

A Special “thank you” to Jelja van den Brand.

A black and white photograph of a full moon over a body of water with a forest silhouette in the foreground. The moon is large and bright, with some clouds visible around it. The water reflects the moon's light. The foreground is filled with the dark silhouettes of evergreen trees.

ROSE N STORM

When
Shadows
Whisper

The Darkest Hour Book Series

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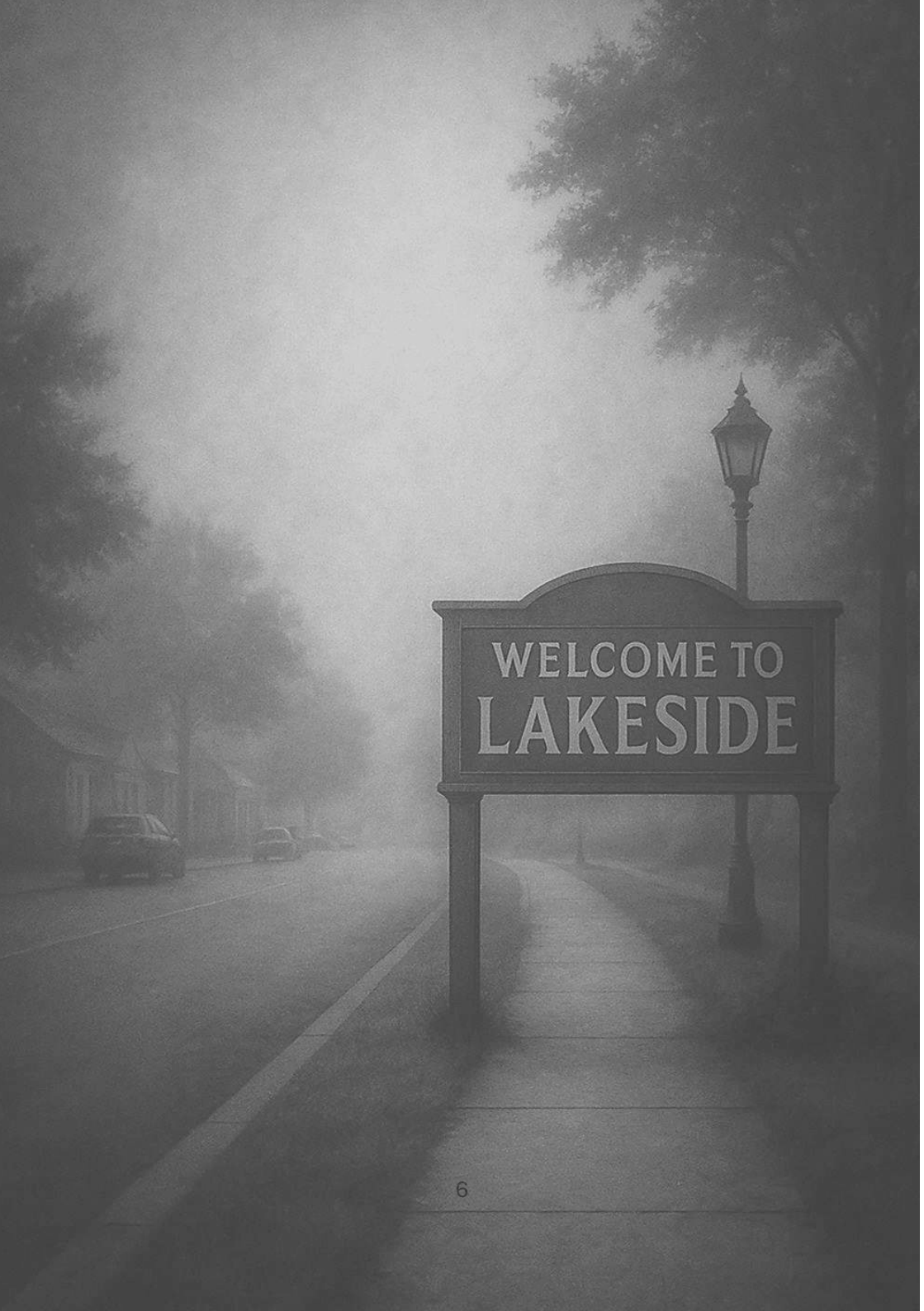
ROSE N STORM

When
Shadows
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The Darkest Hour Book Series

Book 1

Young Adult



WELCOME TO
LAKESIDE

Prologue

A shiver ran down my spine as dark clouds swallowed the sky. The streets were quiet, with only a few cars parked along the sidewalks. A faded sign stood at the town's edge, its peeling letters barely visible: "Welcome to Lakeside." The message should have been warm and inviting, but instead, an uneasy chill crept through me.

