch of scrapes latticed over one another. But, at this point, they didn’t hurt. It just looked really painful.

I flipped my hands back over, pleading innocence again, “I’m fine!”

Nikki then launched into a retelling of what happened in the alleyway after Maya “deserted.”

I felt like it was a little unnecessary since Kota was the one hospitalized, and I just had scrapes on my hands, which I had already forgotten about for the most part anyway.

Maya stood up and hugged me. She took a step back and said, “I knew you weren’t okay that night. I saw it. You weren’t okay. I’m sorry. That could’ve gone so bad, Lydia. Like bad, bad.”

I nodded my head, not sure what else to do or say.

“Sure, right,” Nikki scoffed, “Act like you care. People don’t care. At least most people. Lydia does. I bet Kota does. You don’t. You just wanna look good. Get out.”

Kota stood up, “Hey, that’s not fair.”

Nikki looked at me, expectant.

“I think Maya cares a lot. It’s just there’s so much caring and it gets all confused sometimes but she still cares, it’s just not all sent out the way she means to, is all.”

Kota started laughing and Maya looked relieved. Nikki pressed her palms into her eyes like she had a massive headache.

“Lydia, she doesn’t care. If she cared, she wouldn’t have left us. If she cared, she would have listened to us. When people don’t listen or stay, they don’t care, okay?”

Nikki said this all with her hands over her eyes, saying it like it made the most sense in the world and like it pained her to have to explain something so simple.

We kind of all just looked at her until she lowered her hands, looked at us, and then turned and walked back to her car.

She left, and we all looked at each other. Maya and I both shrugged at the same time, unsure what to do next. Kota started itching his left ear as he watched Nikki’s car pull away.

Then he grinned at us, wider than any smile I’ve ever seen him give, and declared, “We’ll have to prove her wrong. We do care, and she’s gonna feel it.”

Maya looked at him like he had just asked her to befriend a rabid dog, and I felt pretty much the same.

Then his smile got a little more mischievous, and he wriggled his eyebrows at Maya, “Maya, so you’re down, right?”

Something about the atmosphere around us kind of shifted, and Maya started to mirror his sly grin, turning to me to say, “Lydia, this is going to be a thing.”

I had the strongest sense of déjà vu, but there was this growing sense of excitement that overpowered it almost immediately.

“I don’t think I really get the whole ‘thing’ that’s happening right now, but I’m in,” the words came out of my mouth, and I didn’t feel a moment’s hesitation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lydia

For the next month-and-a-half, everything Kota and Maya wanted to do was blasted in the group chat they made with themselves along with Nikki and me. A lot of the aggression I thought Nikki had gotten over came full frontal directed at me. She thought we were making fun of her or something. Kota coached me on how to handle it, which was basically to only say nice things and ask “So, would you like to come, because I would love to wait for you.”

I was too scared the first six times she berated me to really say anything except “No, we want you to come,” as I ran out the door to go to lunch or some random late-night event the school put on that Kota had sent earlier in the day. But, the seventh time, Kota’s lessons sank in, because it all came out of my mouth just how he had said.

Nikki stopped mid-sentence, and then she came. The first thing she came to was this late-night art session the school provided in the student union building. It turns out, Nikki could actually paint, and she was a lot less scary when focused on painting rather than on my general person.

I was still a little thrown off by Kota’s whole focus on friendship. I hadn’t lain around in a hospital contemplating life and its meaning and all of that, but whatever happened, it did change Kota. He was still goofy and fun and all, but he just really would stand still and look at me or Maya or Nikki when we spoke and he was always checking in and asking how we were. It was weird, and it kind of started to make us check on him and each other all the time. I was even doing it with my family. I started to call my

parents outside of our usual weekly chats and asked questions about their lives, work, moving. I even knew some of Phoebe's friends' names. It was so weird. I never knew more about what my family or my friends actually did every day. Especially Nikki. I had kind of imagined she went around finding the insecure and making them cry, but turns out the girl spent most of her waking hours in class and studying. Although, I was right about her penchant for partying and general preference for sketchy areas.

As I left the room bright and early on my third to last Saturday morning of the semester, bundled in a hat, gloves, and winter coat, intent on my tire swing, I wondered if I would run into Creed. Since the day Kota was hospitalized, I had only seen him once.

It was on a random Thursday. Well, in my head, it is now "the day before I knew I had actual, legit friends," but at the time, it was a random Thursday.

It was getting toward dusk, and I wanted to go outside before it got too dark. I had been stuck inside all day doing homework even though my Thursday class got canceled because my professor was sick. It was actually lucky because I probably would have been working past dinner if I hadn't gotten that time back.

In the last moments of warm sun for the season, I strolled around the Green, breathing in and out, and worrying about Maya.

