

When You Believe

by Deborah Bedford

Chapter One

It started like any afternoon, that first Tuesday of October, a solid bright school day when sun fell across everyone's arms like a warm shawl. The glare on Lydia's desk had veered to the left along the windowsill, and it was after two p.m. Yes, she recalled, because the shadows of the sumac stalks outside all bent toward the east.

Lydia Porter had stayed ensconced in her cubicle at Shadrach High School ever since the second lunch bell. If the juniors and seniors tested upstairs, she'd been thinking, the sophomores could take over B-hall downstairs. Only that left a quarter of this year's freshmen wandering around A-hall after third period with nothing to do.

Her biggest challenge every year, she thought. The Missouri standards-test schedule. That's when the timid tap-tap-tapping began.

"Come in."

The door opened five inches and a teenager's head appeared in the crack. Amazing how these young ladies always acted so hesitant when the boys just burst their way in.

A little wave, an uncertain smile. "Miss P?"

"Hey, Shelby. How are you?"

For the moment, the teenager left the door open behind her. Halls that in nine minutes would be coursing with students, friends shouting, conversation rising, stood empty. Rows of beige metal lockers waited, closed. Except for the hum of incandescent lights in the ceiling and the far, muted voice of someone's emphatic lecture in a classroom, the building was quiet.

"I'm...I'm okay. Well, I guess."

Lydia's chair rolled over the plastic floor mat with a welcoming clatter. "So, how's that leg?"

Her first order of business in the counseling office was always putting visitors at ease. Shelby had gotten hurt tripping up the goalie from Monett. Everybody had teased her since the third game of the season that, for a gentle and sweet girl, she'd been getting downright mean on the soccer field.

"It's getting better."

"That's good."

"Yeah." A pause, while they studied each other. "Miss P? You got a minute?"

"Sure I do. Come on in. What's up?"

"I was hoping...maybe...we could talk."

"I'd love to."

In Shelby came, her messy bun sprouting from her crown like a rhododendron and her sunglasses perched high atop her head. She pulled up a chair, adjusted her tiny skirt and sat. She stayed a good minute with her knees together and her feet splayed apart, her clog-toes tapping the ground, and didn't speak.

With solemn eyes she fiddled with the engraved nameplate on Lydia's desk that read, 'Miss Porter. School-to-Careers Counselor.'

"So," Lydia asked in a light voice, slapping her legs with her hands, settling in. "You been thinking about colleges lately?"

"No, not really."

Of all the students at Shadrach High, Lydia couldn't help counting Shelby Tatum as one of her favorites. She was one of those lucky kids whose mother showed up at every parent/teacher conference, giving proof to their favorite dictum in this office: the parents who showed up at teacher's conferences were seldom the parents who needed to. Her grandfather had sold an old house down in Barry County and they'd let him build a guesthouse on their property. Such a blessing; most kids never even got to know their grandfathers. And Shelby's step-dad parked himself on the sidelines of every game, perching with one Topsider cocked over a knee in one of those soft-slung chairs that folded itself up into an accordion while you were in it, roaring his approval of her team. Every week he'd be there with his golf umbrella, a dilapidated briefcase as wide as a corn-fed piglet, a clipboard of documents from Place-Perfect Missouri Real Estate where he worked.

So college wasn't the right button to push. Lydia probed a little further. "Your classes coming okay?"

"Yeah," the girl said. "Okay."

Over the past year Shelby had sealed Lydia's admiration by launching into those loose, comfortable conversations in the hall. Not the way adults launched into them, mind you, but the way only a sixteen-year-old would do it, stony silent if you dared ask questions, burbling torrents of information when you least expected it and, generally, didn't have time.

That's why it seemed odd today, after the door shut quietly behind them, when Shelby didn't have anything to say.

Lydia's pointed questions, Shelby's short vague answers, fizzled into silence.

A heavy breath lifted Shelby's breastbone and set it down again.

Lydia tilted her jaw so she could better examine the girl's face. Shelby's eyes had taken on an unfathomable hue, a darkness that made Lydia's pulse quicken. No, I can see. It's more than that.

She hung back, waiting for Shelby to volunteer something. She knew she had to be willing to wait. This girl who normally gestured largely to her friends in the sophomore hallway, who slumped against her locker and chattered on her cell, now sat with her chin against her collarbone, one twist of hair fallen from her bun, hiding her face. For the first time she noticed the swollen eyes, the smudges beneath them as dark as slashes of purple lipstick. Lydia balanced her weight on the balls of her feet, held tight to her own knees. She had never seen Shelby this troubled.

Oh my.

Watching her, Lydia felt a draw toward the girl so strong and natural that it might have been a tide in the ocean or the pull of the moon. She cared so much about all of them, especially the discomfited ones, the ones who had pushed boundaries a little too hard, the ones broken and flailing out against people, who didn't understand how worthy they were.

