

THE SECRET CHEERLEADER

Transgender Transformation Romance

"This story is for you.

*May it transform you into
the person you are meant to be and
transport you into a world
where your fantasies come to life."*



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INTRODUCTION

“It’s called Spirit Swap! And you are about to become a cheerleader!”

I thought senior year would be something I survived quietly.

Then the whole school voted to turn me into a cheerleader.

At Cedar Forest High, I was Carl White: awkward, invisible, good at Chemistry, and terrible at being the kind of boy everyone expected me to be. I kept my head down, avoided attention, and counted the days until graduation.

Then Benny Hayes, the school’s golden-boy quarterback, became my lab partner.

Benny was everything I hated. Popular. Cocky. Worshiped by the football team. The kind of guy who could make a whole hallway laugh with one careless joke.

Especially when the joke was me.

But when a Homecoming fundraiser called Spirit Swap nominated me to cheer at the pep rally, everything changed. My best friend Hannah promised that if the whole school wanted to make me a punchline, we would make me so pretty the joke died in their mouths.

At first, the makeup was supposed to be damage control.

The gloss. The soft hair. The cheer uniform. The girl in the mirror.

But then she had a name.

Cleo White.

And the terrifying part was not that I looked different.

It was that different felt like relief.

As Hannah helped me uncover the girl I had been hiding from myself, Benny started looking at me like he saw her too. Not as a joke. Not as a dare. Not as a secret.

But Benny had spent years hiding behind football, popularity, and cruel little jokes. And when the boy who made me feel most exposed became the only one who made me feel protected, I had to decide if I could trust him with the truth I barely understood myself.

Clutch your Necklace Tight and Prepare for a **Transgender Romance Ride!**

*Note: **The Secret Cheerleader** is a sweet, emotional, first-time feminization romance about a bullied senior, a jock who learns how to be brave, a makeover that becomes a revelation, and the terrifying, beautiful moment when hiding stops feeling safer than being seen.*

I'm Lilly Lustwood and I'm a transgender woman. I'm a senior editor by day and I recall and write my romantic rendezvous by night.

Most of my titles deal with feminization. A fragment of what makes me find happiness in my gender identity, amidst the discrimination against women like me, is my transformation.

When I look in the mirror and I gaze at my authentic self, I know that no matter what happens, I'm living my life and not somebody else's idea of how I should.

The clothes I wear, my long black hair, the fruity bath products that I use, the hormone medications I take before I go to bed, the sillage of my floral perfume, the surgeries I've undergone, and every step that I take with my size 12 Jimmy Choos, are all proudly from me...
...from my authentic feminine self.

Picture this...

- ❖ I have long and straight black hair and stand 5ft 6in.
- ❖ My curvaceous physique enjoys silk dresses
- ❖ I'm blessed with huge cat eyes and heart-shaped lips
- ❖ I want to share the rest, but that's not very lady-like *wink*

Now that you know what your storyteller looks like, let's get to The Secret Cheerleader.

CHAPTER 1

BY THE TIME I stepped through the front doors of Cedar Forest High School, I was already tired of senior year. That felt unfair, considering senior year had only existed for about seven minutes, but the exhaustion was real. It sat on my shoulders like a backpack full of bricks, heavier than the actual backpack hanging from one strap over my right shoulder.

The lobby looked exactly the way it always did at the beginning of September: too bright, too loud, and too convinced that this year was going to be the best one yet.

Red and gold streamers had been taped across the trophy cases. Someone from student council had made a giant poster that said **WELCOME BACK, TIMBERWOLVES!** in bubble letters. Under it, a smaller poster announced the Homecoming theme like it was breaking national news.

Cedar Forest Homecoming: Under the Stadium Lights

There were paper footballs on the walls, glittery cutouts of megaphones, and a big countdown board that said there were only four weeks until the Homecoming game.

Only four weeks.

As if that was supposed to make me excited.

The hallway smelled like floor wax, cheap body spray, and cafeteria cinnamon rolls. Lockers slammed. Sneakers squeaked. People shouted names like they had been separated for years instead of three months.

I stood near the entrance for a second too long, watching everyone fall back into place.

The football players clustered near the main staircase, already wearing their Cedar Forest hoodies and varsity jackets even though it was too warm for jackets. The cheerleaders stood under the second-floor balcony in little groups, their ponytails swinging, their white sneakers impossibly clean. Student council kids carried clipboards around like they were coordinating an airport evacuation.

Everyone looked like they knew which group they belonged to.

I looked like someone had accidentally placed me in the wrong building.

“Move, man,” someone muttered behind me.

I stepped aside quickly, my shoulder bumping into the brick wall. A guy from my English class last year pushed past me without even glancing back.

Right. Great start.

I adjusted my backpack and walked down the main hallway, keeping my eyes forward. That was my strategy for high school in general: eyes forward, shoulders down, don't give anyone a

reason. The problem was that I had spent the last three years trying not to give anyone a reason, and somehow my existence still felt like one.

I was not the most bullied person at Cedar Forest. I was not shoved into lockers or drenched in chocolate milk in the cafeteria. My life was not some tragic after-school special.

It was quieter than that.

I was the guy people forgot until I did something slightly wrong. The guy who got called “Carl the Calculator” because I was good at math. The guy who got told to speak up and then got laughed at when my voice cracked from nerves. The guy who walked too stiffly, dressed too plainly, and somehow still got accused of trying too hard.

Most days, I could survive it.

But the first day of senior year had a way of making everything feel symbolic. One last year. One last chance. One last performance before college, where everyone promised you could become a new person.

I did not know how to become a new person.

I barely knew how to be the person everyone thought I already was.

I passed a group of freshman boys gathered around a map taped to the wall. One of them looked like he might cry. I almost felt sorry for him. Then I remembered he had four full years left here and decided my sympathy had limits.

My locker was on the second floor, down the junior-senior hallway near the windows overlooking the student parking lot. The good thing about having a locker in that hallway was that it was close to most of my classes. The bad thing was that every senior with a lifted truck, a football jersey, or a loud opinion passed through there at least six times a day.

I spun the combination twice before getting it right.

“Come on,” I whispered.

The lock finally clicked open. I shoved my summer reading book inside, arranged my notebooks by class, and tried not to notice the couple making out three lockers down.

They were not even subtle about it. The girl had one hand tucked into the front pocket of the guy’s hoodie. He was leaning down like kissing her was his assigned morning activity.

I looked away too fast.

That was another thing I had never figured out: where to put my eyes.

Girls could look at couples and sigh. Guys could look at girls and make jokes. I had somehow failed both options. I mostly looked at the floor.

A burst of laughter rose from the stairwell.

I knew that laugh before I saw him.

Benny Hayes did not just enter a hallway. He changed the weather in it.

He came up the stairs with three football players around him, wearing a red Cedar Forest Football hoodie with the sleeves pushed up his forearms. His hair was still damp, like he had showered after an early workout, and it fell in careless light-brown waves over his forehead. He had the kind of face people described as all-American when they were trying not to say unfair. Strong jaw. Straight nose. Smile that made teachers forgive late homework and girls forget their own names.

He was the starting quarterback, which meant Cedar Forest treated him like a community resource.

He was also, unfortunately, the person I most wanted to avoid.

“Hayes, you see the new hype video?” one of the guys asked.

“Yeah,” Benny said. “My left side looked better.”

“You mean your only good side?”

“Careful, Keller. I throw the ball. You just chase people for attention.”

The guys laughed. Benny grinned like he knew he could get away with anything.

I lowered my head and pretended to search for something in my locker. My chemistry notebook was already in my hand. I moved it around anyway, because apparently I believed camouflage worked if you looked nervous enough.

The laughter got closer.

Of course it did.

Of all the lockers in all the hallways in all of Ohio, Benny Hayes had to pass mine.

I kept my shoulders angled toward the locker, praying to every possible power in the universe that he would just keep walking.

He did not.

“White,” Benny said.

My stomach dropped.

I turned my head, not fully. “Hayes.”

He stopped beside me. So did the others, because popular guys traveled like weather systems. His friends fanned out near the lockers, grinning already, waiting for him to be funny.

Benny looked me over. Not in a cruel way exactly. That would have been easier to hate. His eyes just flicked down and up, taking in my too-big gray hoodie, my dark jeans, my old sneakers, my grip on my notebook.

“First day and you already look like you’re about to ask for a bathroom pass during the SAT,” he said.

The guys laughed.

Heat shot up my neck.

It was not even a devastating joke. That was the worst part. It was almost lazy. Mild. The kind of thing he would forget saying

five seconds later while I remembered it at two in the morning for the rest of the semester.

I forced my mouth into something that probably looked like a smile if you were generous. "Good to see your summer made you smarter."

"Ouch." Benny pressed one hand to his chest. "Carl White developed claws."

"Tiny ones," Trent Keller said. "Like a nervous hamster."

More laughter.

I stared at the inside of my locker and tried to decide whether closing the door on my own head would be too dramatic.

Benny's grin faltered for half a second. It was so quick I could have imagined it. Then he looked at Trent. "A hamster could outrun you at practice, Keller."

"Whatever, man."

"Seriously. We should put one at wide receiver. Might actually catch something."

The guys shifted their laughter toward Trent. It was seamless. Effortless. Benny had changed the target without making it obvious he was changing the target.

I noticed.

I hated that I noticed.

Benny looked back at me. His eyes were lighter than I remembered, hazel with a little green in them. That was an annoying detail for my brain to keep.

“Try not to sprain anything carrying those honors classes,” he said.

“Try not to sprain anything spelling honors,” I replied.

One of the football players made a low “damn” sound.

Benny’s smile widened, but it was different this time. Less for his friends. More private. “There he is.”

Then he walked away.

The hallway seemed to exhale after him. The football guys followed, shoving each other and laughing as they headed toward the senior lounge.

I stood there with my chemistry notebook in my hand, my face still hot.

There he is.

What did that even mean?

I closed my locker harder than necessary.

“Nice comeback.”

I turned.

Hannah Pitman stood a few feet away, holding an iced coffee in one hand and her phone in the other. She had on a cropped Cedar Forest sweatshirt, a pleated skirt, and white sneakers. Her

dark-blond hair was pulled into a high ponytail with a red ribbon tied around it, because apparently some people were born capable of making school spirit look casual.

Hannah was the only cheerleader I knew who could talk about lip gloss and AP Government with the same level of violence.

She had been my friend since eighth grade, when we got assigned to the same doomed group project about the War of 1812. She had done all the speaking. I had done all the research. We got an A and somehow stayed attached.

"It wasn't a comeback," I said. "It was a panic response."

"Still counted." She took a sip of coffee and looked down the hall where Benny had disappeared. "He is so annoying."

"Thank you."

"And so into getting your attention."

I almost dropped my notebook. "Please don't start."

"I'm just saying."

"You are always just saying things that make me want to walk into traffic."

"There's no traffic in the hallway."

"I'll find some."

She smiled and linked her arm through mine. "Come on. We have homeroom."

I let her pull me down the hallway because Hannah had that effect on people. She moved like she expected the world to make room, and somehow it usually did.

Homeroom was mostly paperwork and announcements. Mr. Benson, who taught U.S. History and wore the same brown belt every day of his life, passed out schedules like he was delivering bad news.

Mine looked normal enough.

English. Government. Chemistry. Lunch. Digital Design. Precalculus. Study Hall.

Chemistry sat there innocently in third period, unaware that it was about to ruin my life.

Or maybe I was being dramatic.

I tried to tell myself that.

By third period, I had already been told about college application deadlines, parking pass rules, the new phone policy, the senior sunrise event I had skipped, and the importance of making memories. Everyone was obsessed with memories senior year. Make memories. Take pictures. Go to games. Go to dances. Appreciate this time.

No one ever said what you were supposed to do if the memories mostly made you want to crawl out of your skin.

The chemistry lab was on the first floor in the science wing, past the biology room with the sad fish tank and the environmental science posters about recycling. The room smelled like disinfectant

and old gas burners. Black lab tables filled the center of the room, each with sinks, outlets, and metal stools that made everyone sit with terrible posture.

Ms. Powell stood at the front, writing her name on the board in neat block letters.

She was younger than most of the science teachers, maybe in her early thirties, with curly black hair pulled into a bun and safety goggles sitting on top of her head like a weird crown. I had heard good things about her. Strict, but fair. Did not tolerate stupidity around open flames. Made hard tests but gave study guides.

I chose a seat at the second lab table from the front. Close enough to pay attention. Not so close that I looked like I wanted extra homework.

The room filled fast. People claimed seats with friends. A couple of juniors looked terrified to be in a class with seniors. Someone behind me complained that chemistry was “basically math wearing a lab coat.”

I took out a pen and opened my notebook to the first page.

Then Benny Hayes walked in.

Because of course he did.

He ducked through the doorway with a blue Gatorade in one hand and his backpack hanging off one shoulder. Trent Keller was with him, along with another football player named Mason Reed. They looked too large for the science wing, like the school had accidentally released them from the gym.

Benny scanned the room.

For one horrible second, his eyes landed on the empty stool beside me.

I looked down immediately.

No. Absolutely not. There were at least six other seats. He could sit with Trent. He could sit in the hallway. He could sit inside the eyewash station.

The metal stool beside me scraped back.

“Miss me?” Benny asked.

I closed my eyes for one second.

When I opened them, he was sitting next to me, Gatorade on the table, elbows spread like he owned the oxygen around us.

“I saw you twenty minutes ago,” I said.

“Long twenty minutes.”

Trent dropped into the seat behind Benny. “Don’t worry, White. He’ll copy off you and still fail.”

“I don’t let people copy,” I said.

Benny leaned closer. “Good. I’m more of a hands-on learner.”

I turned my head slowly. “It’s chemistry. That sentence is concerning.”

His mouth twitched.

Ms. Powell clapped her hands twice at the front. "All right, everyone. Welcome to Chemistry. Find a seat, settle down, and no, Mr. Keller, you may not drink a protein shake during lab."

Trent froze with a bottle halfway out of his backpack. "How did you know?"

"I've taught football players before."

Benny laughed under his breath.

Ms. Powell went through the usual first-day speech. Safety contract. Goggles. Lab reports. Attendance. Phones. No horseplay unless anyone wanted to explain to their parents why they had burned off an eyebrow.

Then she passed around a stack of index cards and asked us to write our names, grade level, one thing we wanted her to know, and whether we had taken Algebra II.

On the line for "one thing," I wrote: **I prefer clear instructions.**

Then I stared at it and felt embarrassed by how accurate that was.

Beside me, Benny wrote something quickly and turned his card over.

"What did you put?" he asked.

"None of your business."

"I put that I'm a visual learner."

"You misspelled visual, didn't you?"

He placed a hand over his card. "That's between me and Ms. Powell."

I should not have smiled.

I caught myself too late and looked away.

Ms. Powell collected the cards, stacked them against her desk, and picked up a clipboard.

"Now," she said, "before anyone gets too comfortable, I'm assigning lab partners for the semester."

The room groaned.

I sat up straighter.

No. No, no, no.

Assigned lab partners were dangerous. Assigned lab partners meant the universe could get involved. The universe, in my experience, had a terrible sense of humor.

Ms. Powell lifted one eyebrow. "You can groan, but last year I let students choose their own partners, and I had three groups turn in lab reports where only one person understood the concept of density. So this year, I am choosing peace."

"Peace for who?" someone muttered.

"For me," Ms. Powell said.

She started reading names.

"Madison Lee and Avery Collins. Trent Keller and Priya Shah. Mason Reed and Olivia Brooks..."

I held my breath.

Please let it be someone quiet. Please let it be someone who liked bullet points. Please let it be someone who understood that group work did not require bonding.

“Carl White...”

My heart climbed into my throat.

Ms. Powell looked at her list.

“...and Benny Hayes.”

For a moment, the whole room seemed to pause just long enough to make the situation worse.

Then Trent laughed. “Oh, that’s perfect.”

Benny leaned back on his stool, looking far too pleased. “Looks like fate, White.”

“It looks like a clerical error,” I said.

Ms. Powell glanced up. “Problem?”

“Yes,” I said before I could stop myself.

The room got quiet.

Benny turned to me, eyebrows raised.

Ms. Powell folded her arms. “Would you like to explain?”

No. Obviously no. I did not want to explain. I wanted to evaporate.

But I had already opened my mouth, so my body chose violence and continued.

"I just mean Benny already has friends in this class. It might be easier if he worked with one of them."

Ms. Powell looked at Benny. "Mr. Hayes has friends in every class. That does not mean his friends are good for his grade."

A few people laughed.

Benny put a hand over his heart again. "That hurt."

"It was meant to be educational." Ms. Powell looked back at me. Her expression softened a little, but not enough to save me. "Carl, you had one of the strongest math scores on last year's placement assessment. Benny needs to pass Chemistry to maintain athletic eligibility. I think this pairing could be good for both of you."

For both of us.

That was what adults always said right before making something your problem.

I looked at Benny. He gave me a small salute with two fingers.

"I promise to be gentle with the beakers," he said.

"I am begging you to stop talking."

Ms. Powell smiled like she was satisfied with her own terrible decision. "Excellent. We're already communicating."

By the time class ended, I had learned three things.

One, Chemistry would require more written lab reports than I expected.

Two, Ms. Powell had a seating chart and the heart of a prison warden.

Three, Benny Hayes smelled like clean laundry and mint gum, which was information I had not requested and did not appreciate having.

When the bell rang, everyone stood at once. The room filled with scraping stools and backpack zippers.

Benny stretched beside me. "So, partner."

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Whatever it was, no."

He grinned. "I was going to say we should coordinate our schedules."

"Absolutely no."

"For studying."

I paused.

That was worse because it was practical.

"You actually care about passing?" I asked.

Something flickered across his face. Annoyance, maybe. Or embarrassment. It disappeared quickly.

"I care about playing," he said.

“Same difference?”

“Not really.”

For once, he did not sound like he was joking.

Before I could answer, Trent clapped Benny on the shoulder from behind. “Come on, Hayes. Coach wants us in the weight room after school.”

Benny’s expression shifted back into easy confidence like a mask clicking into place. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

Trent looked at me. “Have fun babysitting him, White.”

“Have fun discovering soap,” I said.

Mason laughed. Trent did not.

Benny did.

I grabbed my backpack and left before any of them could say anything else.

By lunch, I had developed a headache.

The cafeteria at Cedar Forest was less a room than a social experiment with pizza. It had long rectangular tables, vending machines that only worked when they felt emotionally supported, and giant windows facing the football field. On the first day of school, it was louder than usual because everyone was trying to prove they had a better summer than everyone else.

Hannah had claimed our usual table near the side wall. It was not a cool table, but it had advantages. You could see the

whole room, no one could sneak up behind you, and it was close enough to the trash cans that leaving quickly was always an option.

I slid onto the bench across from her and dropped my tray.

"You look dead," she said.

"Chemistry assigned me Benny Hayes as a lab partner."

Her eyes widened with immediate, offensive delight. "Oh my God."

"No."

"I didn't say anything."

"You said it with your face."

"My face is expressive. It's a gift."

"It's a curse to people around you."

She leaned forward. "That is literally a teen movie setup."

"It is literally a hostage situation."

"Quarterback needs nerdy boy to pass Chemistry?"

"Don't call me nerdy."

"Academically gifted boy."

"Worse."

"Quiet mysterious boy."

"I'm leaving."

She grabbed one of my fries. "Sit down. I'm processing."

“There’s nothing to process. Ms. Powell hates me, Benny is annoying, and I’m going to spend the semester explaining covalent bonds to someone whose main skill is throwing things.”

Hannah pointed the fry at me. “First of all, quarterbacks do more than throw things.”

“I’m sure they also dramatically remove their helmets.”

“Second, Benny is not dumb.”

“I know.”

She smiled.

I narrowed my eyes. “Do not make that face.”

“What face?”

“The face where you think I said something meaningful.”

“You noticed he isn’t dumb.”

“That isn’t meaningful. That is basic observation.”

“So you observe him.”

“I observe threats.”

Hannah laughed. “You are so weird.”

“I have been trying to tell everyone.”

She dipped the fry in ketchup. “Well, speaking of threats, have you seen the Spirit Swap board yet?”

“The what?”

Her face lit up in a way that made me immediately suspicious.

“You didn’t hear about it in homeroom?”

“I heard about parking permits and community service hours. After that, my soul left my body.”

Hannah sat up straighter, entering full cheerleader-information mode. “Okay. So every year during Homecoming, Cedar Forest does a fundraiser. Usually it’s boring. Like pie-a-teacher or dunk tank or whatever. But this year student council wanted something more viral.”

“That sentence already ruined my appetite.”

“It’s called Spirit Swap.”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what it is.”

“Anything called Spirit Swap is not my ministry.”

She ignored me. “Students nominate other students to swap into different school-spirit roles for the pep rally. Like a football player joining choir, a theater kid doing the halftime drumline, a cheerleader wearing the mascot suit, stuff like that. People vote with donations. The nominations that raise the most money have to perform during the Homecoming pep rally.”

I stared at her. “That sounds like institutionalized bullying.”

“It’s for charity.”

“That makes it tax-deductible bullying.”

"It can be fun."

"For people like you. You already enjoy being perceived."

Hannah's smile softened. "Carl."

"What?"

"You could enjoy being perceived."

I stabbed a sad piece of lettuce with my fork. "I would rather be hunted for sport."

She watched me for a second longer, like she wanted to say something else, but then the cafeteria erupted in cheers near the doors.

The football team had entered.

Of course they had.

It was amazing how thirty teenage boys could walk into a room and make it feel like a stadium. They were loud, broad-shouldered, and hungry in a way that seemed both physical and spiritual. People called out to them. Girls turned around. Someone started chanting Benny's name because apparently Cedar Forest had chosen embarrassment as a lifestyle.

Benny walked in near the middle of the group, laughing at something Mason said. He had changed into a fitted black T-shirt with Cedar Forest Football printed across the chest, and I hated that I noticed the way it stretched across his shoulders.

He passed our table.

His eyes flicked to mine.

Just for a second.

Then Trent said something, and Benny looked away.

I told myself that was good.

I told myself I did not want him looking.

My body, which had a long history of betraying me, did not agree.

Hannah followed my gaze and made a humming sound.

"Don't," I said.

"I did not speak."

"You hummed."

"It was a neutral hum."

"It was a criminal hum."

She laughed again, then nodded toward the cafeteria entrance. "Anyway, the Spirit Swap board is outside the gym. Nominations started this morning. Voting opens after school."

"I hope you get nominated to do mathletes."

"I would dominate mathletes."

"You would flirt with the calculator."

"If the calculator had good bone structure, yes."

For a little while, lunch was almost normal. Hannah told me about cheer camp, which sounded like a glittery military operation. I told her about my summer job at the local library, which she said

sounded like a Victorian illness. We shared fries. She complained about Madison Lee, the cheer captain, who had apparently discovered “clean girl aesthetic” and made it everyone else’s problem.

Then Benny’s table got loud enough to cut through our conversation.

“Hayes, you’re cooked if Powell gives homework,” Trent said.

“White’s got him,” Mason replied.

