

# **Afterward**

**Bristol Vaudrin**



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**Tortoise Books**  
**Chicago**

FIRST EDITION, March, 2025

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Published in the United States by Tortoise Books

[www.tortoisebooks.com](http://www.tortoisebooks.com)

ISBN-13: 978-1948954914

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**Afterward, I broke open.** I cried. I held him so tight I left nail marks in his skin. What were a few more marks now?

The EMTs ungently separated us, and, with the coordination of motions necessitated a thousand times, they deftly lifted Kyle from the malignity of our apartment floor to a gurney that could barely contain his tall frame. They secured him under a thin blanket pulled all the way up to his chin and rushed him out our door into the hallway, past building onlookers, toward a waiting elevator, shouting to me which hospital to meet him at.

Then I was there, by myself, panting, kneeling on the floor, staring at my still-connected phone nearby with the 911 operator trying to get my attention. I disconnected and a moment later listened to the sirens reverberating off the impenetrable glass apartment towers around us as the ambulance pulled away.

I stared straight ahead, so flooded with emotion that none could get out. I fingered one of the smooth buttons on the front of my jacket until it felt uneven, and realized I had loosened the thread holding it on. I looked down at the ruined thread, thinking about how much effort it would require to fix it later.

I raised my eyes from the thread to the unholy mess that surrounded me, and thought of the money we had to put down to get this place, the most we had ever had to come up with, what almost kept us from getting the apartment.

The wailing of the ambulance was farther away now, and I could hear the disquieted murmuring of our neighbors outside our still-open door.

I picked my keys up off the floor, gathered my phone and purse, smoothed down my skirt, and walked—unsteady, chin raised—out the door into the sea of rubberneckers, locking our apartment behind me.

I do not remember getting in the elevator or pressing *P* so it would sink me down to the level of my car. But that is where I found myself. I do not remember making my way out of the gray parking cavern, across the snowy streets filled with work day stragglers trying to get home, to the hospital. But there it was. It loomed into view ahead of me, and I did not know if I had come to it or it to me. I followed the burning red *Emergency* signs, as this undeniably was an emergency, right? Or had that moment passed? Then I just kept following—following signs, following instructions, following people. It was all I could do.

I answered endless questions from untouchable people in glass enclosures whose entire job was to guide people through this plane that existed outside our normal lives. Finally, when all the check-ins were completed and necessary information provided, I sat down to wait. I was in the emergency room waiting area, my face paralyzed in a thousand-yard-stare, as hours or years slipped by, surrounded by people stuck in the sucking mud of sickness and trauma.

I needed to call Kyle's mom.

Instead, I called my mom. Voicemail. I wanted the recording of her voice to come alive and talk to me. But I forgot, it is Wednesday. Mom is on a plane to Italy with two of her friends: her dream trip. “Mom, something’s happened. Give me a call when you can.”

I lowered my hand to my lap, still holding the now-dark phone. I stared, mute, at an empty wall opposite me. A woman in dull blue scrubs appeared in the way of my stare, and I slowly raised my eyes to hers.

“Lauren?” she said.

I considered the question, then nodded.

“I’m Nurse Lindsay. You can come back now.”

I nodded again, and followed her out of the waiting area through a set of double doors.

The doors opened into a large, antiseptic hallway, housing beds separated by nothing more than what looked like heavy sheets hanging from the ceiling, and I found it impossible to not look at the other patients as we went by. I wanted someone—patient or staff—to scold me for the intrusion, but no one had the energy.

I was so distracted watching a gray-looking man in a bed weakly calling for help that I almost ran into the nurse, who had stopped in front of me at the foot of a bed. I did not recognize that I was standing at the foot of Kyle’s bed until the nurse said, “Here we are,” and gestured at his sleeping figure.

I gasped slightly, as if I’d come upon him like this without warning. Maybe I had, but that moment was hours in the past now. Now the gasp only indicated a crack in the wall of composure I had been building.

The nurse swung a cheap, hard plastic chair up to the bed. “Go ahead and have a seat, but let him sleep if you can. The doctor will be in after he’s had a chance to look at the X-rays.” With that, she pulled a

ceiling sheet near the foot of the bed partway closed, and left. She may have done it to create the illusion of privacy, but I knew we were now just part of the lineup for the other emergency room voyeurs.

I stood next to him and stared while he slept, inanimate, under the harsh judgment of the fluor-escent lights. How could it be Kyle?

I studied him, hunting for something to betray the imposter, but it was Kyle's free range brown hair, his eyebrow divided by a scar from where a baseball caught him trying to steal second base when he was eleven, and another nearly undetectable scar on his lip from mountain biking the year we met. He had shown up that night four years ago for our planned dinner with a cold pack on his swollen face, still leaking blood. My roommates had fawned over him while I pouted about the ruined dinner I had spent all afternoon preparing. He just grinned that quirky smile of his and said he was starving. Watching him eat my dinner that night, despite what had to be withering pain (and what I realized after taking a bite was terrible food), had stoked a spark. That was not the last time Kyle would show up injured, grinning, and packing a great story. It was one of the keys to his magnetism. I smiled at the memory, and cried.

I pulled the chair closer and positioned it next to his chest, where he would be able to see me without contorting himself. Or at least, he could once he woke up.

Outside his tiny, curtained pseudo-room I could hear the staff talking about a bad date one of them had had. Their laughter here seemed like a flower growing in rubble—hopeful, misplaced?

