

Chapter One

The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it.

—Albert Einstein

It looked like we had been robbed. Piles of clothing were strewn across the floor of my small bedroom. Seven sets of flip-flops, three pairs of sandals, and two pairs of sneakers lay in a mismatched heap near the open closet door. Every summer Dad questioned my love of flip-flops, but Mom never did. She totally got it and even had a collection of her own. Mom tried to get Dad to buy a pair, but his response was always the same: “My shoes need to be tied on. Flip-flops make me walk funny.” Then he'd laugh and walk away like Frankenstein. Stiff legs, arms stretched out in front. It never failed to crack me up.

The new suitcase Gram bought me sat open on my bed. I'd never owned a suitcase before and had always used a backpack for weekend trips to Gram's small house, which was only five blocks away from ours.

The suitcase was almost too pretty to use. Wrapped around the entire case was a picture of a sun-drenched forest. In the scene, tree branches glowed in sunlight, casting long shadows on the ground below them. The picture made me think of woodland animals and mythological creatures. It was perfect for the occasion, but especially fitting for my destination. The next day my parents were going to drive me to sleepaway camp, where there'd be plenty of trees. Camp Troy was three hours away from home and was, according to its website, “nestled in a wealth of pure beauty” and promised to be “the foundation for an extraordinary summer.”

The New York City Parks Department sponsored Camp

Troy. This year the camp's focus was wilderness survival skills.

I really wanted to attend, especially after reading *Lost in the River of Grass*. It was a book about a girl my age who took a weekend trip to the Everglades and found herself lost for three days with hardly any food or water.

Of course, normal activities were available at Camp Troy, too, like swimming lessons in the lake, roasting marshmallows, sitting around the campfire, hiking, and putting on shows. But I was more excited about learning survival skills, like how to properly use a map and compass and how to tell the difference between berries that were okay to eat and ones that would knock you dead. Basically, I wanted to learn everything I'd never had the opportunity to experience living in the city.

I had begged my parents all winter to let me go and when they'd finally said yes, that's when my nerves went berserk. Other than staying at Gram's, I'd never been away from my parents overnight. It was like with all of my begging I'd been pulling on a rubber band and when it finally gave way, I had no idea what to do next. Until that point, I hadn't thought it completely through. The camp was way out in the country and I was pretty sure there'd be lots of snakes plus all sorts of creepy crawlers I'd never seen before. Not only that, but I'd have to share a cabin with five complete strangers. One week could feel like a month if my cabinmates didn't like me. But I knew that no matter what happened, I'd have to suck it up. My parents made sure I knew that unless it was a real emergency—like my asthma acting up—I was going to stay put for a whole week.

As I sat on top of the suitcase, trying to smooch everything down inside it, there was a knock on my bedroom door.

“Come in,” I said.

Julius squeezed by me and the bulging suitcase. “Hey,” he said. “Almost done packing?”

Julius, my best friend, was the only person I knew whose eyes changed color. Sometimes they were green, other times light brown. That day they were green, my favorite. He’d always been the cutest guy in our neighborhood and in school.

Julius’s short silky hair was as black and shiny as fresh tar and refused to do anything but lie straight on his head. He kept it parted to the side and used hairspray and gel to keep it from flopping into his eyes. His mother called him her “chocolate licorice,” not just because he was tall and skinny, but because she said he was “as sweet as candy.”

I shook my head, then pointed to the flip-flop mountain.

“I still have to squeeze those in somewhere.”

“Are you supplying your cabinmates too?”

“Very funny. I need a different pair for each day. Now come help me.”

Julius crammed five pairs of flip-flops and one pair of sandals in the outside pockets of the suitcase.

“Sorry, that’s all that’ll fit,” he said.

“It’s okay, I’ll wear my sneakers there and stick the rest of the flip-flops into my hoodie pockets.”

Julius sat on the floor beside me. “You’re so lucky, T,” he said. “I wish I were going too. You excited?”

“Yeah, I’m super excited. I can’t believe the day is almost here.” I stopped struggling with the suitcase and began fanning myself. “I’m a little nervous though. I mean, it’s a whole week. What if the food is really gross or one of my cabinmates snores like moose? Or worse, I get the top bunk and fall off in front of everyone?”

“Hmm,” Julius said. “What if the sky falls too?”

“You got jokes today, huh?”

Julius laughed then added, “Seriously, I’m sure the snacks will be good at least and you can always pack earplugs. And the bed? Just make sure you claim a bottom bunk as soon as you can. Like, fling a pair of flip-flops on to it or something.”

Julius flung an invisible Frisbee into the air, which made me laugh, and I suddenly felt much better.

After a little while, Julius softly nudged his knee into mine. “I’m going to miss you.”

The spot where his knee touched mine grew warm and I couldn’t bring myself to look at him. “I’m going to miss you too Jul.”

It wasn’t until then that I realized being away from Julius was one of the things I was worried about.

Julius looked at the time on his phone. “I have to go,” he said. “I promised Mom I’d clean my room today.”

We both stood, then Julius grabbed me for a quick hug. “I’ll bring your suitcase to the front door for you so you won’t have to do it in the morning when you leave.”

I watched him go, lugging my suitcase behind him, and almost wished I’d never heard of Camp Troy.

That night, it was impossible to fall asleep, and when I finally did, it was only to be awakened at 3:00 a.m. when that familiar breathing-through-a-straw feeling struck. My lungs squeezed smaller and tighter and demanded more air. As I reached for my inhaler, I tried my best to stay calm, but failed. My heart slammed against my rib cage like it wanted out.

