

Chapter One

COUNSELING

There's one scene at the end of almost every made-for-TV movie.

You know the one: the big dramatic emotional confrontation happens, fade out, and before the credits speed by with a promo for the next show, you're forced to watch a minute of the super-traumatized young woman (and it's always a young woman) sitting in a cozy office with wood paneling and dead, dried flowers, being prompted by some cross-legged PhD to start telling her story and working through her issues so she can get on with her life. That one.

I've always hated that scene.

But I guess that's my life. A low-budget cable-channel movie you watch half-asleep at 3:00 a.m. because you're too hungover to remember where the remote is.

Pretty freaking lame, huh?

I mean, it could be worse. At least my life has the unmistakable benefit of starring the one and only Lydia Bennet, aka me. Not some former Disney channel star struggling to prove she can handle "real drama" so one day she might be "taken seriously" as an "actress."

Fine, and therapy—okay, counseling— isn't all that bad, it turns out. It's actually kind of nice talking to someone about your life and knowing they aren't going to act like you're some stupid overemotional kid or butt in with dumb opinions when they don't even know anything about you.

In real life, anyway. I still think that's an idiotic way to wrap up a movie. Because that's not the end. If anything, it's the start of the sequel.

Problems aren't magically solved just because you throw out some societally approved ideas for how to fix them. Putting things back together is always harder and more complicated than breaking them.

I should know. I'm excellent at breaking things.

"Have you heard anything about your college application?"

So, yeah. Counseling. I'm in that. Like, right now.

I shrugged. "They sent me some more forms. Still collecting my thoughts about it."

My counselor, Ms. Winters, reminds me of my oldest sister, Jane, in certain ways. As kind and patient as Ms. W can be, like Jane, you just get this feeling she could break someone in half for looking at her wrong if she wanted to.

Although Ms. W is overall less prancing chipmunks and double rainbows than Jane. And she's never once offered me tea.

I miss Jane.

Ms. W seems to be pretty good at what she does, and she's freakishly insightful sometimes. It's that insight that made me think I might be good at counseling, too—from the counselor's side of it, I mean.

So I thought if I wanted to go into psychology, maybe become a counselor or a therapist or whatever myself, it couldn't hurt to try to learn a few techniques from her. Learn . . . copy right in front of her during our sessions . . . whatever you want to call it. She's never said anything about my mimicking, but I sometimes wonder if she thinks I'm crazy. Like The Roommate crazy (that's Single White Female crazy for those not versed in popular teen movie rip-offs about stalking people and taking over their lives). Either way, that could be a fun twist.

I probably shouldn't mention that to anyone.

"I've just been really busy getting ready for summer classes tomorrow and prepping for Mary to move in, and with Lizzie leaving today . . ." I could already hear Ms. Winters in my head as I rambled (I see. So it's all external factors holding you back, then?), but it was the best I could do. "I've still got a few weeks. Nothing to worry about!"

Yep. Summer classes. Such is my curse. You see, I kind of . . . didn't finish up all the credits I was supposed to during the spring semester. It sucks, but it's not like the end of the world. I had my reasons for missing classes. But now I've gotta spend the summer taking two more courses so I can claim my associate degree and transfer to Central Bay College in the fall. Happy summer vacation to me.

Ms. Winters scribbled something into her notebook without looking down or away from me at all. She kept staring, most likely trying to read my mind or some other counseling voodoo (seriously, not convinced there isn't witchcraft behind it all—and I so better get to learn that in college if there is). I wasn't sure if I was supposed to say something else, so I just waited.

"Lydia, you know I'm not here to tell you what to do." Yes, you are. "But as challenging as some of your classes here have been, if you're serious about going into psychology, this next level of work is going to be even more difficult. And the one after that, and the real world after that. I want to make sure we're setting you up with the tools you need to succeed."

I wrinkled my nose. Did she think I couldn't do it? Wasn't she, like, paid to believe in me?

"It isn't that I don't think you're absolutely capable of this, because you are." (Okay, seriously? Mind voodoo.) "I just want to make sure you understand you're going into something that's going to take a lot more effort and preparation than just filling out an application."

"Pfft. Don't worry, Ms. W. You and I both know there's nothing to this whole psychology/counseling thing. I've got it down."

"Oh, there isn't?" Ms. W said, smiling. "Then let's try something. If you think you've 'got it down,' try putting yourself in my shoes. If you were acting as your own counselor, what questions would you ask yourself?"

"Like, how can the world handle two doses of mega-adorbs without imploding?"

"Something like that," said Ms. Winters. "But maybe at least a few questions you think would lead to answers that could help you. Or maybe just a list of questions that would help, in their own way. Do you think you'd be up for that?"

"Please. Lists are my specialty." I corrected myself: "One of many."

"Good. I'll see you here next Sunday? With the questions?"

"Don't we have that special session on Tuesday?" I asked.

"That's right," she said, as if she'd forgotten, but she definitely hadn't. I normally only have counseling on Sundays, but this week being this week . . . "See you Tuesday, then?"

I nodded and grabbed my things as Ms. Winters went to hold the door open for me on my way out. She always does that. I haven't figured out what kind of psychology trick it is yet, but I will.

"Oh, Lydia? If you need to pop in unscheduled this week, don't be afraid to, all right?"

"I know. Thanks."

"And you can always text, too. You have my number."

"That I do."

I stepped out into the hallway and heard that generic click of a door closing behind me.

It's strange to think of summer classes starting tomorrow, seeing as how I've still been coming to the school for these counseling sessions every week since the spring semester let out. It feels like everything is running together, no clearly defined end and beginning with a break in between. I guess that's what life will always feel like once I'm finally done with school.

Not that that will happen any time soon.

I've been at this lame community college for three years now. More than three, once you count the upcoming summer session. I'm not a ditz or anything; school was usually just so boring. Academics were always my sister Lizzie's thing. Art and fashion and that sort of creativity is Jane's. And mine is . . . partying. Interacting with humanity. Socializing, drinking, going out. The fun stuff. The cool stuff.

Or was. I haven't really done that in a while.

It's just that, being a third-year student in a two-year school, literally all my friends have left town at this point. And I mean, how can you party alone? Solo partying would basically be the definition of lame. If it wasn't for that, I'd so be out there painting the town pink (a way better color than red; "painting the town red" sounds like you're bleeding everywhere, and I certainly don't see how that sounds like anything fun or cool).

That's all. NBD.

So I just gotta rededicate. "Hunker down," as my dad always says. Do well in these last summer courses, (finally) move on to a real college near where Lizzie will be, and make

awesome new friends I can party with—while still proving myself to be a responsible college student/kind of technically an adult.

That's the plan, anyway. Sounds easy enough, right?

And the first step is preparing for class. Which means school supplies. Which I should probably go buy.

See? Responsibility. What up?