As we drove deeper into town, the landscape revealed itself—tall trees lined the winding roads, their branches swaying in the breeze like whispering figures. Houses sat nestled between them, some well-kept, others lost to time and neglect. On the surface, it seemed like any other small town, but something wasn't right.

I never imagined I'd leave my old life behind, yet here I was, staring at a place that was now going to be my new home. This move was meant to be a fresh start, an attempt to rebuild, to fix the cracks my family had been living with. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that Lakeside had its own secrets.

A deep ache settled in my chest as memories of my dad resurfaced. He walked out on us without a warning. His

addiction had torn us apart long before, but his disappearance made everything worse. My mom tried, but there was nothing left to fix. When he left, so did any hope of normalcy.

It had been years, but those scars never healed. Moving here was supposed to help me leave it all behind, but as the first drops of rain hit the windshield, I knew the past wasn't done with us yet.

The town reminded me too much of Darkfalls, the place we'd tried so hard to forget. The towering trees, the stillness in the air—it was all too familiar. But this time, there was no turning back.

My brother and I would be starting our final year at Lakeside High, and despite everything, I tried to convince myself that things would be different. Maybe this town wouldn't hold the same nightmares as the one before. But deep down, I already knew the truth. Lakeside had its own ghosts. And soon, I would come face to face with them.



Chapter 1

With a sigh, Salina placed the last book into her

school bag. “I really don’t want to go to school,” she mumbled. The thought of a new day struggling to meet the relentless expectations of her teachers and peers felt like another challenge. This time, at a new school. She wanted nothing more than to stay home, curl up in bed, and escape the pressures of teenage life.

“Come on, sis, it’ll be fun,” Aaron said, trying to cheer her up. He knew their new life could be tough for them, but there was no other way than to cope with it.

Salina couldn’t help but feel nervous and overwhelmed at the thought of starting school in an unfamiliar place. She knew that the competition would be fierce, and making friends would be challenging since everyone seemed to already have their own clique. She wanted to trust her brother’s assurance about how exciting this new chapter of their lives would be, but Salina couldn’t shake the anxiety. Starting over in a new place meant reintroducing herself, competing with already-formed groups, and finding a spot to belong. Everyone would have their

friends, their routines, and fitting in felt more like surviving.

Aaron flashed a cheeky grin. "I bet there'll be a bunch of cute girls. If so, I'll forgive Mom for dragging us here."

Salina snorted, folding her arms. "How very forgiving of you to let Mom off the hook for uprooting your life. All for the opportunity to meet some new girls." She raised an eyebrow and tilted her head slightly. "Let's hope they're worth it, because if not," Salina leaned in with a mischievous grin, her eyes narrowing. "I'm sure Mom will be thrilled to know her sacrifice was in vain." Her words dripped with sarcasm. "We must go now. I'm so nervous, you can sweep me under the rug if I'm late for class," she added with a dramatic sigh. The idea of arriving late on day one freaked her out.

"You'll be alright, drama queen," Aaron chuckled.

"How can I not worry? You're probably in the same class as well, and on top of that, you often caused trouble before," she said, expressing her frustration towards her big brother.

Aaron made a mock-hurt face. "Not my fault I had to redo a year. Besides, it's pretty cool we'll be in some of the same classes now." He grinned again. "We can help each other, catch up. Not so bad, right? Especially for me." He threw an arm around her. "It's gonna be a blast!"

"Suuure..." She shrugged him off and flipped her long brown hair over her shoulder as she mentally ran through her checklist. Something was missing. "Damn, I forgot my notebook. Be right back," she sighed, heading

upstairs.

