

Vanishing Act

At the moment that Lydia's mother decides she doesn't want to be Lydia's mother anymore, Lydia is in her room, lying on top of her floral pink bedspread, watching *Gossip Girl* and scrolling through Instagram. She vaguely hears the front door open and close. She thinks it's her dad or brother coming home. Or maybe her mom is getting the mail. Later, Lydia will remember the door crashing, an earthquake below her, the hinges crying out to the woman who had already turned the corner of their street, but in reality, the door shuts lightly, a sound more akin to a leaf crunching under her mother's brown suede boots than an earthquake.

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Lydia's mom is making chocolate chip cookies. Scraping off the measurement of flour as she hums a slipping tune, the catty dialogue from her daughter's show foggily ambling through the floor to the kitchen. She cracks the eggs, mixes in the chocolate, evenly places the drops of dough on the cookie sheet. She puts the cookies in the oven. Replies to a work email. She puts the kettle on. Texts her high school friends about reunion weekend, smiling at the photo of her kids at Disney World she has as her background. Pours a cup of tea that will go cold. She pulls the cookies out. Lets them cool, opening her book to the dog-eared page. She eats a cookie.

There could be more. There could always be more. That is the nature of *more*. It is a nebulous, ever-expanding parasite. It has been invading her thoughts for months now. You don't even have to know what more is to know it is there, lounging in the shrouded expanse between is and isn't. And that is enough. Enough to make her finally act. She wants the *more*.

She walks out the front door. It shuts behind her, and she can just hear the slow hiss of the hinges as she rounds the corner, her book still in her hand.

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“Lydia! What did you do with my headphones?”

She pauses her show as her brother stomps up the stairs, pushing open her door. He’s slick with sweat from his baseball game.

“Can you please take your sweaty self out of my room, Ethan?”

“I need my headphones back.”

She jumps off her bed and walks across the room to her backpack, rummaging through it for a moment before pulling out the tangled knot of Ethan’s headphones. His eyes bulge as he grabs them from her, immediately pulling at the knot.

“What did you do to them?”

“Just because you have the time to nicely wrap them up doesn’t mean anyone else does, E.”

His gaze doesn’t move from the Celtic knot in his hands. “But you could least be nice to *my* things.”

“Don’t get all high and mighty on me. They’re just headphones.” Lydia crosses her arms, sinking her weight into one hip and flicking her blonde ponytail over her shoulder.

“I’m just saying that -”

She waves a hand, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, okay, I’ll be nicer to your headphones next time, I promise. How was your game?”

“We lost.”

“Sorry. You’ll win the next one. Now go take a shower before I have to move out of this house because of the smell.”

He leaves after muttering something about how that “might be nice,” and then Lydia climbs back on her bed, sighing before reluctantly pulling her Calculus textbook towards her. But then, just as she’s opening the tome, her dad calls her downstairs, a gift from heaven.

She bounces down the stairs and into the kitchen where her dad is standing, scruffy grey sweatshirt pulled over his coach's jersey.

"Hey Lyds, have you seen Mom?"

"She was here when I got home." Lydia reaches across the counter to grab a cookie from the tray. They're still warm.

"Well she's not here now, and her phone's sitting on the counter."

Her dad's voice would sound unconcerned if you didn't know him. But Lydia can hear the tremor in the last syllable of "counter." She sees the way his eyes shift around the room, looking for clues. It's the same way her dad looked when Ethan ran away at five-years-old. He had only run to see if he could. That's what Ethan said, their mom's tears slipping down her cheeks and into his shirt after they found him sitting calmly on a bench in the parkette a few blocks over. So Lydia knows the look in her father's eyes. She immediately straightens, every muscle clenching. She can feel every one of her teeth as she grinds them together.

"What's wrong?"

"She didn't have anywhere to go tonight." He glances to the calendar they keep on the fridge, labelled with everything from sports practices to family movie nights. They're watching *Brave* tomorrow night. But nothing is penned in for today. It's free.

"Maybe she needed to go to the store, or there was an emergency at the office."

"Maybe." Her dad shakes his head, taking off his hat emblazoned with "Toronto Bears Baseball" and a grizzly wearing a glove. He runs a hand through his scraggly blonde hair. "I'm sure she just ran out somewhere." He lumbers over to the pantry. "What would you like for dinner?"