We were all focused on getting Nikki to hang out with us. It's what we talked about, and it was kind of a game in a way, and I liked it. Kota and Maya planned things and I was able to just let them know how she was responding. I was like a spy for their mission. But, Maya and I hadn't hung out 1:1 since the D.C. trip. Because of that, I had time to do a bunch of extra credit in my classes, but I wasn't sure that was my favorite trade-off. Kota and I had gotten closer, and I even walked him to a few of his Bible

studies and tried to climb the rock wall with him again. He didn't really hurt my feelings anymore, and the one or two times he did, he apologized and said he was working on his language, which I thought was funny because the only person who spoke kinder than he did was Creed.

But, either way, I tried to use the stroll to think about me and Maya. If we were characters in a book, we'd have to have some kind of big moment of reunion or something. We couldn't just hang around each other and not talk about what happened, right? The stroll ended up turning into me trying to figure out what had even happened. All I could remember were her eyes when they looked at me like I was a traitor and sold her out for the other side.

I started talking in my head in circles, telling myself I was the worst but also that I did nothing wrong but also I should do something but also how could I do anything productive but also just be a better friend but also am I racist?

It felt like this whole time, ever since I came to Encounter, that I was a blind man wandering around trying my best to listen to what the voices around me were telling me to do, and the more I tried to, the more I heard wrong and ran into stuff, breaking things or getting hurt.

The stress of it all coupled with my progressively faster speed as I walked started to make me sweat, and I could feel my face burning more than usual.

“Hey!”

I turned around, startled. Honestly, it was kind of creepy how often I ran into him in the Green, but we both liked it here and came here often, so maybe it wasn't creepy.

But still. Why'd he always have to show up when I'm in crisis or sweaty? I mean, come on. If there was a God, He's got a twisted sense of humor.

"Hi, Creed," I said, unable to keep the dejected tone out of my voice, both from me being gross and from not knowing what to do about Maya.

"Here," he offered me a dark brown handkerchief that I am only now realizing might have been dark brown because it was dripping wet.

"Uh?"

"I thought you might need to cool down. You walked past me kind of mumbling," he gestured right behind us where apparently he had been sitting on a bench, "And I had put some ice in my water bottle, but it was mainly melted, so I threw some of the cold water on this handkerchief."

"Uhm, okay?"

Creed started to lower the soggy fabric, but then I finally made the connection that he wanted me to wipe my face with it or something, so I snagged it from him.

"Sorry, I mean, thanks, I guess, haha," I took it and wiped around my eyes, "So, it's kind of weird you have a handkerchief."

"We played a game earlier this week at youth group. You have to blind fold one of the kids for it, so I've had that in my backpack all week."

I pulled it away from hands and handed it back, wondering how many kid germs I had just dabbed my face with.

"Thanks."

"So, Lydia, what are you trying to figure out? Or were you mumbling for fun?"

I sighed and we both naturally walked over to the bench he had left his bag on. I caught him up on how Kota was doing and explained that Maya and I had tacitly self-relegated our friendship to group settings.

By the end of it, he just kind of smiled at me.

“What?”

“I don’t know if you want advice or not,” he said, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees.

“I mean…” I guess technically, I really hadn’t been looking for advice, but on second thought, “I think I might need some.”

He nodded slowly, threw his hands behind him on the bench and looked up for a second before turning his head back to me.

“I think you have to talk to her.”

I felt like that was too simple to even try. Besides, talking hadn’t really gone over well with Travis Riley and Maya.

But then he kept talking, “And I know that’s kind of a simple thing to say, or too obvious, and maybe you just don’t know what to say to her but you’re already planning on speaking to her. But, just in case that wasn’t what you were thinking, I needed to say it. It’s way better to just talk to someone than it is to let it fester!”

He was making me queasy, “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

He nodded and stood up, stretching the way people do when they get out of a car after driving for way too long.

“I understand. And, it works out, because I have to go. Turns out, I need to meet up with Kota.”

I gaped at him for a second, “You know Kota?”

“He’s in Bible study. There aren’t really that many Christians on campus; we kind of find each other.”

It made me really uncomfortable that my Creed world was suddenly colliding with my only other world. Creed was...mine? I don’t know. That’s not right. But. Creed existed in the Green. He didn’t exist anywhere else.

He started walking, “But, thanks for the hospital updates! I thought I should tell you I knew him because, well, it seems like you didn’t know! Anyway, see ya!”

He was nearly out of sight when he stopped and walked back toward me a few paces, “Hey, Lydia. What helps me figure out what to do...Well, I take a shower and pray, and usually that helps me see more clearly.”

Then, he left.

I felt like he had just told me that I was nasty and needed to wash up. Which wouldn’t be wrong. But, then again, I trusted Creed on some weird level. So, I tried it. I went and showered, and I might have prayed. Somewhat. I wasn’t confident on the whole praying part in general. But, I tried to take his advice.

By the time I got out of the shower, I finally shook that blind, wandering man feeling, and I knew I had to meet up with Maya. So, for the first time all semester, I asked Maya if she wanted to catch dinner. She used to always be the one to ask me.

