

THREE

**CAUGHT
BY SURPRISE**



THURSDAY MORNING IN THE COSTAIN HOUSEHOLD

was the usual chaos. The task of getting Celia's five younger siblings fed and dressed was complicated by the fact that the dryer had broken two nights ago, which meant that all laundry had to be drip-dried in the basement overnight.

Celia set up the ironing board in the living room and plugged in the iron to heat up. She went downstairs to get her uniform blouse and skirt, pausing briefly to grab her youngest brother, John Mark, who was whirling around pretending to be a helicopter and veering towards the potted plant that he'd knocked over just last week.

"I think they need the rescue 'copter over there," she instructed, pointing to an imaginary group of people in peril.

"Whup-whup-whup!" said the five-year-old, making helicopter noises and spinning, arms outstretched, in the direction of the rec room.

Her brothers Daniel and Jeremy were charging up the basement stairs with their own clothes as Celia was descending, nearly causing a collision. Daniel yelled "Sorry!" as he and his brother disappeared at the top of the stairs.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, Celia pulled her clothes from the line that had been strung from the dryer to the utility closet. They were not exactly damp, but they still felt a little clammy. Hopefully the iron would fix that. Her blouse really did need ironing. Big wrinkles fanned out from the shoulders where the clothespins had gripped them.

But Miranda wouldn't stop. "Dad! Mom's being so unfair."

Mr. Costain was coming down the stairs, adjusting his tie, just in time to pick up the argument right where his wife left off. "It's not our job to be fair, Miranda. Our job is to prepare you for life."

"Gimme one good reason why I shouldn't go," said Miranda, ironing furiously.

"Boy-girl parties have ninjas. You will be killed if you go. Killed by the ninjas."

Miranda just stared at him, eyes smoldering angrily. Mr. Costain sighed. "Miranda, a wise man once said, 'Life isn't fair, princess. Anyone who tells you differently is selling something.' You better get out to the bus."

"Who's watching John Mark?" Celia's mother called from the kitchen. "Keep him away from my plant!"

"*Whup-whup-whup!*" John Mark could be heard from the rec room.

"It's going to be all eighth-graders from St. Bridget's Parish School. It's going to be all kids you trust. It's no big deal!" said Miranda, looking as though she were almost done with the iron.

"Boy-girl parties are a big deal to your father and me," said Mrs. Costain.

"Is it a big deal to you that I don't have any social life *whatsoever?*" Miranda was fuming and smoothing out a maroon tee, having finished with her blue uniform shirt.

"Miranda, you know that I need to use the ironing board at some point, right?" Celia said. "Do you really need that—?"

“It’s for gym class. Geez, has *everyone* in this house decided to bite my head off this morning!”

“We’re not biting your head off, Miranda,” interjected Mr. Costain. “We are being responsible parents.”

“Yeah, responsible for ruining my life.”

“Don’t get smart,” Mrs. Costain started, but then was distracted by a thumping sound from the hallway. “Boys! Stop tearing around the house and get your brother away from that plant! Celia, I started making breakfast; could you go check on it for me?” Celia took the spatula from her mom and directed her brothers into the kitchen.

She found a frying pan heaped with a mound of smoking scrambled eggs already on the stove. The top of the eggs was still translucent, but the bottom was dark brown, nearly scorched. She lumped her damp, rumpled clothes on one of the kitchen chairs and started stirring the eggs, unable to avoid hearing everything her parents and Miranda were saying in the next room.

Daniel watched Celia stir the eggs and listened with her as the argument raged in the living room. “I’m Mira-a-a-nda,” he said to Celia in a mocking falsetto voice. “And I never get to do *anything*. Everybody *hates* me ’cause I’m *Mira-a-a-nda*.”

Celia smiled. “Stop being silly and help me by setting the table.”

“I never get to do *anything*,” Miranda yelled from the next room. Celia and Daniel giggled. Daniel’s falsetto was remarkably accurate.

“No dating until you’re eighteen, period,” Mr. Costain said. “Those are the rules of the house.”

“Why?” Miranda whined.

“Miranda, you know this already, but since you obviously need a refresher: first, because dating is a time of courtship for marriage. Do you honestly think you’re ready to get married?”

“I’m not talking about getting married! I just want to go to a party, and yes, there will be boys there. Why is that the end of the world?”