I stiffened.

Hannah noticed immediately.

Across the cafeteria, Trent turned in his seat and looked right at me. “Yo, Carl! You charging tutoring rates or doing charity work?”

A few people looked over.

My face heated again.

Benny said something I could not hear. Trent laughed and raised both hands like he was innocent.

I focused on my tray.

Hannah’s voice dropped. “Ignore him.”

“I am ignoring him.”

“You’re turning red.”

“I am ignoring him in color.”

She reached across the table and tapped my wrist. "Hey. Seriously. They're idiots."

I nodded, but my throat felt tight.

It was not that Trent Keller mattered. He did not. He was one of those guys who had turned being average at football into a full personality. But humiliation did not need to come from someone important to work. It only needed an audience.

After lunch, the day blurred into a series of syllabi and seating charts. Digital Design was fine. Precalculus was tolerable. Study Hall was a blessing because no one expected me to introduce myself using one fun fact.

By the final bell, all I wanted was to go home, lie face down on my bed, and reconsider the concept of public education.

Unfortunately, I had to return to Chemistry for the first mini-lab.

Ms. Powell had warned us earlier that she liked starting with something simple on the first day, "simple" being a word science teachers used right before handing you glassware.

When I arrived, Benny was already at our lab table, tossing a pencil in the air and catching it.

"Look at you being on time," I said.

"Look at you noticing."

"I notice hazards."

He caught the pencil and pointed it at me. "You wound me."

“Not yet.”

His smile flashed.

I hated how easily he smiled. I hated how the room seemed warmer when he aimed it at me. I hated that hating him required so much attention.

Ms. Powell passed out goggles and a worksheet titled **Observation and Reaction Lab**. It was basic: mix small amounts of safe solutions, record color changes, temperature shifts, and precipitate formation. No flames. No dangerous chemicals. Just enough science to make people feel productive.

“Read every instruction before touching anything,” Ms. Powell said. “If I see anyone treating lab equipment like toys, you will spend the next lab period writing an essay about safety.”

Benny leaned toward me. “Is this the part where you tell me not to touch anything?”

“Yes.”

“What can I touch?”

“Your pencil. Maybe.”

He put on his goggles. They should have made him look ridiculous. They did not. They made him look like a quarterback in goggles, which was still somehow better than what I looked like in goggles. I looked like a startled lab mouse.

I read the instructions twice. Benny read them once, or at least moved his eyes across the page in a way that suggested reading.

“We need ten milliliters of Solution A,” I said.

He picked up the graduated cylinder.

I grabbed his wrist before he could pour.

The contact shocked me. Not emotionally. Literally. Like static electricity jumped between us.

His hand stilled.

I let go too quickly. “Eye level. You have to measure at eye level.”

His gaze dropped to where my hand had been, then returned to my face. “Right.”

For a second, neither of us moved.

Then Trent’s voice came from the lab table behind us. “Damn, White. Buy him dinner first.”

Heat slammed into my face.

I turned back to the worksheet so fast my goggles slipped down my nose.

Benny looked over his shoulder. “You jealous, Keller?”

Trent snorted. “Of that?”

The word hung there.

Of that.

It should not have hurt. It was barely even specific. But my body understood it anyway.

That.

Not him. Not Carl. That.

Benny's expression changed.

It was not dramatic. His jaw just tightened, and the lazy amusement left his eyes.

"Watch it," he said.

Trent blinked, surprised. "What?"

"I said watch it."

The lab table went quiet. Mason looked between them. Priya, Trent's lab partner, suddenly became fascinated by her worksheet.

Trent scoffed. "Relax. I'm joking."

"Then be funny."

No one laughed.

Benny turned back to our table like nothing had happened. He picked up the graduated cylinder again, this time crouching slightly to check the measurement at eye level.

"Ten," he said.

I stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You're doing the thing."

"What thing?"

"The thing where you look like your brain opened seventeen tabs."

"It did not."

"Pretty sure one of them is about me."

"Unfortunately, yes. It's labeled 'Why?'"

He huffed a laugh.

We continued the lab. For exactly nine minutes, it went almost well. Benny followed instructions when I gave them. I recorded observations. We mixed Solution A and Solution B and watched the liquid turn cloudy. He leaned too close twice, and I pretended not to notice. I corrected his wording on the worksheet. He accused me of being allergic to fun. I accused him of being allergic to accuracy.

Then he knocked over the beaker.

It was not catastrophic. There was barely any liquid left in it. But the beaker tipped, rolled, and sent a cloudy puddle across the lab table toward my notebook.

"Oh, crap," Benny said.

I lunged for the notebook.

He lunged for the paper towels.

Our shoulders collided. The notebook survived. The worksheet did not. A corner of it soaked through, blurring part of our observations into blue-gray mush.

I stared at it.

Benny froze with paper towels in his hand. "Okay. Not ideal."

"Not ideal?" I repeated.

"It could be worse."

"How?"

"Fire?"

"There is no fire in this lab."

"Then see? We're ahead."

I pressed both hands to the edge of the table and inhaled slowly through my nose.

Benny's smile faded. "Carl."

"Don't."

"It was an accident."

"I know it was an accident. That's not the problem."

"What's the problem?"

"The problem is I care about my grade, and you care about staying eligible, and somehow I'm the one who has to make both happen while you treat everything like a joke."

He looked taken aback.

The room around us kept moving. Glass clinked. People talked. Ms. Powell helped another group near the front. But our little corner felt sealed off.

Benny put the wet paper towels down. "I don't treat everything like a joke."

I gave him a look.

His mouth tightened. "I don't."

"Fine."

"You don't know me."

That should have been easy to dismiss. I wanted to dismiss it. I wanted to tell him I knew enough. Popular quarterback. Hallway comedian. Guy who made people laugh and somehow never paid for it.

But his voice had gone flat in a way that made the words feel heavier.

So I just said, "Then act like someone worth knowing."

His eyes held mine.

For one second, I thought he might get angry.

Instead, he looked down at the ruined worksheet. "We can redo the last observation. There's still enough solution."

I blinked.

He reached for a clean copy from the stack on Ms. Powell's side table before I could answer.

When he came back, he pushed it toward me.

"I'll pour," he said. "At eye level."

It was not an apology.

But it was close enough to make me uncomfortable.

We finished the lab with three minutes to spare. Our observations were not perfect, but they were legible. Benny wrote the final answer in surprisingly neat handwriting while I cleaned the glassware.

At the end of class, Ms. Powell collected the worksheets and glanced at our damp original sitting off to the side.

"Rough start?" she asked.

"Minor spill," Benny said.

"No fire," I added.

Ms. Powell looked between us. "I'll take that as a victory."

Benny grinned. "That's what I said."

I refused to smile.

The bell rang.

I was packing up when Benny leaned one hip against the table. "So. Tutor me."

I looked up. "That sounded like a command."

"Please tutor me."

"That sounded painful for you."

"It was."

I zipped my backpack. "Why should I?"

"Because you're a good person."

"No."

"Because Ms. Powell basically assigned you as my academic guardian angel."

"No."

"Because if I fail Chemistry, Coach benches me, my dad loses his mind, and I spend senior year becoming a cautionary tale."

That stopped me.

Again, there it was. A crack in the performance. Quick, but real.

I studied his face, trying to figure out if he was manipulating me. He probably was. Handsome people did that without even knowing. They looked at you with earnest eyes and expected doors to open.

Still, his voice sounded different when he mentioned his dad.

"I'm not doing your work for you," I said.

"I'm not asking you to."

"You can't copy my labs."

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“You have to actually try.”

He held up three fingers like a scout. “I will try with medium enthusiasm.”

“Full enthusiasm.”

“Let’s not get unrealistic.”

I sighed. “Library. Tuesdays and Thursdays after school. One hour. If you’re late, I leave.”

His face brightened. “See? Partner.”

“I already regret this.”

“You say that a lot.”

“Because you create consistent opportunities.”

He laughed, and I hated that I liked the sound of it.

I left Chemistry before he could say anything else that made me question my own survival instincts.

The hallway outside the gym was packed when I passed it after class. At first, I thought there had been a fight, because people had gathered in a loose crowd around the bulletin board near the trophy case.

Then I saw the sign.

SPIRIT SWAP NOMINATIONS ARE OPEN!
Vote with donations starting today! Winners perform at the Homecoming pep rally!

Under the sign, several poster boards had been arranged by category.

Football Swap. Cheer Swap. Band Swap. Mascot Swap. Drama Swap. Teacher Swap.

People were writing names on sticky notes and slapping them onto the boards while student council members tried to maintain order and failed.

I should have kept walking.

I knew that.

A smarter version of me would have gone straight to the parking lot, gotten in my used Honda Civic, and driven home with my dignity mostly intact.

But curiosity was a design flaw in my personality.

I drifted closer.

Some of the nominations were harmless. Madison Lee for mascot. Principal Harris for drumline. Mason Reed for drama club monologue. A freshman named Tyler for football.

People laughed and pointed.

Then I saw the Cheer Swap board.

My name was in the center.

CARL WHITE – CHEER AT THE HOMECOMING PEP RALLY

The handwriting was big, black, and aggressive. Someone had drawn little pom-poms around it. Underneath, another person had added:

PLEASE. I WOULD PAY ACTUAL MONEY.

My body went cold first.

Then hot.

Then strange, like I had stepped slightly outside myself and was watching from a few feet away.

People were laughing.

Not everyone. Maybe not even most people. But enough.

A girl near the board covered her mouth and giggled. One of the sophomore boys said, "Oh my God, imagine." Someone else said, "Wait, I'd vote for that."

I stood there with my backpack strap cutting into my shoulder, staring at my name.

Carl White.

Cheer.

Homecoming pep rally.

In front of the whole school.

The words did not fit together. They looked like a sentence created by someone who hated me.

"Carl?"

Hannah appeared beside me, breathless, like she had come from practice or had run across the hall.

She followed my gaze to the board.

Her face changed.

"Oh," she said.

I swallowed. "Did you know?"

"No." Her voice sharpened. "No, I didn't."

"Is this a cheer thing?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

She looked offended. "I would not do that to you."

I knew that. Even with my brain melting, I knew that.

"Right," I said. "Sorry."

She stepped closer, blocking part of the board with her body like she could shield me from my own name. "Who wrote it?"

"I don't know."

But I did know.

Or I thought I did.

Because across the hall, leaning near the gym doors with Trent and Mason, stood Benny Hayes.

He was not laughing.

That should have mattered.

It did not.

He was there. His friends were there. My name was on the Cheer Swap board. The morning hallway joke, the chemistry pairing, Trent's comments — it all folded together too easily.

Benny's eyes found mine.

For a second, his expression looked almost alarmed.

Then Trent said something to him, and Benny looked away.

My stomach sank.

Of course.

Of course it had been him.

The quarterback needed entertainment. The quiet weird kid made a convenient joke. Put him in a cheer uniform. Make the whole school pay to watch him embarrass himself. Call it charity.

Classic.

Clean.

American.

I turned away from the board.

Hannah grabbed my sleeve. "Carl, wait."

"I'm fine."

"You're doing that thing where you say you're fine like a hostage."

"I said I'm fine."

“Okay, then I’m saying you’re not.”

A group of girls pushed closer to the board behind us.

“Wait, Carl White?” one of them said. “That quiet guy?”

“Honestly, I’d donate,” another said.

My throat tightened.

Hannah heard it too. Her eyes flashed.

“Keep walking,” she told me.

“I was planning to.”

“No. Walk with purpose. Like you have somewhere better to be.”

“I don’t.”

“Pretend.”

That, at least, I knew how to do.

We walked down the hall together. I kept my face blank until we reached the side exit near the student parking lot. The moment the door closed behind us, the noise of the school dulled, and I let out a breath I had been holding too long.

The afternoon sun hit the pavement in bright white sheets. Cars filled the senior lot. Someone’s truck had a Cedar Forest Football decal across the back window. A cheer bow hung from another rearview mirror.

Everything looked normal.

That felt rude.

Hannah stood in front of me, hands on her hips. "Okay. We have options."

I laughed once, without humor. "Do we?"

"Yes."

"Option one, I transfer schools."

"No."

"Option two, I fake my death."

"No."

"Option three, I actually die."

"Carl."

I rubbed both hands over my face. "Sorry."

Her expression softened. "Don't apologize."

"I can't do that, Hannah."

"You don't have to."

"If people vote —"

"Then you still don't have to."

"That's not how this school works."

She went quiet because we both knew I was right.

Technically, everything at Cedar Forest was voluntary. Spirit Week, pep rallies, themed dress-up days, student games, senior traditions. No one forced you. Not officially.

But refusing came with its own punishment.

If my nomination won and I backed out, people would not forget. They would make chicken noises in the hallway. They would say I ruined the fundraiser. They would talk about it in the cafeteria and online and at the football game. My refusal would become its own performance.

I could already hear Trent's voice.

Can't even take a joke, White?

Hannah looked past me toward the school, her jaw tight. "If Benny did this, I'll kill him."

"He did."

"You don't know that."

"He was standing right there."

"That's not proof."

"It's enough."

She studied me. "He didn't look happy."

I hated that she had noticed too.

"Maybe he's a better actor than I am," I said.

"Maybe."

The word hung between us.

Hannah shifted her iced coffee from one hand to the other. The ice had melted. Water ran down the cup and dripped onto the pavement.

Then her eyes narrowed, not at me, but at an idea.

"What?" I asked.

"If this wins..."

"Don't say if this wins like that's a real possibility."

"It is a real possibility."

"Comforting."

"If this wins," she continued, "and if you decide to do it—"

"I won't."

"If," she repeated, louder, "you decide to do it, then we do not let them control the joke."

I stared at her. "What does that mean?"

"It means we make it good."

"No."

"It means we make you good."

"No."

"It means if the whole school wants to see Carl White in a cheer uniform because they think it'll be humiliating, then we make sure you walk into that gym looking so good they choke on it."

My face went hot for an entirely different reason.

"Hannah."

"I'm serious."

"That's insane."

“So is letting them laugh at you for free.”

“I don’t want to be in a cheer uniform.”

She tilted her head. “Are you sure?”

The question landed wrong.

Not wrong like offensive.

Wrong like accurate in a place I had not given her permission to touch.

I opened my mouth.

Nothing came out.

Hannah’s expression changed immediately. She did not pounce. She did not smile like she had caught me. She just softened, careful and quiet.

“Carl,” she said, “I’m not making fun of you.”

“I know.”

“Okay.”

“I just...” I looked away, toward the football field beyond the parking lot. The goalposts stood bright against the trees. “I don’t want everyone laughing.”

“Then we make them stop laughing.”

“You say that like makeup is a weapon.”

“It is.”

Despite everything, I almost smiled.

Hannah stepped closer and lowered her voice. "Listen to me. If you don't want to do it, we fight it. I'll talk to Madison, student council, whoever. I will be deeply annoying. You know I can."

"You are gifted."

"But if part of you does want to do it, even a tiny part, then that doesn't belong to Benny or Trent or anyone else. That belongs to you."

My chest felt tight.

Behind us, the side door opened, and voices spilled out.

Benny came out first.

Of course he did. The universe had not finished stepping on my neck.

He stopped when he saw us.

Trent and Mason came out behind him, still laughing about something.

Hannah turned slowly.

If looks could injure, Benny would have left in an ambulance.

He seemed to register that immediately. "What?"

"What?" Hannah repeated. "That's what you're going with?"

Benny's gaze flicked to me. "What happened?"

I laughed, because anger was easier than whatever else I felt. "Don't."

His brows drew together. "Don't what?"

"Act confused."

"I am confused."

Trent looked between us, grinning. "Oh, is this about the Cheer Swap thing?"

Benny went still.

There.

There it was.

Something in his face changed before he covered it.

I saw it, and I still did not know what it meant.

Hannah stepped toward Trent. "Did you do it?"

Trent held up his hands. "Hey, nominations are anonymous."

"Not an answer."

"Relax, Pitman. It's for charity."

I felt sick.

Benny turned to Trent. "You nominated him?"

Trent shrugged. "I didn't say that."

"You nominated him?" Benny repeated, lower this time.

Mason shifted awkwardly.

Trent rolled his eyes. "Dude, who cares? It's funny."

Benny's jaw tightened.

Hope sparked in me, stupid and unwanted.

Then Benny glanced at me, and the hope made me angry.

Because even if he had not written my name, he had laughed enough times before. He had taught people which direction to aim. Maybe that was worse. Maybe the person who loaded the gun did not get to act shocked when someone else pulled the trigger.

I stepped back. "Forget it."

Benny looked at me. "Carl—"

"No." My voice came out sharper than I expected. "You don't get to say my name like that."

His expression flickered.

For once, he did not have a comeback.

Good.

I turned and walked toward my car.

Hannah followed after one final glare at the football players.

"Carl," she called.

"I'm okay."

"No, you're not."

"I'm going home."

"Text me."

"I will."

“Promise?”

I stopped beside my Civic and looked back at her. “Promise.”

She nodded, but her face still looked worried.

I got in the car, shut the door, and sat there without starting the engine.

Through the windshield, I saw Benny still standing near the side entrance. Trent was talking with his hands, probably defending himself, probably saying it was just a joke. Mason looked like he wanted to disappear. Benny was not looking at them.

He was looking at my car.

I turned the key.

The engine coughed, then started.

I drove home with the radio off.

My house was fifteen minutes from Cedar Forest, in a neighborhood full of split-level homes, basketball hoops, and lawns everyone pretended not to judge. My parents had bought our house when I was six. My dad liked to say it was a good school district. My mom liked to say the maple tree in the front yard was what sold her.

When I pulled into the driveway, the house looked exactly the same as it had that morning.

White siding. Blue shutters. Porch swing. Potted mums my mom had bought too early because she loved fall more than the weather allowed.

I sat in the car for another minute.

Inside that house, I was still just Carl. Their son. Their quiet, responsible, honor-roll son who forgot to take the trash out sometimes but never caused real trouble. The version of me they understood.

The problem was, I did not feel like I understood him either.

I went inside.

“Carl?” my mom called from the kitchen. “How was the first day?”

I froze in the entryway.

There were several possible answers.

Fine.

Good.

Benny Hayes ruined my life.

The entire school may pay money to watch me become a cheerleader.

A girl named Hannah asked if I was sure I didn’t want to wear the uniform, and I couldn’t answer.

“Fine,” I called back.

It was the oldest lie in the English language.

Mom appeared in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She had the same light hair as me, though hers was cut in a neat bob, and the same worried crease between her eyebrows that I had probably inherited against my will.

"Just fine?" she asked.

"First day stuff."

"Classes okay?"

"Yeah."

"Any friends in them?"

"Hannah's in Government."

"That's good." She smiled. "What about science? You have Chemistry this year, right?"

I gripped my backpack strap tighter. "Yeah."

"Do you like the teacher?"

"She seems fine."

"Good."

She waited, because mothers did that. They stood in doorways and offered you space to confess without technically interrogating you.

I did not confess.

"I have homework," I said.

"On the first day?"

“Senior year is very aggressive.”

She laughed softly. “Dinner at six.”

“Okay.”

I went upstairs to my room and shut the door.

My room was not interesting. Navy comforter. Desk by the window. Bookshelf full of old paperbacks and art supplies. A corkboard with college brochures pinned to it because my mom believed visual reminders helped. The walls were painted gray, which I had chosen in ninth grade because it seemed mature and then regretted almost immediately.

I dropped my backpack on the floor and sat on the edge of my bed.

For a while, I did nothing.

Then I pulled out my phone.

There were already posts about Spirit Swap.

Of course there were.

Student council had uploaded a photo of the nomination boards to the school account. The caption said:

SPIRIT SWAP NOMINATIONS ARE LIVE! Vote after school all week. Highest donations win. Let's make this the best Homecoming yet, Timberwolves!

I zoomed in before I could stop myself.

My name was visible.

Carl White – Cheer.

There were comments.

Most were about other nominations. Principal Harris for drumline. Madison Lee for mascot. Someone named Tyler for football. A few laughing emojis.

Then:

carl white cheer swap would be insane

i'm donating for carl lmao

need to see this

I turned my phone face down on the bed.

My hands were shaking.

That made me angry too.

I hated my body for reacting before I gave it permission. I hated the heat in my face, the tightness in my throat, the stupid twisting feeling in my stomach.

I hated that under all the humiliation, under the fear and anger and certainty that everyone would laugh, there had been one tiny impossible spark when Hannah said we could make it good.

A spark did not mean anything.

People had weird thoughts all the time. Intrusive thoughts. Random thoughts. Thoughts like, What if I drove into that ditch? or What if I screamed in the middle of class? or What if I said yes

and let Hannah put makeup on me and walked into the gym so pretty no one knew how to laugh?

I pressed my palms into my eyes.

No.

Absolutely not.

My phone buzzed.

I grabbed it, expecting Hannah.

It was an unknown number.

hey. it's benny. got your number from the chem group roster.

I stared.

Another message appeared.

i didn't nominate you.

Then:

trent's an idiot.

Then, after almost a full minute:

i'm sorry.

I read the messages three times.

My thumb hovered over the keyboard.

I wanted to write back something cutting. Something perfect. Something that would make him feel small for once.

Instead, I locked the phone and threw it onto my pillow.

A second later, it buzzed again.

This time it was Hannah.

You alive?

I typed back:

Unfortunately.

Her response came immediately.

Good. I'm still mad. Also I have thoughts.

I stared at the screen.

Terrifying.

If this wins, we make you iconic.

My heart did something strange.

I typed:

It won't win.

Three dots appeared.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

Bestie. It is absolutely going to win.

I groaned and fell backward onto my bed.

For a while, I stared at the ceiling.

Downstairs, my mom moved around the kitchen. A cabinet opened. Water ran. The normal sounds of home went on like my life had not tilted sideways.

My phone buzzed one more time.

Hannah again.

I mean it. If they want a joke, we kill the joke.

A second message followed.

We make you look so good the joke dies in their mouths.

I read the sentence until the words blurred.

I should have felt only dread.

Mostly, I did.

But not only.

And that was the part that scared me most.

CHAPTER 2

TUESDAY MORNING arrived and my name had more school spirit than I did. That was what it felt like, anyway. Every time I passed the Spirit Swap board outside the gym, there it was, written in thick black marker like a threat:

CARL WHITE – CHEER AT THE HOMECOMING PEP RALLY

Someone had added a second sticky note under it overnight.

PLEASE LET THIS HAPPEN.

Then a third.

I’LL DONATE \$10.

By lunch, there was a little paper cup taped under my name with cash in it.

Actual cash.

For charity, technically. For my humiliation, realistically.

I stood in front of the board between second and third period, staring at the folded bills and loose quarters like they had personally insulted me. Students flowed around me in both directions, carrying backpacks, iced coffees, gym bags, and the aggressive confidence of people who had never been nominated to cross-dress for public entertainment.

"Wow," Hannah said beside me. "You're already beating Principal Harris for drumline."

"That does not make me feel better."

"He's very popular with the band kids."

"I want to drop out."

"You're not dropping out."

"I could get a GED."

