

# CROSSROADS

## 1. BACK IN NEW YORK

The man passed the school. The brim of a New York baseball cap, just bought at a souvenir stand, gave his eyes the much needed protection from the glaring sun. The collar of his polo shirt was wide open, and dark spots on his shirt revealed his sweat from the oppressing heat. The man passed the gate, an endless row of black iron bars topped with arrowhead-shaped points. The windows also had the same kind of bars. The gate was still closed.

He rounded the corner. Behind the school building were the main apartment buildings. Some were eight stories, some ten stories high, all with innumerable little square windows. He walked along the buildings as if he were looking for something. It should be here somewhere, he thought.

He looked up. The front of the building seemed so lifeless, as if nobody lived there. He saw only rows of windows, all exactly the same, each divided into nine little squares, with a colorless curtain here and there. The entrance was in the middle of the huge building. Doors that never closed, covered with graffiti, their windows smashed.

Next to the entrance some little shrubs tried to survive in a small plot of grass. Their prickly branches had caught pieces of paper and other garbage and did not let it go. The man looked around. He seemed to hesitate. He looked at one of the open doors. Then he looked at the next apartment building whose door was also wide open. Then he turned around and walked back.

The air seemed to shimmer from the heat. When Lydia looked up, she could see the tops of the skyscrapers. They seemed to quiver. It was a strange sight. Her hair was plastered against her forehead. With a quick swipe of her hand, she pushed it back. She would try to remember to put it in a ponytail tomorrow.

She wrinkled up her nose. New York City really smelled. This always happened a few days after it was very hot. Everything began to stink when there was no breeze to carry the odors toward the ocean. She smelled the cars, restaurants, people, and especially junk and garbage.

She was startled as someone called out, "Hey, Lydia!"

It was Chris again! She began to walk faster towards home, but he caught up with her. "Phew! It's hot! We sure got a heat wave this time!"

He was trying to sound friendly. She glanced sideways. What did he want anyway? This was the third time he had walked with her. She felt uneasy. He sounded friendly, but he didn't dare to look at her. Why did his eyes always dart from side to side when he talked to her? Her heart began to pound. She wished he would leave. She didn't want to talk to him.

“So you live here, do you?” He held the door open for her. Lydia began to blush, which made her feel warmer yet.

“Yes,” Lydia said.

“I hope you aren’t angry anymore about that, you know, about Eddie,” he said, while he was still standing in the doorway. Her heart began pounding again. What did he want? The stairs were right there. She wanted to go up, but Chris was holding the door so she couldn’t get passed him.

He continued with a smirk, “We aren’t mad at him anymore, Andrew and I. We should have told him what we were doing, that’s all. That’s why Eddie thought we had lied to him, but it’s all over with now. That happened a long time ago.”

Lydia didn’t say a word. Some children arrived and tried to get through the doorway to take the elevator. Chris stepped aside for a second, letting them pass. Now Lydia could go in, too.

“Do you ever hear anything about Eddie?” he continued. But Lydia wanted to get to the elevator. That was it! All he wanted was to hear what she knew about Eddie. She didn’t answer him. He didn’t need to know anything about Eddie.

Chris faked a smile. “Oh, you don’t have to tell me, Lydia. I just thought I’d ask. I knew he was a friend of yours and that you had lived there for a while. And so I think, Lydia, we should also be friends.”

Lydia hesitated. She was holding on to the step railing. Even the railing feels hot, she thought. Behind her she could hear the elevator zooming up. Chris still stood in the doorway, smiling and trying his best to be friendly, but it gave her a cold feeling. What was going on? What did he want? Was he really just trying to be friendly? But why? And why with her? She knew he didn’t have many friends. His own father had thrown him out of the house a few times. That must have been awful!

She looked at him before she began to climb the stairs and said in a slightly friendlier voice. “I, uh... I really don’t know, Chris.”

“Well, hope to see you tomorrow then, Lydia.”