At the top, she paused for a moment. The dim hallway buzzed faintly as the lights flickered, casting warped shadows along the walls. Her bedroom door stood slightly open. She hesitated, took a calming breath, and reached for the doorknob. With one swift turn, she pushed the door further open, bracing herself for whatever lay ahead. Her mind was plagued with haunting visions, as if some sort of premonition had taken hold of her subconscious.

Every night when she closed her eyes, the same nightmares crept in and tormented her. This was another one of those. She had lived through these horrors before and kept reliving them repeatedly. Sometimes she wondered if these dreams held important messages or warnings. The fear and uncertainty were beginning to take their toll on her waking life; every sound started to make her jump, every shadow cast doubt on her sanity. She knew deep down she needed to confront these demons head-on and figure out what they meant before she would lose herself entirely, but how?

As Salina entered the room, her dark eyes darted from corner to corner until they finally landed on the closet. Stepping slowly towards it, she could feel her breathing grow shallow. Daring herself to open the door, her hands trembled as she reached out to grasp the cold metal handle. With a deep breath, she flung open the closet door, but all she saw was darkness. Silence filled her ears

before gradually being replaced by a soft hissing noise that seemed to be coming from within the abyss before her.

“Wake up, Sal...” she whispered to herself, when two bright dots appeared in the darkness. Like a pair of glowing embers. They grew larger and more intense with each passing second.

As Salina stood frozen in fear, the ground beneath her began to tremble. A low growl echoed through the air, and a shadowy figure emerged from the darkness. Its massive body crawled towards her with terrifying speed. Its form began to shift and twist, taking on a human shape.

Salina squinted through the darkness but couldn't make out its face. It was covered in a thick layer of mud, making it impossible to see any features. A scent of decay filled her nostrils.

The figure opened its mouth, as if to speak, but instead of words, a wave of murky water poured out. Just as its clawed hands reached out to grab her, Salina jolted awake with a scream, sitting straight up in her bed.



Chapter 2

Salina felt completely worn out, both mentally and physically. A weary sigh escaped her lips as she glanced at her alarm clock: 8 a.m. The nightmare had left her rattled to the core, and dragging herself out of bed felt like climbing a mountain. Just the thought of facing another demanding day made her chest tighten. Then it hit her; she had only thirty minutes before school started. Panic surged through her as she jumped out of bed. Her mind spun while she scrambled to get dressed, brushed her teeth in record time, and crammed her belongings into her bag. “Aaron!” she shouted, charging down the stairs half-asleep and still disoriented.

Downstairs, Aaron sat calmly at the kitchen table, his backpack ready and breakfast already eaten. He looked like he'd been up for hours.

Salina envied his ability to look so composed in the morning, especially compared to her chaotic routine. She went straight for the coffee machine, pouring herself

a steaming cup, praying the caffeine would make her feel more awake. “Why didn’t you wake me up?” she snapped, shooting him a sharp glare.

Aaron merely shrugged.

“Thanks a lot, brother,” she muttered bitterly, taking a sip.

“I hope we’re in the same classes today,” Aaron said with a smirk, reaching for an apple. “Wouldn’t want to miss out on teasing you.”

Salina narrowed her eyes, instantly suspicious. His mischievous tone said it all; he was already plotting something.

Aaron always took joy in pushing her buttons, and as much as it annoyed her, their playful dynamic also brought a strange sense of comfort. Despite the pranks, they somehow balanced each other.

He took a noisy bite of his apple and grinned.

Rolling her eyes, Salina couldn’t suppress a slight smile.

“Let’s go. I don’t want to be late.” She slung her backpack over her shoulder and headed toward the door.

“Hold up, Sal! I’ll be good, promise,” Aaron called as he caught up with her.

Salina turned to face him and arched an eyebrow. “You better be,” she warned, though her tone softened.

He gave her the classic puppy-dog look, adorable but rarely trustworthy. Even if he meant it this time, Salina didn’t dare let her guard down. Still, she gave his hair a quick tousle, ruining whatever styling he had spent time on, then bolted for the car to avoid retaliation.

“Seriously?” he groaned, hurrying after her.

The heat outside was intense. The sun lit up Aaron's golden-blond hair. His green eyes sparkled under the morning rays as he took a long gulp from his water bottle before tossing it in the car. He slid into the driver's seat while Salina buckled herself in beside him. With a twist of the key, the car roared to life.

