

Chapter One – A New Beginning



"Sometimes the biggest changes begin with the smallest steps... like walking through a door you've never opened before."

The sound of rain tapping softly against my bedroom window woke me long before my alarm ever had the chance. For a few seconds, I stayed exactly where I was.

Curled beneath the thick duvet, staring at the pale white ceiling above me. It was strangely quiet. Well... Almost quiet. A loud thud echoed from somewhere downstairs. "Give it back!"

"I had it first!" I sighed before I even opened my eyes. *The twins*. Some things never changed. A small smile escaped my lips despite myself. No matter how much they drove me insane, hearing them argue over something completely ridiculous every morning had somehow become part of my routine. I reached across my bedside table and switched off the alarm before it could start ringing. 7:00 a.m.

My first day. Not just the first day of a new school year. The first day at an entirely new school. I wasn't sure which one scared me more. Slowly, I pushed the blanket away and let my feet touch the cold wooden floor. The room still smelled faintly of fresh paint. We had only moved into our new house in Alderhaven three weeks ago. Most of the moving boxes had disappeared by now, but a few were still stacked neatly beside my bookshelf, waiting for someone to decide where everything belonged.

I wasn't in a hurry. Neither were my parents. Dad kept saying, "*We'll unpack the rest when the house starts feeling like home*." "So far... It didn't". Not yet. I walked towards the large window overlooking the quiet street outside. Morning mist floated lazily between the old brick houses. Everything looked grey. The pavement was still wet from the rain that had fallen during the night. Orange and golden leaves covered the sidewalks, dancing gently whenever the wind decided to wake up. It looked like one of those postcards people bought in tourist shops.

Beautiful. Peaceful. Almost perfect. If only I felt the same. A cold shiver ran across my arms. Not because of the weather. Because today... I had to start all over again. New teachers. New classmates. New people judging me before they even knew my name. I rested my forehead against the cool glass. "What if it's exactly the same?"

The question escaped my lips before I realised I had spoken aloud. A new school didn't magically create a new person. I was still me. Still awkward. Still quiet. Still the girl who always preferred sitting in the library instead of joining everyone outside. Still the girl people eventually forgot to invite. Still the girl who somehow never fitted anywhere. A knock interrupted my thoughts. "Kiara?"

"Mum's voice was gentle." "Are you awake?" "Yeah." The bedroom door opened slowly. She smiled the moment she saw me standing by the window. She was much shorter than Dad, with warm brown eyes and chin-length brown hair that curled slightly inwards at the ends. She always looked calm, even on stressful mornings like this one.

"There you are." She stepped inside carrying a neatly folded pile of clothes. "I thought you might still be asleep."

"I couldn't."

"I figured." She placed the clothes on my bed. "You don't have to wear these if you don't want to." I looked down. A cream-coloured knitted jumper. Light blue jeans. A dark green scarf. Very... Mum. I couldn't help smiling. "I think I'll stick with my hoodie." She laughed quietly. "I knew you were going to say that." I opened my wardrobe. Most of my clothes looked almost identical. Oversized hoodies. Simple T-shirts. Jeans. Nothing fashionable. Nothing expensive. Nothing that would suddenly make me fit in. My hand automatically reached for my favourite dark-grey hoodie. It was soft from years of washing. Comfortable. Safe. The kind of hoodie you disappeared inside whenever the world became too loud. I pulled it over my head before slipping into a pair of faded blue jeans. Finally, I sat down on the edge of my bed to pull on my worn white Converse. "They're getting old," Mum said. "They're comfortable."

"They're falling apart."

"I know." She shook her head with an amused smile. "You've always been stubborn."

"Runs in the family."

"It certainly does." When she left the room, I walked towards the mirror hanging beside my wardrobe. For a moment... I simply looked at myself. Long chestnut hair reached almost to the bottom of my back. Straight. Soft. A little messy from sleeping. I quickly brushed it until it fell neatly over my shoulders. Then... My eyes. They always made me stop. Gold. Not brown. Not hazel. Not amber. Gold. Depending on the light, they sometimes looked almost honey-coloured. Other times they became darker... Warmer... Almost glowing. People noticed them. They always noticed them.

Children asked questions. Adults stared a little too long before pretending they hadn't. Even doctors had never been able to explain them. "*Rare genetics*," one had once suggested. Whatever that meant. I looked away first. Somehow... Looking into my own eyes for too long always made me uncomfortable. The smell of freshly toasted bread reached me before I had even made it halfway down the stairs. For one brief moment... everything felt normal. Almost comforting. The wooden steps creaked softly beneath my feet as I descended into the kitchen, following the sound of laughter, arguing, and Mum trying—unsuccessfully—to keep the peace. "She started it!" "I did not!" "You literally threw a spoon at me!" "It slipped!" "It did not slip!" "It absolutely slipped!" I stopped in the doorway. "Morning," I said.

Nobody heard me. Typical. My younger brothers, Liam and Lucas, sat opposite each other at the kitchen table, each convinced the other had committed the greatest crime in human history. Liam had somehow managed to steal Lucas's slice of toast. Lucas had responded by launching a grape across the kitchen. Judging by the purple stain on the wall... his aim had improved.

"Enough."

Dad didn't even lower his newspaper. One word. That was all it took. Silence. Well... Almost. Lucas muttered something under his breath. Liam kicked him gently underneath the table. Lucas kicked back. Dad slowly lowered the newspaper just enough for them to see him raising one eyebrow. Neither of them dared continue. I couldn't help smiling. Dad had that effect on people. He was tall enough to make almost anyone look short, broad-shouldered despite his age, and completely bald, something my brothers never stopped joking about. He always claimed losing his hair meant he had become wiser. Mum insisted it simply meant he spent too much time worrying. Personally... I thought both were true.

"There she is." Mum placed a warm mug of hot chocolate beside my plate. "I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind." "I considered it." "You've got this." "I know." "I didn't. Not really." She sat beside me for a moment. "You nervous?" "I shrugged." "A little."

"A little?"

"A lot." She smiled softly. "I was too."

"You?"

"My first day at a new school." "You never told me." "You never asked."

I looked at her. Sometimes I forgot she had once been sixteen too. Before becoming Mum. Before becoming the person who always seemed to know exactly what to say. "I promise," she continued quietly, "by the end of today you'll remember maybe three names." "Only three?"

"If you're lucky." Dad folded the newspaper. "Don't listen to your mother." I looked up. "You'll remember four." Even Mum laughed. The tension inside my chest loosened just a little. Just enough to breathe. Outside, rain continued to fall in a soft rhythm against the kitchen window. Not heavy. Just enough to leave tiny silver trails across the glass. Perfect Belgian weather. "Bus or walking?" Dad asked. "Walking."

"It's almost twenty minutes."

"I know."