“And you and I both know the kind of thing that goes on at those parties,” Mrs. Costain said. “Don’t pretend to me that you’re all going to be sitting around drinking milk and saying the rosary.”

“You guys are *suffocating* me! I’m the *only* kid at that school that can’t go to these parties! You make me look like a freak!”

“Celia lived under the exact same rules that we are imposing on you, and she never once complained,” said Mrs. Costain.

Oh, no, Mom, thought Celia. *Why, WHY did you have to say that?*

“Of course! Celia’s perfect! That’s why you guys are always on my case! ’Cause I’m not perfect like Celia!” sneered Miranda.

Perfect Celia stood in the kitchen, still wearing the perfect sweatpants and perfect t-shirt that she had slept in, stirring her perfectly burnt eggs. Her perfect hair was still wet from the shower, and hung, unbrushed, around her face as she sighed.

She just now noticed that John Mark had picked, out of all the chairs to sit on, the one that had her uniform

on it. He was using it as a seat cushion and giving it a few more perfect wrinkles.

“John Mark!” she lifted him off the seat and grabbed her clothes just as her younger sister Sophie came into the kitchen. “Everyone to the table. Time for breakfast.”

“I want French toast,” Jeremy announced.

“That’s too bad. You get scrambled eggs,” said Celia, scooping the eggs onto the plates that Daniel had set out.

“Can I have soy sauce?” asked Daniel.

“Nooooooo!!!” cried John Mark in horror. “I hate soy sauce for eggs!!!”

“Soy sauce is for Daniel. You can have ketchup.”

“Nooo soy sauce, pleeeeeease!!!”

“Who’s crying? What’s the matter?” Mrs. Costain returned to the kitchen. “Oh, Celia! You’re still not dressed! I’ll take over here.”

Celia grabbed her uniform and went upstairs, feeling a sense of temporary relief as she closed the bathroom door and locked it. She towed her hair again and ran a comb through it, pulling out the kinks, and then got dressed in her cold, soggy clothes.

She looked at her reflection. Wet, straggly hair and her wet, crumpled uniform. She would have looked better if she had skipped personal grooming altogether and slept in her clothes.

Perfect Celia.

She took one last look at her glum expression in the mirror. With a deep breath, she forced a smile and her countenance lit up with all the cheerfulness that she did not feel.

Celia parked the Costains' battered old Volvo in the JP2HS parking lot as her father shuffled his papers back into his briefcase. "I'm afraid I have some calls to make this morning. Would you and George clean up the classroom, take attendance, and start the rosary for me once the others get here?"

"Sure, Dad," Celia said automatically. This was a typical request. The administrative work of running John Paul 2 High was not something that came easily to her dad, she knew. The school day usually started a few minutes late, especially when he had to make phone calls.

After her dad went inside, though, Celia lingered in the parking lot, gazing at the snowy landscape. She knew George would be arriving in a few minutes and it would be so *good* to see him right now. Again, she felt a surge of familiar affection for him. George knew her better than anyone else. And he definitely understood how it felt for her to be Miranda's sister. He couldn't stand Miranda either.

Vividly she remembered standing next to him at her parents' New Year's party while Miranda chattered on and on to the guys there, tossing her hair and trying to make herself the center of attention. George had met her eyes over Miranda's shoulder and raised his eyebrows in exasperation . . . Celia giggled at the memory.

But her mood darkened again as another memory pushed its way, unbidden, into her mind: opening the gym closet door at Sparrow Hills and seeing George on the floor, tied hand and foot, his face taut and humiliated.

She and Allie had cut him free from the ropes, and she remembered wincing at how tightly they had been pulled into his skin.

And because of Tyler's revenge, George had missed the wrestling Sectionals and failed to qualify for States—and she knew he could have gone to States this year. It had been so unfair to him. Celia, who hadn't missed one of George's big meets her entire life, could only guess at how he felt.

Wrestling was so much a part of who he was, no wonder it was so hard for him to forgive Tyler. *I know how I would feel.*

She blinked back tears. George probably seemed so strong to most of the others, but she knew what it cost him to be that way.

I've got to be there for him, she resolved. I've got to support him, and remember how he's feeling and how he's struggling . . . and I've got to keep praying for him.

A car pulled into the lot: It was the Petersons.