"Ready for your big debut?" he teased.

"Not even close," Salina mumbled.



The ten-minute drive felt like an eternity.

Salina rested her forehead against the window, letting the warm sun wash over her. Trees lined the roads like leafy guardians, and bright flowerbeds burst with color. The skies stretched wide and open, streaked with clouds like soft brushstrokes. For a moment, she let herself breathe. Playgrounds dotted the route, full of energetic children and watchful parents. A fleeting sense of normalcy settled over her, something she hadn't felt in weeks.

"I still can't believe we live here now," she murmured.

"You'll adjust," Aaron said gently. "Give it time."

As the school came into view, Salina's nerves kicked in full force.

Lakeside High towered ahead, its aged brick façade and

creeping ivy giving it an eerie charm. The building looked like it belonged in a ghost story. Above the entrance, the words '*Since 1709*' were carved.

"Comforting," she muttered under her breath.

The moment they stepped through the front door, a man greeted them with a welcoming smile.

"You must be the new students," he said warmly.

"Welcome to Lakeside High."

Salina lowered her gaze, feeling small under his scrutiny.

"I'm Robin Wood, the principal," he introduced, offering his hand. His presence was commanding, but not harsh.

There was a calmness to him, the kind that came with years of experience.

Aaron's lips twitched. "Robin Wood? You must be some hero."

"Aaron!" Salina hissed, mortified.

Mr. Wood raised an eyebrow, amused. "A joker, huh? I suppose visiting my office won't be a problem, then?"

Aaron's grin faded. "Uh, right."

Salina sighed. "Here we go again."

"And your name, young lady?" the principal asked.

"Salina, sir. But everyone calls me Sal."

He nodded. "Sal it is." Then he turned back to Aaron.

"You could learn a thing or two from your sister. Miss Sal," he added, "your classroom is down the hall, first door on the right. Mr. Anderson is your teacher."

"Thank you, sir." She lifted her bag and shot Aaron a pointed look before disappearing into the corridor.



Chapter 3

Salina stepped into the classroom and immediately noticed that most of the seats were already taken. The air was filled with conversations and the soft rustle of papers. Posters and motivational quotes brightened the walls, giving the room a cheerful and inviting feel. Scanning quickly, she spotted a few free tables at the back, exactly what she needed to ease into the chaos. She made her way over, unpacked her bag, and sat down quietly. The other students were immersed in their discussions and activities, paying her little attention. Just the way she preferred it. Her gaze was drawn to a girl at the next table who wore a clear look of irritation. Even from a distance, her mood was unmistakable. It didn't take long before the teacher entered. Mr. Anderson stood at the front, patiently waiting for the chatter to die down. "Welcome to your senior year at Lakeside High," he began. "Today marks the start of something new for all of us. And we're joined by two new students this year. First, let's welcome Salina." He

looked around the room, as if expecting her to step up. "Miss Walker, would you mind introducing yourself?" Salina's chest tightened as a jolt of anxiety shot through her. Her cheeks flushed while she slowly rose, feeling dozens of eyes fixated on her. She inhaled sharply, summoning every ounce of courage she could muster. "Uhm... my name is Salina Walker. We just moved from Darkfalls to Lakeside a week ago. I enjoy writing and... uhm..." she faltered. A boy smirked. Another student whispered, "Nerd."

Before she could recover, Aaron burst into the doorway, fear written all over his face. "Salina! We have to go, now!" The alarm in his voice made her freeze, and the room fell into hushed curiosity. *Was something seriously wrong, or was he just being dramatic again?*

Aaron held the suspense for just a moment longer before his serious look changed into a mischievous grin.

The silence broke, and the room erupted with laughter, except for Salina. She felt the floor vanish beneath her. *So much for keeping a low profile.* She glared daggers at him.

Mr. Anderson stood, clearly unamused. "Can I help you, young man?"

"Yes, sir. I'm supposed to be in this class too. Sorry for being late."

"You must be Aaron. Late on your first day, huh?"

"Well, you know... Mr. Wood,"

"Take a seat, Mr. Walker," the teacher interrupted, motioning him to enter inside. "Now, where were we?"

He sat back down. “Right, Salina was sharing her introduction.”