My fingers trembled and instead of grabbing the inhaler, I accidentally sent it flying off the night table. It skidded across the floor, barely making a sound. I tried not to move too fast as I got out of bed. I had learned the hard way that it was better to stay calm when my asthma acted up. Well, easier said than done.

The imaginary straw I breathed through became even smaller as my lungs demanded more air. My upper back hurt, too, sometimes that happened when my lungs worked overtime.

I probably should’ve woken up my parents, but I didn’t want to freak them out. They might change their minds about Camp Troy. If Mom thought I might be having trouble breathing, she’d want to rush me into the ER, where we would spend most of the night counting oxygen levels. The ER can be scary sometimes too. Once, the cops brought in four guys who were in a street fight. They were bloody and loud. One guy wasn’t even wearing a shirt. The gash on his back looked deep and painful. Dad stood in front of me so I wouldn’t have to see, but he couldn’t do anything about the nasty things the man said to the doctors and nurses, like it was their fault he was there and not his.

On my hands and knees, I finally found my inhaler near the window, almost completely hidden behind a stack of old books that I just couldn’t seem to get rid of. My bedroom would make hoarders everywhere proud.

After I emptied my lungs as much as possible, I pumped the inhaler once, sucked down the miracle mist, then held it in and forced it deep into my ailing lungs until I couldn’t anymore. One puff would make things better, but two would completely banish the invisible beast that sat on my chest. So, I pumped again.

I’d always thought of my inhaler as a lion tamer, only in my case it was more of a lung tamer. I’d heard that some kids outgrew their asthma, but since I was already thirteen, I knew my chances of that were slim.

I stood and sipped from a bottle of water on my night table to the right side of my bed, near the window. I pulled the gauzy white curtain aside, looking out into the night as I waited for the medicine to kick in.

It was a clear night, the kind I loved—dark blue like velvet, with more stars dotted across the sky than usual.

I looked down to the sidewalk, and at first, I wasn’t sure what I saw. I thought maybe I was having some kind of hallucination. I mean, my lungs felt like they were stuffed with big fluffy cotton balls, so there had to be a serious lack of oxygen to my brain. I figured a brain short on air on a humid July night was more than capable of holding some kind of weird power over the rest of my body. But no, not mine. My brain just kept on seeing truths as clear as Gram’s fancy crystal water glasses. That truth was a man face down on the bloody cement sidewalk. The truth didn’t stop there either. Another unfamiliar man, dressed in dark pants and hoodie, kneeled over him. He held a knife.

The light from the streetlamp caught the blade and sent a momentary gleam into the night. Maybe he had heard me as I wheezed.

Shocked, I trembled like it was the middle of February. I'd never felt anything like this in my life. Even my insides quaked and stirred up the dinner I had eaten hours before.

I tried to convince myself that it was all a sick prank, and that the man who lay on the ground would get up and laugh it off. At least that was what I prayed for. But when that didn't happen, I ripped my cell phone from the nearby charger and began to enter the passcode. My hands shook like crazy, but when I finally got it right, I made the mistake of looking back to the shadowy stranger below. My face had been lit up by my phone screen. If he looked up, he'd be able to see me clearly. Even though I knew this, I couldn't make myself move. No matter how many times my mind screamed for me to step away from the window, my bare feet wouldn't budge.

The man used his foot to nudge the hooded figure lying in a growing pool of blood. When the man on the ground didn't move, I began to dial 911, but the phone slipped from my quivering hands before I had finished dialing. That's when the man looked up, directly at me and held a finger to his lips.

I stumbled backward. I never took my eyes off the knife.

"Oh no," I whispered.

In my mind, I heard his hush loud and clear. It became a part of me, and I knew if I didn't keep the man's secret, I'd die too. If he could hurt a grown man, permanently silencing a thirteen-year-old girl would be easy. Still, I thought about trying to call 911 again, but the giant pool of blood around the man and the stillness of his body told me that I was already too late to save him.

Little by little, I drew the curtain closed but left it open just enough to peek through. At the very least, I thought, maybe the stranger would think he hallucinated too.

The killer looked one last time in my direction, shooting a glare up to my window, then took off. And just like that, the world I knew was shattered.

I stayed at the window a few minutes longer and numbly stared out into the night. Seeing, but not comprehending.

When I got back into bed, nothing was the same. The room somehow felt bigger—or maybe I was smaller; I didn't know. Even the air was thicker and warmer, and time seemed to slow my every move. It was like someone had carved a hole in the universe and tossed me into space.

With each blink, the scene outside my window glowed like an X-ray on the insides of my eyelids. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter and tighter, but nothing got rid of the image. I sat on the edge of my bed and punched the pillow until my arms ached.

Finally, I buried my face into the pillow. "No," I screamed

like a prayer, until my throat felt raw. No for the man who had been hurt. No for the man with the knife. No to being threatened. No to being changed forever because I knew I'd miss the girl I was before tonight.

I'm not sure how long it was before my lungs eased themselves back to normal, but when they did, I quietly slipped into Mom and Dad's room. I stood silently in the doorway and listened to the sound of their unworried breathing. It was like they were part of a team I no longer belonged to and I felt jealous. I

was alone and would have to stay that way so that they could continue to live in that peaceful, untroubled world. I could never tell them what I saw, I realized, remembering the murderer's echoing "hush."

When I wiggled between my parents, something I hadn't done since I was little, Mom absentmindedly patted my leg. "It was just a bad dream, Tia," she said, "todo está bien."

I wondered if Mom would've still believed all would be well if she knew what had brought me to her bed.

Gram once told me that God never needed to hear actual words, that if you spoke to him with your mind and heart, he'd hear you. Still, as I willed myself to sleep, I whispered one last prayer. "Please, please, keep me safe."