"You sure?" I nodded. "I'd rather walk." Truthfully... I needed those twenty minutes. Twenty minutes before pretending to be brave. Twenty minutes before smiling at strangers. Twenty minutes before becoming the new girl. Again. After breakfast I carried my empty mug to the sink before slipping my backpack onto one shoulder. It wasn't heavy. A few notebooks. A pencil case. A novel I'd started reading three days earlier. My headphones. Nothing else. Mum handed me a dark green raincoat. "Take it."

"I'm wearing a hoodie."

"And you'll get soaked."

"I'll survive."

"You'll complain tonight. "

"I won't."

"You absolutely will." She wasn't wrong. I sighed dramatically before putting the raincoat on. "There."

"You look lovely."

"I look like a walking tent." Dad chuckled. "It suits you."

"I live with comedians." Lucas grinned. "The funny part is that nobody pays us." Liam burst out laughing. "Oh, please," I muttered. "I haven't even left the house yet." Before opening the front door, Mum suddenly wrapped her arms around me. It wasn't one of those quick hugs parents give without thinking. She held on for just a second longer. Long enough for me to understand what she couldn't quite put into words. You'll be okay.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you too." Then... I stepped outside. The cool morning air immediately brushed against my face. The scent of rain, damp leaves and fresh earth filled every breath. Alderhaven looked almost asleep. Old brick houses stood shoulder to shoulder along narrow streets, their windows reflecting the pale grey sky. Flower boxes overflowed with autumn colours. Some gardens still carried traces of summer. Others had already surrendered to October. I adjusted my backpack and started walking. The streets were unfamiliar. Every corner reminded me that I was the newcomer. People passed me without a second glance. An elderly couple walked hand in hand beneath one umbrella. A baker arranged fresh loaves behind the window of a small shop. Somewhere nearby, church bells rang eight times.

I checked the time on my phone. Plenty of time. Good. I wanted to arrive early. Not because I was excited. Because arriving late on your first day felt like the fastest way to become unforgettable. And not in a good way. As I turned the final corner... I stopped. There it was. St. Alderic Secondary School. Even from across the street it looked ancient. Dark stone walls stretched across almost the entire block. Tall gothic windows reflected the cloudy sky. A large iron gate stood open, welcoming hundreds of students inside. Or warning them. I wasn't sure which. Groups of teenagers laughed together as if they had known each other forever. Some hugged after the summer holidays. Others compared schedules. Nobody stood alone. Except me. I tightened my grip on the strap of my backpack.

"Okay, Kiara..." I whispered to myself. "You've done this before." Not here. Not with these people. But before. One deep breath. Then another. Finally... I crossed the street. And stepped through the gates of St. Alderic Secondary School for the very first time. The moment I stepped through the iron gates, the noise hit me. Conversations echoed across the courtyard, lockers slammed shut somewhere inside the building, and laughter drifted through the crisp morning air. It was loud without being chaotic, like everyone already knew exactly where they belonged. Everyone except me. I stopped for a second, pretending to look at the folded timetable in my hands while secretly observing the students around me. Some wore the same nervous expression I probably had. Most didn't. Small groups stood

together after what had probably been weeks apart over the summer. They talked over one another, hugged, laughed and compared holiday stories as if no time had passed at all. I wondered what that felt like. To walk into a place and already know where you belonged. I folded the timetable again and took a slow breath.

Just keep walking. The heavy wooden doors opened with surprising ease. Inside, the entrance hall was even more impressive than it had looked from outside. The floor was covered with worn grey stone tiles polished smooth by decades of footsteps. Tall arched windows stretched almost to the ceiling, allowing soft morning light to spill across the corridors. Old portraits of former principals lined the walls, their painted eyes seeming to follow everyone who passed beneath them. The school smelled faintly of old books, chalk dust and fresh coffee. It felt...old. Comfortably old. Almost alive. I glanced down at the map printed on the back of my timetable.

Class 4B.

Second floor. Room 214. Simple enough. Or so I thought. Five minutes later I was standing in front of a science laboratory on the third floor.

"So much for simple," I whispered.

Students hurried past without paying much attention to me. A tall boy carrying three textbooks almost walked into me before muttering a quick apology. Someone else laughed loudly from further down the corridor. The building seemed endless. Every hallway looked exactly the same. I turned another corner. Still nothing. Great.

"I'm officially lost."

"You and about half the first-years."

The voice startled me. I turned around. A girl stood a few metres away, smiling as though getting lost on the first day was the most normal thing in the world. She looked about my age. Maybe a little taller than me. Her shoulder-length brown hair framed a friendly face, and warm brown eyes studied me with open curiosity rather than judgement. She wore a dark green jacket over a white T-shirt and carried her backpack carelessly over one shoulder.

"I'm Marie," she said, stepping closer. "You look like someone who's been walking in circles."

I couldn't help smiling.

"Is it that obvious?" She laughed. "A little."

I looked down at the timetable still clutched in my hands. "I've been trying to find room 214." She glanced at the paper. "Oh." She pointed behind me. "You walked straight past it." I blinked. "I did?" "Mhm." I looked over my shoulder. Sure enough...A small brass sign beside the next classroom door clearly read: **214** I sighed dramatically. "That's embarrassing." "It could be worse." "How?" "You could've walked into the teachers' lounge." I laughed. "Did you?"

"My first day last year." We both laughed this time. The awkwardness I'd been carrying since waking up seemed just a little lighter. "So..." Marie said, "you're new."

"That obvious too?"

"You've got the 'please don't let me embarrass myself before lunch' look."

"I really do, don't I?" "A little." She smiled again.

Not the fake smile people gave because they felt sorry for someone. A real one. The kind that reached her eyes. "I'll show you around during lunch if you want." "You don't even know me." She shrugged. "I don't have to." There was something wonderfully uncomplicated about her. No judgement. No awkward questions. Just kindness. "I'm Kiara."

"Nice to meet you, Kiara."

"You too." Before either of us could say anything else, the bell rang. A loud metallic sound echoed through the corridors, immediately setting hundreds of students in motion. Doors opened. Teachers appeared. Voices lowered.

The school suddenly transformed from a noisy building into something strangely organised.

Marie nodded toward room 214. "That's us." For the first time that morning... The words *that's us* didn't sound so frightening. We stepped inside together. The classroom was already half full. Rows of wooden desks faced a large whiteboard at the front of the room. Sunlight filtered through tall windows overlooking the courtyard, making tiny particles of dust sparkle in the air. Students looked up as we entered. Some smiled politely. Others barely noticed. A few stared just a little too long. I felt my stomach tighten. Being the new girl always came with an audience. Marie leaned closer. "Don't worry."

"I wasn't."

"You just swallowed."

"I did not."

"You definitely did." I rolled my eyes. "Fine." She grinned victoriously. "Thought so."