I went down to the dining hall five minutes before I asked Maya to meet me. She hadn’t responded to my text, but I had a feeling that if she was going to come, she would walk in around ten minutes after I asked her to come to see if I had stuck it out anyway.

I sat for a couple of minutes with a sad plate of fries in front of me, using one fry to drag ketchup around my mini side plate instead of agonizing over my phone and whether to text Maya again. As I tried to make a ketchup butterfly, a plate of lettuce and ranch smacked down across from me, and I looked up to see Maya, who just looked back at me.

I hadn't planned out what to do next. That's when I realized I had never actually thought Maya was going to come. After she never reached out to me again, I knew she was still seething about what happened in D.C. My brief moment of relief when I thought Maya and I were back to normal, back when she had hugged me two weeks ago, dissipated more and more with each day she ghosted me.

"I-I didn't, I wasn't thinking you'd come," I stammered.

Maya's shoulders relaxed, she pulled out the chair, and she leaned back against it as she crossed her legs, leaning over them to get eye level with me as we sat, "Lydia. I wasn't thinking you'd want to talk to me."

I shook my head, confused. She was mad at me. I broke trust with her. If anything, it was awful that I pressured her to come meet with me when I should be letting her take her time.

"Lydia. I've been talking to Kota. When he was in the hospital, I got to talk to him a lot about what happened that weekend, and I...it's not that I'm not upset. It's just maybe I shouldn't be all upset at you. We all make mistakes."

Mistakes hit me in a weird way. I felt bad for hurting Maya. But, I wasn't sure what she was calling a mistake. Standing with Nikki wasn't a mistake...maybe she was saying she made a mistake?

“It’s okay, Maya, I’m not upset with you. I just wanted you to know that I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings.”

Maya uncrossed her legs and scooted her chair closer, crossing her arms on the table and leaning against them.

“So, why did you do it?” She asked, and I felt the undercurrent of ‘why did you leave me?’

“Because...Nikki was all alone.”

“But Nikki wasn’t doing a good thing. You have to let people make their wrong choices, Lydia.”

I felt like this was not what the conversation was supposed to be.

“If you were standing alone, I would’ve stood with you, though!”

“Sure. Of course you woulda. Except, you didn’t come with me to join that second protest. You hung back in the alleyway then. So, actually, no, no you wouldn’t stand with me.”

She breathed in and out really quickly, then kept going, “So, you’re not sorry? You think what you did was okay? It’s okay that Nikki might feel whatever. But, you’re my friend. You can’t just look at me and tell me that I shouldn’t voice my opinions. You know better. You know me. You know there’s a problem. I thought you got that. I thought that was why you stood up for me in front of Nikki. You know I’m right, that’s how you know I care about you and everything that’s happening.”

As she was speaking, her hands clenched her arms tighter and tighter and her voice got lower and lower.

I just don't understand how other people's brains work. When did I ever say that she shouldn't speak up? What was happening? I couldn't fully comprehend. I thought she mainly just figured I was a secret major supporter of police brutality or was getting back at her for something, and I could have cleared that up and said that no, in fact, I was not on either point. But, there I was with someone who thought I had a full blown agenda against her.

“Maya...what? No, I don't...I never said...I just wanted—”

“You wanted what?”

Suddenly, I was tired of just kind of fumbling my way through everything. If it was better to just get everything out there, if that was a way not to have everything fester, then this was the time.

I looked at Maya.

I didn't just see Maya that was sitting in front of me, hurt, expectant. I saw Maya from day one, the one who made me be honest about how I was feeling. I saw Maya who insisted Kota be our friend. I saw Maya who cared so much about equality and freedom. I saw Maya who sometimes laughed so hard she coughs. I saw Maya who can speak in front of crowds and strangers and friends. I saw Maya who loved her mom. I saw Maya who loved me. I saw Maya from the D.C. protest who thought I didn't love her back. I saw Maya who hugged me anyway when she thought I was in trouble.

She was my friend, and she was hurting. And, I helped cause that, even though I meant well.

“I want...I wanted to be like you, Maya. I wanted to be passionate and caring and bold and deep and cool. And when I finally was, it meant I couldn't stand next to you.

But, I wasn't *against* you, Maya. I was just...I was just not okay with Nikki being alone. Not when people were yelling at her. We shouldn't...I don't think we can just yell at people. If you're mad at a system, address the system. If you're mad at a person, address the person. You can't just be mad. And—but, I mean, that's not to say that you're just being mad. I've seen you DO actual good stuff. But, right then, that whole group of people wasn't doing anything helpful and good. Like that guy in the alleyway wasn't being helpful and good. There are people like you who are doing good, helpful things. But that's not everyone, and I won't be like them. I'll be like you; but not like them. I like who you are, Maya, but I don't like what anger makes anyone. But, I don't want to hurt you. But—but, but," I felt the words I was about to say hit my tongue and I tried my best not to stroke out as I said them, "*But* I'd rather hurt your feelings than pretend I believe in stuff that I don't. And if I have to believe everything you believe to be your friend, then...then I guess...I guess we can't be friends. Even though. I think you're great. And a great friend. Mostly."