“Good luck, Sis!” Aaron grinned and plopped into a chair.

“And yeah, Aaron is my brother,” Salina added flatly.

“Obviously! Hotness runs in the family,” Aaron said with zero shame.

Laughter spread through the room again, but Salina just rolled her eyes. He always had to steal the spotlight.

“Aaron, please be serious for once?” she hissed, her tone tight with annoyance.

His grin softened. “Sorry, Sis. Just trying to lighten the mood,” he said, his voice quieter.

“Hey, can I borrow a pencil?” asked a boy seated behind her.

“Sure,” Salina replied gently, retrieving one from her pouch. She glanced over her shoulder, and paused. He was alone, someone she hadn’t noticed before. Odd. She turned to hand him the pencil... but he was gone. A puzzled frown crossed her face. She stood slowly, unsure of what had just occurred. Pressing her fingers to her temples, she tried to shake the haze from her mind. “I need to go to the restroom.” Without waiting for a response, she hurried out of the room.

The classroom fell into stunned silence.

“Don’t get lost!” someone called after her.

“That’s enough, Jeremy!” Salina heard Mr. Anderson say. “Show some respect.”

Aaron stood instinctively.

“Sit down, Mr. Walker!” the teacher ordered sharply.

Aaron hovered, uncertain whether to go after his sister.

She seemed upset. He looked at Jeremy, who smirked and licked his lips with a cruel glint in his eye.

“Respect’s earned, not given,” he said mockingly.

Aaron clenched his jaw, his glare sharp. “And you think you’ve earned it?”

Jeremy’s smile widened. “More than you, bud.”

Aaron inhaled through his nose, restraining himself.

“We’ll see about that.”



Meanwhile, Salina moved quickly through the empty hallway. Her knees felt wobbly, and the spinning in her head didn’t help, but she needed that restroom. When she finally reached the door, a sense of relief washed over her. She pushed it open and stepped inside.

The restroom was dim and silent, with a row of sinks beneath fogged-up mirrors. The sharp scent of disinfectant lingered in the air. After a few deep breaths and a splash of cold water, Salina stared at her reflection. The shadows under her eyes had deepened. *Stress? Lack of sleep?* Likely both. She sighed. *This needed to stop.* But she couldn’t just wish it away. Her breathing accelerated, again. Another anxiety attack loomed.

She tried to focus on her surroundings. Her therapist had told her to visualize something calming. Sometimes it helped. Other times, not at all. She wished people understood how exhausting it was to pretend to be okay.

When she was younger, Salina had an imaginary friend, or so her parents claimed. Over time, she'd become withdrawn, clinging to that invisible presence. They tried everything to get her to connect with others, but nothing worked. As she grew older, it got worse. She barely slept, haunted by visions no one else could see. Spirits with unfinished business seemed drawn to her. The lack of rest, coupled with relentless bullying, turned her defensive, sometimes violent. After she was suspended for fighting a classmate who tormented her, her parents sent her to therapy. The boy had ended up with a broken nose. Luckily, no charges were filed. To make things worse, her best friend Heather betrayed her. Heather always wanted popularity more than loyalty, and she abandoned Salina when it suited her. Daniel, Salina's ex, had been her rock. But even he gave up eventually. She splashed water on her face again and glanced at the stall door. Someone had carved *Jeremy and Krista 4-ever* inside a heart. *Cute*. It brought back memories of her and Daniel sneaking into the restrooms to doodle. Before Heather stole him. She hadn't seen Heather in months. Last she heard, she'd transferred to a new school.

The temperature in the room dropped, making Salina's breath fog in the air. "Oh no, not again," she whispered. She wasn't alone. She could feel it. Every creak and groan of the building echoed too loudly. Her thoughts drifted to a memory, an accident. A man dying in front of her. She had seen his spirit rise. His bloodied face, lifeless eyes... she'd never forget them. The light above her, which had been flashing uncontrollably, finally stabilized. *Was it all in her head?* A shadow moved in the mirror. It was a boy. His features obscured. A quiet scream escaped her lips as she stumbled backward. She grabbed her bag and fled toward the door, slamming into someone on the way out.

"Salina?" a sharp, familiar voice said.

She looked up to find Heather standing in front of her.

Speak of the devil... Salina thought.