As we walked toward two empty desks near the middle of the classroom, I noticed another girl watching me. She had long blonde hair that fell perfectly over her shoulders and striking blue eyes. She whispered something to the two girls sitting beside her. One had long dark brown hair and warm olive skin. The other wore her dark curls loose around her shoulders. All three glanced in my direction before quietly laughing.

Not loudly. Not enough for a teacher to notice. Just enough for me to know I wasn't imagining it. Marie followed my gaze. Her smile faded slightly. "Ignore them." "Who are they?" "The blonde one is Naomi." She lowered her voice. "The girl beside her is Fara." "And the one with the curls is Salma." "They're..." "They like talking about

people." "I've been here five minutes." Marie gave a small shrug. "Unfortunately, that's more than enough."

I looked away. Maybe Mum had been right. Maybe by the end of the day I'd remember more than three names after all. I just wished those weren't the first ones. Outside, rain continued to fall against the classroom windows. Somewhere in the corridor, footsteps echoed before slowly fading away. Then... A voice. Deep. Calm. Only for a brief moment. Someone outside greeted another teacher. "Morning, Mr. Borrens."

The name meant nothing to me. Not yet. But for reasons I couldn't explain... I found myself listening until the footsteps disappeared into the distance. Then the classroom door opened. Our first lesson was about to begin. The classroom settled almost immediately after the teacher walked in. Conversations faded into whispers before disappearing altogether. A woman in her early fifties placed a stack of folders on her desk before turning towards us with a warm smile.

"Good morning, everyone." Her voice was calm. Gentle. The kind of voice that instantly made the room feel less intimidating. "My name is Mrs. Gullens." She picked up a piece of white chalk. "For those of you who don't know me yet, I teach mathematics." She wrote her name on the board in neat handwriting. **Mrs. Gullens**

Even the way she wrote looked organised. She had short blonde hair that framed her face neatly, warm brown eyes and a tall, slender figure. Everything about her seemed calm, almost motherly. "I know the first day after summer always feels a little strange," she continued. "So today we're going to take things slowly." A few relieved sighs escaped around the classroom. Mine included. Mrs. Gullens smiled. "I heard that." Soft laughter spread through the room. Maybe this wouldn't be such a disaster after all. She began calling everyone's name from the attendance list. Each student answered with a quick "Here." I listened carefully. It helped me connect names to faces. "Naomi Verstraeten."

"Here." The blonde girl from earlier raised one perfectly manicured hand before immediately returning to her conversation with Fara. Mrs. Gullens looked at her for a second. "Thank you, Naomi." Naomi gave a sweet smile that somehow didn't look genuine. "Fara El Idrissi."

"Here."

"Salma Benali."

"Present."

"Bourak Ait..." A tall boy near the back lifted his hand. "Here." He looked relaxed, leaning back in his chair as if school didn't concern him in the slightest. "Mirko Janssens." A small blond boy wearing rectangular glasses answered quietly. "Here." He barely looked up from his notebook. "Jolanda Peeters." A petite girl with long light-brown hair smiled politely. "Here."

"Samantha Claes."

"Present." The girl had neatly tied blonde hair and striking green eyes. Even before she spoke again, I somehow knew she liked correcting people. She had that

look.Finally...Mrs. Gullens looked down once more."Kiara Carter."Every head turned.Of course.The new girl.I swallowed."Here."Mrs. Gullens smiled warmly."Welcome to St. Alderic, Kiara."

"Thank you."

"I hope everyone makes her feel welcome."Silence.A few students smiled politely.Others looked away.Naomi exchanged another glance with Fara before whispering something.The three of them laughed quietly.Mrs. Gullens noticed.

"So..."She crossed her arms."Would one of you like to share the joke with the rest of us?"The classroom became very quiet.Naomi's smile disappeared almost instantly."No, Mrs.Gullens."

"I didn't think so."Without raising her voice...Without sounding angry...Mrs. Gullens had somehow won.I liked her immediately.For the next forty minutes she explained how the school year would work.Homework.Exams.Projects.Nothing unexpected.Still...I struggled to concentrate.Not because I wasn't listening.Because everything around me was new.Every classroom had different smells.Different sounds.Different people.

Different routines.It felt like trying to memorise an entire world in a single morning.When the bell finally rang, everyone stood up almost simultaneously.Chairs scraped across the floor.Bags zipped shut.Students hurried into the corridor before the next lesson.Marie waited beside my desk.

"So..."

"You survived."

"Barely."She laughed."I told you."

"I think I forgot half the names already."

"You'll remember."

"I doubt it."

"You remembered mine."

"That one's easy."She pretended to look offended."Easy?"

"I meant..."I searched for the right words..."...worth remembering."She smiled again."I'll accept that."Together we stepped into the crowded corridor.Students moved in every direction.Some rushed towards lockers.

Others leaned against the walls talking.Teachers disappeared into classrooms carrying piles of books.The building suddenly felt alive again.I looked around, trying to memorise everything.Every corridor looked almost identical.

Dark stone walls.Old wooden doors.Large windows overlooking the courtyard.Somewhere nearby, someone dropped a folder.Papers scattered across

the floor. Several students simply walked around them. Nobody stopped. Except one person. A man bent down and calmly helped gather every sheet before handing them back to the embarrassed teacher.

It happened so quickly I barely saw his face. Only... Dark hair. A long black coat. Pale hands. Something about the way he moved seemed... Different. Almost effortless. He handed the last papers back with a polite nod before disappearing into another corridor. I frowned. "Who was that?" Marie followed my gaze.

"Oh." "Him?" She sounded surprised that I was asking. "That's one of the maths teachers." I kept looking towards the now-empty corridor. "He seems..." I stopped. How could I even describe it? Calm? Different? Impossible to ignore? Marie tilted her head. "What?" "I don't know."

She smiled. "That's Mr. Borrens." I repeated the name quietly inside my head. **Mr. Borrens.** For some reason... It felt strangely familiar. Even though I was certain... I had never met him before.

Chapter Two-The First Day

The second bell echoed through the ancient corridors of St. Alderic, sending another wave of students spilling into the hallways. For a moment I simply stood there. The crowd flowed around me like a river, everyone moving with confidence toward their next classroom. Nobody hesitated. Nobody stopped to study a timetable every few minutes. Except me. I unfolded the crumpled sheet in my hand once again.

"French," I muttered. "Room 118." Marie leaned over my shoulder. "You're holding it upside down." I stared at the timetable. "...I knew that." She laughed. "No, you didn't."

"Okay... maybe I didn't." She gently turned the paper around before handing it back. "Come on."

"You'd still be wandering these halls tomorrow without me."

"I was doing perfectly fine."

"You ended up on the third floor looking for a classroom on the second."

"I prefer calling it exploring." Marie grinned. "I think we're going to get along just fine."