Maya got up and walked out of the cafeteria. I felt like I was saying goodbye to one of my first real friends. She actually used to want to hang out with me. Just me. And she wasn't even related to me. So, she didn't have to. But she did.

I fully embraced the sad kid in a public space vibe by getting up and walking gracefully to the bathroom, only running into two different chairs and one table on the way.

Later that night, I got a text from Maya.

It read:

"hey. sorry 4 just leaving. i talked it over with momma j. made me angrier. then i talked it over with Kota. And that made me angry. But different angry. And now im not angry.

proud of you 4 saying what you meant. that was impressive. thats what id want me to say. lets try again. breakfast? same cafeteria, diff table? dont want negative energy from last night”

And, so, we got breakfast the next day. She was shocked by my lack of genuine passion for either side in the police/race debate, and she struggled to understand that it wasn't because I didn't care. I just felt like there was way too much decent reason to be on either side. That didn't mean people shouldn't say their opinions, just that I don't have a strong one, and I could see arguments for both sides. I also finally told her about Creed and how he helped push me to talk to her, because she was genuinely surprised I reached out.

It was nice to talk to someone else about the stuff Creed has said to me and what Kota has been saying to Maya. It was...neat. We had an actual conversation. I hadn't realized how much time I spent “talking with” people where I just listened or asked questions. I never shared my own opinion. Actually, I didn't really know I had many of them anyway. And, for some reason, it was very relaxing to be able to talk about our thoughts on God because we were both in the same spot in all of that. Neither of us had more of a claim on the subject, and I ended up realizing what I was trying to tell Kota back at the restaurant before everything went to near pandemonium.

I don't feel right, and I am messed up. But, I don't *need* to be perfect. I just need to try to do the right thing, like I see Kota and Creed trying, like I tried with Nikki. And, it makes me want to know more about this God who drives them to try.

It's still something hard for me to explain, but Maya understood what I was trying to say when I explained it. And, that's what mattered to me.

But, anyway, all of that to say, I was wondering if I would run into Creed as I settled into my tire swing on one of the last Saturdays of the semester.

I was proudly reading my *Twilight* book, considering the different take on eternity than what I'd been hearing from Kota the past month or so. As Edward kissed Bella's neck, I wondered if that really was enough for forever because I wasn't so sure anymore. I used to. I had thought every person had some other person they were supposed to run into and find 'enough' in. Like Edward and Bella, or Jane and Mr. Rochester. And when we didn't find it, or if we lost it, then we'd just be hunting and unwhole for forever. I thought that was why I wasn't whole. But...

"*Twilight?* What happened to your actual books?" Creed stood with his hands in his pockets, his smile impish like Kota's.

"This *is* an actual book."

"That was really confident of you to claim."

I got a little red and lifted my chin up, "Actual books create actual thoughts. And I'm having actual thoughts, thank you very much."

Creed reached out and tugged on the chain closest to him on the tire swing, making me swivel right to left.

"So, what are your actual thoughts? And do they have to do with Maya?"

I shook my head, "I know you know Kota now. You and your..." I started waving my hands around my head trying to come up with the words for the way he makes me spill my internal thoughts, "well you know. You're get-people-to-spill-their-life-stories thing. You used that on Kota already, so, so you know Maya and I are good."

“Just because you’re good doesn’t mean you’re not thinking about Maya,” he raised his eyebrows, obviously proud of his response.

I stood up, letting the book fall to the ground.

“I was thinking about eternal life, actually,” I told him, realizing that I was officially in the kiss or kill zone I learned about in high school drama class.

My eyes drifted down to his mouth, knowing that was my option since I wasn’t of murderous intent.

I watched as his smile grew, “Eternal life? You want to be a vampire or are we talking about something else?”

The conversation was completely beyond me at this point. Whatever deeper thoughts I had were gone, and I was wondering how to close the distance between his smile and mine.

As I took a step forward, he took a step back.

“Hey! Sorry, didn’t realize I was standing that close. Sorry,” for added measure he took a few more steps back.

I swallowed hard realizing I had just actually tried to make a move on this guy I basically didn’t know. He was just a dude I ran into a few times. Seven times, to be exact, and every time it was completely unintentional. What was wrong with me? I didn’t even know if this kid had a girlfriend or something. That thought freaked me out extra, and before I knew it, there I was asking:

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

I wasn't even asking for personal benefit at that point; I was just curious. But given the circumstances, it was a rough spot to put Creed in. His eyes went wide and his face was actually redder than mine must have been.