Heather grabbed her arm. "What are you doing in my school?" she hissed, eyes narrowed.

Salina yanked her arm back and rubbed the sore spot.

Heather looked different, her hair straighter, her confidence sharper, but the old hostility still clung to her.

"Your school?" Salina snapped. "Did you buy it? Is your name on the building? No? Then step aside. Or do I need to remind you about the boyfriend who used to be mine, the one you stole?"

Heather faltered. "I'm dating someone else now. His name is David. He's better than Danny ever was," she mumbled, trying to recover.

Salina didn't bother responding. She glared, turned, and slammed the door behind her.

Unbelievable. Of all the schools, Heather had to be at this one? Deep in thought, Salina rounded a corner, and crashed right into someone. Her books tumbled to the floor. Typical.

“Watch it!” a voice barked.

She looked up, it was the grumpy girl from class. “Sorry,” Salina stammered, as she scrambled to collect her things.

The girl sighed. “I’m sorry too. Wasn’t watching. Let’s try again, I’m Krista.”

“Salina,” she said, brushing off her skirt. “But I guess you already knew that.”

Krista helped her up. “Mr. Anderson sent me. He thought you got lost.”

“Yeah... let’s head back, before they find something else to laugh at.”

As they walked, Salina glanced sideways. “So, how long have you been here?”

Krista shrugged. “Since the beginning.”



Chapter 4

*K*rista pushed the door open. “After you,” she said with a warm, welcoming smile.

Salina nodded in thanks and stepped inside, her nerves tightening with every step. A hush fell over the room as the students turned to look at her.

“Hey, look, there she is... the girl who’s scared of her own shadow,” a mocking voice rang out from the middle of the room.

Salina’s gaze darted toward the source. *Jeremy*. The dark-haired guy Mr. Anderson had called out to earlier sat there with a smug grin that made her skin crawl.

Aaron glared at him, clearly trying hard not to react.

The taller guy beside Jeremy gave him a sharp smack on the arm, prompting him to flinch. “Cut it out, Jer,” he muttered, voice low and commanding.

“Yes, Jeremy,” Krista chimed in, unamused. “Just because she’s new doesn’t mean you get to act like a jerk.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes dramatically, slouching in his seat as he nibbled on his pen, wearing a look of exaggerated

boredom.

Krista and Salina had just settled into their chairs when Salina leaned closer. "Who's the boy next to Jeremy?" she whispered, nodding subtly in their direction.

Krista glanced at him, watching the relaxed confidence in the way he laughed at something Jeremy said.

Salina followed her gaze, taking in his casual charm. His smile was infectious, his eyes lit with a spark of mischief that made her chest flutter.

"That's David," Krista said. "Jeremy's best friend."

David? You're joking, right? Salina thought, raising an eyebrow as she recalled the name Heather had mentioned earlier. "And Jeremy? Is he your boyfriend?"

"Why would you think that?" Krista asked, clearly caught off guard.

"I saw your names in the restroom. Or was that another 'Krista and Jeremy forever'?"

Krista's cheeks flushed. "Oh... that."

"What? You guys broke up?"

Krista's gaze lingered on Jeremy, a shadow of wistfulness in her expression. "We were never really together. I liked him... but it was months ago. He had a girlfriend, Grace. Last week, Jer and I went to a party. We had too much to drink and ended up arguing. He hasn't spoken to me since. Not even answering my texts. And my mom's still mad because I snuck out."

Salina nodded, understanding more than she let on.

Krista sighed. "Jeremy always acts like he's better than everyone else. But David? He's different. He's got Jeremy's back, but he's kind. Loyal."

“Sounds like someone worth knowing,” Salina said, rising from her seat when she noticed Mr. Anderson distracted by another teacher in the hallway.

“Where are you going?” Krista asked curiously.

“To do something about my nerves. Be right back.”

Salina walked confidently over to Jeremy and David’s table. “Hi, I’m Salina. You’re David, right?” she said, deliberately ignoring Jeremy. She was putting on a show of confidence, but inside, she was anything but calm. David smiled warmly. His presence instantly made her feel at ease. There was something honest in his expression, his dimples enhancing his charm. As their hands met in a handshake, a strange, electric sensation rushed through her.