I smiled despite myself. Maybe... Maybe this day wouldn't be so bad after all. Together we walked through the corridor, our footsteps echoing against the old stone walls. Sunlight filtered through the tall windows, painting long golden stripes across the worn floor. Students greeted teachers as they passed. Someone rushed by carrying an armful of books. A locker slammed shut somewhere behind us. The school no longer felt quite as intimidating. Not while I was walking beside someone who actually knew where she was going.

"So," Marie asked, "where did you live before Alderhaven?"

"About an hour from here."

"Do you miss it?" I thought about it. "A little."

"The people?" I shrugged. "Not really."

"The place?"

"Maybe."

"The bakery?" That made me laugh. "There was a really good bakery."

"I knew it." She placed a hand dramatically over her heart. "It's always the bakery." We both laughed. For the first time since arriving... I forgot I was the new girl. Only for a few seconds.

But it was enough.

The French classroom was smaller than the mathematics room.

Dark wooden beams stretched across the ceiling, giving the room a warm, almost old-fashioned feeling. Shelves filled with French novels lined the back wall, their worn spines hinting that they had been read by countless students before us. Rain continued to tap softly against the tall windows. It was strangely calming. Marie slipped into the seat beside me before placing her notebook neatly on the desk. "You survived your first lesson," she whispered. "I deserve a medal."

"A small one."

"I was hoping for something gold."

"You've been here two hours."

"I've worked hard." She laughed quietly. "I like you." The words caught me off guard. Nobody had said something that simple to me in a long time. "I like you too." Before either of us could continue, the classroom door opened. A tall man stepped inside carrying a worn leather satchel beneath one arm. His sandy-blond hair had begun to grey slightly at the temples, and a pair of thin glasses rested comfortably on his nose. He wore a navy-blue blazer over a light shirt with the sleeves rolled neatly to his forearms. Without raising his voice, he smiled.

"Bonjour, everyone." Almost instantly, the class answered. "Bonjour, Monsieur Laurens." He nodded approvingly. "I hope you've all enjoyed your summer." A few students laughed. "Judging by your faces, perhaps not enough." Even Naomi smiled. Mr. Laurens had an easy way of speaking that made the classroom feel relaxed. He spent the first part of the lesson introducing himself to the new students before asking everyone to say a few words about themselves—in French, if possible. My stomach tightened. Marie noticed immediately. "You'll be fine," she whispered. "I barely remember any French."

"You know more than you think."

"I know how to order a croissant."

"That's a start." One by one, students stood. "My name is Naomi..."

"My hobbies are..."

"I like volleyball..."

"I have two brothers..." The closer my turn came, the louder my heartbeat became. Finally... "Kiara?" Mr. Laurens looked at me kindly. "It's your turn." I slowly stood up. Every pair of eyes in the room seemed to settle on me at once. "My name is Kiara..." My voice sounded much smaller than I intended. "I recently moved to Alderhaven." I searched for the right French words. "...J'aime lire." A smile spread across Mr. Laurens' face. "You enjoy reading?" I nodded.

"Very much." "Excellent." He leaned casually against his desk. "Then you'll enjoy this class." Relief washed over me as I sat back down. "See?" Marie whispered. "You survived." "Barely." She grinned. "You keep saying that."

"Because it's true." The rest of the lesson passed surprisingly quickly. Mr. Laurens never embarrassed anyone who struggled. Instead, he encouraged every answer, no matter how hesitant. By the time the bell rang, I found myself smiling. Maybe... Just maybe... School here wouldn't be as terrible as I'd imagined. Students immediately began packing their bags. The corridor outside filled with voices once again.

As Marie and I stepped through the classroom door, she stopped suddenly.

"Oh no."

"What?"

"I forgot my pencil case."

"I'll wait."

"I'll only be a minute." She hurried back inside. Left alone in the corridor, I leaned against the cold stone wall and watched students hurry past in both directions. Some teachers walked by carrying stacks of books. Others chatted quietly before disappearing into nearby classrooms. Then... A sudden silence settled over the hallway around me. Not complete silence. More like... A pause. As though conversations had softened without anyone realizing it. I looked up. A man walked calmly toward the far end of the corridor. Tall. Dark hair. Black coat. His hands rested casually in his pockets as he passed a group of students who politely stepped aside without even noticing they had done so. For the briefest moment... He lifted his head. Our eyes met. Warm brown. Steady. Unreadable. Time seemed to slow. Then, with the slightest nod, he continued walking. No smile. No greeting. Just... A single glance. "Kiara!" I blinked. The moment was gone. Marie stood beside me again, holding up her pencil case triumphantly. "Found it!"

I looked once more toward the end of the corridor. Empty. The man had vanished. "What are you looking at?" Marie asked. I hesitated. "...Nothing." But somehow... I wasn't entirely sure that was true. The rest of the morning passed faster than I expected. History. English. A short introduction from each teacher. More names. More classrooms. More corridors that all somehow looked exactly the same. By lunchtime my head felt completely full. If someone had asked me to draw a map of St. Alderic, I probably would have ended up inventing three extra hallways. Marie laughed when I admitted it. "I got lost for almost two weeks."

"Seriously?" She nodded confidently. "I once spent ten minutes looking for the gym."

"Isn't that a building on its own?"

"It is." I blinked. "Exactly." I couldn't help laughing. "You make me feel a lot better."

"I know."

She linked her arm through mine for a second as we joined the stream of students heading downstairs. "You'll fit in." The words warmed me more than they probably should have. "I hope so." "You will." She sounded so certain. I wished I could borrow some of that certainty.

The cafeteria occupied almost the entire ground floor of one wing. The smell reached us before the room itself did. Fresh soup. Warm bread. Pasta. Coffee.

Something sweet that reminded me of cinnamon. Dozens of round tables filled the room, nearly all of them occupied by laughing students. The noise was overwhelming. Hundreds of conversations blended into one constant hum. "Busy," I murmured. "It always is." Marie picked up a tray. "Come on." The lunch line moved surprisingly quickly. I chose a bowl of tomato soup, a bread roll and a bottle of water.

Marie looked at my tray. "That's it?"

"I'm not very hungry."

"First-day nerves?"

"Maybe." She smiled knowingly. "I couldn't eat either on my first day." Once we'd paid, we searched for somewhere to sit. Most tables were already full. Groups had clearly claimed their usual spots. Near the windows. In the corners. Close to the doors. Everyone seemed to have a place. Everyone except us. "There." Marie pointed toward a small table with two empty chairs near one of the tall windows. Perfect. The rain had finally stopped, leaving tiny droplets clinging to the glass. Beyond the window, the courtyard shimmered beneath a pale afternoon sun that had finally broken through the clouds. "It actually looks beautiful," I said softly. "It does." Marie followed my gaze. "Especially in autumn."

"I like autumn."

"Me too."

"It's quiet."