"You do not even like leaving class to go to the bathroom."

That was unfortunately true.

I looked at the cup again. There had to be at least forty dollars in there. Maybe more. It was only the second day of school. Voting had not even been open for a full twenty-four hours.

"This is going to win," I said.

Hannah did not answer quickly enough.

I turned to her. "Lie to me."

"It might not win."

"That was awful."

"I'm a cheerleader, not a criminal defense attorney."

A group of sophomores drifted past the board, whispering.

One of them pointed at my name. "That's the guy, right?"

I looked away immediately.

Hannah's face sharpened. "Keep walking," she said to them.

They did.

I wished I could borrow that from her. The ability to make people move. The ability to stand in a hallway and look like the world had been built with enough room for you.

I had spent most of my life trying to take up less space.

Now my name had a donation cup.

"I'm not doing it," I said.

"Okay."

"I mean it."

"I know."

"You said okay too fast."

"Because I'm not going to argue with you in front of a bulletin board."

"That has never stopped you before."

She shrugged. "I'm evolving."

The bell rang.

People surged toward class. Hannah and I stepped away from the board, but the sight of my name seemed to follow me like a shadow.

At my locker, I found a small folded piece of notebook paper shoved through the vent.

For one stupid second, my heart jumped because I thought it might be from Benny.

Then I hated myself for that.

I pulled it out carefully and unfolded it.

Inside, someone had written:

**GO TIMBERWOLVES! CAN'T WAIT TO SEE THOSE
LEGS, CARL.**

My stomach turned.

Hannah grabbed the note before I could crumple it.

Her face went flat.

"Who wrote this?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I'll find out."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does."

"It's just a stupid note."

"Carl."

"What?"

"You do not have to pretend everything is smaller than it is."

I looked down at my shoes.

The hallway buzzed around us, but for a second I could only hear the blood rushing in my ears.

Then, from farther down the hall, Benny Hayes appeared.

Because apparently the universe had started a loyalty program where after every traumatic moment, I earned one free Benny Hayes sighting.

He was walking with Mason Reed and Trent Keller, football bag over one shoulder, dark red hoodie hanging loose over jeans. His hair was still a little messy from morning practice. His face looked tired in a way I had not noticed before, or maybe I was getting worse at not noticing things about him.

His eyes landed on the note in Hannah's hand.

Then on my face.

"Everything good?" he asked.

The question sounded normal. Casual. But his voice had gone lower.

Trent looked over Hannah's shoulder. "What's that?"

Hannah folded the note before he could read it. "A reason for you to keep walking."

Trent grinned. "Damn, Pitman. First week and already bossy."

"I was bossy in preschool. Ask around."

Benny did not look at her. He looked at me.

I should have said something. Anything. A cutting remark. A polite dismissal. A sentence that proved I was not standing there feeling like my skin did not fit.

Instead, I closed my locker.

"We're late," I said to Hannah.

We were not late.

But she understood.

We walked away together.

I felt Benny watching me until we turned the corner.

By the time school ended, my nerves had been sanded raw.

I survived Chemistry by taking notes so aggressively my hand cramped. Benny arrived two minutes before the bell and slipped onto the stool beside me without making a joke. That was almost worse. I had prepared for the jokes. I did not know what to do with silence.

Ms. Powell reviewed lab safety symbols, then gave us a short worksheet on matter, mixtures, and pure substances. Benny actually worked on it. He got three answers wrong, erased them after I explained, and only made one comment about chemistry being "a bunch of tiny things having commitment issues."

I told him atoms had more emotional maturity than he did.

He laughed.

I hated that it made the room feel less awful.

After class, he tried to talk to me.

"Carl," he said as I packed my backpack.

I zipped it harder than necessary. "Library. Thursday. One hour."

“That’s not what I was going to ask.”

“It’s the answer anyway.”

His mouth pressed into a line. “Are you okay?”

I looked up.

The question should have been simple. It was not.

Benny Hayes was good at a lot of things, apparently. Throwing footballs. Making teachers sigh instead of yell. Looking effortless while leaning against lab tables. Ruining my ability to have a normal blood pressure.

But he was not supposed to be good at asking if I was okay.

I did not want him to be.

“I’m great,” I said.

His eyes flicked over my face like he did not believe me. “That’s your worst lie yet.”

“You haven’t heard all of them.”

“About the note —”

“What note?”

His jaw tightened. “Carl.”

I stood. “See you Thursday, Hayes.”

Then I left before his concern could become another thing I had to think about.

Hannah was waiting for me by the main entrance, one sneaker propped against the wall, phone in hand, red cheer bag at her feet. She looked up when I approached.

"We're going to my house," she said.

I stopped. "Are we?"

"Yes."

"I was going to go home and quietly dissolve."

"You can dissolve at my house."

"That's very generous."

"Also we need to practice."

The word landed like a brick. "No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Carl."

"No, Hannah."

She lowered her phone and gave me the look she usually reserved for people who said cheerleading was not a sport. "I am not saying you have to do Spirit Swap. I am not saying you have to perform. I am not saying you have to wear anything in front of anyone. I am saying that right now, everyone else has an image in their heads of what this is supposed to look like."

"Humiliating?"

"Exactly. So we need to create a different image."

“That sounds like something from one of your cheer leadership seminars.”

“It was from TikTok, actually.”

“Worse.”

She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “They’re picturing you as a joke. Messy wig. bad makeup. hairy legs. too-small uniform. Everyone laughing.”

My stomach twisted.

“Thank you for narrating my nightmare.”

“I’m not done.” Her eyes softened. “I’m saying we don’t let that be the version you imagine too.”

I looked through the glass doors toward the parking lot. Students were spilling outside, heading to buses, cars, practices, and clubs. Normal afternoon things. Normal people.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I said.

“That’s why you have me.”

“I don’t even know what this is.”

Hannah did not answer right away.

That was how I knew she understood me.

She could have made it a joke. She could have said, It’s just makeup, Carl. She could have grabbed my arm and dragged me along until my embarrassment turned into surrender.

Instead, she said, “Then we don’t name it yet.”

My throat felt tight.

“We practice,” she continued. “Just you and me. No photos. No posting. No pressure. If you hate it, you hate it. If you feel nothing, you feel nothing. If you want to wash it off five minutes later, I’ll hand you the cleanser myself.”

“And if I don’t hate it?”

Her expression gentled.

“Then we deal with that too.”

I hated how much I trusted her.

That was the problem with Hannah Pitman. She made terrifying things sound organized.

I exhaled. “Fine.”

Her face lit up.

“But,” I added quickly, “no glitter.”

She gasped. “You wound me.”

“I mean it.”

“Fine. No glitter today.”

“Today?”

She picked up her cheer bag and looped her arm through mine. “Baby steps.”

“Never call me that again.”

“No promises.”

Hannah lived ten minutes from school in one of those neighborhoods where every house had a basketball hoop in the driveway and a decorative wreath for every possible season. Her parents' house was pale yellow with white trim, a wide porch, and flower beds that looked like someone's mom had a Pinterest board and the discipline to follow through.

Her mom's SUV was gone when we pulled into the driveway. Her dad's truck was parked near the garage, but Hannah said he was probably in his home office on a conference call and would not bother us unless the house caught fire.

"Comforting," I said.

"My dad once ignored a smoke alarm because he thought it was someone's ringtone."

"Less comforting."

She led me through the front door. The house smelled like vanilla candles and laundry detergent. Family photos lined the hallway: Hannah in cheer uniforms from different years, Hannah's older brother Luke in football gear, Hannah's parents at the Grand Canyon, everyone at some beach vacation looking aggressively wholesome.

I paused at one photo of Hannah and Luke standing on the Cedar Forest football field. Luke wore a jersey with PITMAN across the back. He had the same confident smile as Hannah, but broader shoulders and a buzz cut.

"Is Luke home?" I asked.

"No. College. Thank God."

"I thought he graduated."

"Last year. He's at Ohio State now, where he can bother a whole new population."

"So why would Benny come here?"

I regretted the question the second it left my mouth.

Hannah turned slowly.

I looked at the wall. "I mean. Football people. They know your brother."

"They do." Her smile was dangerous. "Interesting that your brain went to Benny."

"My brain is under stress."

"Clearly."

"Hannah."

"Relax. Luke and Benny were close when they played together. Benny still drops stuff off sometimes if my dad has booster club papers or if Luke forgot something. But he usually texts first."

"Usually?"

She waved a hand. "It's fine. He's probably at practice."

Probably was not a word I enjoyed in that sentence.

Hannah's bedroom was at the end of the upstairs hall. I had been there before, plenty of times, but it felt different when I walked in knowing what we were about to do.

Her room was painfully Hannah. White comforter, red accent pillows, a vanity with a round mirror, shelves full of makeup organizers, cheer bows arranged by color, a bulletin board covered in photos, ribbons, ticket stubs, and handwritten quotes. A small clothing rack stood near the window, holding skirts, sweaters, dresses, and a few Cedar Forest cheer pieces sealed in garment bags.

It looked like a place where femininity had rules, storage solutions, and good lighting.

I stood near the door.

Hannah noticed immediately. "You can sit."

"Where?"

She pointed to the chair at her vanity. "There."

I stared at it.

It was a white chair with a fuzzy pink cushion.

Of course it was.

"I don't know why that chair feels like a legally binding contract," I said.

She laughed. "Sit down, Carl."

I sat.

The mirror in front of me was surrounded by little lights. They were not on yet, but even without them, my reflection looked too exposed. Pale skin. Light hair that never did what I wanted. Narrow face. Nervous mouth. Hoodie sleeves pulled over my wrists like I was trying to disappear hand-first.

Hannah dropped her cheer bag on the bed and started pulling products from her vanity drawers.

"First rule," she said. "This is practice."

"Right."

"Second rule. Nothing leaves this room."

"Good."

"Third rule. You tell me if you're uncomfortable."

"I'm already uncomfortable."

"More uncomfortable."

"That scale has levels?"

"Many."

She handed me a stretchy black headband. "Put this on to keep your hair back."

I held it like it might bite me. "Is this necessary?"

"Yes. Skincare first."

"I wash my face."

"With what?"

“Soap.”

Hannah turned around slowly, horror blooming across her face. “What kind of soap?”

“Normal soap.”

“Carl.”

“What?”

“Like hand soap?”

“It has a pump.”

She pressed her fingers to her temples. “I need a minute.”

“It says moisturizing.”

“I need several minutes.”

Despite myself, I laughed.

That helped.

A little.

I pushed my hair back with the headband and immediately regretted every decision that had led me there.

“I look like I’m about to do community theater,” I said.

“You look like you’re about to have clean pores.”

She clipped a towel around my shoulders like I was at a tiny spa or being prepared for surgery. Then she washed her hands, tied her ponytail tighter, and stood behind me with professional seriousness.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re starting simple. Cleanser, moisturizer, maybe a little primer. Then concealer where you need it, light brows, mascara, lip gloss. Nothing crazy.”

“You say ‘nothing crazy’ while listing witchcraft.”

“It’s not witchcraft. It’s chemistry for your face.”

“I’m in Chemistry. This is not on the syllabus.”

“It should be.”

She wet a cotton pad with micellar water and handed it to me. “Wipe your face.”

I did.

She watched like a coach. “Gentle. You are not sanding a deck.”

“Sorry.”

After cleanser, she gave me moisturizer that smelled faintly like cucumber. It felt cool and strange on my skin. I expected to hate the whole process immediately, but there was something oddly calming about it. Steps. Instructions. A beginning, middle, and end.

Hannah was good at instructions.

“Your skin is actually nice,” she said, leaning closer to inspect my face.

I flinched. “No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. You have some redness around your nose, but that’s normal. A little darkness under your eyes, probably because you sleep like a haunted Victorian child.”

“I do not.”

“You text me existential dread at one in the morning.”

“That’s different.”

She dabbed something under my eyes with a small sponge.

The touch was light, almost careful. I watched in the mirror as the shadows softened. Not disappeared. Just softened. Like my face had been tired and someone had turned down the volume.

Then she brushed concealer around my nose and chin, blending until I could not tell where the product ended and my skin began.

“This is weird,” I said.

“Bad weird?”

I thought about lying.

“No,” I said finally. “Just weird.”

“Okay.”

She did not smile too much. I appreciated that.

Next came brows. That was worse because eyebrows, apparently, had architecture. Hannah brushed them upward, trimmed one tiny hair that she called “rebellious,” and filled them

in with a pencil so lightly I barely saw what changed until I saw the whole effect.

My face looked cleaner.

Not made-up exactly.

Just more intentional.

"That's unfair," I said.

"What is?"

"That eyebrows can do that."

Hannah grinned. "Welcome to society."

Mascara was a battle.

"Don't blink," she said.

"You're approaching my eye with a tiny black wand."

"Look down."

"I thought you said don't blink."

"Look down without blinking."

"I'm not a doll."

"Clearly. A doll would be less dramatic."

The first try made me jerk back. The second made my eyes water. By the third, Hannah threatened to tape my forehead to the chair, and I managed to stay still long enough for her to coat my lashes.

When I looked in the mirror, my stomach dropped.

My eyes looked bigger.

Not a lot. Not impossibly. But enough.

The change was subtle and completely devastating.

I stared at myself.

Hannah pretended to organize lip products. She gave me a second without making it obvious that she was giving me a second.

“What?” she asked eventually.

“Nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

My voice sounded too thin.

She picked up a tube of gloss. “Last thing for this stage.”

“What color is that?”

“Soft pink.”

“No.”

“It’s barely pink.”

“It looks pink.”

“Because it is pink.”

“Hannah.”

“Carl.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

She smiled and handed it to me. "You do it."

That was somehow worse.

I unscrewed the cap. The gloss smelled like vanilla and strawberries. The applicator looked harmless, which I did not trust. I leaned toward the mirror and dragged it clumsily across my lower lip.

"Not like you're painting a fence," Hannah said.

I glared at her reflection.

She laughed. "Softer."

I tried again.

She fixed the edges with her pinky, then stepped back.

"There," she said.

I looked.

My lips had always been there, obviously. That was how faces worked. But I had never really looked at them as something that could be pretty. They were just part of the general problem of my head.

Now they looked softer. Slightly shiny. Noticeable.

My face was still my face.

But less harsh somehow.

Less like an accusation.

Hannah watched me in the mirror. "Okay?"

I nodded too quickly. "Yeah. It's not that different."

She did not call me a liar.

Instead, she walked to the clothing rack and pulled out a long, wavy, honey-blonde wig on a stand.

I physically leaned back. "Absolutely not."

"You said no glitter. You did not say no hair."

"That is a legal loophole."

"That is fashion."

"I thought we were doing simple."

"We are. This is just to see shape."

"I have hair."

"You have hair that looks like it apologizes before entering a room."

"My hair has done nothing to you."

"It has done nothing for you either."

She brought the wig over.

I stared at it like it was alive. "Where did that even come from?"

"Old Halloween costume, then I restyled it. Don't worry. I washed it."

"What costume?"

"Pop star. Long story. Sit still."

The wig cap was humiliating. There was no poetic way around that. Hannah helped me tuck my hair under it while I stared at the mirror and tried not to think about how vulnerable it felt to have someone's hands so close to my head.

Then she placed the wig on me.

The room changed.

No.

That sounded too dramatic.

The room did not change. The walls remained pale blue. The vanity lights stayed warm. Hannah's cheer bows still hung above the dresser.

But the person in the mirror changed so abruptly that my brain went quiet.

Long honey-blond waves fell around my face and brushed my shoulders. Hannah adjusted the part, tugged gently near the hairline, then used her fingers to loosen the curls. The color warmed my skin. The length softened my jaw. The hair framed my face in a way my own never had.

I stared.

My hoodie looked wrong under it. My posture looked wrong. Everything else about me looked unfinished.

But my face —

My face almost made sense.

Hannah's voice was careful. "I know it's not perfect. It's just for practice."

I swallowed.

The person in the mirror looked delicate.

Nervous.

Pretty, maybe.

Not magazine pretty. Not cheerleader pretty. Not Hannah pretty. But pretty in a quiet, startled way, like she had walked into a room she was not sure she was allowed to enter.

My chest ached.

I hated that.

I hated it because I did not understand it. Because looking wrong had always been painful, but looking almost right hurt too, in a sharper and more dangerous way.

Hannah knelt beside the chair so her face was level with mine in the mirror.

"Carl?" she asked softly.

I blinked.

The girl in the mirror blinked too.

My eyes burned.

"I look weird," I said.

It was the only sentence I could find.

Hannah nodded slowly. "Okay."

"I mean, it's obviously weird."

"Okay."

"I don't look like me."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "Maybe that's why you're staring."

I looked away from the mirror.

The room felt too warm.

"I shouldn't have done this," I said.

"Do you want me to take it off?"

Yes.

No.

Yes, because I could not breathe.

No, because the second she took it off, she would disappear.

I hated that I thought of the reflection as she.

"I don't know," I whispered.

Hannah's face softened so much it hurt to look at her.

"That's okay," she said. "Not knowing is allowed."

I laughed weakly. "Since when?"

"Since I decided."

"You're very powerful."

"I know."

I looked back at the mirror despite myself.

The girl looked back.

She did not save me. She did not explain me. She did not magically answer every question I had been avoiding since puberty turned my body into a series of unfortunate announcements.

But she was there.

And for one horrifying second, I did not want her to leave.

Then the doorbell rang.

I jumped so hard I almost knocked over three lip liners.

Hannah stood quickly. "It's probably a package."

The doorbell rang again.

Then a male voice called faintly from downstairs, "Hannah? It's Benny."

My blood turned into ice water.

"No," I said.

Hannah's eyes widened. "Oh my God."

"No. No, no, no."

"Okay. Don't panic."

"I am already panicking. I'm in the middle of panicking. The panic has begun."

She hurried to the bedroom door and shut it. "He's probably here for my dad."

"I don't care if he's here for the Constitution. He cannot see me."

"You're right."

The doorbell rang a third time.

"Hannah!" Benny called again. "Your dad said the folder's on the kitchen counter?"

Hannah mouthed a word I was not allowed to say at school.

"Why is he inside?" I hissed.

"My dad probably told him to come in!"

"Why does your house have no boundaries?"

"Because my dad thinks every football player is his bonus son!"

Footsteps sounded downstairs.

I stood, then sat, then stood again. The wig shifted.

"Hannah," I whispered, horrified.

"Bathroom," she said.

"What?"

She pointed to the door across the hall. "Go. Now."

I moved too fast and almost tripped over her rug. She grabbed my arm, steadied me, and shoved a makeup wipe into my hand like a weapon.

"Don't scrub," she whispered. "Blot."

"I'm going to die."

"Not in my hallway."

I opened the bedroom door and darted toward the bathroom.

At the exact same time, Benny reached the top of the stairs.

We both froze.

He stood there holding a manila folder, one hand still on the banister. His hoodie sleeves were pushed up. His hair was wind-tossed. He looked like every terrible American high school fantasy had been assembled in a laboratory and given a football scholarship.

I stood in Hannah's hallway wearing mascara, lip gloss, concealer, a headband under a long blonde wig, and the expression of someone witnessing his own murder.

For one second, no one spoke.

Benny stared at me.

Not like Trent would have stared.

That was the first thing I registered, even through the panic.

There was no immediate laugh. No cruel smile. No loud announcement. His face did not twist with disgust.

He just stared.

Too long.

His eyes moved over my hair, my face, my lips, then snapped back to my eyes.

Something changed in his expression.

Softened.

Opened.

Then Hannah stepped between us like a tiny blond Secret Service agent.

“Benny,” she said loudly. “Why are you upstairs?”

He blinked, as if remembering language. “Your dad said the folder was in Luke’s room.”

“It’s not.”

“Clearly.”

No one moved.

I wanted to rip the wig off. I wanted to hide. I wanted to shove Benny down the stairs. I wanted him to keep looking for one more second.

All of those wants arrived at once, which seemed medically concerning.

Benny’s gaze flicked to me again.

"You look..." he started.

My stomach clenched.

Different.

That was what he said.

Not bad. Not ridiculous. Not hilarious.

Different.

The word landed softly and somehow hurt worse.

Then, as if realizing he had sounded too sincere, Benny's mouth pulled into a crooked half smile.

"I mean, the school spirit thing is really getting serious, huh?"

There it was.

The joke.

Of course.

I stepped back as if he had shoved me.

Hannah's face went dangerous. "Benny."

His smile disappeared.

I turned and went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me with shaking hands.

For several seconds, I just stood there, breathing too fast.

The bathroom was small and aggressively clean. White towels. Blue soap. A framed sign over the toilet that said **Wash**

Your Hands And Say Your Prayers Because Jesus And Germs Are Everywhere.

I stared at it.

Then I laughed once, quietly and horribly.

My reflection in the bathroom mirror was harsher than the one in Hannah's vanity. The lighting was overhead and unforgiving, but she was still there. Less magical. More real.

My fingers gripped the edge of the sink.

Different.

He had said it like he could not decide whether the difference scared him or pulled him in.

Then he had made the joke.

Of course he had made the joke.

That was what Benny did. Any time something real got too close, he turned it into a football and threw it away from himself.

Voices murmured in the hall.

Hannah sounded angry. Benny sounded low and defensive. I could not make out the words.

I should have used the wipe. I should have taken off the lip gloss, the mascara, the hair. I should have turned back into a version of myself that could walk out of this bathroom with some dignity.

Instead, I touched one blonde curl near my cheek.

The bathroom door opened without warning.

I yelped.

Hannah slipped inside and shut it behind her. "Sorry."

"You can't just enter a crime scene."

"Benny left."

I exhaled so hard my knees felt weak.

"Did he..." I swallowed. "Did he say anything?"

Her expression went complicated.

"Hannah."

"He asked if you were okay."

I looked down. "That's it?"

"No. Then I told him if he said one word about this to anyone, I would ruin his life with the precision of a woman who knows his ex-girlfriend's group chat."

Despite everything, I smiled.

"Thank you."

"He also said he wasn't making fun of you."

I looked up.

She folded her arms. "For what it's worth, I believe him."

I did not want to care what it was worth.

Unfortunately, I cared deeply.

"He made a joke," I said.

"I know."

"He always makes a joke."

"I know."

"I hate him."

Hannah's mouth twitched.

"I do," I insisted.

"Okay."

"I hate his face."

"Sure."

"I hate his stupid quarterback voice."

"Completely."

"I hate that he saw me like this."

Her expression softened again. "Like what?"

I turned back to the mirror.

The girl looked shaken.

"Like this," I said.

Hannah came to stand beside me. We looked at our reflections together: her polished and confident, me trembling in borrowed hair and lip gloss.

"I don't think this is bad, Carl," she said.

I hated how close I was to crying again.

"I don't know what it is."

"We still don't have to name it."

"What if other people name it for me?"

Her face hardened. "Then they're wrong."

"How do you know?"

"Because they're not you."

I looked at her.

That sounded simple. Almost too simple. But I wanted to believe it so badly that I had to look away.

Hannah picked up a small brush from the counter. "Come back to my room. I want to fix the hairline. Benny ruined the reveal."