"Listen, I am so sorry if I gave that impression at all. I think you're great, and I would love to be friends, and--"

I started waving my hands to try and get him to stop this trainwreck, "No, no, no, I was just curious. I mean yes, I may have been kind of earlier seeming to uh maybe, but I don't...it just occurred to me that I know nothing about you. You know a lot about me. But, here I was being the way that I was, well, I guess you were there, obviously, and I uhm figured maybe I should know you before I even thought about stuff like what I was thinking, which, to be clear, I wasn't thinking, really. But if I just made this weird then..."

"I...I don't know. I mean. Do you...like me?" Creed looked like he was trying really hard to look calm. He was achieving the look overall, except for the way his eyes would dart away from me every five seconds.

"I think I could," I mumbled that sentence so hard, I'm not sure if he actually heard what I said, but either way I kept talking with a little more confidence, "but I'm not sure if I want to."

Creed actually relaxed a bit after that, "What do you mean?"

"Well. I think I want to figure out God stuff first. Because if He's real or...if...I don't know. It just seems like that should come first."

Creed looked like he was about to fist pump or something; it was the way my dad looked whenever the Terrapins scored a touchdown.

“That is such a good perspective. Do you know how hard it was for me to think like that? And I still don’t! But you do! That is so cool. Praise Jesus!”

I wasn’t sure what to do with that, but I stupidly kind of shot a double thumbs-up and tried to recover by just knocking my fists together like I was fidgeting. Because normal people don’t just give thumbs-ups as a response.

My weird hand movements distracted me from whatever Creed was saying, but I could’ve sworn he said something like “thanks God for hearing me, so cool,” but I couldn’t be sure.

Then he looked back to me, and he asked me how I was trying to learn more about God, and I told him I wasn’t really sure.

“Listen, I know you’ve been walking Kota over to our Bible studies...there’s a girl group meeting at the same time. Next time you walk Kota, how about you join in with that one?”

The thought of just walking up to a bunch of strangers to talk about a massive book I haven’t read sounded like a horrible idea.

But, this past semester, I definitely went through worse things, so I found myself nodding. I might as well just jump in. It might be weird and hard, but at least I’d make my own opinion about it.

Creed grinned, and then he asked if I wanted to head over with him to meet up with Kota. They were grabbing lunch together, and he figured it was time we knew each other outside the Green (and maybe more in group settings until I figured out what I thought about him). I felt a little sad about leaving our little refuge behind. But, I knew it was time.

As I reached the edge of the Green, I stood at the hedge line and looked over the grass, knowing this might very well have been my last Saturday out here until we came back this Spring.

I heard Creed calling my name and saw he had already made it almost across the street.

“Lydia, come out!” Creed encouraged me, waving his arm.

I couldn’t help but chuckle about my sentimental moment over the little place where so much had happened. The first time I had been here, the scariest moment of my life had been meeting a mean, pale girl, and my deepest thoughts had centered on whether or not I could make friends. Now, here I was, Nikki as my almost friend, thinking about eternity.

I smiled, excited to see what in the world could happen next, and I followed Creed out of the Green and into the new life ahead, somewhat still hoping I didn’t trip too often or run into too terribly many people along the way.

APPENDIX A

Discussion Topics

- 1) What key themes seem to drive the narrative of the book?
- 2) What philosophical or political underpinnings can you identify?
- 3) What significance, if any, do you see in the chapter titles?
- 4) How does the phrase “Lydia, come out” tie into the narrative of the book?
- 5) How can the reader come to fully understand Lydia as a person?

APPENDIX B

Insights from the Author

1) *Key Themes*

Throughout the book, I hope for the reader to see the dangers of unchecked politics and then to see the beginnings of how to protect against those dangers. The other major theme is cultivating the ability to think for oneself, as seen throughout Lydia's personal journey throughout the whole narrative. For the first theme, community and genuine connection with others helps shield from enmity between people of different ideologies, escalation of political discourse into destruction, and severe disappointment when politics ultimately lets you down. The smoldering animosity between Maya and Nikki is the most blatant example of political enmity, and it is exemplified between Maya and Lydia by the end of the book and in the different characters' reactions to Travis Riley. The second danger of escalation is shown through the night of the violent protest, where what was once peaceful develops into something wholly different. Then, the final danger is seen in the unhealthy hope the characters put in politics.

By the end of the book, the focus seems to shift from politics to friendship and exploring religion. I will return to the concept of the *seeming* focus shift, but first I must say that this transition is not condemning politics as bad or demanding that people focus on other topics. Rather, this transition is showing what is necessary in order to do politics well. Creed's viewpoint on Travis Riley is a guardrail to the

reader showing that politics and activism are not inherently bad. However, *only* being an activist can stymie improving oneself and one's personal relationships, as we see happen to the main characters in the book.

Decreasing the focus on politics toward the end allows for a redirection of energy into the people right in front of them. Kota's concern with Maya ignoring the homeless people she sees and his realization that he has not been the best friend he could be are one and the same point. People say they care, but they do not act that way. People say they want to help the homeless but feel scared or disgusted; people say they love their friends, but they do not know their friends' feelings or even their daily lives.

