

## Chapter 2 No.2

The car rolled into the town long after the sun had gone down, and the world outside my window was all shadows and quiet. The streets seemed peaceful, lined with houses where soft, yellow light glowed behind curtains.

A tiny, fragile hope sparked inside me. Maybe here, I thought, maybe things could be different.

We passed a sign that read "Westfield High School." It was a low, sprawling building made of pale brick, sitting empty and silent under the night sky.

A few minutes later, the car crunched to a stop on a gravel driveway in front of a small, boxy house. My heart sank as I looked from the house back toward the school. The distance was obvious and discouraging. This meant early mornings and long, lonely walks.

The inside of the new house smelled of old paint and dust, a scent of deep neglect.

Robert immediately dropped onto the worn living room sofa, becoming a permanent fixture.

"Alright, start unloading. The heavy stuff first. Don't just stand there," he commanded, his voice filling the empty space.

Alice just nodded, her shoulders already slumped in defeat. I said nothing. This was our pattern. Robert, who never kept a job and spent his days drinking, always acted like a king.

An hour later, my arms ached and a fine layer of grime coated my skin. Alice and I had done all the work, hauling in boxes while Robert ordered critiques from his throne. They had exchanged sharp, hissed arguments the whole time, but I tuned them out. Their battles were just background noise to my life.

But then, there was a single, glorious victory. Alice gestured to a small door on the hallway. "That one's yours," she said, her voice flat.

I pushed the door open. The room was tiny, just big enough for a single bed with a bare mattress and a small, wobbly desk. There was no closet, just a row of hooks on the wall.

But to me, this room was a sanctuary. My own space.

I didn't care that my wardrobe was just a few plain t-shirts and jeans, all bought with my own meager earnings from a part-time job back in Oklahoma. Alice provided shelter, and that was it. Every penny for anything else came from my own savings, which I guarded fiercely for college.

This room, with its four walls and a door that locked, meant safety. It meant that when Robert drank, I could turn a key and be safe.

That night, after a quick shower, I collapsed onto the thin mattress. Exhaustion was a heavy blanket, pulling me down into a deep, dreamless sleep the moment I closed my mismatched eyes.

The blaring of my phone alarm tore me from sleep. The room was still dark. I dressed quickly in my standard grey t-shirt and jeans, moving like a ghost through the silent house. Passing the living room, I saw Robert sprawled on the sofa, snoring loudly, an empty beer bottle on the floor. The sight was so expected it barely registered.

The morning air was crisp. I walked until I found a small coffee shop, its warm light a beacon. The bell above the door jingled. Inside, a girl with friendly eyes and a splash of freckles smiled at me.

"Hi! What can I get for you?" she asked.

"Just a ham sandwich, please," I said, my voice soft.

As she rang me up, she tilted her head. "You're new, right? I haven't seen you around."

I was startled. "How did you know?"

She laughed. "It's a small town. You get to know everyone. I'm Chloe." She handed me the sandwich.

"Thanks," I mumbled, offering a tight, awkward smile before hurrying out.

A small town where everyone knows everyone. My heart sank. The thought of being the new spectacle, the subject of stares and whispers, was a special kind of torture.

Westfield High felt enormous. I found the main office, registered, and was handed a class schedule. Back in the bustling hallway, my head down, I focused intently on the slip of paper, memorizing the room number for History.

Room 214... down the hall, take a left...

I was so absorbed I didn't see the top of the wide staircase. My foot met empty air.

A jolt of pure panic shot through me. My stomach lurched as I pitched forward. A terrified, practical thought flashed through my mind: I didn't have health insurance. A broken bone would ruin me.

But the impact never came. I collided with something solid and warm. The air left my lungs in a soft oof. Strong arms wrapped around me, stopping my fall completely. A faint, woody cologne enveloped me. It was a safe, clean smell.

For a heart-stopping moment, I was pressed against a firm chest, my ear against a steady, rhythmic thump-thump. The fear receded, replaced by stunned relief. I was so startled, so unused to being held, that I froze.

A sharp, venomous voice sliced through the moment. "Bitch! Get your hands off my boyfriend."

I jerked back as if scalded, stumbling a step.

A girl was glaring at me, her eyes burning with pure hatred. She was stunningly beautiful in a way that felt almost unreal-like she'd just stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine.

Her blonde hair fell in perfect, beachy waves around her shoulders, each strand seemingly placed by divine intervention. She had the kind of body I'd only seen in movies-tall and curvy in all the right places, showcased in a fashionable crop top and high-waisted jeans that looked expensive even to my untrained eye.

"Aldric," she said, her voice dripping with venom, "are you going to let this... nobody... just paw at you all day?"

I finally looked up, my gaze traveling from the leather of his jacket to the face of my rescuer. And my heart did this funny little stutter-stop in my chest.

He was the most strikingly handsome boy I had ever seen. His features were sharp and defined, like they'd been carefully carved from marble. A strong jawline, a straight nose, and eyebrows that were dark and perfectly shaped. His deep dark eyes were focused on me, with an intensity that made me feel both seen and completely unraveled.

A lock of his jet-black hair fell casually across his forehead, and I had the most absurd, fleeting thought about how soft it might look.

He finally released my waist, but his eyes remained fixed on mine for a second longer before he turned to her. "Relax, Fiona. She was falling."

"Falling right into you, how convenient," Fiona sneered, placing a perfectly manicured hand on her hip. She looked me up and down with obvious disgust, taking in my plain grey t-shirt and worn jeans. I could practically see her mentally calculating how little my entire outfit must have cost.

I took another step back, my face burning with humiliation. "I'm sorry," I mumbled, "I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Obviously," Fiona snapped. She stepped forward and possessively linked her arm through Aldric's. "This is why you should watch where you're going, new girl. Unless you're looking for attention."

The way she said "new girl" made it sound like an insult. I clutched my schedule tighter, the paper crumpling in my sweaty palm.

Just as the tension felt thick enough to choke on, another voice, smooth as honey and just as sweet, cut through the air. "Hey, Fiona, don't be upset."