"There was supposed to be a reveal?"

"There is always a reveal."

"I'm afraid of you."

"Good. Fear keeps you still."

The second time I sat in front of Hannah's vanity, I did not feel less nervous.

But I felt less alone.

Hannah adjusted the wig, added a tiny bit more concealer near my jaw, and swapped the gloss for one that was softer, less

pink, more like my lips but better. She talked the whole time, partly to distract me and partly because Hannah not talking for more than three minutes would probably cause a weather event.

She explained cheer counts. Uniform fittings. Why red lipstick was a commitment. Why people who said makeup was shallow were usually people who had never had to control how the world looked at them.

That sentence stayed with me.

"How the world looks at you," I repeated.

She met my eyes in the mirror. "Yeah."

"Is that why you like it?"

"Partly." She brushed powder lightly across my face. "People think cheerleaders are naturally confident. Some are. A lot of us are just very good at construction."

"Construction?"

"Hair. face. smile. posture. You build the girl people expect to see."

I thought about that.

"What if you don't want to build her anymore?"

Hannah paused.

Her reflection looked sad for a moment. Not devastated. Just honest.

"Then senior year gets interesting," she said.

I wondered if everyone at Cedar Forest was pretending to be something.

Maybe Benny was pretending to be untouchable.

Maybe Hannah was pretending confidence was the same as certainty.

Maybe I was pretending to be a boy correctly and failing because some part of me had never wanted the role in the first place.

The thought scared me so badly I shoved it away.

“What now?” I asked.

Hannah smiled. “Now we take the wig off before your soul leaves your body.”

“Thank God.”

But when she removed it, when my own flattened hair appeared again under the wig cap, my chest sank.

It was small.

But Hannah noticed.

Of course she did.

She did not say anything.

She just placed the wig carefully back on its stand.

A few minutes later, I washed my face. The mascara took effort. The lip gloss came off easily. The concealer disappeared

under warm water and cleanser that smelled like flowers. My face returned piece by piece.

When I looked in the mirror afterward, I felt relieved.

Mostly.

The rest of me felt like I had lost something I had only borrowed.

Hannah drove me home before dinner. The car ride was quieter than usual. The sky had turned pale gold, and the school day felt like something that had happened to someone else.

As she pulled into my driveway, she turned down the radio.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked.

I looked at her, surprised. "No."

"Promise?"

"Yeah. Why would I be mad?"

"Because I pushed."

"You always push."

"I pushed different today."

I looked down at my hands.

She had. But maybe I had needed someone to.

"I'm not mad," I said. "I'm just confused."

"That's fair."

"And embarrassed."

“Also fair.”

“And I hate Benny.”

She gave me a look.

“I hate him adjacent,” I corrected.

“Closer.”

“I hate that he saw.”

“That I believe.”

I reached for the door handle, then stopped. “Did I look stupid?”

Hannah’s face shifted.

“No,” she said. “You looked pretty.”

The word hit me like a thrown stone wrapped in velvet.

Pretty.

No one had ever called me pretty before.

Cute as a baby, maybe. Nice-looking when my grandmother wanted me to tuck in my shirt. Handsome once, from an aunt at Easter, which had made me feel like my skin was full of bees.

Pretty was different.

Pretty did not bounce off me.

It sank in.

I opened the car door before she could see too much of my face.

"Thanks for the trauma," I said.

"Anytime."

I got out.

"Carl?"

I leaned down to look back inside.

Hannah smiled softly. "Thursday. Library with Benny."

I groaned. "Don't remind me."

"And maybe after, if you survive, we practice again."

I should have said no.

Instead, I said, "Maybe."

Her smile grew, but she did not push.

"Good enough."

I went inside.

Dinner was meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans. My dad talked about a problem at work involving a client who did not understand deadlines. My mom asked about college application essays. I answered like a normal person. I passed the salt. I drank water. I did not mention Spirit Swap, Benny Hayes, Hannah's vanity, the blonde wig, or the fact that the word pretty was still sitting inside my chest like a secret.

After dinner, I went upstairs and checked my phone.

There were two messages from Benny.

The first:

sorry about earlier. for real.

The second:

library thursday still?

I stared at them for a long time.

Then I typed:

Yes. One hour. Bring your Chemistry notes.

He answered almost instantly.

yes sir

I made a face.

Then another message appeared.

sorry. bad joke.

Then:

thanks, carl

I did not answer.

But I did not delete the messages either.

Thursday after school, I almost canceled.

I had a headache. A real one, not just the emotional kind. Spirit Swap donations had climbed again. Principal Harris for drumline was still doing well, but I had taken the lead in the Cheer Swap category. Someone had drawn a tiny cheer bow next to my name on the board.

I wanted to believe the whole thing would burn out.

It was not burning out.

It was becoming a thing.

By the time I reached the public library, my stomach felt like it had been tied into a sailor's knot.

The Cedar Forest Public Library sat on Main Street between a coffee shop and a dentist's office. It had brick columns, big front windows, and a children's section painted with cartoon trees. I liked it there because libraries had rules people actually followed. Mostly.

Benny was already sitting at a table near the back.

That surprised me.

He had his Chemistry binder open, a pencil behind one ear, and a large iced coffee sweating onto a napkin. He looked up when I approached and gave me a small smile that did not know what kind of smile it was allowed to be.

"You're early," I said.

"You said you'd leave if I was late."

"I did."

"I believed you."

"Good."

I sat across from him and pulled out my notes. "We're reviewing classification of matter, physical and chemical changes, and balancing simple equations."

He stared at me.

"What?" I asked.

"You sound like a teacher."

"You need one."

"That's fair."

For the first twenty minutes, Benny was awful.

Not because he was stupid. He was not. That became obvious quickly. He understood things when they were explained clearly, especially if I used examples. But his notes were a disaster. Half his definitions were missing. One page had a football play drawn in the margin. Another had the word **molecule** spelled three different ways.

"This binder is a cry for help," I said.

He leaned over to look. "It has character."

"It has symptoms."

He laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. Okay. I'm not great at this stuff."

"Science?"

"School."

"You're passing other classes."

"Barely."

That made me look up.

He tapped his pencil against the table. "Teachers give athletes chances."

The way he said it was strange. Not bragging. Almost ashamed.

I studied him. "That bothers you?"

His shoulders moved. "It should help, right?"

"I guess."

"It does. But then you start wondering if anyone thinks you can actually do anything."

I did not know what to say to that.

Benny looked down at his binder. "Forget it."

"No," I said, surprising both of us. "I get that."

His eyes lifted.

I regretted speaking but continued anyway.

"People think because I get good grades, school is easy. So if I'm stressed, I'm dramatic. If I mess up, I'm wasting potential. If I need help, I'm not trying hard enough."

Benny watched me closely.

Too closely.

"Exactly," he said.

Something quiet settled between us.

Then his phone buzzed on the table. The screen lit up with a text from someone named **Dad**.

Benny glanced at it and immediately flipped the phone over.

His face changed.

Not much. Just enough.

"You need to get that?" I asked.

"No."

"You sure?"

"Very."

I looked back at the worksheet. "Okay. Balancing equations."

He exhaled like he was grateful for the subject change.

I wrote an example on a blank sheet of paper.

"Think of it like football," I said.

His eyebrows rose. "Dangerous approach."

"Atoms are players."

"Okay."

"You can move them into different formations, but you can't just create new players or delete them. Same number on both sides."

Benny leaned forward. "So the coefficients are like adjusting the lineup?"

"Kind of."

"That actually makes sense."

"Don't sound so surprised. I'm gifted."

He smiled. "Quiet mysterious boy with teaching skills."

I froze.

He seemed to realize what he had said a second too late.

"Hannah," I said.

"What?"

"That sounds like Hannah."

His smile turned guilty. "Maybe."

"You talked about me with Hannah?"

"Briefly."

I did not like how warm my face felt. "Why?"

He tapped the pencil again. "Because I asked if you were okay after Tuesday."

"You didn't have to."

"I wanted to."

The words landed too gently.

I looked down at the page.

Benny cleared his throat. "Also she threatened me."

"That sounds more like her."

"She said she'd ruin my life with group chats."

"She would."

"I believed her too."

Despite myself, I smiled.

The tutoring got easier after that. Benny listened. He made jokes, but fewer of them were defensive. When he did not understand something, he actually asked. I explained physical versus chemical changes using examples from the cafeteria, football practice, and his coffee melting the ice.

"So if my coffee gets watered down, physical change," he said.

"Right."

"If Coach yells until my soul leaves my body, chemical change?"

"Psychological damage."

"Different unit?"

"Advanced Placement trauma."

He laughed too loud, then glanced around the library. An older woman at the next table gave him a dirty look. He lowered his voice immediately.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"You're bad at libraries."

"I'm learning."

Near the end of the hour, I gave him a short practice quiz. He complained for thirty seconds, then took it seriously.

He got seven out of ten right.

I marked the wrong answers with my red pen.

Benny leaned across the table. "That looks violent."

"It's educational."

"You and Powell would get along."

"I take that as a compliment."

He looked at the quiz, then at me. "Seven out of ten is not failing."

"No."

"So I can learn this."

"Yes."

He sat back slowly, like that answer meant more than it should have.

For the first time, I saw the pressure around him clearly.

Benny Hayes was the kind of guy people expected to win. Games, attention, forgiveness, life. But expectation was not the same as confidence. Maybe it was the opposite. Maybe when everyone looked at you like winning was your natural state, failure became the one thing you were never allowed to do.

His phone buzzed again.

This time, he did not look at it.

"Dad?" I asked before I could stop myself.

His jaw tightened. "Yeah."

"You don't have to answer."

"I know."

A pause.

Then he said, "He thinks if I don't get a scholarship, I'm wasting everything."

"That's a lot."

"He says it's reality."

"Adults love calling their fears reality."

Benny looked at me.

I looked back, startled by my own sentence.

Then his mouth curved slightly. "You're kind of mean."

"I'm extremely mean. People don't notice because I'm quiet."

"I notice."

My chest tightened.

He seemed to catch the weight of the words at the same time I did.

He looked down first.

Good.

No, not good.

I did not know.

I started packing my notes because the hour was almost over and I needed something to do with my hands.

Benny watched me. "Thursday again next week?"

"Tuesdays and Thursdays, remember?"

"Right."

"If you keep improving, you might pass."

"Medium enthusiasm paying off."

"Full enthusiasm."

He smiled. "I'll work up to it."

I stood.

He stood too, too quickly, like he had been waiting for me.

"Carl," he said.

I paused.

He shoved his hands into his hoodie pocket. "About Spirit Swap."

My body tensed.

"I didn't nominate you," he said. "I know I already texted that, but I wanted to say it where you could see my face."

I looked at his face.

That was the problem.

He looked sincere.

"I didn't," he repeated. "And I'm sorry people are being idiots."

"You say that like you're not people."

His mouth tightened. "Fair."

"And like you haven't made jokes too."

"Also fair."

The apology sat there, unfinished.

He looked toward the library windows, where the late-afternoon light had turned the sidewalk outside gold. "I'm not great at... public stuff."

"You're the quarterback."

"I'm great at football public stuff."

"That's different?"

"Yeah." He looked back at me. "Very."

I wanted to understand him.

That annoyed me more than not understanding him.

"I don't trust you," I said.

"I know."

"You humiliated me on Monday."

His face went still.

"You made everyone laugh," I continued. "Maybe it wasn't huge to you, but it was to me."

"I know," he said quietly.

"No, you don't."

He swallowed. "I'm trying to."

That was not enough.

But it was not nothing.

Benny took a breath. "Let me make a deal with you."

"I hate deals."

"You haven't heard it."

"I hate most things in advance."

His mouth almost smiled, but he controlled it.

"You keep helping me with Chemistry," he said. "I actually try. No copying, no wasting your time. In return, I make sure the team backs off about Spirit Swap."

"You can do that?"

"With most of them."

"Trent?"

His expression darkened. "I'll handle Trent."

That should have comforted me.

It did, a little.

Which made me suspicious.

"And why would you do that?" I asked.

“Because I need Chemistry.”

“That’s the only reason?”

He looked at me for a long moment.

The library hummed quietly around us. Pages turning. Keyboards clicking. The distant beep of someone checking out books. Outside, a car passed slowly down Main Street.

“No,” Benny said.

My heart kicked once.

Then he looked away. “But it’s the reason you’ll believe.”

I hated that answer.

I liked it too much.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I said.

He nodded. “Okay.”

“I don’t.”

“Okay.”

“But if you’re going to tell Trent to shut up, I’m not stopping you.”

This time, he smiled.

Not big. Not cocky.

Just relieved.

“Deal?” he asked.

I looked at his offered hand.

It was ridiculous. Too formal. Like we were business partners or old men buying land.

Still, I shook it.

His hand was warm.

Mine was probably freezing.

“Deal,” I said.

His grip lasted half a second longer than it needed to.

Or maybe I imagined that.

I pulled away first.

That night, I did my homework at my desk while my phone sat beside my notebook like a tiny loaded weapon.

Benny did not text again.

I told myself that was good. I needed fewer Benny Hayes thoughts, not more. My brain was already crowded enough with Chemistry notes, Spirit Swap dread, Hannah’s vanity lights, and the memory of myself with blonde hair.

Not myself.

The girl.

No.

I crossed out a wrong answer on my Precalculus worksheet so hard the paper nearly tore.

Around nine, my mom knocked lightly on my bedroom door.

“Carl?”

“Yeah?”

“You okay in there?”

I looked around like the room might betray me. Nothing was out. My backpack was by the bed. My homework was on the desk. My phone was face down.

Everything was normal.

“Yeah,” I called.

“Can I come in?”

“Hold on.”

I did not know why I said that.

There was nothing to hide.

Then my eyes landed on my hoodie pocket.

My heart stopped.

The lip gloss.

I had forgotten.

At Hannah’s house, after I washed my face, I must have slipped the tube into my pocket without thinking. Or maybe I had thought about it and then buried the thought so fast it felt like an accident.

The soft pink gloss was sitting half-visible inside the pocket of my hoodie draped over the chair.

My mom knocked again. "Carl?"

"One second."

I lunged for the hoodie, grabbed the gloss, and shoved it into the top drawer of my desk under a stack of old sketchpads.

Then I sat down so fast my chair squeaked.

"Okay," I said, too loudly.

Mom opened the door.

She looked in with a small frown. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah."

"You sounded like you were moving furniture."

"Dropped a textbook."

Her eyes moved to the desk. To my face. To the drawer.

For one terrifying second, I thought mothers might have X-ray vision.

Then she smiled faintly. "First week stress?"

"Something like that."

She came in and set a folded towel on my bed. "You've been quiet."

"I'm always quiet."

"Quieter, then."

I picked up my pencil and pretended to check my worksheet.
"Just tired."

She sat on the edge of my bed.

That was dangerous. Parents sitting meant the conversation had decided to grow roots.

“Senior year can feel like a lot,” she said.

“Everyone keeps saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

“I thought it was supposed to be fun.”

“It can be. But big transitions are rarely just one thing.”

I looked at her despite myself.

She was wearing her reading glasses on top of her head and one of my dad’s old sweatshirts. She looked soft and normal and kind in a way that made guilt twist through me.

She did not know about the board.

She did not know about the note.

She did not know about Hannah’s room, the wig, the gloss hidden three feet from her hand.

I wanted to tell her.

The wanting was sudden and painful.

I imagined saying, Mom, something weird happened.

No. Too vague.

Mom, Hannah put makeup on me.

No. Too small.

Mom, I saw a girl in the mirror and I miss her.

Absolutely not.

My throat closed.

Mom reached over and touched my shoulder. "You know you can talk to me, right?"

I nodded.

She waited.

I said nothing.

After a moment, she squeezed my shoulder and stood. "Don't stay up too late."

"I won't."

"Goodnight, honey."

"Night."

She left the room, closing the door halfway behind her.

I sat very still until her footsteps faded down the hall.

Then I opened the drawer.

The lip gloss lay under my sketchpads, small and stupid and powerful.

I picked it up.

The room was quiet except for the hum of my laptop and the muffled sound of the television downstairs. My door was half closed. The hallway light made a thin line across the carpet.

I should have put the gloss back.

Instead, I unscrewed the cap.

The vanilla-strawberry smell rose immediately.

My hand shook as I leaned toward the dark reflection in my laptop screen. It was not a mirror, not really. Just enough of one to see the shape of my mouth.

I touched the applicator to my lower lip.

Softer this time.

Not like painting a fence.

The gloss slid on cool and smooth.

I pressed my lips together the way Hannah had shown me.

In the black laptop reflection, I could barely see the shine.

But I could feel it.

That was worse.

Or better.

I sat back in my chair, heart pounding, wearing lip gloss in my bedroom like it was some kind of secret identity.

Nothing happened.

No alarm went off. No one burst through the door. The house did not collapse under the weight of what I had done.

I was still Carl.

But not only.

My phone buzzed.

I almost screamed.

The gloss slipped from my hand and landed in my lap.

I grabbed the phone.

A text from Hannah:

Did you survive library tutoring?

I stared at the screen, breathing too fast.

Then I typed:

Unfortunately.

A second later:

Was he annoying?

I looked at my laptop reflection, at the faint shine on my lips.

Yes.

Three dots appeared.

Was he cute?

I made a strangled sound and typed:

Blocked.

She sent back five laughing emojis.

Then another message came through.

From Benny.

i did the practice problems. got 8/10 this time.

A photo followed. His worksheet, messy but completed.

Then:

full enthusiasm or whatever

I should not have smiled.

I did anyway.

Before I could answer, there was another knock on my door.

This time, my dad's voice.

"Carl? You still awake?"

Panic detonated.

I grabbed the lip gloss, shoved it into the drawer, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, then realized that would probably smear it. I snatched a tissue from the box on my desk and scrubbed once, too hard.

"Yeah," I called, my voice cracking.

The door opened.

Dad leaned in, holding a laundry basket against his hip. He was still in his work shirt, tie loosened, hair damp from a shower. "Your mom said you had towels."

"On the bed."

He glanced at me. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

He squinted slightly.

I stopped breathing.

"Your face is red," he said.

"Homework."

He looked at the Precalculus sheet on my desk. "That'll do it."

I laughed too loudly.

He took the towels from my bed and paused by the door. "First home game's next Friday. You going?"

"I don't know."

"You should. Senior year. Make some memories."

There it was again.

Make memories.

I swallowed. "Maybe."

He nodded. "Night, bud."

"Night."

The door closed.

I sat frozen for another ten seconds.

Then I turned slowly toward the mirror over my dresser.

The gloss was mostly gone, but not completely. A faint shine remained at the center of my lower lip.

I touched it with one finger.

My reflection looked like Carl White.

Pale. Nervous. Hiding in a gray T-shirt. Pretending he was fine.

But now I knew something else could happen to that face.

Now I knew there was another version waiting under the right light, with the right touch, with soft hair around her cheeks and pink gloss on her mouth.

I did not have a name for what that meant.

Not yet.

But as I sat there in my quiet bedroom, listening to my parents move around downstairs, I realized the scariest part of Hannah's makeover had not been that I looked different.

It was that, for a few minutes, different had felt like relief.

CHAPTER 3

IT WAS A MONDAY afternoon when the Spirit Swap board had become a crime scene with glitter. That was the only way I could describe it. Someone from student council had decorated the hallway outside the gym with red and gold streamers, battery-powered string lights, and a giant poster that said:

SPIRIT SWAP VOTING CLOSSES FRIDAY! MAKE IT COUNT, TIMBERWOLVES!

Under it, the nomination boards had multiplied like mold. There were little donation envelopes taped under each category now, and every afternoon, student council updated the totals in dry-erase marker.

Football Swap was competitive.

Mascot Swap was ridiculous.

Teacher Swap had somehow become an ugly war between Principal Harris doing drumline and Mr. Benson reading dramatic cafeteria announcements over the PA system.

But Cheer Swap was not competitive at all.

Cheer Swap was me.

CARL WHITE – \$214.75

Two hundred fourteen dollars and seventy-five cents.

I stared at the number, trying to understand what kind of school donated that much money to see one person suffer.

Behind me, someone laughed.

I did not turn around.

Turning around made things worse. Turning around told people they had hit something.

My strategy was the same as always: eyes forward, shoulders down, pretend I did not hear.

Except pretending had started to feel different lately.

Heavier.

Maybe because there were actual dollar amounts attached to my humiliation now.

"Do not stand here alone and stare at it like it's your obituary," Hannah said, appearing beside me with her cheer bag over one shoulder.

"I'm trying to calculate how many people hate me."

"It's for charity."

"So people hate me generously."

She looked at the board and winced. "Okay, yeah. That is a lot."

"Thank you."

"Not emotionally helpful, but mathematically true."

I adjusted my backpack. "Can I still fake mono?"

"No."

"Food poisoning?"

"No."

"Temporary amnesia?"

"Carl."

"I could forget what cheerleading is."

She turned to face me fully. Hannah was still in her school clothes, but her hair was already up in a tight ponytail with a red ribbon, which meant cheer Hannah had begun replacing regular Hannah. Cheer Hannah stood straighter. Cheer Hannah gave commands with her eyebrows.

"You said maybe," she reminded me.

I immediately regretted every conversation I had ever had.
"Maybe is not a legal contract."

"No, but it is a moral opening."

"That means nothing."

"It means you're coming to practice today."

My stomach dropped.

I looked toward the closed gym doors. The muffled echo of music thumped from inside, bass vibrating faintly through the walls.

"No," I said.

"Yes."

“No.”

“You don’t have to perform. You don’t have to commit. You don’t have to wear a uniform today. You just have to learn enough not to break your ankle if the donations keep going up.”

“They are already up.”

“Exactly.”

“I hate that logic.”

“It’s not my fault the school has chosen you as its weird little Homecoming project.”

“Hannah.”

Her face softened. “Sorry.”

I looked back at my name.

Carl White.

Cheer Swap.

\$214.75.

It had started to feel less like my name and more like a dare someone had written about me. Like the school had created a version of Carl White that existed only for people to point at.

A joke boy.

A boy in a cheer uniform.

A boy who would stumble around under gym lights while everyone recorded it on their phones.

I could already hear the laughter. I could already see Trent Keller's face.

But under that dread, buried deep enough that I wished it did not exist, was the memory of Hannah's vanity lights. The soft pink gloss. The blonde hair around my face. The word pretty sinking into my chest like it belonged there.

I hated that part most.

The part of me that was not only afraid.

Hannah shifted beside me. "Carl, if you don't go in, Madison's going to assume she can make this as stupid as she wants."

"Madison?"

"Madison Lee. Cheer captain. Human hair flip. Very organized. Very scary. Sometimes useful."

"I know who Madison is."

"Then you know she'll choreograph you like a joke if we don't get ahead of this."

I turned to her slowly. "That was supposed to make me feel better?"

"No. It was supposed to make you move."

The gym doors swung open, and a burst of music spilled into the hallway.

A couple of cheerleaders came out laughing, carrying water bottles and warm-up jackets. One of them saw me and did a quick double take.

“Oh,” she said. “Is he actually coming?”

