



## LYDIA

I jump up and before I'm even back on the ground, I swing out at his face. I nearly get a tap, but Joshua manages to duck away. He groans angrily and jabs at my stomach. I suck it in and jump backward, but I'm closer to the edge than I'd thought and my back slams into the rope.

Joshua smirks. He knows he's got the upper-hand.

He goes for my stomach again, but I slip out of the way, dive into a roll that takes me behind him, and spin around to face him.

He whirls around and slices his stick down toward the top of my head. I grab my stick with both hands and hold it above me. Block.

I realize he's holding his vertically like a sword, as opposed to holding it horizontally above his head. Bad form. I push my stick against his, forcing it toward his body. A look of confusion crosses Joshua's face. Then I give his stick a good shove with my own, thrusting him backward enough that he loses his balance and falls down onto the mat, flat on his back.

While he's down, I jab my stick toward his neck and tap his throat. The fight is over.

Joshua looks up at me with wide eyes, probably realizing what the result of a full force hit like that would be, and I suddenly become very aware of the fact that I'm glaring down at him. Had I wanted to fight again for revenge? What if I had lost my cool? Then I wouldn't have been any better than he was.

Except, I didn't hit him, whether a part of me wanted to or not. And I certainly didn't cheat. That's not who I am, or ever want to be.

Finally, the blood from my scratches runs all the way down my face, and just as a single drop of blood falls onto the mat, I hear the whistle.

"Winner! Lydia Humsworth!"

The crowd cheers. I'm brought back to reality. During the fight, it was as if everything and everyone had melted away and become silent. Nothing existed but me, my opponent, and the ring. I look up at the crowd who's roaring for me. Daniel, Lucas, and my mom are cheering louder than anyone else. It hits me: I won.

I put my stick down and look up at the audience, letting my victory sink in before turning back to help Joshua up. I hold out my hand, but he shoves it away and gets up on his own.

We bow. He looks mad again. So many remarks run through my head. I told you so. Sorry to burst your bubble. Apologies for deflating your ego... But I leave it alone. He's probably punishing himself enough.

Instead, I bow my head and say, "Good fight, Joshua."

He seems a little surprised at my humility, but he doesn't return it. All he does is sneer and bow his head in return. Then we separate to have quick words with our instructors before the final winners are announced.

"Well done, Lydia," Mr. Neil tells me, handing me a towel to wipe my face with. "You had the upper hand for most of the fight and you did

some quick thinking with that final move. It was different, unexpected, and intelligent.”

“Thank you, sir,” I say politely. I’m surprised by his kind words, but I can also tell that he’s holding something back. I sigh. “What is it?” He shifts his eyes to the side, then looks back at me. “You’re still too slow.” I purse my lips. Of course...