The book as a whole actually begins with friendship, as seen by Lydia's first reactions and interactions with the people around her. With Nikki, Lydia had idealistic visions of her roommate being an important friend. When Lydia met Maya, both shared that what was most stress-inducing about college was whether they would have quality friends, or friends at all. Then, when Maya orchestrated Kota into the friend group, we see the first strain put on their relationships due to Maya's implication that Lydia needs to behave in a certain way to let the friendship work. By the end, each idea of friendship is revisited and amended. Nikki does become friends with Lydia, Lydia and Maya's hopes for quality friends are realized, and Kota resets the friendship based on the desire to be friends with people out of love, not orchestration or specific behaviors.

Connection to community as a whole would have helped to quell the misdirected frustration on the night of the violent protest. The destruction the

protesters wreak was intended by some to be a statement against the oppression of a marginalized group in society; however, that protest ended up affecting black business owners. The female owner of the restaurant has African heritage, which is appreciated through her traditional Zulu hairstyle. The peaceful protestors from earlier in the day, one of whom was leading the charge on the violent protest night, had never indicated violence. In the beginning, they were directed not to touch any officer, but later that same movement ends up being associated with the violence of others against not only officers, but members of their own community and of the marginalized community as a whole. This violence happens at night when people are hard to recognize and need not be held accountable to one another. Had the protestors personally known the streets they were running down and the owners of the restaurants and businesses they damaged, then their rage would not have been so misdirected. Additionally, had the protestors known one another, there may not have been the unrestrained action. People are emboldened by anonymity. When they are not anonymous, they must stand by their words and actions. Combatting anonymity means making sure that people are known. The violent protestors failed their community that night, but the community also failed the protestors who may feel anonymous even in the middle of the day. When we are removed from the community, either through lack of interaction or the cover of night, then we let our emotions about politics become overgeneralized and create rifts with people that, left alone, could turn violent.

Friendship is one means of having genuine connection with others, but a deeper connection people need is with God. The theme of discovering God highlights

another protection from one of the dangers of politics. Throughout the text, Lydia starts to gravitate more and more toward that greater connection. She feels a sense of peace that is hard to understand, she talks to someone but is alone, and she learns about God, including about spiritual warfare and answered prayers, from Creed. There is something extra that Lydia seeks out, but she does not often realize what or who that is. As the author, I know that that's God. Lydia does not realize this, but one day soon she might.

That genuine connection to God helps guard against placing undue hope in politics. Many people unwittingly place salvific power into politics, placing politics and politicians in a place where they can only disappoint. As Creed said, we are broken people. We feel that brokenness and then we put all of our hope in societal change and a politician. We paint political figures as possible saviors of the world, when, at the end of the day, these figures are not perfect, and they will let us down. We see a hint of this when Travis Riley leaves the restaurant discussion without clearly shutting Maya down the way Nikki had hoped. For the rest of the book, Nikki does not mention his name. There's a reason for that. She idolized him, and he let her down. That cycle will continue unless there is a realization that no one can save us except Jesus.

The final theme that should stand out is the importance of crafting your own opinion. From the beginning, Lydia tamps down her own thoughts in order to follow the ideas of someone else. Alan Jacobs' book *How To Think*¹ presents a clear explanation of how to go about thinking for oneself, despite the reality that no one

1. Jacobs, *How To Think* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

can think independently of all other people. Lydia's journey helps show some of the key takeaways from Jacobs' book. Thinking for oneself requires being able to think over someone else's opinions, tie them with others' thoughts, and then mull it over without being too quick to speak.² When there is no attempt to truly think, people become bystanders and followers, being lost like Lydia or following blindly into violence like Maya.

Throughout the book, connection and politics struggle against one another, while Lydia struggles to determine who she really is. By connecting with others and with God, she is able to start thinking about who she wants to be and what she wants to stand for, while also protecting herself from the dangerous pitfalls that can come from politics.

2) *Philosophical/Political Underpinnings*

This book enters a contemporary philosophical conversation centered on liberalism between one of my professors at Baylor, Dr. David Corey, and another political science professor from Notre Dame, Dr. Patrick Deneen. The overall underpinnings of the book thus come from the overall topic of what liberalism is, if it is good, and if it has failed as seen through the lens of the political unrest during the summer of 2020.