He.

The word should not have bothered me.

It was the correct word.

It had been correct my entire life.

Still, after Hannah’s room, after the mirror, after the gloss hidden in my desk drawer, something about it scraped.

Hannah noticed. Of course she did.

“Yes,” she said brightly, stepping between me and the cheerleaders with the force of a parade float. “He is. And you’re going to be nice.”

The girl blinked. “I wasn’t being mean.”

“Great. Keep practicing.”

The cheerleaders disappeared into the hall.

I looked at Hannah. “You are extremely bossy.”

“I’m a cheerleader. It’s in the job description.” She pushed open the gym door. “Come on.”

I wanted to run.

Instead, I followed her inside.

The Cedar Forest gym looked different after school. During assemblies, it felt huge and bright and public, with bleachers pulled out and the whole student body packed shoulder to shoulder. After school, with only the cheer squad inside, it felt like a stage before the audience arrived.

The polished floor reflected the overhead lights. Red and gold banners hung from the rafters. The Timberwolves logo took up the center court, all sharp teeth and school pride. On the far wall, a sign listed district championships going back decades, because apparently even walls had to brag.

A speaker sat near the bleachers blasting a pop song with a beat so aggressive it felt like it wanted me to make eye contact.

About a dozen cheerleaders stood in lines across the floor, stretching, talking, adjusting ponytails. Most wore Cedar Forest practice tanks or fitted T-shirts with shorts. Their white sneakers squeaked when they moved. Their bows looked crisp enough to have been engineered.

I felt like an intruder in a country where everyone else spoke the language.

Hannah dropped her bag near the bleachers and turned to me. "First rule: don't apologize for taking up space."

"I was not planning to."

"You were already doing it with your shoulders."

I looked down. My shoulders were, in fact, trying to leave the gym without me.

Before I could fix them, Madison Lee crossed the floor toward us.

Madison was the kind of pretty that made other girls stand a little straighter and boys forget how doors worked. She had shiny dark hair in a high ponytail, perfect winged eyeliner for no reason at three-thirty in the afternoon, and the posture of someone who had never once wondered if she belonged in a room.

Her eyes moved over me.

Not cruelly.

Worse.

Efficiently.

“So,” she said. “This is happening.”

“That’s the plan,” Hannah said.

“I thought Spirit Swap participants didn’t practice until next week.”

“Carl needs time.”

Madison’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “That’s one way to put it.”

My face heated.

Hannah’s smile sharpened. “Madison.”

“What? I’m being realistic.” Madison turned to me. “Can you count music?”

I stared at her. “Like... numbers?”

One of the girls behind her snorted.

Madison closed her eyes for half a second, like she had been given exactly what she expected. "Counts. Five, six, seven, eight. Can you follow counts?"

"I can count to eight," I said.

"Great. We have a foundation."

I hated her a little.

Not as much as I hated Benny.

But enough to put her on the list.

Madison folded her arms. "Look, I'm not trying to be mean. Spirit Swap is supposed to be funny, but we are still not letting anyone make cheer look sloppy. If you're doing this, you need to learn the routine properly."

"That's why he's here," Hannah said.

Madison glanced at her, then back at me. "Fine. Shoes?"

I looked down at my old sneakers. "These are shoes."

"Not cheer shoes."

"They have laces."

Hannah touched my arm before Madison could respond. "They're fine for today. He's not stunting."

Madison sighed. "Obviously."

I did not know what stunting meant in cheer language, but I was grateful not to be doing it.

The music changed. The girls moved into formation like someone had pressed a button.

Hannah guided me toward the back corner of the floor.
“You’re learning counts first.”

“Good. I like numbers.”

“You’re going to like them less when they come with arms.”

She stood beside me and demonstrated the first motion.

“High V,” she said, snapping both arms up diagonally.

I copied her.

“No,” she said immediately.

“What?”

“Wrists straight. Fingers together. Strong arms.”

“I have arms.”

“You have noodles with opinions.”

I adjusted.

“Better. Low V.” She moved her arms down diagonally. “T.
Half T. Clap. Clean.”

I followed her through the motions, feeling more ridiculous with every second.

Arms up. Arms down. Arms out. Elbows sharp. Hands in fists. Smile but not too much. Chin up. Feet together. Don’t hunch. Don’t look at the floor. Count.

Always count.

Five, six, seven, eight.

One, two, three, four.

By the tenth repetition, sweat had started under my hoodie.

By the twentieth, I took the hoodie off.

That was a mistake because I immediately felt visible in my plain gray T-shirt. My arms looked too pale under the gym lights. My body felt wrong, all angles and discomfort, like I had been assembled for a role I did not audition for.

“Again,” Hannah said.

“I’m dying.”

“You’re standing.”

“That’s how it starts.”

“Again.”

We did it again.

And again.

And then, annoyingly, something happened.

Not magic.

Not transformation.

Just the smallest click.

The counts started to make sense.

The motions lined up with the beat. My arms stopped flailing and started hitting positions. My feet remembered where to go. When Hannah called, "Clean!" I snapped my hands to my sides at the right time.

It should have felt stupid.

It did, a little.

But it also felt precise.

There was a rhythm to it, a structure. I did not have to wonder what my body was supposed to do because the counts told it. One, two, three, four. Hit. Step. Clap. Turn. Clean.

For once, movement was not random evidence against me.

It was something I could learn.

Across the floor, Madison watched.

I tried to pretend I did not care.

Hannah restarted the music. "Okay. Add the walk-in."

"The what?"

"You can't just appear on the floor like a haunted substitute teacher. You enter with the squad."

"I would prefer to appear never."

"Noted. Step-touch, step-touch, clap, turn."

She demonstrated, light and sharp and bright.

I copied her badly.

"Nope," she said.

"I did the steps."

"You did the steps like you were being led to court."

"I feel like I am."

"Less court. More pep."

"I do not contain pep."

"We'll install some."

After twenty minutes, my legs hurt.

After thirty, I had sweated through the back of my T-shirt.

After forty, Madison walked over with her arms crossed.

I braced myself.

She looked at Hannah first. "Run the entrance again."

Hannah nodded, oddly serious.

The music started.

I moved.

Step-touch. Step-touch. Clap. Turn. High V. Low V. Clean.
Count. Hit. Step. Don't look down.

When the sequence ended, I stopped in the right place.

Breathing hard.

Madison stared at me.

Then she said, "He's not as bad as I thought."

I should not have felt proud.

I did anyway.

"Thank you?" I said.

"That was not a compliment. It was an adjustment of expectations."

"Still better than most of my day."

A couple of cheerleaders laughed. Not cruelly this time.

Madison's mouth twitched like she was fighting a smile. "Your arms are weak, your posture is tragic, and you keep apologizing with your face."

"My face has anxiety."

"But you can count," she said. "And you listen."

"That sounds like a compliment."

"Don't get used to it." She pointed at Hannah. "Keep him on back-line counts for now. No jumps until I say so."

"No jumps?" I asked.

Hannah patted my shoulder. "You're welcome."

Madison walked away.

I stood there, sweaty, exhausted, and confused by the strange flicker of accomplishment in my chest.

Hannah bumped her shoulder against mine. "See?"

"See what?"

"You didn't die."

"There is still time."

"You were good."

"No, I was not."

"You were focused. That matters more at first."

I looked at the gym floor.

Focused.

That word felt safer than graceful.

Graceful was too much. Pretty was too much. Anything soft was too much.

Focused I could handle.

We ran the counts again.

This time, I smiled by accident.

Only for a second.

Only because the music hit right and my arms landed where they were supposed to.

But Hannah saw.

She did not say anything.

That was how I knew it mattered.

Near the end of practice, the gym doors opened.

The football team started filing in.

My body noticed before my brain admitted why.

Players came through in workout gear, carrying helmets, water bottles, and shoulder pads. Their voices filled the gym, rough and loud after the sharper sound of the cheer music. Some headed straight toward the locker room. Others slowed down to watch.

My stomach tightened.

Trent Keller entered near the front, laughing with Mason Reed.

Then Benny came in behind them.

He was wearing black athletic shorts, a Cedar Forest Football T-shirt, and a red practice jersey hanging loose over one shoulder. His hair was damp at the temples. His face looked tired again, but when his eyes found me, he stopped walking.

I was in the middle of a sequence.

Of course I was.

Hannah called counts beside me.

“Five, six, seven, eight!”

My body wanted to quit. It wanted to fold inward, turn away, become nothing. I imagined Trent laughing. I imagined Benny smirking. I imagined the entire football team seeing every awkward angle of me.

But the counts kept going.

One, two, three, four.

High V. Low V.

Five, six, seven, eight.

Step, clap, turn.

I forced myself to finish.

When the sequence ended, I faced the bleachers.

Benny was sitting halfway up, elbows on his knees, watching me.

Not laughing.

That made it worse.

No, not worse.

Different.

He watched like he was trying to understand something and afraid someone would catch him understanding it.

Trent dropped onto the bleacher below him and said something I could not hear. Benny did not answer. His eyes stayed on me.

My face heated.

Then Benny gave me a small nod.

Just one.

Private.

So small no one else would have noticed.

But I did.

It was not a joke. It was not applause. It was not the kind of showy support that made something about him. It was more like he was saying, I saw that.

My chest tightened.

I looked away first.

Hannah leaned close. "Breathe."

"I am breathing."

"You are doing an impression of a deer near headlights."

"I hate him."

"I know."

"I do."

"Sure."

From the bleachers, Trent's voice rose. "Yo, White! You gonna do a toe touch for us?"

The gym went slightly quiet.

My body locked.

Hannah turned so fast her ponytail swung.

Before she could speak, Benny said, "Keller."

It was one word.

Not loud.

But something in his tone made Trent look back.

"What?" Trent said.

Benny held his gaze. "Don't."

Trent scoffed. "I'm joking."

"No one laughed."

A few football players shifted awkwardly.

Madison, from across the floor, watched with narrowed eyes.

Trent stood, trying to turn embarrassment into swagger.
"Whatever, man."

He walked toward the locker room.

Benny stayed seated.

I hated the relief that moved through me.

I hated that he could give it to me with one word.

Practice ended ten minutes later. I escaped to the bleachers for my backpack while the cheerleaders gathered in a circle near Madison. My shirt stuck to my back. My legs felt strange, like they belonged to someone who had made questionable life choices.

Benny was still there.

Of course he was.

He stood when I approached the bleachers.

I froze.

"Hey," he said.

Very original. Extremely dangerous.

"Hey," I said back, because apparently I was no better.

His eyes flicked briefly to the gym floor. "You were good."

I laughed. "No, I wasn't."

"You were."

"I looked like a malfunctioning flagpole."

His mouth twitched. "A focused malfunctioning flagpole."

I hated that he had chosen the same word Hannah had.

Focus.

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"Do what?"

"Be nice because you feel guilty."

His expression shifted. "That's not why."

"Then why?"

The question came out too quickly.

Benny looked at me, and for one second the noisy gym fell away.

"I just thought you were good," he said.

My face went hot.

I bent down and grabbed my backpack. "Well. Your standards are low. That explains your Chemistry grade."

He smiled, but it was softer than usual. "Studied last night."

“Good.”

“Did the practice problems twice.”

“Even better.”

“I’m aiming for full enthusiasm.”

Against my will, I smiled.

Benny noticed.

Of course he did.

His smile widened just a little, and my stomach did something humiliating.

Then Mason called his name from the locker room doors.

“Hayes! Coach is looking for you.”

Benny glanced over. “Coming.”

He looked back at me. “Library tomorrow?”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Right.” He stepped backward. “Don’t forget me.”

“I’m trying to.”

He laughed, then jogged toward the locker room.

I watched him go for exactly two seconds too long.

Hannah appeared beside me like a judgmental ghost.
“Interesting.”

I jumped. “Stop doing that.”

"Stop looking at him like he personally invented sunlight."

"I do not."

"You kind of do."

"I was assessing whether he was leaving."

"With your whole soul?"

"I hate you."

"No, you don't." She smiled and handed me my water bottle.

"Come on. My house. We need to talk hair."

"I just survived cheer practice."

"Exactly. You deserve trauma with seating."

"I deserve a coma."

"You can have one after skincare."

That was how I ended up back in Hannah's bedroom, sitting in the white vanity chair while she examined my face like she was planning a museum restoration.

This time, I did not resist the headband.

That felt dangerous.

The first makeover had been an accident I could blame on panic. A response to Spirit Swap. A practical rehearsal. Damage control.

The second time felt like choosing.

Even if I told myself I was not choosing anything.

Hannah cleansed my face gently, then handed me moisturizer. "You do it."

I rubbed it in, trying not to think about how familiar the steps were becoming.

"Good," she said.

"Don't sound proud. It's lotion."

"Growth is growth."

She did less makeup this time. Concealer under the eyes, a touch around my nose, brow gel, mascara, and the soft gloss I had definitely not used again after Thursday night.

I had not.

Not much.

Not in a way that counted.

When she reached for the wig, I looked down at my hands.

Hannah paused. "Too much?"

I shook my head.

That was the problem.

It was not too much.

She placed the wig on me carefully, tucking and adjusting until the honey-blond waves fell around my face again. My reflection shifted.

There she was.

Less shocking this time.

Still impossible.

Hannah stood behind me, fingers resting lightly on the back of the chair. "Hi again."

My throat tightened.

"Don't," I said.

"Don't what?"

"Make it weird."

"I'm not making it weird. I'm making it polite."

"That is worse."

She smiled in the mirror.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

I studied the reflection in pieces because the whole thing was too much. Eyes first. Then lips. Then hair. The soft curve the wig created around my cheek. The way mascara made my stare look less guarded, somehow. The way gloss made my mouth look like it belonged to someone who knew how to be looked at.

"She needs a name," Hannah said quietly.

My heart kicked.

"She?"

Hannah met my eyes in the mirror. "If you want."

I looked away.

"I don't."

"Okay."

"I mean, it's not like that."

"Okay."

"It's just makeup and a wig."

"Okay."

"You don't have to keep saying okay like a therapist."

"I'm trying not to spook you."

"I'm not a horse."

"You have the survival instincts of one."

I laughed, but it came out shaky.

Hannah opened one of her drawers and pulled out a small palette of blushes. "Maybe we try a little color."

"No."

"Just a tiny bit."

"Hannah."

She smiled. "Trust me."

That was unfair because I did.

She used a fluffy brush to tap the smallest amount of pink across my cheeks. It looked wrong at first. Too visible. Too girlish. Too honest.

Then she blended it.

The girl in the mirror came alive.

I stopped breathing.

The blush made her look warmer. Not painted. Not fake. Just emotional. Like she had been caught feeling something and had not learned how to hide it yet.

Hannah's voice was almost a whisper. "Oh."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

She looked at me in the mirror, eyes shining a little. "You look really pretty."

I stared at the reflection.

The words should have embarrassed me.

They did.

But they also settled somewhere deep.

Pretty.

Again.

I swallowed hard. "It doesn't count."

"Why not?"

"Because it's fake."

"What part?"

I opened my mouth.

The wig, obviously.

The makeup.

The gloss.

The blush.

But when I looked at the mirror, none of those things felt like the answer. They felt like tools. Like lights turned on in a room that had always been there.

“My face,” I said weakly.

Hannah’s expression softened. “Your face is the part that makes it work.”

My eyes burned.

I hated crying. I especially hated almost crying. Actual crying at least committed to the bit. Almost crying just made your throat hurt and your face stupid.

Hannah leaned one hip against the vanity. “Can I ask something?”

“You’re going to anyway.”

“What would you name her?”

The room went quiet.

Not actually. Downstairs, her dad was watching sports. A car passed outside. Somewhere in the house, the air conditioner clicked on.

But around the mirror, everything held still.

I should have laughed.

I should have said something stupid. Brittany. Football Carl.
Spirit Swap Victim Number One.

Instead, the name came out before I could stop it.

“Cleo.”

Hannah did not move.

I stared at myself.

At her.

Cleo.

The name looked like it had been waiting behind my teeth.

I had no idea where it came from. It was not a name I had planned. It was not from a movie I loved or a girl I secretly wanted to be. It just arrived, complete and terrifying.

Hannah’s voice was soft. “Cleo.”

I tried to laugh. “That was random.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“It was.”

“Okay.”

“Hannah.”

She smiled, but her eyes were gentle. “Hi, Cleo.”

My vision blurred.

I looked down immediately. "Stop."

"Sorry."

"You're not sorry."

"No," she admitted. "But I'll stop."

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes, then remembered the mascara and dropped them. "I don't know why I said that."

"Maybe because you knew it."

"I didn't."

"Maybe some part of you did."

That was too much.

I stood so quickly the chair rolled back. "Can we take this off?"

Hannah nodded at once. "Yes. Of course."

She helped me remove the wig. The moment it lifted away, cool air touched my neck, and my own hair appeared flat and messy underneath.

Relief came first.

Then loss.

Small, sharp, immediate.

I hated that Hannah saw it.

She did not say the name again.

That made me want to cry more than if she had.

The next day, school felt almost normal for exactly seventeen minutes.

Then I passed the Spirit Swap board and saw my total had gone up to **\$289.50**.

Someone had added a red bow sticker beside my name.

I stood there, staring at it.

Cleo.

The name flashed in my mind so suddenly I almost dropped my books.

No.

Carl.

The board said Carl White.

The school wanted Carl White in a cheer uniform.

It did not know Cleo existed.

No one did, really.

Except Hannah.

And, in a broken almost-way, maybe Benny had seen something in Hannah's hallway.

That thought followed me into Chemistry.

Benny was already at our lab table, flipping through his notes. He looked up when I sat down, and his face did that annoying brightening thing before he controlled it.

"Morning," he said.

"It's third period."

"Still morning."

"Barely."

He slid a worksheet toward me. "I did the homework."

I looked at it.

He had.

Not perfectly, but completely.

"You actually tried," I said.

He leaned back. "Full enthusiasm."

"Medium-high enthusiasm."

"I'll take it."

Ms. Powell started class with a short quiz. Benny looked pained but not hopeless. I finished mine early and tried not to watch him work.

Tried.

Failed.

He frowned at the paper, lips moving slightly as he counted atoms on both sides of an equation. His pencil tapped once, then stopped. He erased, rewrote, checked again.

He was trying.

That did something inconvenient to my opinion of him.

After class, he caught up with me in the hall.

"Library after school?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"I might be ten minutes late. Coach wants to talk before practice."

"You have practice after library?"

"Weight room. Then film."

"That sounds awful."

"It builds character."

"You have enough character."

He smiled. "Was that a compliment?"

"No."

"Sounded like one."

"Get your hearing checked."

He laughed, then glanced over my shoulder.

His expression changed.

I turned.

Trent was near the lockers with two other football players, looking at his phone. When he saw us, he smirked.

“Hey, White,” he called. “Heard the cheer squad’s got you sweating already.”

My stomach tightened.

Benny stepped slightly forward, so subtly I almost missed it.

“Keep walking,” he said.

Trent lifted both hands. “I’m just asking about practice.”

“No, you’re not.”

The hallway slowed around us. Not fully. High school never fully stopped unless there was a fight or free food. But enough people glanced over that my skin started to prickle.

Trent’s smirk deepened. “You his manager now?”

Benny’s voice stayed calm. “I said keep walking.”

For a second, I thought Trent would push.

Then Mason appeared and tugged at his sleeve. “Come on, man. We’re late.”

Trent gave me one last look. “See you at the pep rally.”

Benny watched him go.

I stared at the floor.

“You okay?” he asked.

I hated that question from him. I hated wanting to answer honestly.

"I'm fine."

"Still your worst lie."

"Stop keeping track."

"I'm getting good at Chemistry. I needed a new subject."

I looked up before I could stop myself.

His smile was small, almost careful.

"Thank you," I said.

The words surprised both of us.

Benny's face softened. "Yeah."

Then the bell rang, and the hallway jolted back into motion.

By the time Thursday arrived, Hannah had upgraded her plan from "practice makeup" to "we need basics."

That was how she phrased it at lunch, casually, as if she had not just suggested the most terrifying field trip of my life.

"Basics?" I asked.

She stabbed her salad with a plastic fork. "Yes. You can't keep borrowing everything from me."

"I can absolutely keep borrowing everything from you."

"No. My foundation is too warm for you, and my gloss collection is not a public resource."

"I don't need a gloss collection."

"You need one gloss that belongs to you."

My heart tripped over itself.

I looked around the cafeteria. No one was listening, but it felt like everyone could hear.

"Lower your voice," I said.

"I said gloss, not felony."

"It feels like both."

She softened. "We'll go out of town. Not the mall here."

"There is no mall here."

"Exactly. We'll go to Briarwood."

Briarwood was a town thirty minutes away with a real shopping mall, a movie theater, chain restaurants, and enough suburban sprawl that people from Cedar Forest went there when they wanted to buy things without running into their neighbors.

I still shook my head. "No."

"After school. Quick trip."

"No."

"You said maybe to practicing again."

"A mall is not practicing. A mall is public."

"A public where no one knows you."

"That is still public."

Hannah leaned across the table. “Carl, if Spirit Swap happens, you’re going to need tights, maybe a sweater or something for before and after, your own makeup basics, and shoes that don’t make you look like you’re being punished.”

“I thought the cheer uniform was provided.”

“It is. That does not mean we let you show up like a kidnapped math tutor.”

“I am a kidnapped math tutor.”

“Not on my watch.”

I tried to argue.

I really did.

But the truth was, part of me wanted to go.

Not the loud part. The loud part had written a very detailed report on why this was a terrible idea. But underneath it, something quieter wanted to walk through a place where no one knew Carl White and touch soft fabrics without being watched by people waiting to laugh.

That quiet part scared me.

So of course, I agreed.

Briarwood Mall smelled like pretzels, perfume, and air conditioning.

I had not been there in months. Maybe over a year. My family usually ordered things online now, and when I needed

clothes, my mom bought jeans from department stores with the same grim efficiency people used for replacing tires.

Going there with Hannah felt different.

For one thing, Hannah entered the mall like she had been hired to inspect it.

"We start with basics," she said, walking beside me through the main corridor. "No big dramatic dress today. Nothing that makes you panic. Soft, wearable, easy to hide if needed."

"That last part is not comforting."

"It's realistic."

"Realism is rarely comforting."

She glanced at me. "You okay?"

"No."

"Manageable no or we should leave no?"

I looked around.

Teenagers clustered near the smoothie place. A mom pushed a stroller. Two older women examined candles in a store window. A guy in a baseball cap carried three shopping bags and looked dead inside.

No one looked at me.

That helped.

"Manageable," I said.

Hannah smiled. "Good."

The first store was too bright and too trendy. Music pulsed from hidden speakers. Mannequins wore cropped sweaters, skirts, and boots I would have broken my ankle in.

I hovered near the entrance.

Hannah handed me a soft cream sweater dress.

I stared at it.

"No."

"You haven't touched it."

"I can see it."

"Touch it."

"I don't need to touch things to know they are dangerous."

She put it in my hands.

It was soft.

Of course it was.

Not itchy. Not heavy. Soft in a way that made my fingers curl around the fabric before I could stop them.