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Elusive light from the moon creeps through the windows, just barely illuminating the dishes in the sink, the last remnants of their dad's famous grilled cheese still visible.

Lydia sits at the table, her Calculus textbook open. But she can't read it. Her mother still isn't home. Her dad went upstairs after their achingly silent dinner, feigning fatigue, but she can hear him pacing in his room. Ethan sits across the table from her, headphones in, doing History homework, but she can see his knee bouncing under the table. They're an earthquake. About to rip the front door from its hinges. The snow globe her mother brought her from Rome tumbles from its shelf.

If Lydia's mother were here, she would give a speech about the role of women in World War Two as Ethan did his work. She would make whipped cream sandwiches with the cookies because they don't have ice cream. She would help Lydia with her Calculus and braid her hair back and watch *19 Kids and Counting* with Lydia's dad.

Ethan turns on *Chopped* in the living room. Their mother still isn't home.

Lydia plops next to him on the couch, clutching the light blue pillow with "home is where the heart is" stitched on it. Their mom isn't home.

Her mom's phone beeps sadly from where it still sits on the counter. Lydia races to check it, but it's just a text from Rose, her mom's friend from high school, with way too many wine emojis in it. Lydia's mom isn't home.

Their dad comes downstairs, paces around the table once, and is about to go back upstairs when Lydia calls to him from the couch. "What about the bank, Dad? Check your credit cards."

He comes over to her and Ethan, his gaze dense as it slides between them. "She switched to her own cards a month ago. I can't see any of it."

Lydia flicks puzzled eyes at him and the secrets fenced in by those words, but he's now looking to the floor, breaths rattling through his chest. Her mom was the one who marched up to the counter when they got bumped off their flight home from Florida, who yelled at Ethan's fourth grade teacher when she marked him down for being "too shy." Her dad had always supported from the background.

“It’ll be okay,” he utters the words quietly, but sure, decisively meeting Lydia’s stare for a moment. And then he goes back upstairs.

“This is ridiculous.” Lydia gets up from the couch suddenly, grabbing her mom’s phone from the counter. “I’m done waiting for nothing.”

She opens the phone with a swipe and dials before putting the phone to her ear, cocking her hip. Inside, her stomach is slowly crawling up her throat. *It’s going to be fine. She’ll be back.*

“Who are you calling?” Ethan asks, concern rattling his words.

“Rose.”

The phone rings a few times before she picks up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Rose, It’s Lydia.”

“Oh, hi, Lydia! How are you? Have you decided what you’re doing next year yet?”

“No, I haven’t. Actually, I was wondering if you’ve seen my mom tonight?”

“I haven’t, dear. Is everything all right?” Rose’s voice drops, as if this is a secret.

“Yes, but, um, you wouldn’t happen to know if she had something to do tonight?”

“Not that she told me. Lydia, honey, are you sure everything’s fine? Where’s your dad?”

“He’s here. Mom’s just not home tonight and we weren’t sure where she was, but I’m sure she told us and we forgot.”

“Okay. You call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you.” Lydia hangs up the phone. It drops back on the table. As if it was never picked up at all.

...

“Mom?” Lydia’s voice sneaks its way through the threads of pillow between them. They’re lying on the living room floor, a fort of pillows and blankets and cookie crumbs

surrounding them. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan confess their love on the television. This is what they do whenever the boys are away at baseball tournaments. “Rom-Com 101,” Lydia’s mom calls it.

“Yes, Lyds?” Her eyes don’t leave the TV, but she can hear her daughter turn to face her.

“I think I like a boy.”

“Well that’s good. We can’t have you hating half the population.”

“No, I mean like *like-like* a boy.”

Lydia’s mom turns her head, a sneaky light in her eyes. Her thirteen-year-old daughter looks worried, her brown eyes like little round planets. They contain worlds.

“And is that a bad thing?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I don’t either.”

“But what do I *do* about it?”

She laughs at that. Lydia’s eyes only grow wider, her voice indignant.

“It’s not funny!”

“Okay, okay.” She pushes a ringlet back behind her ear. “It’s up to you, Lyds. You could talk to him or ignore him or kiss him or any other number of options. You’ll figure it out.”

“Okay,” Lydia says tentatively. She turns her head back to the movie. Her mother watches her for a minute, then turns back as well.