A sense of warm purpose welled in her bosom.

How she longed to touch these kids with her heart, to share with them real tools for living instead of the slick pages of college catalogues.

It's the future you see in this place, never the present, Lydia thought. All the signs on the walls: Summer Academy, Basic Training For Creative Minds; Selecting The Right College; The Smart

Buyers' Guide To Trade Schools. Never the present, until a worried student came walking in the door.

Now that Lydia thought about it, she remembered Amy Mera mentioning that Shelby, usually a stellar student, had missed homework in history. She hadn't finished a French II assignment, either.

And so she asked, "You been having trouble keeping up in class?"

Besides soccer, Shelby sang in honor choir, had been picked to be on the team for mock trial, and came early for meetings of the student council. And, well, everybody talked about it; these days, the good kids could get way too busy.

All the time in the chair, and the girl had been keeping her backpack slung by one strap over her shoulder. She let it slip to the floor between her legs, the plastic buckles jostling. "If I had problems in one of my classes," she asked as she replaced Lydia's nameplate and reached for a paperclip instead, "could you help me?"

"Of course I could. We could get you into a study hall fifth period. We could find you a tutor for French II if you needed it."

"That's all it would take to get you to help me with something, Miss P? To tell you about it?"

"Yes."

"I want to tell you about it," she said, "because you're the only one I can tell it to."

Lydia nodded, waited.

"You're the only one who's really listened to me for a long time."

Lydia waited some more.

"Well." Her fingernails, painted a Glamour-magazine buff, had been chewed on. With them, she bent the paperclip into the shape of an elongated 's' and dropped it on the desktop. "Really, it's nothing."

"It is that, then? Do you need a tutor?"

They listened to each other breathing for a while.

"No, it isn't that, either."

Another dead end. Well, Lydia knew how to find her way around dead ends. She began to try a little harder. "Things okay with your peers? Everything okay between you and your friends?"

"Yeah." The girl cocked her head. "Everything's fine."

"So, everything okay at home?"

At that moment the door burst open and in barreled three uninvited boys. "Hey, Miss P," Tommy Ballard announced as the door hit the wall. "My mom said I was supposed to stop by here and pick up something."

"Tommy--"

"Don't remember what it was, though."

How Lydia resented this interruption. "Are you going to be out? Homework, maybe?"

"No. Something else."

"You know the rules around here, don't you? When you come into this office, you're supposed to knock. We were talking."

"Oh." Lydia saw Tommy glance with some interest at Shelby. "Sorry."

Shelby surveyed the weave of the industrial carpet beside her left clog as if it were the most intriguing pattern she'd ever laid eyes on. She looked like she wanted to disappear into thin air.

"What are you doing in here, Shelb?"

"None of your business, Ballard."

"Tommy--"

"Oh." He snapped his fingers. "I know what I needed. Is this where we get those SAT sign-up things?"

"Over there."

"Thanks."

In the same way they'd burst in with no regard, the boys overzealously helped themselves to what they needed. They started out before Lydia finished. "And this is the book of sample questions on the test," she called as she held out another pamphlet. "You boys knock next time."

Tommy seized the booklet from her hand as if he'd already been held too long. He rolled it inside his palm and smacked the doorjamb with it. "See you, Shelb." He led his tribe of friends out the door.

Wordlessly, they watched Tommy Ballard go. Lydia readjusted herself, settled in the chair. Shelby played with a buckle on her backpack.

Lydia tried again after the silence seemed like it had gone on forever. "You didn't answer my question, Shelby. Is everything okay at home?"

Shelby tossed her head so one strand of unrestrained hair flew back against her shoulder and then fell forward again. Her shoulders slumped against the back of the chair. Lydia saw her slight hesitation. Her lips parted as if she wanted to say something. Then, they shut again.

Shelby grappled on the floor for her backpack. "I've got to go."

Lydia couldn't lose her now. If she did, Shelby might be gone completely. She might disappear inside the river of students that coursed toward their next classes when the bell rang, vanished forever.

With a sinking heart, Lydia tacked a different direction, broaching the subject the way someone would check a tender bruise. "You're frightened. I can tell that much."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you want to run away."

"I-I can't do this."

"But you're here. You came because you wanted to talk."

The girl rose, upsetting the nameplate on the desk. "I said I've got to go."

"Shelby." Lydia reached for her arm and grabbed her, but didn't rise. To rise would have meant concession, and she wouldn't do that.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does."

Silence.

"Sit down."

"I can't do it."

Lydia searched her mind for something, anything, which might sway the girl's decision to leave. All of her educational training, all of her practical work with students and, at this moment, she couldn't think about what she knew. She couldn't think of what to do, only what she had to be.