Hannah noticed and did not comment.

Bless her.

She added black tights, a longer cardigan, and a simple pleated skirt to the pile.

"Hannah."

"Options."

"I don't need options."

"Everyone needs options."

"I need an exit."

"After we check sizes."

The fitting room was out of the question.

Absolutely not.

I could not do it. Not with a store employee nearby, not with women coming in and out of stalls, not with mirrors on three sides and Hannah waiting outside like this was normal.

Hannah saw my face and adjusted.

"Okay," she said. "No fitting room. We buy what's likely to work, keep receipts, and try things at my house."

I exhaled. "Thank you."

"See? Manageable."

We bought the sweater dress in two sizes. Hannah paid before I could protest, then made me pay her back through a money app because she knew I would spiral if it felt like a gift.

At another store, we bought black tights and plain flats.

The flats were the worst.

Not because they were dramatic.

Because they were not.

They were simple black ballet flats. Soft, flexible, practical. Something a girl could wear to school without anyone thinking much of it.

I held one in my hand and felt an ache behind my ribs.

Hannah stood beside me quietly.

“Too much?” she asked.

I shook my head.

That was not exactly true.

Everything was too much.

But I did not want to put the shoe down.

At the beauty store, I nearly turned around.

Rows of makeup stretched under bright lights: foundations, mascaras, lipsticks, blushes, brushes, palettes, bottles, tubes. It looked like Hannah’s vanity had become an entire country.

A sales associate smiled at us. “Can I help you find anything?”

My soul tried to leave.

Hannah answered before I could panic. “We’re just browsing, thanks.”

The associate nodded and moved away.

I whispered, “I almost died.”

“You did great.”

"I did nothing."

"Exactly. Sometimes that's the goal."

She guided me to a quieter aisle and started picking things up.

"Concealer," she said. "Your shade. Mascara. Clear brow gel. One gloss. Maybe a blush."

"No blush."

"Yes blush."

"No."

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

She put a soft pink cream blush in the basket.

"Traitor," I said.

"Visionary."

At the perfume section, she handed me a small bottle with a pale pink cap.

"Try this."

"I don't wear perfume."

"You don't wear perfume yet."

"That sentence is haunting."

She sprayed a paper strip and passed it to me.

I sniffed.

It smelled like clean laundry, vanilla, and something floral I could not name. Soft but not childish. Sweet but not loud.

My chest tightened.

“I like it,” I admitted.

Hannah smiled. “That one?”

I looked at the bottle.

It was small enough to hide in a drawer.

That was the thing that made me nod.

We left the mall with two shopping bags, one pretzel we split because Hannah insisted shopping required sodium, and a silence between us that was not awkward but felt loaded.

On the drive back, the sun set behind the strip malls, turning the sky orange and pink.

Hannah kept the radio low.

I looked down at the shopping bag between my feet.

The sweater dress was folded inside. Tights. Flats. Makeup. Perfume.

Not costume pieces from Hannah’s room.

Mine.

Or maybe not mine.

Maybe Cleo’s.

The thought came quietly this time.

I did not push it away as hard.

That night, I did not go straight home.

I went to Benny's house.

It was for Chemistry.

That was what I told myself while Hannah dropped me off two blocks away because I did not want Benny or his parents seeing me climb out of her car with shopping bags from the mall. I had hidden everything inside my backpack anyway, folded carefully under my Chemistry binder like makeup and tights could be disguised by ionic compounds.

Benny lived in a newer subdivision on the other side of Cedar Forest, where the houses were larger, the lawns were greener, and every mailbox looked like it belonged to someone who owned a pressure washer.

His house had white columns, dark shutters, and a basketball hoop over the garage. Two cars were in the driveway: a black SUV and a silver pickup. A small Cedar Forest Football sign stood near the walkway.

GO TIMBERWOLVES! #12 BENNY HAYES

I stared at it longer than necessary.

Then I rang the doorbell.

Benny opened the door almost immediately.

For a second, he looked surprised to see me, even though he had invited me.

Then he smiled. "You came."

"That is how scheduled tutoring works."

"Right. Yeah. Come in."

The house smelled like lemon cleaner and grilled chicken. The entryway was spotless. Family photos lined the walls, but unlike Hannah's warm chaotic photo collection, the Hayes family photos looked staged. Benny in football uniforms. Benny with trophies. Benny's parents standing beside him at awards nights. Benny signing something at a school table while his father stood behind him with one hand on his shoulder.

His dad appeared from the kitchen before I had even taken off my backpack.

He was tall, broad, and fit in a way that looked deliberate. His hair was cropped short, with gray at the temples, and he wore a Cedar Forest Football quarter-zip like it was a uniform.

"You must be Carl," he said.

"Yes, sir."

The sir came out automatically. My dad had raised me to be polite to adults, especially adults who looked like they had opinions about handshakes.

Mr. Hayes shook my hand firmly. Too firmly.

"Benny says you're helping him with Chemistry."

"I'm trying."

"We appreciate it. Eligibility rules are no joke."

Behind him, Benny's face tightened.

"No, sir," I said.

Mr. Hayes looked back at Benny. "You need to take this seriously. No distractions. You've got scouts coming to the Homecoming game."

"I know," Benny said.

"Knowing and doing are different."

"I know."

His dad's jaw flexed slightly. "Good."

The conversation was so short, but it changed the temperature of the room.

Then Benny's mom came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She was pretty in a careful way, with blonde hair cut just above her shoulders and a sweater that looked expensive without trying.

"Hi, Carl," she said warmly. "We're glad you're here. Do you want water? Soda? We have lemonade."

"Water's fine, thank you."

"Benny, take him to the dining room. I'll bring snacks."

Benny looked like he wanted to vanish. "Mom, we're fine."

"Nobody studies well hungry."

Mr. Hayes checked his watch. "I'm heading to the booster meeting. Benny, I'll be back by eight. I want to see that workout plan finished too."

"Yeah."

"And email Coach Daniels about the recruiting questionnaire."

"I will."

"Tonight."

"I said I will."

Mr. Hayes held his gaze.

Benny looked away first.

I stood there feeling like I had walked into the middle of a game where everyone knew the rules but me.

When his father left, the front door shutting hard behind him, Benny exhaled.

"Sorry," he said.

"For what?"

"That."

I did not pretend not to understand. "He's intense."

Benny laughed once. "That's the polite word."

We settled at the dining room table with our books. The room looked like it was used mostly on holidays: dark wood table,

framed mirror, perfect centerpiece. It felt too formal for balancing equations.

Mrs. Hayes brought water, lemonade anyway, and a plate of cheese, crackers, and apple slices. She asked about my classes and whether I was applying to in-state schools.

"Mom," Benny said.

"What?"

"We're studying."

"I'm being friendly."

"You're interviewing him."

She smiled at me. "Am I?"

"A little," I said.

Her laugh was soft. "Sorry. I'll leave you alone."

She did, mostly.

For the first half hour, Benny was distracted. He kept glancing toward the hallway, his pencil tapping too fast. He missed easy questions he had gotten right at the library. When he erased the same coefficient three times, I put my hand over the worksheet.

"Stop."

He blinked. "What?"

"You know this."

"I know."

“Then why are you acting like the worksheet is attacking you?”

He rubbed both hands over his face. “Because my dad is going to ask what we covered, then he’s going to ask what score I got on the next quiz, then he’s going to remind me about scouts, then he’s going to ask if I lifted, then he’s going to tell me I looked slow on film.”

I did not know what to say.

Benny leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. “It’s like there’s no version of me that’s enough. If I win, I should have played cleaner. If I pass, I should have gotten an A. If I get looked at by a college, it should have been a bigger one.”

His voice cracked slightly on the last sentence.

He looked embarrassed immediately.

I glanced toward the kitchen to make sure his mom was not listening. “That sounds exhausting.”

“Yeah.”

“I thought being you was easy.”

He looked at me.

I regretted it as soon as I said it, but he did not look angry.

He looked tired.

“Everybody does,” he said.

Something in my chest shifted.

I thought about the hallway. The way he entered and people moved. The way laughter followed him. The way teachers forgave him. The way girls watched him. The way guys waited for his jokes like he decided what was funny.

Then I thought about his father saying eligibility rules were no joke.

No distractions.

Scouts.

Workout plan.

Recruiting questionnaire.

Maybe being watched was not the same as being known.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Benny looked down at the table. "Don't be. I'm used to it."

"That doesn't mean it's fine."

He gave me a small smile. "Adults love calling their fears reality, right?"

I looked at him, startled.

He remembered.

"You stole my line," I said.

"It was a good line."

"It was copyrighted."

"I'll cite you in the footnotes."

Despite myself, I smiled.

We got back to work after that, and this time Benny focused. Really focused. He asked questions, wrote down steps, and made me explain polyatomic ions twice without complaining. When he got an equation right on the first try, he looked so relieved I had to look away.

At seven-thirty, Mrs. Hayes came back to check on us.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Good," Benny said quickly. "Really good."

She looked at his worksheet. "That looks complicated."

"It's not bad," Benny said. "Carl explains it better than the textbook."

I stared at my notes like they had become fascinating.

Mrs. Hayes smiled. "Then we're lucky to have him."

Lucky.

The word made me uncomfortable in that house.

When she left again, Benny tapped his pencil against the paper. "I meant that."

"What?"

"That you explain it better."

"Oh." I cleared my throat. "Thanks."

He looked at me for a second too long. "You're good at stuff, Carl."

"That was vague."

"I mean it."

"I'm good at school. That's not exactly rare."

"No." His voice was quiet. "You're good at seeing things."

That landed in a place I did not have armor for.

I looked down.

My backpack sat beside my chair, partly open. I could see the edge of the shopping bag inside. Pale pink tissue paper peeking out beneath my Chemistry binder.

Panic sparked.

I reached down and shoved the binder deeper.

Benny noticed.

Of course he did.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Convincing."

"Homework."

"In pink tissue paper?"

My face went hot.

He looked at me.

The room went silent.

Then his expression changed—not teasing exactly, but careful.

“Hannah?” he asked.

I did not answer.

His eyes softened. “For Spirit Swap?”

“Yes,” I said too quickly. “Obviously.”

“Right.”

I waited for a joke.

He did not make one.

That made my throat tighten.

“I’m not doing it because I want to,” I said.

Benny’s gaze stayed on my face. “Okay.”

“I’m doing it because if I don’t, it’ll get worse.”

“Okay.”

“And because Hannah thinks if people are going to laugh anyway, I should at least not look stupid.”

The corner of his mouth moved, but he controlled it. “That sounds like Hannah.”

“It does.”

A pause stretched.

Then he said, “For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’d look stupid.”

My heart stopped doing its job correctly.

I looked at him.

His face was open for maybe one full second.

Then he looked down at the worksheet, like he had said too much.

“I mean,” he added, “you were decent at practice. Less flagpole than expected.”

There it was.

The joke.

But it was weaker this time.

Almost nervous.

I should have hated it.

Instead, I found myself asking, “Were you watching the whole time?”

He froze.

Then he shrugged, trying too hard. “I was waiting for practice.”

“You sat in the bleachers.”

“That’s where waiting happens.”

“You watched.”

He looked at me then.

No grin. No audience. No Trent.

"Yeah," he said. "I did."

The air changed.

My mouth went dry.

I did not know what to do with that answer, so I did what I always did. I retreated into sarcasm.

"Creepy."

He smiled faintly. "A little."

I shook my head and looked back at the worksheet. "Balance number six."

"Yes, sir."

I glared at him.

"Sorry," he said, but he was smiling.

When the study session ended, Benny walked me to the door.

His mom called goodbye from the kitchen. His dad's truck was still gone. The house felt easier without him in it.

At the entryway, Benny opened the front door but did not step back right away.

Porch light washed over his face. Outside, the neighborhood was quiet, lawns silver under the early evening sky.

"I need to tell you something," he said.

My stomach tightened. "That sounds bad."

"It's not."

"People always say that before bad things."

He leaned one shoulder against the doorframe. "I really didn't nominate you."

I looked away.

"I know I texted it. I know I said it at the library. But I need you to understand I didn't."

"Why?"

"Because you still think I did."

I did.

Mostly.

Maybe less than before.

"You were there," I said.

"I know."

"With Trent."

"I know."

"And you've made jokes about me."

His face tightened. "I know."

"So why would I believe you?"

He looked down at the porch.

For once, he did not answer quickly.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe you shouldn't yet."

That was not what I expected.

He looked back at me. "But I didn't do it. And when I found out Trent was bragging about maybe putting your name up, I told him not to."

My pulse jumped. "Maybe?"

"He never admitted it straight. He kept acting like it would be hilarious if someone did it."

"And you just... what? Asked nicely?"

Benny's jaw tightened. "I told him to drop it."

"But he didn't."

"No."

The honesty in his voice annoyed me because it made the world less simple.

If Benny had nominated me, hating him was easy.

If he had not, then everything became messier.

He had still laughed before.

He had still made me a target in ways he probably did not understand.

But he had also shut Trent down in Chemistry. At practice. In the hallway.

He had watched me from the bleachers and nodded like I had done something worth seeing.

"I don't know what to do with that," I said.

Benny's face softened. "You don't have to do anything."

"I still don't trust you."

"I know."

"But I maybe believe you more than I did."

His mouth curved slightly. "That's something."

"Barely."

"I'll take barely."

I stepped onto the porch, then turned back. "Do the rest of the practice problems."

"Yes, sir."

"Benny."

"Sorry." His smile warmed. "Carl."

The way he said my name made me want to run and stay at the same time.

I chose run.

Not literally. That would have been embarrassing.

But I walked quickly to my car and did not look back until I was safely inside.

Benny was still standing in the doorway.

Watching.

Again.

At home, I went straight upstairs.

My parents were in the living room watching a crime show, and my mom called, "How was studying?"

"Fine," I called back.

Another excellent lie.

In my room, I shut the door, locked it, and sat at my desk.

For a long time, I did not move.

Then I opened my backpack.

The shopping bag from Briarwood Mall slid out with a soft rustle. I pulled out the makeup pouch first. Then the perfume. Then the tights, still in their package. The black flats. The cream sweater dress folded neatly in tissue paper.

My room looked different with those things in it.

Not visibly. If someone opened the door, I could shove everything away in ten seconds.

But I knew.

That was enough.

I picked up the perfume and sprayed the tiniest amount onto my wrist.

The scent rose soft and clean.

My heart started pounding.

I sat at my desk, surrounded by Chemistry notes and secret girl things, and pulled my notebook toward me.

The cover was plain black. Inside, the pages were filled with equations, definitions, lab observations, and Ms. Powell's neat handouts taped into place. Normal school things. Safe things.

I opened to the back page.

For a minute, I only held the pen.

Then, in the bottom corner, small enough that no one would notice unless they were looking for it, I wrote:

Cleo White

The name looked impossible.

Then familiar.

Then dangerous.

I stared at it until my eyes burned.

Cleo White.

Not a joke written on a Spirit Swap board.

Not a dare.

Not a humiliation.

A name.

My hand shook. I traced the C once with the tip of my pen, then immediately panicked.

What was I doing?

If my mom found it, I would have to explain. If my dad saw it, I would have to lie. If anyone at school saw it, the whole thing would explode before I understood it myself.

I tore the page out.

The sound was too loud in my quiet room.

I froze, listening.

No footsteps.

No knock.

Downstairs, the television murmured on.

I folded the piece of paper once.

Then again.

Then I opened the top drawer of my desk, lifted the stack of old sketchpads, and hid it beneath the lip gloss.

For a second, I just looked at the hidden corner of pink plastic and folded paper.

Lip gloss.

Cleo White.

Evidence.

I closed the drawer carefully.

Then I sat back in my chair and pressed my hand to my chest, as if I could hold myself together from the outside.

I was still Carl White.

I had to be.

I had school tomorrow. Chemistry. Spirit Swap voting. Cheer practice. Benny Hayes looking at me like he was trying to solve a problem neither of us had the formula for.

I was still Carl.

But somewhere in my room, hidden under old drawings and homework I never looked at anymore, Cleo White existed on paper.

And even after I turned off the light, I could feel her there.

CHAPTER 4

HOMEcoming WEEK arrived like Cedar Forest High School had been possessed by a pep rally demon. By Monday morning, the hallways had been transformed into a red-and-gold explosion. Streamers hung from the ceiling tiles. Posters covered every open inch of wall space. Someone had taped paper footballs to the floor with arrows pointing toward the gym, which seemed like a safety hazard, but apparently school spirit overruled common sense.

Every class had a theme day schedule taped to the door.

Monday: Pajama Day

Tuesday: Twin Day

Wednesday: Jersey Day

Thursday: Red and Gold Day

Friday: Spirit Day / Pep Rally / Homecoming Game

The student council table outside the cafeteria sold temporary Timberwolves tattoos, glow bracelets, and Homecoming buttons. Cheerleaders walked around with donation buckets. Football players wore jerseys over hoodies. Teachers pretended to hate the chaos while secretly wearing school-color lanyards and smiling at the decorations.

I hated almost all of it.

I hated the noise. I hated the forced excitement. I hated that every announcement ended with someone yelling, “Go Timberwolves!” like we were legally required to respond.

Most of all, I hated the Spirit Swap board.

By Monday afternoon, my total had passed four hundred dollars.

CARL WHITE – CHEER SWAP – \$417.25

Four hundred seventeen dollars and twenty-five cents.

Apparently, humiliation had excellent fundraising potential.

I stood in front of the board before first period, staring at the number while people passed behind me.

Someone had drawn a tiny skirt under my name.

Someone else had written:

CAN'T WAIT, CARLIE!

My stomach tightened.

Carlie.

Not Cleo.

Not the name hidden in my desk drawer under lip gloss and folded paper.

Carlie was a joke. A nickname built for laughter. The kind of name people gave you when they wanted to make sure you knew they were not seeing a person, only a punchline.

I reached up and peeled the sticky note off the board.

"That's student council property," a voice said.

I turned.

Madison Lee stood beside me in a red Cedar Forest Cheer hoodie, her hair in its usual perfect ponytail, her expression unreadable.

"It's my name," I said.

"Technically, it's a nickname."

"Technically, I hate it."

Madison looked at the sticky note in my hand. Then she held out her palm.

For one second, I thought she was going to tell me to put it back.

Instead, she said, "Give it to me."

I handed it over.

She crumpled it into a tiny ball and dropped it into the trash can beside the board.

I blinked.

Madison adjusted the strap of her cheer bag. "Nobody gets to be sloppy on my board."

"Your board?"

"My pep rally. My board. My week. My stress rash."

I looked at her face. "You have a stress rash?"

“Emotionally.”

Despite everything, I almost smiled.

She glanced at my total. “You’re probably winning.”

“I had noticed.”

“Then you need to practice after school. Full run-through.”

My stomach dropped. “Full?”

“As in music, entrance, cheer, exit. Hannah said you know the counts.”

“Hannah lies to motivate people.”

“Hannah lies to protect feelings. I don’t.” Madison turned toward the gym doors. “You can do the counts.”

That stopped me.

I stared at her. “Was that a compliment?”

“No. It was information.”

“Still feels rare.”

She looked back at me, and for a second, her expression softened just enough to make her seem human. “Carl, I’m going to be honest. When I heard about the nomination, I thought it was going to be a disaster.”

“Comforting.”

“But you listen. You work. You actually care about getting it right.”

I shifted my backpack higher on my shoulder. "I don't care."

"Yes, you do."

I looked away.

She did not push. Madison Lee could be ruthless, but she knew when she had landed a hit.

"Practice," she said. "After school."

Then she walked away before I could argue.

I stayed by the board for another second, staring at my name.

Carl White.

Not Carlie.

Not Cleo.

Not yet.

The first two days of Homecoming week blurred together in a mess of noise, classes, and cheer practice.

At first, I had expected everyone to laugh every time I stepped onto the gym floor. Some people did. A few football players made comments from the bleachers. Some cheerleaders still watched me like they were waiting for me to trip over my own feet. But after enough repetitions, enough counts, enough sharp corrections from Madison, the routine became less impossible.

I was not good.

Not really.

But I was not a disaster anymore.

I knew when to step. I knew when to clap. I knew where my arms belonged. Hannah had drilled the motions into me until I could hear her voice in my head even when she stood across the floor.

“Strong wrists.”

“Chin up.”

“Don’t apologize with your shoulders.”

“Smile like you know something they don’t.”

That last one was the hardest.

I did know something they did not.

I knew about the cream sweater dress folded beneath old sketchbooks in my closet. I knew about the black flats hidden in a shoebox behind winter boots I never wore. I knew about the perfume tucked inside a rolled-up pair of socks. I knew about the lip gloss in my desk drawer and the folded piece of paper with **Cleo White** written in the corner.

Those secrets felt heavier every day.

Not heavier like guilt exactly.

Heavier like they were becoming real.

On Tuesday, Hannah brought a makeup pouch to practice and made me wear tinted lip balm for “stage visibility.”

“It’s basically chapstick,” she said.

“It is pink.”

“Barely.”

“People can see it.”

“People can also see your face. We’re all coping.”

I complained, but I wore it.

No one noticed at first.

Then Benny did.

He had started showing up in the gym more often under the excuse of waiting for football practice, studying plays, stretching, or doing whatever quarterbacks did when they wanted everyone to think they were not watching the boy in the back line of the cheer routine.

He sat on the third row of the bleachers with his elbows on his knees and a Chemistry worksheet beside him like a prop.

During a water break, I glanced over and caught him staring at my mouth.

My entire body forgot how temperature worked.

He looked away too fast.

That made it worse.

Hannah followed my gaze and nearly choked on her water.

“Don’t,” I said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You breathed judgmentally.”

“I breathed with interest.”

“I hope you dehydrate.”

She smiled and handed me a towel. “You’re welcome for the lip balm.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

The terrible thing was that cheer practice had started to make me feel better.

Not all the time. Not when people laughed. Not when Trent Keller existed in my general area. Not when Madison corrected my posture in front of the entire squad by saying I looked like “a coat rack with a secret.”

But sometimes, in the middle of the music, when the counts hit and my body followed, I forgot to be ashamed for three seconds at a time.

Three seconds did not sound like much.

It was more than I was used to.

By Wednesday, Jersey Day, Cedar Forest had reached a level of football worship that felt almost religious.

Teachers wore jerseys over button-down shirts. The cafeteria served “Tailgate Nachos,” which were regular nachos with a name. The morning announcements included a hype video for Friday’s Homecoming game against West Brook High. Benny appeared in

three separate slow-motion clips throwing passes under stadium lights.

I tried very hard not to notice.

Failed.

Then hated myself for noticing.

I was at my locker after lunch, switching out my Government binder for Chemistry, when the hallway around me shifted.

That was the only warning I got.

Trent Keller and two other football players moved in like they had rehearsed it. Mason Reed was not with them, which made me nervous. Mason at least had the decency to look uncomfortable when Trent got mean. These guys looked ready to enjoy themselves.

Trent leaned one shoulder against the locker beside mine.

“Big week, White,” he said.

I kept my eyes on my locker. “Move.”