I noticed the black dress shoes of someone standing on the other side of our half-wall who seemed to be working there, because they were not moving off



like all the other shoes. I stared at them; they were worn but immaculate.

A loose strand of my dark brown hair fell into my peripheral vision, and I tucked it behind my ear to delay having to take care of it properly. I looked reflexively at my phone to see if I had missed anything, but there was nothing.

I looked at Kyle again. I briefly, selfishly, thought about waking him. I needed to know what happened, and for him to tell me everything would be all right.

Beneath the blanket, his chest rose and fell with percussive monotony. I watched it, transfixed, tears streaming freely now.

Then, a doctor with a clipboard appeared in the opening between the curtain walls. "Knock, knock," he said, stepping in. "Hi, I'm Dr. Moreno. Are you Lauren?"

"Yes." I stood up but looked away, smearing tears across my cheek in a failed attempt to wipe my face clean of giveaways.

"Great, have a seat." He gestured to my chair and pulled another chair up to face mine. We both sat.

"And what is your last name?"

"Delgado."

"D-E-L-G-A-D-O?"

"Yes."

"So, Spanish?" he said, as he wrote it on the clipboard paper.

"My father was from Mexico."

He continued ticking boxes and flipping pages on the clipboard. "Ah, I just spent some time down there volunteering in a village. Where is your father from?"

"I don't know. He died before I was born."

He looked up. "Oh, I'm sorry."

I smiled politely, accepting the obligatory sympathy.

“Is your mother also from Mexico?”

“No, New Hampshire.”

The doctor chuckled. “That’s a long way from Mexico.”

I smiled weakly. It was. And growing up in one looking like the other had left me feeling like a citizen of neither. Because in the small, friendly college town where I grew up, there were only a few others like me, and none I saw regularly—not on the playground, not in class pictures. In the Thanksgiving play I was cast as a Wampanoag Indian. Again. And again. And again. Until finally I came home in tears and my mother called my third-grade teacher, Ms. Martin, to suggest someone else have a chance to experience the role. (I can still remember Ellie Thompson’s anguish when she lost her role as Pilgrim and was recast in my place. “But my family came over on the Mayflower!” she wailed.)

My mom said we were helping to educate good people. But that was a job I had never asked for.

She also worked hard to explore my father’s culture with me. Every year for *Día de los Muertos*, we painted our faces and dressed up as skeletons. My grandparents would play my father’s cassette tapes and the three of us would dance around by candlelight while Mom was cooking. We would buy the local florist out of marigolds, eat sugar skulls, and set up an altar for my father. On it, below his picture, we would set Coca-Cola, his favorite (though as a kid I preferred apple cider), and the special foods Mom had made, including his favorite enchiladas. We would take a raft of pictures, mostly of me, and send them, along with a letter carefully translated by the high school Spanish teacher for some cash on the side, to his mother, my *abuela*. We never heard back from her, but every year we continued to send pictures and a letter.

I remember when I was four or five, after checking the mailbox every day for weeks, I asked, "Why doesn't *abuela* write back, Mommy?"

She stopped what she was doing and took my hands. "Well honey, your father grew up very poor out in the country, so she may not have the money for paper and pencils and postage. But that doesn't mean she doesn't enjoy receiving our letters and pictures."

I nodded, hearing but not fully understanding this new detail about the man who contributed half of my genetic material, with no sense of what it meant to be him.

Even after I went away to college, my mom would send me a care package to celebrate my father on that day, and ask me to send pictures she could print out to send to her. Despite her best efforts, I still wore that culture like a backpack, rather than feeling it in my veins. The majority-white people of New Hampshire were my people, even though I was always a side glance away from feeling they were not. I did not have to codeswitch, because no one had told me the code.

The doctor with the clipboard was saying something. "And you live with Kyle, is that right?"

"Yes."

He made a note.

"Is he your boyfriend?" he asked, without looking up.

"Yes." This was all information I had given before, but I was thankful to be asked questions I had the answers to.

"It's been a rough day for you, hasn't it?" Now he looked at me earnestly, and I tried to push down the brick that had just developed in my throat. I nodded and lowered my eyes, refusing to believe I was going

to cry in front of this doctor, though fresh tears were already rallying.

The doctor put his hand on my arm, then reached for a box of tissue. "Here."

I pulled the top tissue to my face and met the doctor's eyes again, as if lack of moisture proved composure, as if my red eyes were not already blazing the banner "not composed."

The doctor continued, flipping through several pages on his clipboard and looking at Kyle. "We have him on something for the pain. He didn't break any bones, fortunately, but there is obviously some other trauma. We're going to be moving him to a room in the regular part of the hospital, so that'll be more comfortable than our little tents here." He paused to look at me and smile, then continued. "And, of course, we want to make sure he's doing okay before he leaves the hospital."

I nodded.

He paused, looking at his clipboard. "The EMTs said you didn't know how long he had been like that when you found him, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Okay." He looked at the clipboard again, then rapped his pen against it and stood up. "Okay! Do you have any questions?"

I shook my head, lying.

"We'll get him set up in that room as soon as we can. Would you like to wait here with him?"

"Yes, if that's okay. I mean, I know I'm not actual family."

He smiled. "In here, it's whoever shows up."

I smiled.

"Someone will check back in with you in a bit." He laid his hand on my arm again, giving me a reassuring nod. "Take care."

“Thank you. I will.”

I still needed to call Kyle’s mom.