Liberalism can be understood variously, but I chose to grapple with the concept in accordance to how I have come to understand it through a liberalism class I took from Dr. Corey and the readings we did throughout, especially from Deneen's

2. Jacobs, *How To Think*, 153.

Why Liberalism Failed.³ A snapshot of our conversation regarding that specific book can be found by reading Corey's essay "Against the Deformations of Liberalism."⁴ In short, from Corey's understanding, liberalism refers to the history of political actors seeking various freedoms, starting with the freedom of religion to the latest freedom of today, which is currently the freedom from biological necessity. No one freedom has satisfied all people, and once one freedom appears to be achieved, there is a realization of a new type of oppression. Now, Deneen does not understand liberalism the same way as Corey does, but instead sees it as something devoid of history and tied more to an ideology that has led to such issues as a disconnection between humans, a neglect of true liberal education, and an overemphasis on government rule.⁵ This book acknowledges the pitfalls listed by Deneen and accepts Deneen's general solutions of valuing virtue and cultivating local liberalism rather than liberalism at the federal level.⁶ Those two concepts are seen in the book's focus on personal friendship and doing what is right as prompted by the Holy Spirit. Deneen would likely say that the achievement of such goals should be through changes in education and government, but my argument is that groups of people can choose to combat the negative effects of liberalism on their own, as seen through this small group of characters.

This argument thus brings in Corey's take that liberalism is historically grounded and is not a failure altogether, especially considering that most of the

3. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (United States: Yale University Press, 2018).

4. Corey, "Against the Deformations of Liberalism" (American Affairs).

5. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 26, 73 118.

6. *Ibid.*, 176.

freedoms achieved are freedoms we value highly.⁷ The issue with liberalism and seeking after new freedoms is not the hunt for freedoms, but rather the hunt for freedoms at the exclusion of community and virtue. A snapshot of this can be seen in the moment between the police officer, the woman cleaning a graffitied window, and the angry man on the streets of D.C. Furthermore, this moment takes the argument to the next step, showing that when liberalism shifts from seeking after freedom to imposing viewpoints on others, then what is happening is no longer liberalism. From this train of thought, we would develop into conservatism as understood by Roger Scruton in *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition*, where conservatism comes to curtail the transformation of liberalism into despotism.⁸ Curtailing liberalism comes by acknowledging not just the achievements but also the limits of freedom.⁹ There are hints of this conservative idea seen on the night of the protest, where the freedom to protest ends where others are hurt. However, the book itself does not go so far to fully develop into conservatism, instead stopping at noting the dangers of pure liberalism.

The politics within the book were inspired by both the social unrest displayed throughout the summer of 2020 and the overall political divide seen over the past several years, as commented on by Asad Haider in *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. Haider pushes back on the continual use of personal identity to ground a cause,¹⁰ which is a method Maya uses in her first conversation with Travis Riley. Standing on people's own singular identities creates divides, or impasses, that

7. Corey, "Against the Deformations of Liberalism."

8. Scruton, *Conservatism* (United Kingdom: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2018), 39.

9. Ibid.

10. Haider, *Mistaken Identity* (United Kingdom: Verso, 2018), 21.

prevent individuals from uniting into an effective mass movement.¹¹ For the events of 2020, one video ran through my mind frequently as I wrote, particularly the scene mentioned earlier with the woman scrubbing BLM off a window. The summer of 2020 came from mounting tension between perceptions of police and the black community lit aflame by the tragic death of George Floyd. During the BLM protests and riots, there were thousands of videos, but one video showed a black woman chastising white women who were graffitiing property, saying, “Don’t spray stuff on here when they’re going to blame black people for this.”¹² In the book, it is unclear if the woman cleaning the windows is the store owner or not, and it is never stated whether she agrees with BLM. The only thing known is that the graffiti is among explicit writing and/or drawings, and that the woman has a problem with white people inserting themselves in ways that could hurt. This response shows the complication of the movement while also tapping into the divided organization between people as seen in Haider.

So, at heart, the book is an exploration of the pitfalls of liberalism, and it offers a possible solution similar to Deneen’s, but even more localized and grounded in community connections. The actual events dealt with are inspired by the overwhelming political tension of the current times.

3) *Chapter Titles*

The chapter titles help to explain the storyline of each chapter and the arc of the book itself. The individual chapters are named after the essence of what is

11. Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 31.

12. CGTN, “See These Women Confront Protestors” (Los Angeles: YouTube, 2020).

happening in the chapter on multiple levels. As just one example, chapter seven is named “Anaphylaxis.” Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction, and throughout the chapter, over and over again there are strong responses that reveal the inability of different people to coexist without having a visceral response to each other. The demonstrators outside of Travis Riley’s event have a strong negative reaction to Travis, while Lydia has a strong negative reaction to the demonstration, while Liam has a strong negative reaction to Braden. Then, just like someone in anaphylaxis, they each need outside intervention. Creed intervenes for Lydia, and then Lydia intervenes for both the demonstrators and Liam.

