

## Chapter 3

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Ruby replied, "How would I know? This place stinks! It's disgusting!" She pinched her nose, wishing she could retreat to the car and roll up the windows.

Their reaction didn't surprise me one bit.

I drifted out of the car. I'd spent 15 years in this village. Near the school was a livestock farm, which bustled with herds of cattle and sheep. The lush green pastures were dotted with all-natural fertilizer.

Before Grandma passed, I'd lived here with her, miles away from my parents. It was just the two of us, surviving together.

After school, I often helped tend to the livestock, earning a few bucks to scrape by.

Ruby and I didn't even attend the same school. She was enrolled in an elite private academy in the city, while I went to a small-town high school near Grandma's house.

My parents had never asked about my grades, my life, or how I managed out here. They'd never once set foot in this town.

The only time they came was for Grandma's funeral. Even then, they rushed through the ceremony. From then on, I was only allowed to visit the city during Christmas for a few days with them before being sent back.

To the people in this village, I was as good as an orphan. And honestly, they weren't wrong.

"Jolene Newman, come out! I know you're in there, you heartless brat! Caleb's dying, and instead of saving him, you're hiding? If you're going to hide, then don't bother coming out for the rest of your life!"

Mom was losing it. She grabbed the iron school gate and shook it so violently that the metallic clanging echoed across the small campus. The commotion quickly drew the attention of the few teachers and students still staying at the school.

It was long before the dean, Marissa Gutierrez, appeared.

"Oh, you're Jolene's parents? That's wonderful! She's an exceptional student! In fact, we just received her acceptance letter from Neilway College of Design!"

Ruby froze at the mention of Neilway College of Design. She felt as though the sky had come crashing down.

Exceptional? Acceptance? Jolene?

I stopped in midair, stunned. Neilway College of Design had been my dream college since I was a child.

I remembered how Grandma used to stitch clothes out of scraps of fabric. Her hands were so skilled. Torn rags were transformed into beautiful, wearable pieces under her care, just like magic.

Grandma had told me with a smile, "Jolene, if you make it to Neilway College of Design one day, you'll design the most beautiful clothes."

From that moment, I'd sworn to myself I would get into Neilway College of Design, the world's top fashion design school.

"Neilway College has even granted Jolene a scholarship of 100 thousand dollars per semester, and the government is awarding her a 200-thousand-dollar honor grant."

Ms. Gutierrez was practically in tears. In her decades-long career, she had never seen such an accomplished student from their tiny school.

I longed to open the acceptance letter myself, but I couldn't. I was dead. My hands couldn't touch a single thing.

All I could do was press my face close as Dad shakily unfolded the letter. The scarlet silk paper gleamed, embossed with golden lettering. Inside was a 3D pop-up of the college campus.

Suddenly, a droplet fell onto the paper, smudging the black ink.

Was it snowing again?

I glanced up, but the sky was clear. It wasn't snowing.

Dad's head hung low, and his shoulders trembled slightly. For a moment, I wondered if I was seeing things.

When Mom heard about the 100 thousand dollars scholarship and 200 thousand dollars in government support, her eyes lit up.

Caleb's 138-thousand-dollar medical bill could be covered.

"No wonder she's gone off the rails and refuses to come home. She must've gotten her hands on some money and doesn't want to save Caleb!"

"If she's not in school, could she be at..." Ruby hesitated, her eyes darting nervously.

"You know where Jolene is? Spit it out!" Dad snapped, grabbing Ruby by the shoulders.

His grip must have been iron-tight because Ruby winced, her face twisting in discomfort.

"During Grandma's funeral, I saw Jolene enter a motel with some fat man. Maybe she's there now."

Her words sent a shock through me.

How had she seen that?

"No! Don't go, Dad!" I shouted, but my voice didn't reach them.