

Darby Loughin
Giknis/Ryans
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Matthew Kay
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The Red-Cloaked Riot

It's been three years since I felt a single emotion of my own. Anything I feel is from someone else. I can't feel angry or sad, or even happy. I wish more than anything to go back to the time where my laughter was genuine and didn't belong to someone else.

Ever since the new governor was elected, everything has been so much worse. Everyone is so angry and tense all the time, and I feel every moment of it.

The only thing that blocks it out is music. It distracts me from everything around me, giving my brain the chance to focus on itself and escape from the world.

Today is Monday. I'm still in bed, surrounded by emerald colored walls. As I lay sprawled across the comforter, the cool wind from the open window blows against my face. The strumming of an electric guitar beats loud in my ears.

Ever since a group of doctors experimenting with anxiety medication made a drastic error, everybody lost control of their emotions. In order to control the situation, everyone in the city lives by a block schedule, according to where you live. For example in the northern part of the city people are allowed to leave their houses at 10 o'clock for three hours before a mandatory return to home. This is the government's way of "solving" the problem. Instead of targeting the issue directly, they decided that controlling everybody was more important.

Eventually, I find the energy to pull myself out of bed, my head yearning to return to the soft pillowcase. Somehow I resist and quickly get dressed before heading downstairs.

In the kitchen, I find my mother cutting fruit over the counter, a reporter on the television, announcing today's boring stories.

“Hey, Mom,” I say.

She looks up, disoriented before finally noticing my presence. “Oh, hi sweetie. How are you?”

“Alright,” I reply, taking a seat. “Do you know if the doctors have made any progress in creating an antidote?”

“Nope, all of those doctors are sitting on their asses doing nothing to fix the problem,” she says, slamming her hand on the wooden cutting board, her nostrils flaring.

I begin to feel rage boiling at the surface. I close my eyes, slowly breathing in and out before saying, “Mom, come sit with me for a second.”

She obeys, and sits beside me. I grab her hands, instructing her to take deep breaths. Eventually, her closed shaking fists uncurl and settle calmly on her thighs.

“They’ll figure something out,” I said.

“Olive, it’s been three years,” she replies, tears filling her eyes. “God, why am I crying? I was never like this before everything.”

“None of us were.”

As I walk through the schoolyard, I feel snippets of different emotions as I pass my peers. One girl is on the verge of a panic attack, causing me to feel as if my throat is closing up. Another is fuming and red in the face, causing red hot anger to pulse through my veins.

I race behind a tree and slam my hands over my ears, breathing heavily. After a moment, I reach into my bag for my earbuds, and soon enough, the soothing rhythms of the guitar swarms me, cooling every one of my nerves like ice.

I find myself sliding down the trunk of the tree and for several minutes I sit there motionless, drowning in my quiet mind. Eventually, I walk into the school building reluctantly, dreading everything to come.

My first class is art on the third floor. During the trudge up the stairs, the photos of past principals and sports teams watch me judgmentally. The last few steps feel like several miles, but when I finally approach the entrance to the classroom, I am comforted. The inside of the room has sage green walls and easels organized in a circle with small buckets of paint brushes on each side. To the back of the room lies several shelving units holding tons of paint and other art supplies. I take in the scent of wet paint and clay as I take a seat at one of the easels.

As other students file in the room, Ms. Sands, the teacher, stands up from her desk and welcomes everyone in. Unlike my other classes, there are no feelings of anxiety or anger lingering. It is simply a space of serenity.

Recently, in class we've been discussing color theory and how symbolism can be an important attribute to art. I've always been one to appreciate symbolism; the idea that there is an underlying meaning to something seemingly obvious is something I find so beautiful.

Suddenly a loud bang disrupts the calm. My eyes shoot up at the sound, as another stone makes contact with the glass window, shattering it. I sense a wave of panic enter the room, and my heart begins to race.

My classmates and I rush to the window and below we see a group of individuals in ruby colored cloaks, several of them carrying signs containing threats and profanity.