He laughed. “Not even a hello?”

“Goodbye.”

One of the other players, a linebacker named Cody, snorted.

Trent reached past me and tapped the red-and-gold jersey hanging from his shoulder. “You got your outfit picked out for Friday?”

I grabbed my Chemistry binder. “I have class.”

“Cheer uniform, right?” Trent continued, loud enough for people nearby to hear. “Skirt and everything?”

A few students slowed down.

My skin prickled.

I shut my locker. “Get out of my way.”

Trent did not move.

“Come on,” he said. “It’s school spirit. Don’t be shy now.”

The word shy hit wrong. The way he said it made something crawl up my spine.

Cody grinned. “Maybe he needs pom-poms to answer.”

“Maybe he’s saving his voice for the pep rally,” the other guy said.

My throat tightened.

I could have pushed past them. Maybe. But there were three of them, and my body had gone stupid with panic. The hallway felt too bright, too crowded, too interested.

Trent leaned closer.

“You better not chicken out,” he said. “People paid good money.”

I looked at him then.

There was something in his face that went beyond teasing. He was enjoying the control. He liked that my name was on the board. He liked that I had to think about what he might do next.

"I didn't ask them to," I said.

"Yeah, but you're doing it, right?" He tilted his head. "Or does Hannah have to hold your hand?"

Heat climbed my neck.

"Back off," I said.

Trent's grin widened. "Or what?"

"Or I'll go get Madison," Hannah snapped behind him.

All three guys turned.

Hannah stood a few feet away with her cheer bag in one hand and murder in her eyes.

Trent rolled his eyes. "Relax, Pitman. We're talking."

"No, you're cornering him in a hallway because you peaked in seventh grade and haven't processed it."

A couple of people made surprised sounds.

Trent's face hardened. "You always this dramatic?"

"Yes," Hannah said. "It's my brand."

I took a step toward her, but Cody shifted, blocking me again.

Then Benny's voice cut through the hallway.

"Move."

Everyone turned.

Benny stood at the end of the locker row, still wearing his football jersey from the Jersey Day assembly. Number 12. Hayes across the chest. His face was calm, which somehow made him look angrier.

Trent's expression changed.

Not fear.

Something closer to annoyance. Like Benny had ruined a game he thought they were both playing.

"We're just messing around," Trent said.

"I said move."

The hallway had definitely slowed now.

Benny walked toward us, not fast, not loud, but with that awful quarterback confidence that made space open before he reached it.

Cody stepped back first.

The other guy followed.

Trent stayed where he was.

Benny stopped beside him. "Class is that way."

Trent looked between Benny and me. "You his hall monitor now?"

Benny's jaw flexed.

For one second, I wanted him to say yes.

Not exactly yes.

Something.

I wanted him to stand there in his jersey, in front of everybody, and make it clear that I was not just some weird assignment he felt guilty about. I wanted him to say my name like it mattered. I wanted him to claim the protection he kept giving me in pieces.

Instead, he said, "Coach is looking for you."

It was careful.

Strategic.

Easy to explain.

Trent stared at him. Then he laughed under his breath. "Sure."

He stepped away from my locker, but as he passed me, he murmured, "See you Friday, cheer boy."

Benny heard it.

I knew he did because his shoulders tensed.

But he did not turn around.

The football players walked off.

The hallway slowly remembered how to move.

Hannah came to my side. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Benny looked at me.

His eyes said he knew I was lying.

I hated him for that too.

"Carl," he said.

I adjusted my backpack. "Thanks for letting Coach save me."

His face changed.

Hannah went still.

I should not have said it. Not in the hallway. Not with people still watching. Not when he had technically helped.

But the hurt had already climbed out of my mouth.

Benny took a small step toward me. "That's not what that was."

"It's fine."

"No, it isn't."

"You're right," I said. "It isn't."

Then I walked away before he could say anything that made it harder.

Chemistry was torture.

Not because of Chemistry.

The actual Chemistry was fine. Ms. Powell lectured about reaction types, and I took notes like my life depended on synthesis and decomposition. Benny sat beside me, quiet in a way that pressed against the side of my face.

Three times, he started to say something.

Three times, I turned the page before he could.

After class, he caught my sleeve near the doorway.

"Can we talk?"

I looked at his hand on my sleeve.

He let go immediately.

"I have Government," I said.

"You have lunch."

I hated that he knew my schedule.

I hated that I liked that he knew my schedule.

"I'm busy," I said.

"With what?"

"Being saved by vague football excuses."

He flinched.

Good.

No, not good.

I hated all of this.

Benny lowered his voice. "I was trying not to make it worse."

"You always are."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you only defend me in ways that still let you pretend you're not defending me."

His mouth opened.

Closed.

I looked at him, waiting.

No comeback arrived.

That hurt more than if he had argued.

I walked away.

By Thursday, the air between us had become unbearable.

We still had library tutoring scheduled after school because apparently my academic integrity was stronger than my emotional stability. I considered canceling eight times. I drafted three texts.

Can't make it.

Something came up.

Study by yourself and ask your dad to balance equations since he knows everything.

I sent none of them.

Benny was already at the library table when I arrived, Chemistry binder open, pencil in hand, jaw tight.

"You came," he said.

"I said I would."

"Yeah."

We studied for forty minutes with the kind of politeness people use right before lawsuits.

He answered questions. I corrected him. He took notes. I explained redox basics even though Ms. Powell had only introduced the concept. Neither of us mentioned Trent, the hallway, cheer practice, or the fact that every silence felt like it had teeth.

At five-thirty, thunder cracked outside.

Both of us looked toward the windows.

Rain had started pouring so hard Main Street blurred behind the glass.

"Great," I said.

"You drive?" Benny asked.

"No. Hannah dropped me off. She had a dentist appointment, and I was going to walk to the coffee shop until she picked me up."

"In that?" He nodded toward the rain.

"I own a hoodie."

"You own a death wish."

"I'll be fine."

"I'll drive you."

"No."

"Carl."

"No."

"You're mad at me, not allergic to cars."

"I'm not getting in your truck so we can have some emotionally constipated quarterback conversation."

His eyebrows rose. "That was very specific."

"I've had time to prepare."

"I'll drive in silence."

"I don't believe you."

"I'll try."

"That's worse."

He leaned back in his chair. "Hannah will kill me if I let you walk in a storm."

"Hannah doesn't control the weather."

"She controls fear."

That was true.

Another crack of thunder shook the windows.

I closed my binder. "Fine. But no talking."

Benny held up both hands. "Silent truck."

His truck was parked along the side street behind the library, a dark blue pickup with Cedar Forest Football decals on the back window and a gym bag thrown across the back seat. The cab

smelled like clean laundry, rain, and faintly of the mint gum he always chewed.

I climbed in, soaked from the twenty-second run across the sidewalk.

Benny started the engine and turned the heat on low.

For two minutes, he kept his promise.

Rain hammered the windshield. The wipers moved fast. The streets shone under the streetlights, even though it was barely evening. We passed the coffee shop, the pharmacy, the small movie theater with a marquee advertising a horror marathon for October.

I stared out the passenger window and tried not to feel how small the truck cab was.

Benny's hands tightened on the steering wheel.

"You were right," he said.

I closed my eyes. "That was not silence."

"I know."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Because you were right."

I looked at him despite myself.

His eyes stayed on the road. "Yesterday. In the hall. I used Coach as an excuse."

The honesty took some of the fight out of me.

I crossed my arms. "Why?"

“Because if I make it obvious with Trent, he pushes harder.”

“That’s convenient.”

“It’s true.”

“It can be true and still be convenient.”

Benny’s jaw tightened. “I know.”

Rain streaked down the window beside me.

I wanted to stay angry. I had good reasons. A whole organized list.

But there was something painful about the way he said I know, like he had already convicted himself before I arrived.

“I’m tired,” I said.

His face turned slightly toward me, but he kept his eyes on the road.

“I’m tired of everyone acting like I’m this thing happening at school instead of a person,” I continued. “Spirit Swap. Cheer Swap. Carl in a skirt. Carl in makeup. Carl as a joke. It’s like my name doesn’t even belong to me anymore.”

Benny was quiet.

I laughed once, bitterly. “And the stupid part is, I don’t even know what I want.”

His voice softened. “What do you mean?”

I should have stopped.

The rain made the world outside feel far away. The truck felt like a confession booth with cup holders.

"I mean..." I swallowed. "Some of it is horrible. Most of it. The laughing, the board, Trent. But sometimes, when I'm practicing with Hannah, or when the counts work, or when—"

I stopped before I said too much.

When I see her.

When I see Cleo.

Benny pulled into a quiet spot near the edge of my neighborhood and parked under a maple tree instead of turning onto my street.

The rain hit the roof in a steady roar.

He looked at me then.

"When what?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing."

"Because you're bad at silence."

"I'm also bad at pretending I don't care."

My heart kicked.

I stared at him.

The inside of the truck seemed to shrink.

"What?" I asked.

Benny exhaled sharply and looked away. "Forget it."

"No. You don't get to do that."

"Do what?"

"Say something like that and then hide."

He laughed without humor. "That's rich coming from you."

My face heated. "Excuse me?"

"You hide all the time."

"I'm being humiliated in front of the entire school."

"That's not what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

He turned back to me, and the look in his eyes made my breath catch.

"I mean you act like none of this matters to you when it obviously does. You act like you don't care what Hannah sees, what Madison thinks, what I say, but you care about everything so much it's practically coming off you in waves."

I stared at him, stunned.

"Sorry," he said immediately. "That was too much."

"No," I said, anger and fear tangling in my chest. "Keep going. Apparently you've been studying me."

His hands left the steering wheel and curled into his lap. "Maybe I have."

The rain filled the silence.

I should have looked away.

I did not.

“Why?” I asked.

Benny’s throat moved.

“Because I can’t stop,” he said.

Everything in me went still.

The words were not smooth. Not practiced. Not something he could have said in a hallway with his friends watching. They sounded pulled out of him.

I gripped the edge of the seat. “Don’t.”

His expression flickered. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t say stuff like that when you’ll pretend it didn’t happen tomorrow.”

“I’m not pretending.”

“You always pretend.”

“I know.”

“And I’m tired of being your secret good deed.”

“You’re not.”

“Then what am I?”

He looked at me for a long second.

Then he said, "You don't get it, Carl. I'm always watching you."

The sentence hit me harder than any joke ever had.

Not because it was perfect.

Because it was dangerous.

Because I had felt him watching from the bleachers. In Chemistry. In the hallway. Across the cafeteria. I had felt it and told myself I was imagining it because the alternative made no sense.

Benny Hayes did not watch me.

People watched Benny.

That was the order of things.

But now he sat beside me in his rain-dark truck, looking like the truth had finally cornered him too.

My voice came out unsteady. "You shouldn't."

"Probably not."

"I mean it."

"I know."

"I don't know what this is."

"Me neither."

That scared me more than if he had lied.

Benny's eyes dropped to my mouth.

I forgot how to breathe.

The lip balm Hannah had put on me after practice was still there, faint and soft. I had forgotten about it until that moment. Or maybe I had remembered all along and pretended I had not.

Benny leaned closer.

Not fast.

Not confident.

He moved like he was giving me every chance to stop him.

I should have.

Instead, I sat frozen, heart pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat.

His hand lifted, then hesitated near my cheek.

“Carl,” he whispered.

My name sounded different in his mouth.

Not like a joke.

Not like a problem.

Like a question.

For one second, I let myself imagine it.

His lips on mine. His hand warm against my face. The rain hiding us from the rest of the world. No hallway. No Trent. No Spirit Swap board. No laughing. Just Benny looking at me like he wanted something he was terrified to want.

Then I thought of the gym.

The bleachers.

The way he had said Coach is looking for you instead of Stop bothering him because I care.

I turned my face away.

Benny froze.

The space between us snapped back into shape.

"I can't," I said.

He pulled away immediately. "Okay."

The quickness of it almost hurt more.

"I'm sorry," I said, though I was not sure what I was apologizing for.

"No. Don't be." His voice was rough. "You don't have to be sorry."

"I just—"

"I know."

"You don't."

He looked at me. "Then tell me."

I wanted to.

That was the worst part.

I wanted to tell him about Cleo. About the name. About how the girl in Hannah's mirror had felt less like a costume every time

I saw her. About how I was scared he liked the joke or the secret or the strange thrill of wanting someone he could still deny in public.

But the words were too big.

So I said the smaller truth.

"I can't be something you only look at when no one else can see."

Benny went very still.

The rain kept falling.

Finally, he nodded once. "You're right."

"I know."

A sad smile crossed his face. "You usually do."

That almost broke me.

He drove me the rest of the way home in silence.

Real silence this time.

When the truck stopped at the curb in front of my house, I unbuckled my seat belt but did not open the door right away.

"Benny," I said.

He looked at me.

The porch light from my house cut across his face, leaving half of it in shadow.

"Do the worksheet," I said.

His mouth curved faintly. "Okay."

“And don’t get a concussion at practice.”

“I’ll try.”

“Full enthusiasm.”

This time, the smile reached his eyes.

I got out before I could change my mind.

The next morning, Friday, Spirit Day, Cedar Forest lost its entire mind.

Everyone wore red and gold. Face paint appeared before eight in the morning. The band marched through the hallway between classes, which seemed educationally questionable. Teachers gave up on normal instruction by second period. The pep rally was scheduled for the last hour of the day, followed by early dismissal before the Homecoming game that night.

My name on the Spirit Swap board had a final total taped beside it.

WINNER: CARL WHITE – CHEER SWAP – \$612.80

Six hundred twelve dollars and eighty cents.

I had won.

Won was the wrong word.

Victims did not win.

Hannah found me by the board and handed me a coffee.

“I brought emotional support caffeine,” she said.

“I want to throw up.”

"That too."

"What?"

"I also have mints."

I stared at the winner sign. "This is happening."

"It is."

"I could still run."

"You could."

"Would you stop me?"

"Physically or emotionally?"

"Hannah."

She softened. "I would not force you. You know that."

I did know.

That made everything worse, because if I did it now, it was not because Hannah dragged me. It was because some part of me had chosen to keep walking toward the gym.

Madison appeared with a clipboard. "There you are. Final rehearsal in ten."

"I have class."

"No one has class today. They have school-themed chaos in classrooms." She looked me over. "You brought the black shorts?"

"In my bag."

“Good. Uniform fitting in the cheer room. Hannah, you handle makeup after lunch.”

My stomach flipped. “Makeup?”

Madison gave me a look. “The gym lights wash everyone out.”

“I am not everyone.”

“No, you’re currently the biggest fundraiser in Spirit Swap.” Madison tapped her clipboard. “Congratulations.”

“I hate this school.”

“Use that energy.”

She walked away.

Hannah sipped her coffee. “She’s bonding with you.”

“She has the warmth of a parking ticket.”

“She respects you.”

“That cannot possibly be what respect feels like.”

But the final rehearsal went better than I expected.

Maybe fear had burned away my ability to overthink. Maybe the repetition had finally worked. Maybe the part of me that moved in counts had begun trusting the music more than the audience.

I entered with the back line.

Step-touch. Step-touch. Clap. Turn.

High V. Low V. Clean.

The cheer squad moved around me, polished and bright. Hannah stayed near my left side, close enough that I could feel her presence without looking. Madison called corrections from the front, sharp as ever but not unkind.

When the routine ended, a few cheerleaders clapped.

Not everyone.

But enough.

I bent over, hands on my knees, trying to breathe.

Hannah bumped my shoulder. "You nailed it."

"I survived it."

"Same thing."

Across the gym, near the bleachers, I saw Benny.

He stood alone this time, football jersey over a white compression shirt, helmet hanging from one hand. His eyes were on me.

After last night in the truck, the sight of him hurt.

He gave me the same small nod as before.

Private.

Proud.

I looked away first.

Then I saw Trent.

He was near the gym doors, phone in hand.

At first, that did not mean anything. Everyone had phones. Everyone recorded everything during Homecoming week.

But something about the way he angled it made my stomach drop.

He was not filming the whole gym.

He was filming me.

“Hey,” I said.

Hannah turned. “What?”

I nodded toward the door.

By the time she looked, Trent had already lowered the phone and disappeared into the hallway.

Her face went pale with anger. “I’ll handle it.”

“Hannah —”

But she was already moving.

I followed, but Madison caught my arm. “Uniform fitting. Now.”

“I need to —”

“Carl.” Her voice dropped. “If you chase Trent in the hallway, you give him exactly what he wants.”

I hated that she was right.

The cheer room was a storage room connected to the gym by a short hallway. It smelled like hairspray, deodorant, and fabric softener. Uniforms hung in garment bags along one wall. Boxes of bows, signs, pom-poms, and old spirit props filled the shelves.

Madison handed me a Cedar Forest cheer shell top and skirt.

My body went cold.

The uniform was red and white with gold trim, crisp and bright and unmistakably real. Not a joke drawn on a sticky note. Not a vague idea on a board. A real cheer uniform that real cheerleaders wore under real gym lights.

I stared at the skirt.

Madison's voice softened. "You can wear black compression shorts under it."

"I know."

"Hannah said you were worried."

"I am always worried."

"That tracks."

I expected her to leave me alone, but she lingered near the door, looking uncharacteristically unsure.

"What?" I asked.

She sighed. "I know this started as a joke."

My fingers tightened around the uniform.

“But if you go out there,” she said, “you go out as part of my squad. For the routine, you’re not a punchline. You’re a Cedar Forest cheerleader. Got it?”

My throat tightened.

Madison looked annoyed by her own sincerity. “Don’t make a big thing out of it.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.”

She left the room.

I changed behind a folding privacy screen Hannah had dragged in earlier. The compression shorts helped. The fitted shell top helped less. The skirt felt like a lightning strike.

When I stepped out, Hannah had returned.

Her face was tense, but the moment she saw me, it changed.

“Oh,” she said.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “No.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You said oh.”

“It was a supportive oh.”

“It was a terrifying oh.”

She walked around me once, adjusting the hem and smoothing the shell top. “It fits.”

“That is not the problem.”

“You look like you belong in it.”

That was the problem.

I looked toward the small mirror propped against the shelf.

The person staring back was not fully Cleo. Not yet. My hair was still mine, messy from practice. My face was bare except for tinted balm. My posture was stiff with panic.

But the uniform changed everything.

It made the possibility visible.

My legs looked different under the skirt. My waist looked different. My shoulders still felt too broad, my face still felt caught between worlds, but there was a shape there I had not expected. A version of me trying to step forward through the wrongness.

I whispered, “This is so weird.”

Hannah stood behind me. “Bad weird?”

I looked at the reflection.

Cleo felt close.

So close it scared me.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Hannah’s eyes shone, but she blinked it back. “Okay.”

Madison knocked once and opened the door. “We need him in five.”

Him.

Again, the word scraped.

But Madison's eyes went to my face, and something like understanding flickered there.

"We need Carl in five," she corrected.

It was not perfect.

But it was something.

Then Hannah's phone buzzed.

She looked down.

Her expression vanished.

"What?" I asked.

She turned the screen away too fast.

"Hannah."

She looked at Madison. "Can you give us a second?"

Madison stiffened. "What happened?"

Hannah did not answer.

My stomach dropped. "What happened?"

Hannah's phone buzzed again.

Then mine did.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

From inside my backpack across the room.

The sound was small but horrible.

Madison moved first. She grabbed my backpack and pulled out my phone.

The screen was full of notifications.

Texts.

Group chat messages.

Social media alerts.

Unknown numbers.

My hands went numb.

Hannah looked like she wanted to throw up. "Carl..."

I took the phone.

The top notification was from a school gossip account everyone knew and no one admitted following.

CEDAR FOREST CONFESSIONS

The post had already been shared dozens of times.

A photo filled the screen.

Me.

In the cheer room mirror.

Wearing the uniform.

Lip balm on my mouth, skirt visible, face pale and startled. Hannah's hand was caught in the frame adjusting my shoulder seam. The angle was slightly high, taken through the narrow window in the cheer room door before Madison had closed the hallway entrance.

The caption read:

SPIRIT SWAP PREVIEW 🧛 CARL WHITE IS TAKING THIS WAY TOO SERIOUSLY

Under it, comments were multiplying.

NO WAY

bro actually looks into it

CARLIE WHITE ERA

is this why hayes keeps defending him?

wait why is he kinda —

I stopped reading.

The room tilted.

Madison cursed under her breath and snatched the phone from my hand. "That little —"

Hannah was already moving toward the door. "It was Trent."

"How do you know?" Madison asked.

"Because Mason just texted me." Hannah held up her phone with shaking hands. "Trent nominated Carl. Trent's been taking

pictures all week. Mason finally admitted it because Trent was bragging that he had the ‘perfect post’ before the pep rally.”

My ears rang.

Trent nominated Carl.

Trent had been taking pictures all week.

The photo was online.

The whole school had seen.

Everyone.

Benny.

My teachers.

My parents, eventually.

My parents.

My breath caught so violently it hurt.

“I need to go,” I said.

Hannah turned. “Carl, wait —”

“I need to go.”

“Let me help you change.”

“No.”

“Carl —”

“No!”

The word cracked through the room.

Both Hannah and Madison froze.

I grabbed my backpack, shoved my phone inside without looking at it, and stumbled behind the privacy screen. My hands shook so hard I could barely pull the shell top over my head. The skirt caught on my shorts. I yanked too hard and nearly tore something. I did not care.

Hannah stood on the other side of the screen, voice breaking. "Carl, please let me drive you home."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

"I said I'm fine!"

The oldest lie in the English language had become a scream.

I pulled on my jeans, hoodie, and sneakers. The tinted balm still sat on my lips. I wiped it with my sleeve until my mouth hurt.

When I came out, Hannah looked devastated.

Madison stood by the door, jaw tight, phone in hand. "I'm getting Principal Harris."

"Don't," I said.

Her eyes sharpened. "Carl."

"Not now."

"But—"

"I can't be here."

The hallway outside the cheer room was already different.

People knew.

I could feel it before anyone spoke.

A freshman near the water fountain looked at me, then quickly looked down at his phone. Two girls whispered near the gym entrance. Someone laughed too loudly from behind me.

My phone kept buzzing inside my backpack.

I walked faster.

Hannah followed. "Carl, stop. Please."

I did not stop.

If I stopped, I would fall apart.

Near the side exit, Benny appeared.

He must have come from the locker room because his hair was damp and his jersey was half untucked. His face was pale with anger.

"Carl," he said.

I kept walking.

He moved into my path. "I just saw it. I'm going to kill him."

"Move."

"Please, just —"

"Move, Benny."

His expression broke.

For a second, he looked like the boy in the truck again. Not the quarterback. Not the hallway king. Just Benny, scared and useless and too late.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I tried to stop him."

That stopped me.

Slowly, I looked up.

"What?"

His eyes flicked to Hannah, then back to me. "I knew Trent was messing around with pictures. I didn't know he had that one. I told him to delete everything. I thought he did."

The words hit one by one.

I knew.

I told him.

I thought.

My chest went hollow.

"You knew he had pictures?"

Benny's face tightened. "Not like that."