"I'm not here to make you do something you didn't already want to do."

"Yeah. Right."

"Don't let Tommy Ballard mess this up."

Shelby didn't budge. "Maybe you don't care about me. Maybe you're just a school counselor, paid to be around in case somebody decides to shoot up a bunch of kids or something."

"So, with the way you came in here, how do I know that's not you?"

They stared each other down. At last, Shelby plopped into the chair and dropped her backpack again.

"Okay," Lydia said. "Let's start over."

Outside the counseling-office window, a sprinkler kicked out its traveling arc of water over grass that looked as shorn and sun-cured as a drill sergeant's haircut. The letterboard proclaimed in four-inch red-and-blue capitals, **GO FIRE-RATTLERS! 1999 MISSOURI STATE CLASS 2A CHAMPS 1999.**

Underneath, smaller type declared, **Homecoming Dance, Oct. 13, A Night To Remember.**

And, beneath that, **The Reality of Early Pregnancy--Wait Training Program.**

"It's hard, you know."

"Is it?"

"Yeah."

"Whatever it is that's happened, Shelby, there's probably a way to make it right."

"Not this."

"Try me."

"Sometimes there's things that are just...impossible to tell."

Folks in St. Clair County, Missouri liked to say that Lydia Porter once had a gift. When she'd been a little girl, she'd been able to take her father's hand, lead him into the hill country, and find deer hunters who had lost their way. They'd written up a story about her in the weekly *Shadrach Democrat Reflex* when she'd been ten and her father had brought her here to visit her Uncle Cy, the year Eddy Sandlin had turned up missing during Cub Scout Troup 517's day hike.

She'd helped find him sitting on a beaver dam in Yesterday Creek, snagging driftwood with his feet.

They said she did it by listening to the trees. They said she walked along through the forest at the edge of town, guiding her way through the dusk, touching the heels of her palms against the shaggy, rough bark of the hickory and the smooth, overlapping blue-gray mottles of the sycamore, listening, letting something bigger than herself guide her, willing to hear with an innocent child's ears.

They said she heard things that grown-ups wouldn't let themselves hear anymore.

But that sort of thing hadn't happened to Lydia Porter in a very long time. Except for the yellowed newspaper clipping her mother kept pressed in the family scrapbook between faded Polaroids of border-collie pups and her first communion, Lydia could hardly even remember.

Lydia had learned to rely on other things now. She relied on asking the right questions.

And so, she kept asking questions now. "If there isn't something wrong at home, is it anything to do with the boys?"

A bloom of color burned Shelby's cheeks. Lydia knew she was on to something. A slight tilt of the chin again, trying to see into the girl's downcast eyes. "Is that it? Boys?"

The girl clenched her fist in her lap. "No." Then she unclenched it again. "Maybe." Tears glossed her waxy lashes. One escaped and ran down, leaving behind a track of eyeliner. "I keep thinking maybe it's something I've done. Maybe it's something I've said to him to make him think--"

Lydia watched Shelby try to focus her attention anywhere but on a counselor's face. She watched her stare at the square, sincere letters on the sign beside the desk that read **LACK OF PLANNING ON YOUR PART DOES NOT CONSTITUTE AN EMERGENCY ON MY PART.** She watched her play with the tiny gold promise ring on her left hand, with its almost-invisible chip of diamond. She watched her snuffle and wipe her nose on the back of her wrist. "Well," she said at last, "you know there's Sam Leavitt." In distress, she stopped and began to wiggle the ring back and forth until the tiny stone captured a prism of sunlight from the window. The reflection moved like a flitting bug against the wall.

"You want to finish that sentence?"

"I'm in family science this semester, you know."

"I know."

"W-we talked about abstinence, how it was the best thing to do to keep your body healthy, to be pure. We talked about signing a contract."

A tear fell on Shelby's hands. Another on her jeans. Then another, leaving wet splotches on her denim the size of nickels.

"See, I told you there wasn't anything anybody could do."

"That contract makes you uncomfortable?"

"I c-can't sign something like that. Not after what's--" The girl tucked her elbows hard against her ribcage and moaned. "Sam wouldn't ever want somebody like m-me."

Instinctively, Lydia moved toward her. She was caught off-guard by the flare of terror in Shelby's eyes. Shelby tucked up her body to protect herself, warding Lydia off with her hands. Lydia was stunned. Hastily, she withdrew to the other side of the desk. "Don't you think that about yourself. Why would you think that?"

Their eyes met.

"Have you been" --how to pursue this, to be respectful and gentle with a child who had, perhaps, lost her innocence-- "active with someone? With this boy you like? Or with someone else?"

"No." Her answer came quick and sharp. "No, of course not." Then "--not exactly."