Celia waved to Aunt Linda (even though they weren't really related, she'd always called George's mom that) and waited while George grabbed his backpack, kissed his mom goodbye and got out of the car. He was smiling broadly.

"Hey, Celia," said George.

Celia couldn't help noticing how handsome he was, and felt a faint flutter in her stomach.

God? she thought tentatively, *have You brought George some peace towards Tyler at last?* Maybe her prayers had been answered.

“So, Mr. Peterson,” she asked in her best British accent as they walked toward the main doors, “are you going to make me guess what you’re grinning about?”

George smiled and put on his best English-gentleman face. “It’s really nothing, Miss Costain,” he said with the same accent, “Nothing at all.”

Celia smiled too; the British aristocracy bit was an old standard of theirs, ever since they’d portrayed St. Thomas More and his wife in a grade school play.

“You remember yesterday, my dear?” British George said.

“Indeed, yesterday. That was really unkind of J.P. to mention Tyler, and I thought it was . . .” she broke off as the smile vanished from her friend’s face at the sound of Tyler’s name.

Celia, you idiot, she thought to herself. *George finally gets in a good mood and you can’t go one minute without wrecking it.*

“Yeah. Tyler,” said George. “Funny you should mention him.” He glanced over his shoulder at the woods.

“Did something happen?”

“I saw him sneaking up on me in the woods yesterday,” George said briefly.

Celia stopped walking. “That’s really strange.”

“Yeah,” George said, stopping next to her. “Allie and I were taking a walk, and he was waiting out there, by Chimney Rock.”

He hesitated. “I didn’t tell Allie. I’m wondering if he was on the lookout for her.”

“But Allie’s broken up with him. It’s over,” Celia said. “He’s got to know how she feels.”

“Oh yeah, he knows.” George said abruptly, “All I can say is, he’d better watch it.”

Celia felt apprehension wash over her as she watched George’s expression grow dark. “George, have you, you know, forgiven him?”

George snorted. “Celia, I think you’re the only person alive who could ask me something like that, and I’d take them seriously.”

Celia gave a half smile, but pressed on. “Thanks, I think. But . . . have you?”

George sighed. “Don’t you think I’ve tried?”

“Yeah, I’m sure you tried but—I’m sure it’s hard.” She didn’t know what she was trying to say; she just didn’t like the look on George’s face.

“You got that right.” George looked toward the woods, then back at her. “Well, what’s past is past.”

“Right,” Celia said with relief. “Sorry I brought it up.”

“No problem. Besides, I wanted to tell you something . . . I know this is going to sound silly . . .”

The front door of the school opened and Mr. Costain emerged partway through the door. “Are you coming in, Celia? Oh, good morning George!”

“Sure, Dad!” She turned to George. “It’s getting cold out here anyway. Let’s go inside.”

“I’ll come in a few minutes.”

“Didn’t you want to tell me something?”

“Later,” said George. “Like I said, it’s just this silly thing. It’s not urgent.”

Celia was sweeping the area around her dad’s desk when Brian arrived.

“Good morning, Celia. You’re looking very nice today,” he said with a slight, cordial bow of the head.

“Oh. Thanks,” said Celia, still feeling wrinkled and wet and anything but nice-looking.

J.P. and James were the next to come in. James sat down at his usual spot and opened one of his weird novels. Celia had read the back of one once when James had stepped out of the room; it had said something about the apocalypse and what would bring it about. She hadn’t figured out whether or not it was meant to be fiction.

When Liz opened the door, she eyed the sagging Christmas decorations, rolled her eyes, and shouted with exaggerated holiday cheer, “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” said James, not looking up from his book, sounding like a teacher approving an apt pupil.

Finally, George and Allie entered the room. As Celia checked off the last two names, she noticed that George was carrying Allie’s backpack for her. Actually, he was almost dragging it, as though he hoped no one would notice it.

“Carrying her backpack already, George?” said J.P. “Man! I’ve never seen a guy whipped so fast!”

Celia didn’t understand why Allie was giggling and beaming at J.P.’s remark, or why the class was riveted on George and Allie all of a sudden. Even James had a surprised look on his face. Then he gave a harsh, derisive snort and went back to his book.

“So,” Liz said, “the new couple has arrived.”

Couple?

George and Allie . . . dating . . . ?