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“Okay, who needs CPR?” Catherine’s voice booms into the kitchen from the front hall, and then she is there, striding over to where Lydia has plopped herself on the kitchen table, legs swinging. Lydia’s lightly tossing her mother’s phone up and down, eyes tracing its arc through the air. She’d sent Catherine an SOS text five minutes ago.

“I’ve recently been certified in First Aid and I’ve been dying to try it out.” But then Catherine sees Lydia’s sunken face and a slow “oh” forms breathily between her just-smiling lips.

“My mom’s gone.” Lydia’s voice is cold and crackling. They only use SOS texts in emergencies, but usually they are of the emotional variety, not the my-mother-ran-away-or-maybe-got-kidnapped variety.

“What do you mean?” Catherine sits down, leaning her elbows on the table, resting her round cheeks on her fists.

“I mean she’s not here. She was here when I got home and now she’s not. She didn’t have any plans tonight and she left her phone and no one knows where she is and she’s gone.”

“She probably just ran out. I’m sure she’ll be back soon. It’s only ten o’clock.”

“She’s been gone since five. And I’ve been through her phone calendar, her texts, her emails, there’s nothing.” Lydia tosses the phone one more time. She catches it deftly and then slides it to the other end of the table.

“Shit.” Catherine hops up on the table next to Lydia.

“Yup.”

“And her car’s still here, I saw it in the driveway.”

“She’s disappeared.”

“Where’s your dad?”

“Upstairs. He’s been up there since dinner. He doesn’t do well with problems.”

“And he doesn’t know anything?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“They’re not splitting up, okay? That’s not it.”

“I’m just saying that-”

Lydia leaps off the table. “Just because your parents are divorced, doesn’t mean that mine are headed there too.”

Catherine’s voice is surprisingly calm, but there is a pink tinge to her tanned cheeks. “I didn’t see it coming with my parents either.”

“You were eight! I’m eighteen. And my mom and I tell each other everything. So drop it, okay?”

Catherine throws up her hands. “I’m waving the white flag. Consider it dropped.”

Lydia tugs at the bottom of her blue plaid skirt, pressing the material between her fingers. “Thank you. Sorry I snapped. I just need to know where she is. It’s stressing me out.”

“And you didn’t hear anything?”

“I think I heard the door open and close. But nothing else.”

“Then she must have walked out the door at least on her own.” Light dances in Catherine’s eyes. “Wow, I feel like I’m on *Sherlock* or something.”

Lydia’s about to reply, but then she hears the slow crooning of Death Cab for Cutie coming from Catherine’s pocket.

“Crap.” Catherine pops the word, pulling out her phone. “I’ve gotta go; it’s my mom. I told her I’d only be gone five minutes.” She gives Lydia a quick hug, tugging on the end of her ponytail. “Try to get some sleep, okay? I’m sure she’ll be back by morning. We’ll figure this out.”

Ethan comes into the kitchen as the door snicks closed behind Catherine.

“This is so fucked.” Her brother looks like a conch shell, all folded in on himself. His head is bent down, eyes studying the scuffs in the wood floor.

“You can say that one again, E.”

He does.

She hugs him, because she's supposed to be the comforting big sister even if her veins are weighing her down, and she can feel his shoulders shaking and everything muffles and crescendos at the same time and she feels dizzy and squeezes him tighter because *our mother is gone* doesn't fit nicely into words or letters or runes or binary code or quarter notes.

...

There's a knock on Lydia's locker. She looks up and there's Catherine, braids swinging as she leans around the locker door. Catherine's wearing her favourite red v-neck. It matches her nail polish.

"Any news?"

"She didn't come home."

Catherine opens her mouth and then closes it again. Catherine always has a plan. She meticulously schemed a way for them to sneak out to Jack Pacey's party in ninth grade, and their parents still don't know. But she has no detailed map now.

"Dad's worried, but he just shuts down all my questions. But he says he's gonna call the police today. Though they probably won't do anything because it hasn't been forty-eight hours. Ethan's a mess. I haven't seen him this upset since he was in fifth grade and it didn't snow on Christmas."

"And you?"

"I've got a Calc test."

"Lydia."

"I'm fine."

Catherine just tilts her head, her eyes narrowing to slivers. Lydia knows that look.

She closes her locker. "I'm fine! I'm gonna find her."

"Lydia, I was kidding about that *Sherlock* thing. You're not a detective."