Quickly, Ms. Sands gathers everyone away from the window. As more rocks are thrown, I shudder, taking in every ounce of the protesters' anger.

Above us the speaker phone echoes words from the principal: Hello students and faculty, we are in the midst of a riot from the city's folk. Teachers, please direct all students to the gymnasium.

"We haven't been able to go into the gym for over two years," one student says.

"Well yeah, because those stupid jocks can't control themselves," another says, tinged with vexation rising to the surface.

Ms. Sands stands up abruptly with her hand up. "Everyone stop now. Let's go."

In a single line, we all march to the gym, the halls plagued with unease. As I walk into the gym, chatter from students and teachers fills the room. I find a private corner and slip my earbuds in. I scroll through my phone hastily, searching for a track to calm me and settle the screaming thoughts in my head from the loud conversations around me.

Principal Mathers steps up to the podium. “Everyone, we have called parents and notified them of the situation. This attack is a result of displaced anger, and those people are trying to get anyone they can to listen, which is why it’s important that everyone stays here until the danger has passed,” he barks, “in the meantime, please try to remain calm.”

As everyone returns to their conversations, I sit alone, left to observing everyone around me. I feel a tap on my shoulder, coming from a young woman with olive skin. “Are you Olive Myers?” she asks.

“Yes,” I reply, confused.

“I’d like you to come with me,” she says, standing up.

“Why?”

“I’m sorry. I know this is confusing, but please just cooperate and follow me.”

Swiftly, I gather my things, and follow the woman out of the gym, down the hall to the office, and through the door. There, a tall man with striking red hair stands before me, his dark brown eyes glued to me. *Governor Hart*. My eyes widen and my pulse quickens with surprise. *Why is he here?* I think to myself.

“Hello, Olive. Please sit down,” he says, a serious expression painted on his face.

“Why am I here?” I say, twirling a single strand of blonde hair nervously around my finger. I take a seat in the leather chair across from the governor.

“I need your help. I am not well-loved by many citizens of the city, and I need some support to regain a prosperous union,” he says slowly, “I have heard of your gift of feeling people’s emotions, and believe that you could be of great help.”

“First of all, I wouldn’t call not being able to feel my own feelings a gift, and second, why should I help you? All you, and your administration has done is try to control us,” I pause for a moment, sliding to the front of my seat. “We don’t trust you, and that is because you haven’t given us a reason to trust you. You haven’t taken any action to fix the situation, and instead you make rules that aren’t working,” I say standing now, my face strained and tired. “You must make a plan and tell us what it is that you are going to do to help us. Don’t just say you’re going to bring prosperity back to the city or whatever you said when I walked in, but actually tell us how, and maybe we’ll begin to feel like we can trust the person that is supposed to be leading us.”

Governor Hart sits still, his eyes wide, tussling with his ginger hair. “But—”

“—May I go back to the gym now?” I interrupt demandingly.

He frowns, as I leave the room, slamming the door.

The next morning, I sit at the counter watching television. I sigh, as Governor Hart comes on screen and steps up to a podium.

“Hello everyone. Yesterday, someone told me something that I found incredibly moving. She said that I haven’t given you any reason to trust me, and that is true,” he pauses and takes a breath. “I have not been a good leader. I have tried to control you rather than lead you, and that has not helped the situation that we, as a community are facing together. Last night, I spent hours formulating a plan to figure out what went wrong in the malfunction and I have selected several individuals to find out why. Soon, we will begin to get answers, and discuss how to move forward. I have not listened to you, but I want to start. I want your input, and so, I have also decided that I want to organize a group to bring ideas from the community to my attention. Hopefully, we will eventually return to a supportive, happy society. Thank you for your time,” the governor calls, staring directly into the camera.

As he marches off stage, a smile stretches across my face. At this moment, my mom enters the kitchen. She approaches me, placing her arm around my shoulder. I close my eyes, taking in the sweet scent of her perfume, the fibers of her forest green sweater tickling my eyelashes.

“We’ll be okay,” she whispers into my ear, and for the first time, I actually believe it.