"And everything smells different." I looked at her. "You notice that too?" She smiled. "I notice everything." Before I could answer, a loud laugh echoed through the cafeteria. Naomi. She sat several tables away with Fara, Salma and a few other students. For a moment, Naomi looked directly at me. Then she leaned toward Fara and whispered something. The group laughed. Again. I lowered my eyes to my soup. Marie sighed quietly. "They're not worth your attention." "I wasn't looking." "I know." There was a brief silence. "Do they always do that?"

"Pretty much."

"Why?" Marie shrugged. "They've been the popular group for years."

"Popular because they're nice?" She gave me a look. "You already know the answer." I smiled faintly. "I guess I do." A few minutes later, something unexpected happened. The cafeteria grew... quieter. Not silent. Just... Different. Conversations lowered. Several students glanced toward the entrance without saying a word. I frowned. "What's going on?" Marie looked over her shoulder. "Oh." I followed her gaze. A teacher had just entered the cafeteria.

He carried nothing but a ceramic mug filled with coffee. Dark hair. Long black coat replaced by a charcoal-grey shirt with the sleeves rolled neatly to his forearms. He

walked calmly through the room without seeming to notice the curious looks around him. Or perhaps... He noticed them and simply didn't care. The strange thing wasn't that people looked at him. It was **how** they looked. Some students greeted him politely. Others moved aside almost instinctively to let him pass. No one had asked them to. They simply did.

As though it were the most natural thing in the world. "Is that..." I began. Marie nodded. "Mr. Borrens." I watched as he thanked one of the kitchen staff with a warm smile before accepting a sandwich. It was such an ordinary thing to do. Yet... Something about him still felt impossible to ignore.

Almost as though the room itself shifted ever so slightly when he entered. He turned. For the briefest moment... His eyes swept across the cafeteria. Across dozens of students. Across teachers. Across tables. Until... They stopped. On me. Only for a heartbeat. Then he continued walking as though nothing had happened. I frowned. "Did he just..." "What?" I looked back toward Marie. "...Nothing." "Because surely... I was imagining things. Wasn't I?"

Outside, a cold breeze stirred the leaves in the courtyard. One crimson leaf drifted slowly past the window before disappearing from sight. For reasons I couldn't explain... A shiver ran down my spine. And this time... It wasn't because of the weather. The afternoon lessons passed in a blur. After lunch, every classroom began to look the same. More chalkboards. More wooden desks. More introductions. By the time the final lesson began, my notebook was filled with names, arrows and tiny reminders I'd written in the margins.

Mrs. Corta – English. Mr. Kuipers – P.E. Library → second floor. Locker 143.

I stared at the page and sighed. "So many things to remember." Marie glanced sideways. "You'll know everything by next week."

"You sound very optimistic."

"I prefer realistic."

"You barely know me." She smiled. "I know enough." I wasn't sure why those words made me smile. Maybe because she said them so casually. Like becoming friends wasn't something complicated. Like it simply... happened. The final bell rang at half past three. A chorus of relieved voices filled the corridors. Lockers slammed shut. Students pulled on jackets and scarves before making their way towards the exits. Some hurried to catch buses. Others waited outside for their parents. The school, which had felt enormous all day, suddenly seemed too small for the hundreds of students trying to leave at once. Marie and I walked together towards the entrance hall. "So..." She adjusted the strap of her backpack. "What do you think?" I looked around one last time. The stained-glass windows reflected the pale afternoon light, bathing the old stone walls in shades of gold and blue. "It isn't as scary as this morning."

"Told you." "I'm still going to get lost tomorrow."

"Oh, definitely." I laughed. "But you'll rescue me again?"

"I suppose I can fit that into my schedule."

"How generous." She gave an exaggerated bow. "I know." When we reached the main doors, we stopped. "My bike's over there," she said, pointing towards a row of bicycle racks. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'd like that."

"Eight twenty?"

"I'll be here."

"Good." For a moment neither of us moved. It felt strange. Twelve hours ago, we had been complete strangers. Now... I was genuinely looking forward to seeing her again. "See you tomorrow, Kiara." "See you." She waved before jogging towards her bicycle. I watched until she disappeared around the corner. Then I turned towards the road leading home. The air smelled different than it had that morning. The rain had stopped completely. Everything seemed fresher. Leaves glistened on the pavement, and puddles reflected the grey clouds drifting slowly across the sky. Without the crowds of students around me, Alderhaven felt almost peaceful. I took my time walking home. There was no hurry. Mum would probably ask a hundred questions the moment I walked through the front door. Dad would pretend not to be interested while secretly listening. The twins would interrupt every thirty seconds. I smiled to myself. Some things never changed.

As I passed the old church near the town square, its bell rang four slow chimes. The sound echoed through the quiet streets. A flock of birds suddenly burst from the roof, disappearing into the cloudy sky. I looked up instinctively. One bird remained behind. A large black crow. It sat perfectly still on the stone cross at the top of the church. Watching. For some reason... The sight made me uneasy. Ridiculous. It was only a bird. I continued walking. A few minutes later I noticed something odd. The crow was still there. No... Not there. Ahead of me. Perched on a streetlamp this time. I frowned. Had it followed me? I shook my head. *Don't be stupid, Kiara.* Crows fly. People walk. Of course it reached the next street first. Still... The strange feeling refused to disappear. By the time I reached my street, the sun had almost disappeared behind thick clouds. The houses looked quieter than they had that morning. Warm yellow lights glowed behind curtains. Someone nearby was cooking dinner. The smell of onions and herbs drifted through the air. Home. I could already hear shouting from inside before I even reached the front door. "I DIDN'T TOUCH YOUR CONTROLLER!"

"DAD! HE'S LYING!" I laughed softly. Yep. Definitely home. Just as I reached for the door handle... Something caught my eye. Across the street. Between two old oak trees. Someone was standing there. Far enough away that I couldn't make out their face. Tall. Completely still. Watching the house. A chill ran through me. I blinked. A car drove past, briefly blocking my view. When it was gone... The figure had disappeared. Gone.

As if no one had ever been there. I stared for another few seconds before slowly opening the front door. Maybe... It had just been my imagination. But deep down... I wasn't so sure anymore.

Chapter Three – Whispers

The sound of rain against my bedroom window woke me long before my alarm.

For a few moments, I simply lay there, staring at the ceiling. Yesterday had felt...different. Not because anything extraordinary had happened. Nothing had. I had gone to school. Met a new friend. Attended a few classes. Walked home. A perfectly ordinary first day. And yet...The image of the figure standing across the street refused to leave my mind. I closed my eyes, trying to remember every detail. Tall. Still. Watching. Then gone.

Had someone really been there?