"But I *know* her."

“Okay. You’ve got a prep second, right? I’ll meet you here.”

“What?”

“You didn’t think you were doing this alone, did you? I’m on board. Every Sherlock needs a Watson.”

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Catherine is talking to her girlfriend when Lydia reaches her locker at the start of second period. They’re holding hands, fingers twisting quietly together.

They both wave at her when they see her coming, Jessica taking back her hand and walking down the hall to her next class.

“All right, let’s do this,” Catherine says.

They find an empty classroom, and Catherine grabs a whiteboard marker and starts a timeline. *5:00 - door opens and closes. 6:30 - realize she is gone.*

She stops, taking a step back and hooking her fingers in the belt loops of her high-waisted jeans.

Lydia sighs. “That’s all we’ve got.”

“Okay, so that’s where our trail goes dark, but we’ve got to know something else.”

“She left her phone behind.”

“Which makes it seem like she left in a hurry.” She makes a new heading called *Clues*, and under it writes *Phone left behind*. “Did she leave anything else?”

“Car keys.” Catherine adds it to the list.

“Do we know if she took anything?”

“Her wallet’s gone. It usually sits on the table by the door, but not anymore. And she always leaves her book on the kitchen table, but it’s gone too.”

They both go on the list.

Catherine and Lydia stare at the board for a minute, silence blurring Lydia's thoughts. *There's nothing there.*

"This isn't enough. We don't actually know anything." Lydia gets up to erase the board, but Catherine grabs her arm.

"Hey, we just got started! Detective work isn't supposed to be easy. Nancy Drew had to work for her discoveries!"

Lydia's shoulders slump. "I just want her back."

"I know. And that's why we can't give up because we don't know anything yet."

"So what now?"

Catherine puts her hands on her hips. "We get on the phone."

They call everyone they can think of. Lydia's mom's friends, her colleagues, her neighbours. For once Lydia is glad her mom never figured out iCloud and thus shared all her contacts with her daughter.

"Hello, it's Lydia. . . no, still not sure what I'm doing next year. Actually, I was wondering if you saw or heard from my mom last night? She lost her phone, but she can't remember when she last had it. . . . Okay, thanks anyways."

Most of them don't know anything, and all of them ask about Lydia's plans for after she graduates, and Lydia almost gives up hope but Catherine keeps her focused. And then a star sparks through the dusty sky. It's Lydia's slightly creepy neighbour who lives across the street in a house painted a quirky shade of baby blue.

"Hello, Lydia! How is everything over at the Adams household? Just dandy I hope." His voice lilts through the phone and Catherine covers her mouth as soft giggles start to peel from her lips.

"Good, Mr. Miller. Actually, I was just wondering if you saw my mom last night around five?"

“I did! I was heading out of my garage with my lawnmower when I saw her walk outta your house and down the street. I tried to wave but it looked like she was in a hurry.”

Lydia’s fingers grip tighter on the phone. “Which way did she go?”

“She went north and then around the corner to the east, I think. Why’re you wondering?”

“Oh, she, uh, lost her phone and we’re trying to retrace her steps. Thank you so much, Mr. Miller.” She hangs up. She can picture it, sun glimpsing off her mother’s dark brown hair as she hastens down their street, shoulders back and steps bouncing slightly. Lydia’s vision starts to swish, and her head feels abnormally light. She thinks she might be sick.

“Yes!” Catherine leaps up and bounds to the whiteboard. She adds *goes east from house* to the timeline. Her buoyant laughter rings through her next words as she scrawls. “That’s something, Lydia, that’s something!”

“If you say so.” Lydia can hear the slap of her mother’s footsteps on the buckling pavement of their driveway. Can see her eyes dripping with possibility as she stares towards the towering maple tree at the end of their block.

“You don’t seem as excited as you should.” Catherine adds a few exclamation points after *house*.

“It’s not much.” Just the fact that her mother didn’t get into any sleek CIA cars; she was simply walking, out for a one-way stroll.

“But it’s more than we had before.” She turns back to face Lydia, marker pointed at her. “And you said yourself that you need to find her.”

“I do, but-”

“No ‘buts’ Lydia. You’re either in or you’re not. You know I love your mom, but I’m doing this for you, not her.”

“Then where do you think she is?” Lydia couldn’t say the thought that was slowly forming in her head, the truth starting to cling like vines to the insides of her temples. The words glisten with volatility; if spoken they would explode between her teeth. She pushes them back down her throat.

