

Chapter 3 No.3

A boy stepped up beside Aldric, and I blinked in surprise. He was his mirror image-the same sharply defined features, the same jet-black hair, the same deep-set eyes. But where Aldric's gaze was intense and steady, this boy's eyes twinkled with mischief, and a playful, almost teasing smile played on his lips.

It was instantly clear they were twins, but this one carried himself with a breezy confidence that suggested he was very, very used to charming everyone around him.

He leaned casually against the wall, his eyes sweeping over Fiona's furious form. "You keep frowning like that, you're gonna get wrinkles," he chided lightly, his tone full of mock concern. "And then what? You won't be pretty anymore. My brother here won't like you then."

He nudged Aldric with his elbow, a mischievous grin spreading across his face.

Fiona's anger seemed to deflate, replaced by a flustered pout. She stomped her foot, a childish gesture that looked strange on someone so polished. "Caius! I'm serious, I'm angry!" she insisted, but her voice had lost its sharp, venomous edge.

Caius simply winked at her. "I know you are. But look at you, all worked up over nothing. This poor girl just tripped."

Fiona hurried, crossing her arms over her chest. She shot one last, withering glare in my direction, but the fight had clearly gone out of her. Caius's intervention had effectively disarmed her.

Aldric was still looking at me with an unreadable expression.

"Thank you for your help. I... I have to get to class," I stammered, desperate to escape.

"Good idea," Fiona said sarcastically, and her eyes remained cold. "Run along."

I didn't need to be told twice. I turned and hurried down the hall, my heart still pounding. I could feel their eyes on my back-Fiona's hostile glare and the twins' curious gaze. The scent of Aldric's cologne still clung to my clothes, a reminder of those few seconds of unexpected safety.

As I rounded the corner, I risked a glance back. They were still standing there. Fiona was talking animatedly, gesturing toward where I'd been standing, while Aldric just listened, his hands shoved in his pockets. Caius was still leaning against the wall, his eyes wandering. For a brief moment, his eyes met mine across the crowded hallway, and a strange shiver went down my spine.

I forced myself to look away and disappeared into the stream of students, feeling more invisible than ever.

Soon, I found my history classroom and slipped inside just as the bell rang. The teacher, a weary-looking man with glasses perched on the end of his nose, gestured to an empty seat beside a girl with a brilliant cascade of red hair. "Sylvia, is it? You can sit next to Betty."

Betty turned out to be a human sunbeam. She had a smattering of freckles across her nose and an energy that seemed to vibrate right out of her. The moment she learned I was new to Westfield, she launched into a rapid-fire commentary, her voice a cheerful chirp.

"Okay, so most people here are actually pretty nice," she said, leaning in conspiratorially. Then she paused dramatically, her eyes widening for effect.

I knew I was supposed to take the bait. "So... who should I be wary of?" I asked, playing along.

"Fiona," she whispered, the name dropping like a stone. My heart gave a painful thud. Of course. "She's the queen bee around here. Super rich, super pretty, and super mean. If she decides she doesn't like you, school becomes... difficult."

I managed a weak, bitter smile. Great. I had already managed to get on her bad side.

Betty, completely oblivious to my internal panic, continued, "She's dating Aldric, and she's insanely jealous. She sees every other girl as a threat. My advice? Stay far, far away from her and her entire clique."

Too late, I thought miserably. Still, I nodded as if this were all brand-new, helpful information.

"And then," Betty went on, her eyes sparkling with gossip, "there are the most famous guys in school. A pair of twins."

My stomach did a little flip. "Aldric and Caius?" I guessed, my voice barely a whisper.

"The very ones!" Betty confirmed. "They're ridiculously handsome, I know. But a word of advice? Don't fall for them. Seriously. They're players. Total heartbreakers. They flirt with anything that moves, and liking them is just a one-way ticket to getting your heart stomped on."

I nodded again, more firmly this time. "Noted."

It was easy to agree. The morning's encounter felt like a bizarre anomaly, a strange blip in my otherwise predictable life. I was sure our paths wouldn't cross again.

Remembering my pressing need for a job, and sensing that Betty was a fount of all local knowledge, I shifted the conversation. "Hey, you seem to know everything around here. Do you know if any places in town are hiring? I really need a part-time job."

Betty's face lit up. "Actually, yes! The restaurant where I work, 'The Starline,' is looking for another waitress! I can put in a good word for you with the manager if you want?"

A wave of genuine relief and gratitude washed over me. "Really? That would be amazing. Thank you so much, Betty."

"Of course! Consider it done!"

Fate, it seemed, loved to play cruel jokes on me. Our next class was science, and Betty, with a cheerful wave, headed in a different direction. I walked into the lab alone, only to feel my blood run cold.

There, at a large table near the back, sat the twins. And as the teacher scanned the room for a spare seat, her finger pointed directly at the empty spot right beside them.

"New student, you can take the seat there."

My eyes shot to the teacher, wide with a silent, desperate plea. Please, no. Anywhere but there.

She completely misread my panic for confusion and gestured more insistently. "Go on, now. Don't dally."

Swallowing hard, I gripped the strap of my bag and made the long walk of shame to their table. I could feel two sets of intense eyes on me, one amused, one unreadable. I reluctantly slid into the seat opposite Caius, keeping my gaze firmly on the scratched surface of the lab table.

"Well, well," Caius said, his voice a low, teasing purr. "Look who it is. We meet again, little kitten."

My heart did an involuntary, traitorous flutter at the unexpected nickname. Little kitten? It was both condescending and strangely intimate. I forced myself to remember Betty's warning: the twins were players. Heartbreakers.

I said nothing, pulling my textbook out with more force than necessary.

"Wow, no hello?" Caius feigned offense, placing a hand over his heart. "And after I saved you from Fiona's wrath this morning? That hurts."

"I'm here to listen to the lecture," I stated flatly, not looking at him.

He chuckled, a rich, infuriating sound. "Oh, a scholar. How... dedicated."

I could hear the unspoken word: boring. He thought I was boring. Good. Let him think that.

He turned to his brother, who had been quietly observing the entire exchange. "Aldric, she's so cold. What did we do to deserve such a chilly reception? It's truly saddening."

I kept my eyes glued to the whiteboard, my cheeks burning.

I didn't understand it. Why were these two, who could undoubtedly have any girl in this school, so focused on me? I was utterly ordinary, invisible.

I spent the entire period staring at the clock, praying for the minute hand to move faster, desperately wishing for the bell to ring and set me free.