Slowly Lydia climbed the steps to the fourth floor. Whew! It was just as warm indoors as out. Maybe it would have been better to ride the elevator. She didn’t like the elevator, though. It was dirty, it never smelled very good, and it was often filled with screaming kids. Finally she reached her floor. It was nice to be able to close the door and be in her own apartment. It gave her a secure feeling. It surely was nice that Mom had been able to rent a place in the same neighborhood. She could still attend the same school. Lydia gave a contented sigh as she looked around. Lack of sunshine made the apartment look as if it were getting dark already. It was small, but it was home, and she thought it was very cozy. Mom had gotten another couch from some place and had bought a colorful throw and a few pillows from a flea market. Their own table and chairs were standing in a corner of the room. It was nice they had been able to store

some of their furniture in Eddie's grandfather's barn. She had her own bed again and a small chest where she could store her belongings. There was only one bedroom, which explained the cheaper rent, but that didn't matter. She and her mother had each placed their beds on opposite sides of the room with a dresser between them. It worked just fine.

Lydia put her backpack next to her bed. It was nice that she didn't have much homework tonight, only a little studying for a test.

She walked to the kitchen. Here the window looked out on the rear of the apartments. Several noisy children were running after a ball. In this heat! Lydia sighed.

She looked to see if her mom had everything set for supper and wondered if she needed to prepare anything. Hm... the mashed potatoes should be put in the oven a half hour after the chicken. A dish with tomatoes and cucumbers was also standing ready.

A little later, they were sitting together eating. The clouds had lifted a little and the sun shining through the windows made the kitchen look cheerful and light.

"How was school?" Mom asked. Lydia nodded. Her mouth was full.

"Okay," she said a little later. "I have to study for a test tonight. It's going to be a tough one, I think."

Mom nodded. "Just do your best. Hopefully, if you do well in school, you will be able to get a good job later."

Maybe then I can earn enough to buy a nice house and live in the country, Lydia thought, just like Eddie. But she didn't say that out loud. Mom wanted to stay in the city because her work was here and everything was familiar to her. Too bad!

Mom had brought a pint of ice cream along for a surprise. "It almost melted before I got home. I thought I might have to eat it on the way," she laughed.

After dessert, Lydia hesitated. Were they finished eating? Wasn't Mom going to read the Bible and pray? At first, after they had returned to the city from Eddie's grandparents' place, she had. Mom was quiet for a moment, and Lydia wondered if she had prayed already. Mom glanced outside and waited. She didn't say a word. Lydia quickly shut her eyes, but words wouldn't come to her. It seemed as if Mom didn't want to remember what she had heard at Eddie's grandpa and grandma's house. In the beginning, when they had come back, Mom would read the Bible after a meal, but after a while she didn't do this anymore, and when Lydia had questioned her, she had said, "It's much too hard. If you want to, you can just read for yourself."

The Bible was now in the bedroom along with the little package that was for her father, who was in prison. In that little package was also a Bible. She wondered why Mom hadn't mailed it to him. Didn't she know his address? Someone certainly must know where her father was! Eddie's grandpa had asked if she would send it. And she had promised!

She would really like to know his address. That package had to be mailed. It couldn't be that hard to do. She certainly could try it. She felt that this package had to be sent. Then her father could also read in the Bible Who had created the heaven and the earth and everything else, and also that he needed a new heart. She was pretty sure he didn't know anything about these things. She and her mom hadn't either.

It was nice that now she could read for herself all the interesting stories that were in the Bible. Eddie's grandparents had given her a book that contained all these stories, too. Tonight, when she went to bed, she would read them again.

It had been so totally unexpected that she had gone to Eddie's grandparents. So many things had happened! Her father, who was always drunk, had disappeared, and then Mom had disappeared, too, after she had said she was going to pick Lydia up later. No one knew where she was. It had been a terrible day when her father had sold her jacket and come home drunk again. Then he had had his knife again and she had fled out in the cold, without her jacket, and had slept outside that night, and Mom had never come to pick her up.