“You want the truth?” Catherine asks. Lydia nods. “I think she doesn’t want to be found, the huge cliché that that is. But family means ignoring what people want sometimes.”

“I feel like I don’t know her at all anymore. I always knew what she was thinking, what she would say, and now it’s all darkness.”

“That was exceptionally dramatic, but I’ll let you have it if you promise to be *in* this.” Catherine grabs her best friend’s arm, and Lydia meets her eyes. Lydia can see the sincerity in their gaze.

“I can do it.” Lydia’s not sure if she’s lying or not, but she says it anyways. She’s never been able to disappoint her best friend. Or her mom.

The shrill school bell intrudes on their moment.

Lydia pulls her arm out of Catherine’s grip and takes a photo of the board before erasing it.

“My house after school?” Lydia asks as they walk back to their lockers. She sprays pesticide on the vines still tangled in her thoughts. She won’t believe it yet, *can’t* believe it yet. She was walking, but where did she go? Maybe that’s the lens they need to see clearly.

Catherine nods. “I’ll bring coffee!”

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Lydia slumps at the kitchen table, head bent as she stares at the rips in her jeans. Her mom is sitting across from her, reading her most recent report card. Lydia knows what’s coming.

“Lydia.” The word is a storm.

“I’m trying, Mom.” She drags out the syllables, eyes still lasering more holes in her jeans.

Her mom is silent.

“Mom, you know I’m no good at math -”

“That doesn’t mean you can ignore it. It won’t go away.”

“I wish it would,” she mumbles.

“So do I, Lydia, but you have to do it to pass tenth grade. So you need to care.”

“I do care-” Her eyes finally flick to her mother’s. Her mom’s irises are carved of marble.

“Then you need to care more.”

“Aren’t I allowed to be bad at something? Aren’t I allowed to fail sometimes?”

“That’s not the point, Lydia! I wouldn’t be upset if you were trying but you’re not.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. And from here on out I’m going to make sure you’re trying. You’re going to do math every night even if it’s not assigned. You will work harder.”

Lydia simply gets up and leaves, feet slamming up the stairs. Shame and anger mix into a dangerous concoction in her stomach until tears start to prick at the corners of her eyes. She lets them fall.

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Catherine enters Lydia’s house promptly at four. She comes with two coffee cups in hand, handing one to Lydia before setting herself up at the kitchen table. Lydia’s dad is still at work and Ethan has debate club on Friday afternoons, so they’re alone when Catherine flips open her computer, pulling up the list of numbers they made earlier.

“What about your mom’s friend from work, Melissa? We haven’t called her yet.”

Lydia raps her fingers on the table, taking a long swig of coffee. "I don't know; maybe we should try more of the neighbours? Or go through her Facebook and stuff?"

Catherine blinks at her. "But we already know where she went from your house. Your neighbours probably won't know anything else. And your mom barely ever uses Facebook anyways."

"I just don't want to bug Melissa in the middle of the day."

"Lydia, come on. You said you were in this."

The truth is Lydia doesn't want the truth. At least not the one that's been gnawing at her heels all day. But she looks at Catherine's wide, insistent eyes and firmly set mouth and nods anyways.

Melissa picks up on the third ring. "Hi Melissa, It's Lydia."

"Hello! You're Emily's daughter, right?"

"Yes."

"Well your mom isn't in today, but I'm assuming you knew that."

"Yes, I was actually wondering if you'd heard from her at all?"

"No, she left a message with an assistant last night, saying she wouldn't be in for a week due to a personal matter, which has been a pain in my ass, let me tell you. We've got this big client right now and your mom was supposed to help me with this one. Give her grief for me, okay?" She tries to sound stern, but Lydia can hear the laugh in her voice. "Is everything all right with you guys?"

"Not really, but we're figuring it out, thank you." Lydia looks over to Catherine who's miming talking on the phone with her hand. Lydia nods. "Any chance you know what number my mom called from? Or if she left an emergency contact number?"

She can hear Melissa's heels clinking on the floor through the phone. "She did leave a number, but with strict instructions to only call if the office was on fire." She's rifling through papers now and Lydia meets Catherine's wide eyes. Lydia can practically

feel the edge of the paper between her fingers. “Ah, here’s the number for Emily! But, sweetie, aren’t you with her?”