Or had my exhausted mind turned an ordinary passer-by into something mysterious? I sighed and sat up. "You're overthinking." It was something Mum often said. Maybe she was right. Maybe I needed more sleep. I walked to the window and gently pulled the curtain aside. The street below looked completely normal. Cars passed slowly over the wet road. A woman walked her dog beneath a bright yellow umbrella. The oak trees swayed softly in the wind. There was no sign that anyone had ever stood there. Not yesterday. Not now. I let the curtain fall back into place. Today would be different. Today I wasn't the new girl anymore. Well...

Not completely. Breakfast was exactly as chaotic as the day before. Lucas insisted Liam had hidden one of his socks. Liam claimed he had never even seen the sock. Dad lowered his newspaper just enough to sigh. Mum placed a bowl of cereal in front of me. "So?" She smiled knowingly. "How are you feeling today?" I thought for a moment. "Less terrified."

"I'll take that as progress."

"So will I." Dad folded his newspaper. "Made any friends?"

"One."

"That's all you need." I smiled. Marie. The thought of seeing her again made the knot in my stomach a little smaller. The walk to school already felt more familiar. I recognised the bakery. The little florist on the corner. The old church where the crow had been sitting yesterday. Almost without thinking, I looked up. The stone cross stood empty. No crow. No strange feeling. Just grey clouds drifting lazily overhead. I smiled to myself. Maybe yesterday really had just been a long first day. Maybe everything was perfectly normal. The gates of St. Alderic came into view. Students gathered in small groups, laughing as they waited for the first bell. This time...I wasn't standing alone.

"Kiara!" I turned. Marie waved enthusiastically before jogging towards me, her brown hair bouncing with every step. "You actually came." I laughed. "Were you expecting me not to?" "I wasn't sure." "It's only the second day."

"You'd be surprised." She linked her arm through mine as we walked toward the entrance. "So..."

"I've decided something."

"Oh?"

"You need the official tour."

"I thought yesterday was the tour."

"No."

"Yesterday was emergency survival."

"This is different." I raised an eyebrow. "How?"

"Today you'll discover all the places teachers hope students never find."

"The secret places?" She grinned. "The best places." For the first time since moving to Alderhaven... I felt excited to go to school. I had no idea... That before the day was over... Someone else would learn my name. Someone who had been watching far longer than I realised. The first bell echoed through the courtyard just as we reached the front steps. Students immediately began moving toward the entrance, conversations slowly fading as everyone disappeared into the old building. Marie looked at me with a mischievous smile. "We've got five minutes." "Five minutes before what?"

"Before we're supposed to be in class." I frowned. "And?"

"And five minutes is plenty of time."

"For?" She looked around dramatically before lowering her voice. "I'm about to show you St. Alderic's worst-kept secret." I laughed. "Should I be worried?"

"Probably."

"That's not very reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be." She grabbed my sleeve and gently pulled me through one of the side corridors instead of following the crowd. "This way." The hallway was quieter than the main corridor. The polished stone floor reflected the pale morning light filtering through the stained-glass windows. Portraits of former principals watched silently from the walls. One painting in particular caught my attention. The man's eyes seemed... Almost alive. I slowed my pace. "That's creepy." Marie glanced at the portrait. "Oh, him."

"You know him?"

"No."

"But everyone says his eyes follow you." "They don't." "They definitely do." I looked back. The painted eyes appeared fixed on the corridor. Still... A strange feeling settled in my stomach. "See?" Marie laughed. "Now you're going to keep checking."

"I am not."

"You already did." She was right. I had. At the end of the corridor stood a narrow wooden staircase I hadn't noticed yesterday. It looked much older than the rest of the building. The banister was smooth from years of use, and every step creaked beneath our feet. "Where are we going?"

"The tower."

"The school has a tower?"

"You really haven't seen anything yet." The staircase finally ended at a heavy oak door. Marie pushed it open. The cool morning air rushed past us. I stopped. "Wow." From up there almost the entire town of Alderhaven was visible. Rows of brick houses stretched toward the horizon. The church stood proudly in the town square. Beyond it lay forests painted in shades of green, gold and amber. Rain clouds drifted lazily above them. "It's beautiful," I whispered. "I come here when I need to think."

"No one else knows about this?"

"A few people."

"But most students are too lazy to climb all those stairs." I rested my hands on the old stone wall surrounding the tower. The wind tugged gently at my hair. For the first time since moving here... Everything felt peaceful. Until... "What are you two doing up here?" We both jumped. Standing in the doorway was an elderly caretaker carrying a ring of keys that jingled softly against his leg. He wasn't angry. Mostly amused. Marie smiled sheepishly. "Good morning, Mr. Hendriks."

"So that's where you've disappeared to again."

"We were just leaving."

"I thought as much." His kind blue eyes settled on me. "You must be the new student." I nodded politely. "I'm Kiara." He smiled warmly. "Welcome to St. Alderic."

"Thank you." He unlocked a small storage room beside the tower. "I don't mind students coming up here." He looked at us over his glasses. "As long as they don't try climbing onto the roof." Marie placed a hand dramatically against her chest. "I would never." Mr. Hendriks chuckled. "You said exactly the same thing last year."

"I meant it this time."

"I'm sure you did." Even I laughed. He seemed like the sort of person who had worked at the school forever. The kind everyone trusted. As we headed back down the stairs, Marie whispered, "He's secretly everyone's favourite."

"I can see why." Back in the corridor, the second bell rang. "Oh no." Marie looked at the clock. "We're late."

"Already?"

"Run!" We burst into laughter as we hurried through the nearly empty hallway. Our footsteps echoed loudly against the old stone walls. Just as we rounded the final corner... Someone stepped out of a classroom. I almost collided with him. Again. I stumbled backwards. "I'm so sorry!" A calm voice answered before I even managed to steady myself. "Careful." The single word was familiar. Very familiar. I looked up. Dark hair. Warm brown eyes. Pale skin. For a heartbeat, neither of us spoke. Then, with the smallest hint of a smile, he stepped aside to let us pass. "Thank you," I murmured. He gave a polite nod. Nothing more. No introduction. No lecture for running through the corridor. He simply continued walking. Marie tugged lightly on my sleeve. "Come on."

I looked back once.

The mysterious teacher disappeared around the corner without making a sound. "Who..." I began. Marie smiled knowingly. "I told you yesterday." I searched my memory. Then it came back. Mr. Borrens. Somehow... The name seemed to linger in my thoughts long after he had disappeared. And I couldn't explain why. "Honestly," Marie whispered between breaths as we hurried down the corridor, "I think we broke a school record."

"For what?"

"Being late on the second day."

"I thought you said we had plenty of time."

"We did."

"So what happened?"

"You kept stopping to look at everything."

"I did not."

"You stared at three paintings." "They were interesting."

"You read every plaque."

"I like reading."

"You even stopped to admire a staircase."

"It was a nice staircase." Marie laughed so hard she had to wipe a tear from the corner of her eye. "I'm serious!"

"I know."

"You're impossible."