She remembered how terribly afraid she had been. How fortunate that she had had Eddie's number and could call him.

Eddie had come with his grandpa, and they had brought her along with them to the farm. Meanwhile, she still had not heard where her mother was. The next couple of weeks had been very anxious ones. During that time she had received a message that her father was in prison.

That was awful! Finally they had been notified that Mom was in a hospital, in a coma, and that she had had a bad accident. It was a wonder that Mom had regained consciousness. Grandpa had said it was a wonder of the Lord. Lydia glanced over at her mother, who was reading the newspaper now. Had her mother forgotten all that had happened?

They had all gone to church together, and Eddie's grandpa and grandma had often talked with them. Lydia could sense they possessed something that she didn't have. They worshipped and trusted in the Lord, and they had learned much from the Bible. She and her mother had never had a Bible and therefore had never known about it.

Lydia sighed. She cleared the table. Mom had worked in the restaurant all day and was so tired every night that she would sit in a chair for a while with her feet up.

Twice, after they had come back to the city, they had gone to church together. Mom had said that she didn't understand anything of what was being said, so she wouldn't attend anymore. She told Lydia she could go if she wanted to, because she had promised Eddie's grandpa that they would attend church. She said she wouldn't keep Lydia from going, but Lydia shouldn't complain about her not going any more, either.

And last Sunday... No, Lydia didn't want to think about it. She had dressed for church that morning, and Mom was also dressed nicely.

Lydia's heart had beaten faster. Was Mom going with her this time? However, Mom had suddenly said, "I have to take my turn working on Sundays. Not very often, only once or twice a month. It pays more, too, and we can really use the money. I'll be home by 6 o'clock."

Lydia had swallowed hard. How could Mom do that? Oh, if Eddie's grandpa knew this...!

Every Sunday morning the minister read, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." And Grandpa had explained so clearly what that meant. Had Mom forgotten everything already?

They had walked out the door together. Lydia had gone one way and her mother the other. However, Lydia had not gone to church, either. She had not dared to go. All the way her tears had streamed down her face, even though she had kept wiping them. She couldn't sit in church like that! After she had walked around for a while, she had decided to go back home.

A thought struck her. Suppose the two of them could visit Eddie and his grandparents for a few days this summer? Wouldn't that be nice? Mom would surely go along to church then with them, and Grandpa would be able to talk again with her. School was almost over, and it was getting warmer every day.

She didn't want to stay in this hot city for three months! Should she ask if they could go to the farm for a few weeks? Grandpa had said they were always welcome!

"We ought to talk about summer vacation," Mom said suddenly. She folded up her newspaper and let out a big yawn. "During the vacation the restaurant is also open, so I will be gone a lot, working. It won't be nice for you to be alone for three months. What do you think? Shall I try to find a little job for you this summer? Actually you're still quite young, but..."

She glanced over at Lydia. "You are quite tall and you look older than you really are. Besides, you don't have to tell anyone that you're only fourteen." She smiled. "You know, I think they would be happy to have your help in the kitchen. There are a few odd jobs that have to be done everyday like washing vegetables and doing dishes. Then you can earn something, too. They know we can really use it."

Lydia nodded as she dried her hands. She didn't know what to say. Her head was filled with thoughts. A job for her in a restaurant? Would she like that? Who else worked there? Would they be friendly to her? She had so many questions.

She started to walk toward the bedroom. "I have to study for a test," she said.

Mom turned on the TV as Lydia disappeared into her bedroom. Mom had said she couldn't live without a TV. Eddie's mother had never had one when she lived here in the next apartment building, and Grandpa and Grandma didn't have one, either.

Lydia sighed. Everything seemed so confusing. It was too bad that she couldn't go to the farm for a while this summer, but Mom had said she should earn something, as well.