“No, she’s had to, uh, go out of town somewhere and we misplaced the number she gave us and she left her phone here and we need to call her because Ethan’s really upset that he lost his baseball game and uh yeah. . . .” She trails off, wincing. Catherine shakes her head dramatically, as if Lydia just said One Direction was the best band of all time. She mouths “*Have I taught you nothing?*” and Lydia merely shrugs.

Melissa doesn’t notice Lydia’s terrible lie though, and instead laughs about how *only Emily would go out of town and forget her phone* and then rattles off a number which Catherine quickly jots down on her hand. Lydia thanks her and then hangs up. The more she finds out, the more concrete this feels, like she’s been free falling and now the ground is in sight, reality about to carve the breath from her lungs. She clears her head, braces her knees for impact. Everything must become solid eventually.

Catherine has already whipped out her phone and googled the number. It’s a little hotel in the Beaches. The photos make it look quaint, the kind of place a couple might go to honeymoon, a place that serves afternoon tea. It reminds Lydia of summer days spent doing cartwheels down the boardwalk while her mother took pictures and nights huddled in blankets as they watched a movie in the park and ate salt and vinegar chips.

Lydia’s hands shake as she dials. Her mom could be on the other side of this phone call.

“Cherry Hotel, how may I help you?” The voice is whistle-toned and sugar glazed.

“Hi, I’m wondering if you could connect me to Emily Adams’ room please?”

“Give me one moment.” The clacking of a keyboard comes through the phone. Lydia’s heart is a thunderstorm, the wind-raging, rain-tearing type that she used to be afraid of as a kid. “I’m sorry. It looks like that guest checked out this morning.”

Lightning strikes.

“Did she leave any information?” Lydia can hear her words crumbling as they fall from her lips.

“I’m afraid not. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No.”

“Have a nice day.”

She hangs up. Lydia lets her head fall to the table. It is too heavy to hold up anymore. It is all too heavy.

“Tell me what we do next.” Lydia’s voice is smothered by the table, but Catherine hears her. She doesn’t answer. Lydia raises her head in the silence. “Come on, Catherine. What do we do?”

“I don’t know. We’ve called all your neighbours, her colleagues, the hotel...”

“Shit.” Lydia barely breathes the word.

“I’m sure there’s something, Sherlock can always find a clue.” Catherine touches her friend’s shoulder, and Lydia’s face raises an inch. “Hey.”

Lydia just stares at her. “I don’t want to give up.”

“Good, because we’re not. Let’s take a break and regroup later with fresh ideas.” She stands up, going to the pantry and grabbing a package of Girl Guide Cookies. “Let’s go watch some *Gossip Girl* to take our minds off this. I know you can’t resist it. You’re freakishly obsessed with that show.”

A small smile slips across Lydia’s face. “Says the girl who made at least twenty *Sherlock* references today.”

Catherine rolls her eyes. Lydia sighs, standing up, leaving her phone on the table. They go up to her room and are about halfway through an episode when they hear the door open. Lydia glances out her bedroom door and sees Ethan, dejectedly pushing his way up the stairs and into his room. Catherine and Lydia exchange a pointed look, and then Catherine pauses the show and gestures Lydia out of the room. Lydia goes and knocks on her brother's door.

"I don't want to talk, Lydia."

She walks in anyways. Ethan is sprawled on his bed, holding a book above his head.

"I said I didn't want to talk." His eyes don't leave the page.

"Too bad." She sits on the edge of the bed. He rolls over, so she can no longer see his face. "How are you doing? How was school?"

"Fine." His voice muffles as he turns the page.

"Ethan."

"What."

"Come on."

"I said I'm fine."

"Really, E?"

"Yes. Now please leave."

She hears his voice crack like the snap of a twig underfoot on the last word, but doesn't push it. Ethan's always been resolute; if he doesn't want to talk he's not going to talk.

When Lydia goes back to her room, Catherine is packing up her stuff, hair starting to frizz out of her braids. Her brown skin glows in the sunlight coming through the window behind her.

“Sorry,” she says. “I told Jessica I’d help her study for Chem at seven and I was gonna cancel but I totally forgot and now she’s at my house alone with my mother.” Her eyes go wide and she grimaces as if she’s watching a bus crash. Lydia can’t help but laugh.