Within the context of the storyline, each chapter then works together to reveal the meaning of the story. As a broad overview, Lydia focuses on other people and what they think. She feels the need to try and do what they do, but that does not align with her current identity, so she falls apart. She is standing on the side, doing nothing to participate on her own terms. With new information and ideas, she remains silent, but she is influenced by Creed to the point that she can start on a journey of developing her own opinions. From there, she remembers what is important and can stand up for Nikki with confidence. However, after strides are made toward improvement, that is often when we hit a valley. So, Lydia must confront the awkward space she finds herself in, feeling out of place and alone. In those moments, she has time to reflect once again, entering a quieter place. However, that is when she sits through a high-level conversation, a violent night, and the various perspectives on and aftereffects of the protest as a whole. After this series of platitudes, shadows, shockwaves, and distortions, she is finally presented with one uniform thing. Reality.

Reality is not split into various viewpoints; it is just fact. The fact is that Lydia had not known what end she was fighting for, and she did not understand that there was true potential for harm to her friends. But, once met with reality, the process of replacing disconnection with connection can occur. Then, through the knowledge of reality as it is and true connection with her community, Lydia can start to really meet herself. By the end, the book is not about other people's ideas, it is about who Lydia will decide to be.

So, if you take a look at the table of contents and read through each chapter title, you will see the development of each of these ideas in a quick snapshot.

4) Book Title

The book title has a double meaning. The first meaning may be far more obvious than the second. The first is that Lydia is finally coming out as her own person. She is no longer blindly following her friends, she will stop to ask questions, and she knows that she can stand alone apart from others, while at the same time pursuing a goal that she set for herself—learning about God.

The second meaning is related to somewhat of an Easter egg hidden throughout the text. The phrasing “Lydia, come out,” is a reference to John 11:43 where Jesus calls Lazarus out of his tomb. At first glance, this may seem like a random reference to scripture with undertones of Lydia entering a new life, but the whole book was structured so this moment could happen.

The first part of the book of John is sometimes referenced as the Book of Signs, named after the seven signs or miracles that take place throughout the gospel.

Lydia encounters Creed exactly seven times in the Green, and Lydia chronologically is exposed to the signs of Jesus as listed in the Book of John, which are changing water into wine, healing an official's son from afar, healing a paralytic, multiplying fish and bread, walking on water, giving sight to a blind man, and resurrection of Lazarus.

The connections between Creed and Lydia drive Lydia's development because instead of simply meeting Creed, Lydia is actually experiencing the power of Jesus through a believer. The derivations of the signs and hints of Jesus' conversations with those he performed miracles around show up in ordinary moments, like water changing to Gatorade or a multiplication of baggies of goldfish. These ordinary moments show that the prayers and kindness of a Christian can be miracles in and of themselves that Jesus works through. That power to affect change beyond ourselves is the power of love that God grants us through Jesus' sacrifice and the Holy Spirit. But we don't often recognize the significant changes that happen through small, seemingly insignificant moments. Each moment where Lydia experiences what it is like to be loved in the model of Jesus' love for us, is a moment that she takes a step closer to being the person she was created to be.

The Green was a place where Lydia encountered Jesus, but by the end, she leaves as someone who has experienced Jesus both in and out of the Green. Having done so, she is prepared to go out and try to live the wholly new life to which all Christians are called by Christ.

5) *Understanding Lydia*

There can be some difficulty in understanding who Lydia truly is because, from the start, she does not have any clear opinions and she presents herself through her own insecurity to the reader. By watching Lydia's interactions with others and seeing past the harsher criticisms of herself, you can start to see glimpses of who Lydia is and who she was before college.

Lydia's growth into a person who is willing to stand up for what is right is something that happens throughout the text, but it is also something that she had with her before college. For example, she is not exactly conflict averse when it comes to standing up for her brother Liam, and she takes on a more confident attitude when speaking with him. She clearly loves him and cares for him, protecting him from Braden and listening to the things he cares about. So, she knows what it looks like to care well for someone, but she does not realize that her ability to care well can be directed to her friends. She sees her relationship with Liam as an outlier rather than a model, but throughout the book that shifts. Lydia stands up for Nikki, and she holds her ground against Maya, all the while starting to say what is actually on her mind. These are actions and reactions that she has developed with Liam, but that she now understands can expand outward.

Lydia's confidence and character is interesting as well because her inner monologue is far more advanced than her ability to speak. The stark difference between her thoughts and her dialogue reveals her capacity to reflect and to consider complicated topics and opinions, but simply decides not to. That decision is not active for Lydia, but rather a result of her thinking other people's thoughts should outweigh

her own. Throughout the story, Lydia is constantly picking up a book to read. She allows the thoughts and actions of characters to be the means through which she perceives the world. Take for example *Twilight*. Lydia compares herself to Bella and by the end of the book, compares the eternity within that book to eternity with God. The books she reads are the lens through which she has developed in the past, apart from a community of friends, so she cannot help but bring those books into the current conversations she is having.

To understand Lydia, you have to consider how she became the person she is at the beginning of the book. There are moments along the way that help compile into her character, but the best glimpses into her holistic character pre-college can be seen through what she reads and her relationship with her family. Without those glimpses, it would be more difficult to understand her development that enables her to come out of the Green as a more honest version of who “Lydia” truly is.

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