The world fell silent, frozen in place as if time itself held its breath.

Salina closed her eyes. A cold dizziness swept over her, and when she opened them, the classroom was gone. The same shadowed boy from before stood before her, this time holding damp leaves that shimmered with dew. The scent of pine and earth surrounded her. She could hear the gentle gurgle of a stream nearby, forest embracing her on all sides. And just as quickly, the vision vanished. “So, you’re Salina?” Jeremy leaned in, eyeing her.

“Yes, I am. Apparently, you missed that. And, you might wanna fix your shirt.”

Jeremy looked down and groaned when he realized his shirt was inside out, but most classmates were too busy

with their own conversations to notice.

Salina grinned, satisfied. Just then, Mr. Anderson returned, instantly drawing the class's attention. Tall and serious, glasses perched on his nose, he carried a stack of papers and a steaming cup of coffee like some academic superhero. As his eyes swept the room, the chatter quickly died down.

"Oh no, teacher alert. Gotta run. Nice meeting you, David," Salina said with a wink before heading back to her seat.

Krista looked at her, eyes sparkling with amusement.

"That was bold."

"Why?" Salina gave her a teasing look.

"You're the new girl, and you just marched up to their table like it was no big deal. I'm impressed."

"You said he's decent, didn't you?"

"He is. If you get on David's good side, Jeremy usually follows."

Salina shrugged. "We'll see."

As if summoned by the sheer weight of girl talk, Jeremy suddenly stood and pulled off his shirt.

The room froze. Conversations stopped mid-sentence, and heads turned.

A few girls openly stared while others burst into giggles.

Krista went rigid, her face turning the exact shade of a ripe tomato as she realized people were now staring at her too.

Salina gave her a light shove, laughing. "Didn't mean anything, huh?"

"Oh, shoosh," Krista hissed, grinning despite herself.

“Jeremy, please move to the table in front of you,” Mr. Anderson said with a perfectly straight face.
“What? Why? I didn’t even do anything!”
“Not yet, but I like to stay ahead of trouble. Now move.”
Jeremy blinked, clearly stunned by this logic, but grabbed his things and shuffled forward without further protest.
Salina leaned back in her seat, though her smile faded slightly. Her mind circled back to Heather. *Could David really be that David?* She sure hoped not.



Mr. Anderson paced the classroom with sharp eyes, scanning the room like he could sense when someone wasn’t paying attention.
The students pretended to focus, though the energy said otherwise.
David, clearly less committed to the act, leaned toward Jeremy. “Psst. Bro.” No response. He quietly rolled up a piece of paper, slipped it into the hollow barrel of his pen, and blew it at Jeremy’s head.
“Ow! What, Dave?” Jeremy whispered, rubbing the spot.
“You working or what?”
“Yeah,” Jeremy whispered. “Trying to avoid detention.”
“Mr. Harris!” The sudden bark from Mr. Anderson nearly launched David out of his seat.
Salina jumped too, her pen slipping in her grip. She

wasn't used to teachers with built-in megaphones. All heads turned as Mr. Anderson stormed over like a man running on too much caffeine and not nearly enough patience. "I hope you're not talking more than working," he said, eyes narrowing.

David straightened up, throwing on an innocent expression so dramatic it could've earned him an award. "Never, sir. I'm completely focused," he replied, hands folded like a choirboy.

Salina glanced around. Everyone seemed to know where they fit, like puzzle pieces dropped in the right spots. She was still floating on the edge, trying to figure out what corner she belonged to. Watching David joke his way into trouble almost made things feel... normal. Almost. She shook her head with a grin. *If "focused" meant launching paper missiles across the room, then David was the picture of academic excellence.* She noticed that he caught her amused glance and quickly looked away, the tips of his ears turning red.

"Good. And David, that's the fourth time, I've seen that spit pen. I've already taken three from you, a while ago. Congratulations, you've earned yourself detention."

"What?" David looked personally offended, like he'd just been falsely accused of grand theft auto.

Jeremy, who had been hiding behind his book, tried to suppress a laugh but failed, snorting into his sleeve. "You know," he muttered after the teacher walked off, "for someone who claims to be innocent, your aim is suspiciously accurate."

"Just imagine if I used it for good," David shot back