“It’s okay, go ‘study-’” she does air-quotes “-with your girlfriend. We can get together tomorrow, hopefully with a plan.” Though the polaroid was already starting to develop for her, and Lydia didn’t like the picture breaking through the surface.

Catherine winks, giving Lydia’s shoulder a quick squeeze before dashing down the stairs and out the front door. Lydia hears the door snag as it closes and she shakes her head. She’ll never be able to forget that sound.

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Her dad walks in the door like a question mark, all hunched shoulders and cloudy eyes.

“Nothing,” he says when he sees Lydia sitting on the couch, guessing the question that sits on her lips. “They can’t really do anything yet. But they said they’ll look into it.”

He comes and sits next to her, and she leans her head on his shoulder, letting him stroke a hand down her hair like he used to do when she was little.

“It’s gonna be okay, kid,” he breathes out.

They stay like that for a while.

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The three of them eat another quiet dinner then spend most of the night in their separate rooms; a family fractured by grief.

Lydia changes into her pajamas and then sits crossed-legged on her bed, letting the night fade away as she googles her mother and goes back through old Facebook posts and Tweets to see if there’s anything there. There isn’t. It’s all old pictures of Emily

and stupid jokes with friends. Nothing unusual. Nothing that points to a different answer than the one that is glaring at her like high beams on a dark road. She was walking down the street. She went to a hotel. She checked out of the hotel this morning.

Lydia knocks her computer closed. She wants to talk to Ethan, wants to wake him up and tell him what she's found except she hasn't found anything that wouldn't disappoint him more. She wants to wake up her dad and demand he tell her why her mom got her own credit cards. She wants to do anything but sit on her bed, knees tucked up like a scared child, two words clanging around the stale air.

She left.

A deliberate act of separation. A vanishing act by her mother the magician. She wasn't a part of the CIA or a wanted criminal. She was just her mother. Just Emily.

Just her mother who left. Slamming the door in a mockery of all that they had. Lydia failed her mother just like she tried so hard not to. Why was Lydia not enough? What did Lydia do to warrant her mother ripping up their family without even a glance at the scraps she left behind?

Lydia starts crying. Alone in her room, her breaths hiccup as tears congregate in the corners of her eyes. She scrunches her duvet tight in her fists. *Why?*

...

Lydia finds her dad sitting on the front porch the next morning, staring at the stately oak tree across the street. The branches slice across the sky like highways or the cracks in the ceiling above their kitchen table. Through the lens of the tree, the sky is many.

She hands him a chipped mug of coffee before sitting next to him, and he smiles in thanks. He takes a sip before looking over at her.

“So I realized this morning that we forgot about family movie night last night and it was your movie pick. So I was thinking we could order in Thai and Dairy Queen and watch *Brave* tonight, sound good?”

Lydia blinks slowly at him. He looks genuine; a dim light rests in his eyes. All of the sudden her chest is full of molten lava.

“Obviously I don’t want to do that.”

“Why not?” He leans back, his eyebrows pushing together as he stares at her.

“How can you just pretend everything is fine?”

“I’m not pretending-”

“You are. We can’t just have a family movie night when a quarter of our family decided to walk out the door for God knows what reason two days ago. And maybe you don’t care, but I do!”

His eyes flit back to the tree. He is silent for a few endless seconds, teeth stressing his lower lip. He drags a withering hand through his hair.

“Emily called me on Thursday night.”

Lydia is silent. Those words, like a magnet, pull all the letters from her vocabulary.

“What?” The word falls like a pebble off a cliff. Lydia stands, slowly.

“She called, and told me that she needed some time to herself.” Her dad folds in on himself as he speaks. “That she’d spent her whole life doing one thing and needed to know if there was more, needed to see what else she could be.” He finally looks at Lydia, his eyes shattered. “She asked me to tell you and Ethan, but I told her no, that I wouldn’t be the one to break your hearts like that and that she should come home or at least call you herself. ”

“So the police...”

“She’s not a missing person if she doesn’t want to be found.”

Lydia disintegrates. She bites her lip to stop it from shaking, but it doesn't work. She curls her hands into fists, feeling her fingernails pop into the skin of her palm.