"So I've been told." By the time we reached our classroom, the door was already closed. Marie knocked twice. A few seconds later, it opened. Mrs. Allonda Ros stood in the doorway. She looked to be in her early forties, with dark auburn hair pinned into a neat bun and intelligent grey eyes that missed very little. She wore a dark green

blouse beneath a charcoal blazer, and a silver watch rested on her wrist. She looked at both of us. Then at the clock. "I'm guessing the tower." Marie blinked. "...Maybe." Mrs. Ros sighed, though there was amusement hiding behind it. "I've taught here for twelve years." She folded her arms. "I know exactly which students disappear to the tower." Marie smiled sheepishly. "Sorry." "And you must be Kiara." "Yes, ma'am." Mrs. Ros gave me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry." "Marie has a habit of recruiting new students into her adventures."

"I do not." Mrs. Ros raised an eyebrow. "You convinced three first-years to search for a ghost in the basement last autumn."

"There wasn't a ghost."

"There was a very annoyed plumber."

The entire classroom burst into laughter.

Even Marie covered her face. "I'd forgotten about that."

"I hadn't." Mrs. Ros stepped aside. "Come in." As we walked to our desks, several students looked up. Most only glanced for a moment. Naomi didn't. She watched us the entire way. When I sat down, I heard her whisper something to Fara. Both girls smiled. Not friendly smiles. The kind that made you wonder whether they were talking about you. I looked away. I wasn't going to let them ruin another day. History turned out to be far more interesting than I expected. Mrs. Ros didn't simply read from a textbook. She told stories. Stories about medieval villages. Forgotten battles. Ancient castles hidden deep within Belgian forests. She spoke with such enthusiasm that, for a little while, it felt as though the classroom disappeared entirely. I found myself imagining knights walking through mist-covered woods and forgotten ruins swallowed by ivy. "History," Mrs. Ros said, "isn't just about remembering dates." She rested one hand on the edge of her desk. "It's about remembering people." The room grew quiet. "Every town has stories."

She smiled. "And every story begins with someone asking the right question." I liked that. Very much. When the lesson ended, students slowly packed away their books. Mrs. Ros called after me just as I reached the door. "Kiara?" I turned. "I noticed you were paying close attention." "I like history." "I can tell." She reached into a cupboard and pulled out a thin booklet. "If you're interested, the school library has a section dedicated to Alderhaven's history." I accepted the booklet carefully. "Thank you." "It isn't mandatory reading." She smiled. "But I think you'll enjoy it."

"I will." As I stepped into the corridor, Marie immediately looked at the booklet. "What's that?"

"A guide about Alderhaven."

"Oh." She grinned. "You're officially becoming a nerd."

"I thought I already was."

"You are." She linked her arm through mine again. "But now you have proof." I rolled my eyes dramatically. "I'm never going to win an argument with you."

"No." She smiled. "Probably not." As we continued down the corridor, I looked once more at the cover of the booklet. In faded golden letters, it read: **Alderhaven – A Town of Legends**

Beneath the title was an old black-and-white photograph of the school. Something immediately caught my attention. Standing near the entrance... Was a man. Tall. Dark-haired. Wearing a long black coat. The photograph had been taken decades ago. Yet somehow... The man looked strangely familiar. I slowed my pace. "...Marie?" "Hm?" I pointed at the photograph. "Who's that?" She leaned closer. "I don't know."

"It looks like..." Before I could finish my sentence, another group of students brushed past us, accidentally knocking the booklet from my hands. It landed face down on the stone floor. When I picked it up again... The photograph had folded over the man's face. For a moment, I simply stared at the folded page. The photograph had creased perfectly across the man's face. Almost as though someone had deliberately hidden it. "Everything okay?" Marie's voice pulled me back. I looked up.

"Yeah." I carefully smoothed the page with my hand, but the fold refused to disappear completely. When I looked again, the image was too distorted to make out any real details. The man could have been anyone. A teacher. A parent. A passer-by.

Or...

Maybe I had imagined the resemblance entirely. "You coming?" Marie asked. I slipped the booklet into my backpack. "Coming." The corridor had grown quieter. Most students were already inside their next classroom, leaving only the occasional hurried footsteps echoing through the building. As we walked, I couldn't stop thinking about the photograph. "You're doing it again." I frowned. "Doing what?"

"Thinking too much."

"I wasn't." Marie smiled. "You've been looking at the floor for the last two minutes."

"I was watching where I was walking."

"Mhm."

"And avoiding walking into anyone."

"That's fair." She bumped my shoulder playfully. "Just don't disappear into your own head."

"I'll try." Their next lesson was English. Mrs. Corta welcomed everyone with a bright smile and an enthusiasm that seemed almost impossible for a Wednesday afternoon. She had curly auburn hair tied into a loose ponytail and wore a burgundy cardigan over a cream blouse. "Good afternoon, everyone." The class answered in a sleepy chorus. She laughed. "I see lunch has won." A few students chuckled. "Let's wake those brains up." Instead of opening a textbook, she wrote a single question across the whiteboard. **If you could visit any place in the world, where would you go?** "I don't care about perfect grammar today," she said. "I want imagination." Hands slowly began to rise around the room. "Japan."

"Canada."

"Iceland."

"Italy." One by one, students explained their choices. When it was my turn, Mrs. Corta smiled encouragingly. "And you, Kiara?" I hesitated. "I'd like to visit Scotland."

"Why Scotland?" I wasn't entirely sure. "I think..." I searched for the right words. "It feels like a place full of old stories." Mrs. Corta nodded. "I've never heard anyone describe it that way." "It sounds peaceful."

"It can be." She smiled warmly. "I hope you get to go someday." Something about the way she said it made me believe her. The final minutes of the lesson passed quickly. Just before the bell rang, Mrs. Corta began handing back permission forms for the upcoming autumn excursion. She stopped beside my desk. "Oh."

"I almost forgot." She handed me another sheet. "This is for students who joined the school this year." I glanced at the title. **St. Alderic Heritage Project** "What is it?" Mrs. Corta rested one hand lightly on my desk. "Every new student is paired with a teacher for a small research project about the history of Alderhaven."

"A teacher?"

"Only for guidance." She smiled. "You'll work mostly on your own." Before I could ask another question, the bell rang. Students immediately began packing their bags. "I'll announce everyone's partner tomorrow morning," Mrs. Corta called over the noise. "You'll find out then." Around me, several students groaned dramatically. Marie laughed. "Don't worry."

"It isn't as bad as it sounds."

"You've done it?"

"Last year."

"Who was your teacher?"

"Mrs. Ros."

"Was she nice?"

"The best." We stepped into the corridor with the rest of the class. "So who do you think I'll get?" Marie shrugged. "Could be anyone." She started counting on her fingers. "Mrs. Ros... Mr. Laurens... Mrs. Gullens..." She paused for a second. "...or Mr. Borrens." The name lingered in the air. I looked ahead, pretending it didn't matter. "It doesn't make a difference."