"Well, what do you mean by that? Have you and this boy done some things?"

Even as she asked the question, Lydia was afraid. Say yes, Shelby. Yes. Because anything else means something unthinkable is going on.

"Oh no." The tears came fresh and Shelby's voice broke with regret. "No...no...no, no, no."

Lydia leaned to the edge of her chair, her mouth gone dry with dread. Because suddenly she had begun to understand. "Is it someone else, then? Someone else being inappropriate with you? An adult?"

No nod. No answer. Just a bitten lower lip, eyes that seemed to stare through the floor, tears streaming down the face of a girl who had always seemed so happy. Just the desperate, broken expression of a young lady with her shoulders shaking who, twenty minutes ago, seemed to have everything in the world on her side.

With her teeth, Shelby found a gash in her fingernail and ripped a sliver of it away, leaving raw, pink skin at the quick.

"Shelby?"

The girl covered her mouth and gasped like she was going to be sick. That one helpless gurgle told Lydia everything she needed to know.

Lydia went numb, the silent air pounding heavy against her ears.

Everybody in Shadrach knew everybody else. Nobody in this little town would be capable of something like that.

"You want to give a name, honey? You've got to tell me who's doing this and" --she followed her professional training now, no leading with her words, no power of suggestion-- "bothering you?"

"I c-can't."

"You can." Lydia struggled against her own frantic need to press. Keep this girl safe. Keep this girl at ease, and talking. "We need you to tell us."

Shelby was an achiever, a girl they'd all known since she'd first learned to write in cursive and do long division and run the right direction on a soccer field. If there was someone capable of doing this among them, the folks of Shadrach would find him out, punish him, put him away.

"Then everybody will know, and he said...he said..."

"It's hard, Shelby. But it's important. It's appropriate that you would tell someone."

"...he said if they found out, nobody would believe me anyway. That they'd blame me for what happened."

From the hall came the wakening sounds of Shadrach High School as the minutes moved toward the bell--the hoots of girls in the corridor, a reprimand from a voice she recognized as Maureen Staid, the stale, wet bread smell from the cafeteria creeping under the door. A door opened and, through the window to the hallway, Lydia could see the blue plastic easel with brochures that read, **JOIN THE AIR FORCE. AIM HIGH.**

"He said if I told, he would say I was lying. He said something horrible would happen to me."

"We can only keep you safe if you'll let us help you."

"I just want...I w-want it to stop."

"If you want it to stop, Shelby, you have to give a name. You can't protect him."

The girl sounded as if she were trying to speak through a gag. But she repeated herself, and the meaning sank in. "I-I'm scared."

"We're not going to let him hurt you. Do you understand that?"

Shelby shook her head again. No.

Who? Who would want to do this? Who would do this to some young girl who just wanted to stay pure?

"If you'll just tell me--"

A meeting of eyes.

"--who did it."

Silence. Shelby leaned all her weight on her hands. "He's going to say it was me. He's going to say he didn't do it. That everybody ought not to believe me."

"If you'll just tell me something, we can keep it from happening again."

Shelby stared out the window as if she was uncertain what to do next. Then, after all that waiting, she said it so quickly that Lydia almost didn't realize what was happening. Shelby spoke in a child's voice, telling secrets.

Shelby's thumbnail became interesting as she waited. She studied it from one angle. Then, another. "M-Mr. Stains. It was him."

Lydia took a full five seconds to realize what she'd heard.

The first blow, when she understood Shelby wasn't accusing someone in the community. She was accusing someone in the school.

The second blow, when her brain registered his name.

For maybe the third time in her life, Lydia experienced a physical reaction to words. Adrenaline jolted through her, deserted her, leaving her faint. The silence roared. She couldn't think past the ringing in her ears.

"Who?" she asked, her voice gone weak. "Who did you say?"

But she didn't ask because she hadn't heard. She asked because, at his name, something war-torn and leaden had taken hold in her chest.

"You heard me, didn't you?" Shelby said, holding up the second thumbnail to compare it with the first. "You know who he is?"

In the silence, Lydia made a choking noise. Step by step into the dark journey she went, the weight of horror pitching forward and slamming her. Not Charles Stains.

Lydia stared hopelessly at the empty ring finger on her left hand. "Yes. Yes, of course I do know him."

"The woodshop teacher."

"I know who you're talking about."

"The one everybody calls 'Mr. S.'"

"I know who he is, Shelby."

On the outside, her words sounded as calm as a lapping lakeshore evening, the precise moment of stillness as the stars set in and the breeze died away.

On the inside, Lydia felt as roiled up and out-of-control as the water that churned between the bluffs of Viney Creek.

No. Oh, please, God. No.

Oh, no no no.

Let it be anybody but Charlie.

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