"How-How could she do this?" She murmurs the words. Suddenly she is the axis and the world is spinning around her so fast she can't focus on anything. Bile sloshes in her stomach. They were supposed to tell each other everything yet her mother couldn't even pick up the goddamn phone to tell Lydia herself that she didn't want to be her mother anymore. She turns her gaze to her father, still sitting in the porch chair. She towers over him like this, a twisted reversal of roles. "How could *you* do this?"

"Lydia-

"No! I'm not a child anymore, Dad. You don't just get to decide what I know. I deserved to know why, and you kept it from me. You lied to me."

"Lydia, I didn't want you to get hurt."

"Well I *am* hurt, Dad. You can't protect me from this." And then she's gone, racing down the front steps and calling over her shoulder that she'll be back later. She needs to get away from that snickering front door.

...

She's at Catherine's five minutes later, her breaths heavy as she slows her run up Catherine's driveway. She doesn't bother to knock, just walks in and nods at Catherine's mom before heading upstairs to her best friend's room. Catherine is sprawled on her floor, surrounded by Chemistry notes. Lydia comes in like a tornado.

"What is it?" Catherine asks, immediately standing up.

"My mom called my dad on Thursday."

Catherine's arms are around her in a second, and Lydia finally feels like she can exhale.

"What did she say?" The words are muffled against Lydia's shoulder.

“That she needs to explore her life or some shit. Find out if there is *more* out there.” Lydia pulls away. “And ‘oh could you tell the kids that they just weren’t enough for me? Thanks, bye.”

“Lydia-”

“I knew, I knew she just left, but this is different. I wasn’t good enough. I tried so hard but I failed her. I -”

“Lydia-”

“I need her, Catherine. I need her. She was supposed to be mine and-”

“Lydia, I swear to God, shut up.”

Lydia shuts up.

Catherine grabs Lydia’s hands, squeezing them hard like she used to do when they were ten and watched scary movies in Catherine’s basement. “You did not make this happen.”

“But she wanted more than what she had with me, so she walked out the front door. I could’ve changed that, could’ve made our family the ‘more.’” Lydia’s breaths are speeding up. She can feel panic permeating her bones.

“Lydia, this isn’t all about you. Your mom loves you, I’ve seen it with my own eyes. But her walking out that door was her own decision.”

“I still can’t believe she did that. We weren’t even worth a note.” Lydia’s gaze drops. She feels tears start to skate down her cheeks.

“Hey.” Catherine brushes a tear from her face. “That’s not it. Your mom looked at her life and decided she needed to try something else, see some more of the world’s opportunities. And that was a shitty thing to do, but you didn’t cause it. You are not all that she’s made of, okay?”

Lydia nods weakly. Part of her is still searching for things she did wrong, but she smothers those thoughts. Catherine’s right. She’s been looking at this like she severed

the lifeline, like there was some secret code word she could say to bring everything back to its proper place. Even after Lydia realized her mother had gone of her own accord, Lydia had tried to find blame anywhere else. Tried to find blame in herself. But her mother has always been Emily as well as “mom.” And it is Emily as a whole that wants more, that wants to explore her possibilities. Lydia can’t change those possibilities, no matter how much she wishes she could.

She takes a deep breath, and the world inches closer to its right axis.

...

Her phone rings as she’s walking back home from Catherine’s, her face still blotchy with tears. She doesn’t recognize the number, but her hands shake as she slides her finger across the screen to pick it up.

“Lydia? Hello? It’s Mom.”

Lydia’s breath hiccups, and she stops walking, her other hand gripping the edge of her jacket. The slip of her mom’s words sounds like coming home.

“Lyds? Are you there?”

She hangs up the phone.

All those hours of wondering and searching and needing to know why she left and now Lydia can’t even hear her voice. For all that she wants to fall into her mother’s arms and see her smile and hear her laugh, there is an equal, roaring part of her that can’t take it. Not yet. There are other ways her mom could have found *more*. She could have taken dance classes or joined a book club or done anything but walk out of their family like they meant nothing at all. And maybe Lydia should have recognized her mother more as a person, but Lydia’s job is to climb into her mom’s bed in the middle of the night and get piggyback rides and to need her as a child needs their mother.

And besides, Lydia can picture Ethan curled up on his bed, tears hitting his pillow. She can picture her dad, shoulders hunched, smile gone. They did not deserve this. She did not deserve this.

She shakes her head once to clear her thoughts, reaching up to tighten her ponytail where it sits on the crown of her head. And then she keeps walking.