"No?"

"No." Marie smiled knowingly. "Then why did you stop walking?" I blinked. I had. Without even realizing it. Before I could answer, a voice echoed from the end of the corridor. "Mr. Borrens?" A student hurried after the dark-haired teacher, holding out a

forgotten notebook. He accepted it with a grateful smile. "Thank you." His voice was calm. Warm. He exchanged a few quiet words with the student before continuing down the corridor. Completely ordinary. Yet somehow... As he disappeared around the corner, I found myself watching until he was gone.

Marie noticed.

She didn't say anything. She only smiled to herself. Outside, rain began tapping softly against the tall windows once again. Autumn had settled over Alderhaven. And somehow... It felt as though the town was quietly waiting for something to happen. The last lesson ended with another familiar bell. For a split second, the classroom remained still. Then, almost as if someone had pressed an invisible button, chairs scraped across the wooden floor, books disappeared into backpacks, and conversations filled the room once more. I carefully placed the booklet about Alderhaven inside my bag, making sure the bent corner wouldn't crease any further. "You really like that thing, don't you?" Marie asked. "I've had it for less than an hour."

"And you've already looked at it six times."

"I have not." She tilted her head. "Five?"

"...Maybe."

"I knew it." I laughed quietly and zipped my backpack shut. "I just think it's interesting." Marie slung her bag over one shoulder. "History again?"

"Maybe."

"I should've guessed." Together we stepped into the corridor.

Outside, the rain had returned, drumming softly against the tall stained-glass windows. The golden light from the lamps reflected on the polished stone floor, making the old building feel warmer than it had that morning.

Students streamed toward the exits, eager to begin their afternoon. Some teachers stood outside their classrooms, wishing everyone a pleasant evening. Others disappeared into the staff room with stacks of papers tucked beneath their arms. It felt... peaceful. Comfortably ordinary. Exactly the kind of afternoon that made yesterday's strange feeling seem almost silly. "So," Marie said as we walked toward the lockers, "have you unpacked everything at home yet?"

"Almost."

"There are still boxes?"

"A few." She nodded. "My family still had boxes in the attic two years after we moved."

"Please don't tell my mum that."

"Why?"

"She'll think that's acceptable." Marie laughed. "I'll keep it our secret." I smiled. It was surprisingly easy to talk to her. There were no awkward silences. No pressure to impress her. The conversation simply... flowed. When we reached my locker, I knelt to swap a few heavy textbooks for the ones I needed at home. "You've already made a mess," Marie observed. "I've had this locker for two days."

"It already looks like you've owned it for ten years."

"I call it organised chaos."

"I call it chaos." As I reached for my English notebook, something white fluttered to the floor. A folded piece of paper. I frowned. "I don't remember putting that in there."

"What is it?"

"I don't know." I picked it up. There was nothing written on the outside. No name. No drawing. Just a neatly folded sheet of white paper. Marie looked curious. "A secret admirer already?" I laughed. "I've been here two days."

"So?"

"So that's impossible."

"Stranger things have happened." I slowly unfolded the paper. The handwriting was elegant. Careful. Almost too neat. Only four words were written in black ink. **Be careful after dark.** My smile disappeared. Marie frowned. "What does it say?" I looked at the note again. The letters were perfectly straight. Almost as though they had been written with a ruler. "...It's probably a joke."

"Kiara?" I handed her the paper. She read it once. Then again. The smile slowly faded from her face. "That's... odd."

"You think?" She turned the note over. Nothing. No signature. No clue who had written it. "Maybe someone is trying to scare the new girl." I tried to sound convincing. Even to myself. Marie folded the note carefully. "I don't like it."

"It's probably nothing."

"Maybe."

She looked around the corridor. Students continued laughing and talking, completely unaware of our conversation. Everything looked perfectly normal. Yet for some reason... The tiny piece of paper suddenly felt much heavier than it should have. "I'd keep it," Marie said quietly. "You think so?" She nodded. "Even if it's just a stupid prank." I slipped the note into the inside pocket of my backpack. "I guess." We continued toward the main entrance. Neither of us spoke for a while. For the first time since we'd met... The silence between us didn't feel comfortable. It felt uncertain. As we stepped outside, a cold gust of wind swept across the courtyard. The trees lining the path swayed violently, scattering orange and crimson leaves across the wet pavement. One leaf landed against my shoe. I bent down to brush it away. When I looked up again... Someone was standing at one of the second-floor windows. Watching the courtyard.

Watching...Me.The figure didn't move.Not even when dozens of students passed beneath the window.A blink.Someone walked between us.When my view cleared again...The window was empty.

"Kiara?"Marie had already reached the school gates."You coming?"I tore my eyes away from the building."...Yeah."I forced a small smile before catching up to her.But as we walked away from St. Alderic...I couldn't shake the feeling that someone inside the school had been watching me.Long before I'd ever arrived in Alderhaven.Neither of us mentioned the note on the walk home.We talked about homework instead.About teachers.About how unfair it was that the second day of school already came with assignments.It was easier.Safer.Every now and then, my fingers brushed against the inside pocket of my backpack.The folded paper was still there.Four simple words.**Be careful after dark.**I wished I had never opened it.When we reached the crossroads where our routes separated, Marie stopped."So..."She shifted her backpack onto her other shoulder."This is where I go."I nodded."I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course."She hesitated.Then she looked at me more seriously than she had all day."If you get another note..."

"I'll tell you."

"And if someone bothers you..."

"I'll tell you."

"And if—"I laughed softly."Marie."

"What?"

"I'll be okay."She didn't smile immediately."I know."

"But promise me anyway."I held out my little finger."A pinky promise?"She rolled her eyes dramatically."You're sixteen."

"So are you."After a second, she hooked her little finger around mine."Fine."

"Pinky promise."Only then did she smile."See you tomorrow, Kiara."

"See you."I watched her disappear down another street before continuing home alone.The sky had begun to darken earlier than it had the day before.Autumn was slowly stealing the daylight.The streets of Alderhaven felt quieter now.Most shops had switched on their lights.The warm glow spilling from the windows reflected across the rain-soaked pavement.The old church bell rang somewhere in the distance.Four slow chimes.The sound echoed between the narrow streets before fading into silence.I adjusted my backpack and kept walking.Without really thinking about it...I glanced behind me.Nobody.Just an elderly man locking his bicycle outside the bakery.A young mother pushing a stroller.A delivery van disappearing around the corner.I let out a quiet breath.*See?You're imagining things.*A few minutes later...I looked again.Still nobody.I almost laughed at myself.The note had made me paranoid.That was all.I turned into my street.The familiar row of brick houses stretched ahead of me, their windows glowing softly in the fading afternoon light.