"You knew he was taking pictures of me?"

"I found out yesterday."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I was trying to handle it."

That phrase.

Handle it.

Like I was a situation.

A problem.

A thing he could manage quietly so no one had to know how much he cared.

I laughed once, sharp and horrible. "Of course you were."

"Carl –"

"No. You don't get to be sorry now."

"I am sorry."

"You knew."

"I didn't want to scare you before the pep rally."

I stared at him.

The hallway blurred at the edges.

"You don't get to decide what I know about my own humiliation."

He flinched.

Good.

This time, I meant good.

Hannah whispered my name, but I barely heard her.

Benny stepped closer, voice low and desperate. "I was trying to protect you."

“No,” I said. “You were trying to protect the version of this where nobody knew you cared.”

His face went still.

There it was.

The truth neither of us could put back.

People were watching now.

Not many, but enough.

Benny looked around once, and I saw the instinct in him. The fear. The calculation. The quarterback brain measuring the hallway, the witnesses, the damage.

That hurt worse than everything.

I stepped around him.

This time, he let me go.

I made it to my car before I started shaking so badly I could not get the key into the ignition.

My phone buzzed again.

And again.

And again.

I turned it off.

The drive home was a blur of traffic lights and rain clouds that had not broken yet. My hands gripped the steering wheel too tightly. My mouth still burned from scrubbing away the lip balm. My backpack sat on the passenger seat like a bomb.

When I got home, I did not park in the driveway.

I parked at the curb, because some panicked part of me thought that would make me less noticeable.

Then I ran inside.

“Carl?” my mom called from the kitchen. “You’re home early.”

I froze in the entryway.

The house smelled like coffee and lemon cleaner. Normal. Too normal.

“I don’t feel good,” I said.

My voice sounded wrong.

Mom appeared in the kitchen doorway. “What happened?”

“Nothing. I just need to lie down.”

“Are you sick?”

“Headache.”

I started up the stairs before she could ask anything else.

In my room, I locked the door.

Then I moved.

Not thoughtfully. Not carefully.

I tore open my closet and pulled out the shoebox with the flats. I grabbed the sweater dress, the tights, the perfume. I opened my desk drawer and snatched the lip gloss and the folded piece of

paper with Cleo's name. The makeup pouch from Briarwood Mall was still in my backpack. I dumped it onto the bed, then shoved everything into an old duffel bag from freshman-year gym class.

It was not enough.

The room still felt full of evidence.

My face in the mirror.

The ghost of the uniform.

The post.

The comments.

Carlie White Era.

Is this why Hayes keeps defending him?

I grabbed a tissue and scrubbed my lips again, even though there was nothing left.

My skin hurt.

Good.

Pain made sense.

I carried the duffel bag to the back of my closet, behind board games, an old sleeping bag, and a box of winter clothes. I shoved it deep enough that no one would find it unless they were looking.

Then I took the folded paper out again.

Cleo White.

I held it in my hand for a long time.

I should have torn it up.

That would have been the smart thing. The clean thing. The safe thing.

Instead, I folded it smaller and tucked it inside the zip pocket of the duffel bag.

Then I buried the bag again.

A knock sounded at my door.

I nearly fell backward.

"Carl?" Mom's voice was careful. "Can I come in?"

"Not now."

There was a pause.

"Mrs. Wallace just called me."

The floor seemed to drop out from under me.

Mrs. Wallace lived three houses down. Her daughter, Emily, was a junior at Cedar Forest and followed every school gossip account like it was a public service.

My mouth went dry.

Mom continued, "She said there was something online from school."

I closed my eyes.

"Carl," she said, softer now. "Open the door."

I looked around the room.

The closet door was still open.

I crossed the room and kicked it shut.

“Carl.”

I unlocked the door.

Mom stood in the hallway, phone in her hand, worry drawn across her face. She was still wearing her work blouse and slippers, like she had been in the middle of emails or laundry when someone else’s mother dropped a grenade into our house.

Behind her, Dad appeared at the top of the stairs.

He must have come home early.

Or Mom had called him.

Either way, his face told me he knew something.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

I hated how normal the question sounded.

I hated that there was no answer small enough to fit it.

“It’s stupid,” I said.

Mom looked at me carefully. “Is the photo real?”

My throat closed.

Dad’s eyebrows drew together. “What photo?”

Mom turned the phone toward him.

I looked away.

Dad took the phone.

The silence that followed was worse than yelling.

I stared at my carpet.

At a loose thread near my desk chair.

At anything but his face.

Finally, Dad said, "Carl."

There was no anger in it yet.

That made it worse.

"It was for Spirit Swap," I said quickly. "The Homecoming fundraiser. People nominate students to switch roles. I got nominated for cheer, and Hannah was helping me practice, and someone took a picture and posted it. It's not a big deal."

My words came too fast.

Too rehearsed.

Too desperate.

Mom stepped into my room. "Someone took this without your permission?"

"Yes."

"That is a big deal."

"It's not. I mean, it is, but it's just school being stupid."

Dad looked at the phone again. "You were wearing a cheer uniform."

"For the fundraiser."

“And makeup?”

“For the gym lights,” I said.

The lie sounded pathetic even to me.

Mom’s eyes moved to my mouth.

I had scrubbed too hard. My lips were red, irritated.

Her expression changed.

Not in disgust.

In recognition.

Like she had just found the edge of a much larger shape.

“Carl,” she said softly. “Is that all it was?”

My heart slammed.

“Yes.”

She looked around my room.

I hated the way her eyes moved. Not suspicious like a detective. Worried like a mother.

That was worse.

“Yes,” I repeated. “It was just a stupid school thing.”

Dad exhaled and handed the phone back to Mom. “Then why did Mrs. Wallace say people are calling you names online?”

“Because they’re idiots.”

“Are you being bullied?”

I laughed once. "That feels like a yes-or-no question from an anti-bullying assembly."

"Carl."

"Yes," I snapped. "Okay? Yes. People are being awful. Are we done?"

Mom flinched.

Guilt hit immediately, but I could not stop.

"I didn't ask for this. I didn't put my name on that board. I didn't tell people to donate money. I didn't tell Trent to take pictures. I didn't ask everyone to look at me like I'm some kind of freak."

My voice broke on the last word.

The room went quiet.

Dad looked stunned.

Mom's eyes filled with tears, which made me want to run all over again.

"No one thinks you're a freak," she said.

I laughed, harsh and wet. "You haven't read the comments."

Dad's face hardened. "Who posted it?"

"I don't know."

I did know.

But if I said Trent's name, then this became a parent problem, a principal problem, a football problem, a community problem. I

could already imagine Dad calling the school, Mom emailing screenshots, Principal Harris making serious announcements about digital citizenship while the entire school knew exactly who it was about.

No.

I could not survive that yet.

Mom took another step into my room.

My pulse spiked.

The closet.

The duffel bag.

The makeup.

The dress.

Cleo.

"I just want to be alone," I said.

"I know," she said. "But I need to understand what's happening."

"There's nothing to understand."

"Carl—"

"It was a fundraiser!"

My voice cracked again.

Dad crossed his arms. "Don't shout at your mother."

"I'm not—"

“You are.”

The old pattern snapped into place. Dad firm. Mom worried. Me cornered. Everyone playing the family roles we knew.

Except the room had changed.

Because somewhere behind the closet door, Cleo White was hidden in a duffel bag.

Mom’s eyes shifted toward the closet.

I moved without thinking, stepping slightly in front of it.

She saw that.

Of course she saw that.

Her face went very still.

“What’s in the closet?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

Dad looked between us. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said again.

Mom’s voice stayed gentle, which somehow made it unbearable. “Carl.”

“It’s just clothes.”

“What clothes?”

“Old clothes.”

She walked toward the closet.

Panic exploded through me.

“Mom, don’t.”

She stopped.

The room froze.

That was the confession.

Not the photo. Not the uniform. Not the makeup in the mirror.

That one word.

Don’t.

Mom turned back to me slowly.

Her face had gone pale.

Dad looked confused now. More confused than angry.

“Carl,” he said, “what is going on?”

I could not answer.

Mom looked at the closet again, then at me.

Her voice was barely above a whisper. “This isn’t just a school fundraiser, is it?”

My vision blurred.

I wanted to say yes.

I wanted to lie so well the whole room went back to normal.

I wanted to be Carl White in the way they understood. Their son. Their quiet senior. Their honor-roll kid. Their boy who kept his secrets small enough to survive.

But the photo existed.

The board existed.

Benny's truck existed.

Hannah's mirror existed.

Cleo White existed, folded into a scrap of paper and hidden in the back of my closet.

I opened my mouth.

Nothing came out.

Mom's eyes filled with a kind of fear I had never seen on her face before.

Not fear of me.

Fear for me.

Dad said my name again, but it sounded far away.

I stared at the floor, throat tight, hands shaking, and realized that the secret I had barely admitted to myself had already started escaping.

And I had no idea how to stop it.

CHAPTER 5

MY MOTHER DID not open the closet. That should have made me feel relieved. It did not. Somehow, her stopping was worse. Her hand hovered near the closet door, close enough that I could imagine the whole disaster unfolding: the old duffel bag dragged out from behind winter clothes, the makeup pouch unzipped, the black flats, the sweater dress, the perfume, the lip gloss, the folded scrap of paper with **Cleo White** written in my own handwriting.

But she did not open it.

She looked at me instead.

That was worse.

“Carl,” she said softly, “what am I going to find if I look in there?”

My throat tightened.

My dad stood behind her, arms crossed, his face caught somewhere between confusion and worry. He looked like a man who had walked into the wrong room of his own house and could not find the light switch.

“Nothing,” I said.

The lie was pathetic.

Everyone in the room knew it.

Mom's eyes flicked toward my red, scrubbed mouth. "Is it makeup?"

My stomach dropped so hard I thought I might actually be sick.

Dad's expression changed. Not anger exactly. More like surprise that had nowhere to go.

"Makeup?" he repeated.

I wanted the floor to split open.

Mom turned slightly toward him. "Not now."

"What do you mean, not now?" he asked. "I'm trying to understand what's going on."

"So am I."

"There's nothing to understand," I said.

My voice came out sharper than I meant it to.

Mom looked back at me. "Honey, there is clearly something to understand."

Honey.

She had called me that five minutes earlier, and it had felt normal. Now it felt dangerous. Tenderness was dangerous when you were trying not to fall apart.

I backed toward my desk. "It's just Spirit Swap. I told you."

"Then why did you panic when I looked at your closet?"

"Because you're going through my stuff."

"I haven't touched anything."

"You were going to."

"Because you looked terrified."

"I am terrified!" I snapped.

The words cracked through the room.

Everything went silent.

Dad's posture shifted. Mom went very still.

I had not meant to say it.

But once the truth was out, it kept going.

"I am terrified because everybody at school has seen that picture, and they're laughing, and there are comments, and people keep calling me things, and I don't even know what half of this means yet, but now you know something is wrong, and Dad is looking at me like I'm about to confess to a crime, and I can't breathe."

My voice broke at the end.

Not dramatically. Not beautifully. It just failed.

Mom's face crumpled.

Dad looked stunned.

"I'm not looking at you like that," he said.

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

“You don’t even know what you’re looking at.”

He opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

That hurt because it was proof.

Mom took one careful step closer. “Carl, listen to me. You are not in trouble.”

I laughed, and it sounded awful. “That’s not true.”

“It is.”

“No. Maybe not with you. Maybe not officially. But I’m in trouble. At school. Online. With everyone. With myself.” I pressed both hands to my face, then remembered my raw mouth and dropped them. “I don’t know how to explain something I don’t even understand.”

Mom’s eyes filled again.

Dad dragged a hand over his jaw and looked away toward my window. Outside, the late-afternoon sky had gone gray. It made my room feel smaller.

“Is this...” Dad stopped.

I waited, heart hammering.

He tried again. “Is this about girls’ clothes?”

The sentence hit the room and lay there, ugly in its simplicity.

I looked down.

"I don't know," I said.

It was the most honest answer I had.

Dad exhaled. "What does that mean?"

"It means I don't know."

"But you have clothes in there?"

I did not answer.

"Carl."

Mom turned on him. "Give him a second."

"I am giving him a second. I'm asking because he's my son, and there's a photo of him online in a cheer uniform, and now you're saying there might be makeup and clothes hidden in his closet. I think I'm allowed to ask questions."

My son.

The words should have comforted me.

They did not.

They landed like a door closing.

"I'm still me," I said.

Dad looked at me quickly. "I didn't say you weren't."

"But you're scared I'm not."

His face changed.

There it was again.

Proof.

Mom sat down carefully on the edge of my bed. "I'm scared because you're hurting."

"You're scared because this is weird."

She swallowed. "I don't think you're weird."

"You don't know what I am."

"No," she admitted. "Maybe I don't. But I know you're my child."

Dad rubbed the back of his neck. "That's not the issue."

Mom's head snapped toward him. "Then what is?"

He looked frustrated now, but not in the explosive way I had feared. More helpless. More afraid than angry.

"The issue is safety," he said. "The issue is people at school posting pictures of him. The issue is kids being cruel. The issue is college applications and social media and people in this town talking like they always do. The issue is that once something is online —"

"I know," I said.

"You don't," Dad said. "You're eighteen. You think you know, but you don't understand how fast people can ruin things."

The unfairness of that made my chest burn.

"I didn't post it."

"I know that."

"I didn't ask for it."

"I know."

"Then why does it sound like I'm the problem?"

Dad went quiet.

Mom closed her eyes for a second.

I could tell he regretted it. I could tell he had not meant it that way.

It still landed that way.

He sat down in my desk chair without asking. Suddenly he looked older than he had that morning.

"You're not the problem," he said finally. "I'm sorry. I'm just trying to catch up."

I hated that his apology made me want to cry.

I shrugged because shrugging was easier than forgiveness.

Mom looked toward the closet again. "Do you want to show us?"

"No."

"Okay."

The answer came too quickly.

I looked at her, surprised.

She nodded once, like she was making herself accept it. "Okay. Not right now."

Dad looked like he wanted to object, but Mom gave him a look I had seen only a few times in my life. The kind that ended conversations.

He stayed quiet.

My phone was still off in my backpack, but I could feel it anyway. A dead weight. A whole school of voices waiting.

"What happens now?" I asked.

Mom wiped under one eye. "Now we call the school."

"No."

"Carl —"

"No. Please."

"Someone took a picture of you changing."

"Not changing. I was already dressed."

"That does not make it okay."

"I know, but if you call the school, it gets bigger."

Dad leaned forward. "It is already big."

"You don't understand." My voice rose again, but this time it was panic, not anger. "If parents get involved, if Principal Harris makes some announcement, if everyone knows my mom and dad called, they'll never let it go."

Mom looked pained. "So what are we supposed to do? Let them hurt you?"

"I don't know."

There it was again.

The only truth I had.

Dad stood and paced once toward the window, then back.

“Who posted it?”

I stared at my shoes.

“Carl,” he said.

“I don’t know.”

Mom studied my face. “Do you know?”

I hated mothers.

Not really.

But I hated that mine could still read me when I was trying my hardest to become unreadable.

“I think it was Trent Keller,” I said.

Dad’s eyes sharpened. “Football player?”

I nodded.

“Benny’s friend?” Mom asked.

The mention of Benny made my chest twist.

“Yes.”

Dad’s mouth tightened. “Of course.”

“It’s not Benny.”

The defense came out before I could stop it.

Both my parents looked at me.

Heat crawled up my neck.

"I mean, Benny didn't post it," I said quickly. "Trent did. Or probably did."

Mom's expression shifted, but she did not ask.

Dad did. "Where does Benny fit into this?"

"He doesn't."

Another terrible lie.

Dad stared at me.

I sat on the edge of my bed because my knees suddenly felt unreliable.

"He's my lab partner," I said.

Mom's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"For Chemistry. He's failing, and I'm tutoring him."

Dad looked unimpressed. "And?"

"And he tried to stop Trent."

"Did he?"

"Yes."

Mostly.

Too quietly.

Too late.

Not enough.

Dad seemed to hear everything I did not say. "But he didn't."

I looked away.

Mom's voice softened. "Carl, is this boy part of why this hurts so much?"

I wanted to disappear.

"No."

"Okay."

"You keep saying okay when you don't believe me."

"I'm saying okay because I'm not trying to corner you."

That made me feel worse.

Dad looked at the door, then at his watch, like time had become part of the emergency. "The pep rally is this afternoon, right?"

I nodded.

"You're not going back."

My head snapped up. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Dad —"

"No. Absolutely not. Not after this."

Something in me reacted before I understood it.

A hard, sudden refusal.

"I have to."

Mom stared at me.

Dad looked just as surprised. "Excuse me?"

"I have to go back."

"Carl, you just came home shaking."

"I know."

"There is a photo of you all over school."

"I know."

"Then why would you go back and give them more?"

Because if I stayed home, Trent won.

Because if I let the photo be the last image of me, then I stayed a joke forever.

Because Cleo existed in my closet, and I did not know what that meant, but I knew I did not want her buried because Trent Keller was cruel.

Because Benny had looked at me in his truck like he wanted me and feared himself for it.

Because Hannah had said we could kill the joke.

Because I was tired of everyone else deciding what my name meant.

I could not say any of that.

So I said, "Because I'm already on the program."

Dad stared at me. "That's your reason?"

"No. But it's the only one I can explain."

Mom looked at me for a long moment.

Then she said quietly, "Do you want to do the pep rally?"

Dad turned to her. "Don't encourage this."

"I'm asking."

"I don't know," I said.

Mom nodded. "Okay."

Dad threw his hands slightly. "There's that word again."

She stood. "Can you give us a minute?"

"What?"

"Please."

Dad looked between us, then exhaled hard. "Fine."

He walked out into the hallway, but he did not go far. I could feel him just beyond the door, worried and frustrated and listening badly.

Mom closed the door halfway.

She sat beside me on the bed.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

Then she said, "When you were little, you used to hide behind the couch during birthday parties."

I blinked. "What?"

“Your own birthday parties. Other kids would come over, and once everyone started singing or clapping or looking at you, you’d hide.”

I looked down at my hands.

“I thought you were shy,” she continued. “Maybe you were. But now I wonder how many times you were trying to survive being seen.”

My throat tightened.

“I don’t know what’s happening,” she said. “I wish I did. I wish I had the perfect thing to say, but I don’t. I am scared. Your father is scared too, even if he sounds like a brick wall when he’s scared.”

Despite everything, I almost smiled.

Mom nudged my knee gently with hers. “But I don’t want you to think my fear means shame.”

I looked at her.

She was crying now, quietly.

“I’m not ashamed of you,” she said.

That was the first thing that broke me.

Not completely.

Just enough that I had to look away and press my lips together until they hurt.

“I don’t know what I am,” I whispered.

"You don't have to know today."

"It feels like I do."

"Because everyone else is trying to decide for you."

I nodded.

She reached for my hand but stopped just short, letting me choose.

After a second, I took it.

Her fingers closed around mine.

"Can I ask one thing?" she said.

I tensed.

"You don't have to answer if you can't."

"Okay."

She swallowed. "When you saw yourself in the uniform... was it only awful?"

My breath caught.

The room went very quiet.

I wanted to lie.

I could not.

"No," I whispered.

Mom closed her eyes like the answer hurt and helped at the same time.

When she opened them, she squeezed my hand. "Then we need to be careful with you."

That undid me more than any lecture could have.

Not careful about me.

Careful with me.

I wiped my face quickly, embarrassed by the tears that had finally escaped.

"I don't want Dad to hate me," I said.

Mom's expression crumpled. "Oh, honey. He doesn't."

"He looked at me like —"

"He looked scared. There's a difference."

"It felt the same."

"I know."

From the hallway, Dad shifted. The floor creaked.

Mom glanced toward the door, then back at me. "He needs time. But time does not mean rejection."

I wanted to believe her.

I was not there yet.

My phone was still off.

The school was still waiting.

The pep rally was still coming.

And somehow, after all of that, the worst part was that I still wanted to know whether Benny had texted.

Mom stood slowly. "I'm going to talk to your father."

"Okay."

"Do you want me to call Hannah?"

"No."

"She's probably worried."

"I know."

"You should turn your phone on."

I laughed weakly. "That sounds like terrible advice."

"It is terrible advice. But hiding alone in your room might be worse."

She kissed the top of my head.

She had done that my whole life.

For once, I did not pull away.

After she left, I sat there for maybe five minutes before I turned my phone on.

It exploded.

Messages from Hannah.

Missed calls from Hannah.

Texts from Madison.

A voicemail from Ms. Powell.

Unknown numbers I deleted without opening.

Benny.

So many from Benny.

carl please answer

i'm sorry

hannah said you got home

trent's saying he didn't post it but he's lying

i should've told you

please just tell me you're safe

The last one had been sent three minutes ago.

I stared at it until my eyes burned.

Then I replied:

I'm home.

He answered immediately.

thank god

Then:

i'm handling trent

I almost threw the phone.

I typed:

Stop handling things without me.

The three dots appeared.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

you're right

Another message:

come back if you can. if you want. hannah says you don't have to.

Then:

i'll understand if you don't want to see me

I stared at that one for a long time.

Finally, I wrote:

I don't know yet.

His answer came slower this time.

okay

Then:

i'll be here

That was not fair.

That was the kind of message that made hope feel like a trap.

I found Dad downstairs in the kitchen with Mom. They were speaking in low voices that stopped the second I appeared.

"I'm going back," I said.

Dad's face tightened. "Carl —"

“I’m not saying I’m doing the pep rally. I’m saying I need to go back. Hannah has my stuff. Madison has the uniform. The school needs to take the post down. I can’t just sit here while everyone decides what happened.”

Mom looked at Dad.

Dad looked at me.

The silence stretched.

Finally, he said, “I’ll drive you.”

“No.”

His face hardened.

“I need to drive myself,” I said. “Please.”

He looked like that hurt.

Maybe it did.

But I needed one decision to belong to me.

Mom touched his arm.

Dad exhaled through his nose. “Text us when you get there.”

“I will.”

“And if anyone threatens you —”

“I’ll tell someone.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

He nodded once, stiffly.

As I turned to leave, he said, "Carl."

I stopped.

His voice was rougher. "I don't hate you."

I could not look at him.

If I did, I would cry again.

"I know," I said.

I was not sure I did.

But I wanted to.

Cedar Forest felt different when I came back.

The parking lot was full, but classes had mostly dissolved into pre-pep-rally chaos. Students in red and gold drifted between the gym, cafeteria, and hallways with the restless energy of people waiting for something to happen.

Something had already happened.

Me.

I stepped through the side entrance near the gym, and the first person I saw was Hannah.

She ran at me so fast I barely had time to brace before she threw her arms around me.

"I'm sorry," she said into my shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

I stood stiffly for one second.

Then I hugged her back.

"It wasn't you."

"I should've seen him. I should've checked the door. I should've —"

"You cannot control every awful guy with a phone."

"I could try."

Despite everything, I laughed weakly.

She pulled back and gripped my shoulders. Her eyes were red. That scared me more than if she had been angry.

"Are your parents okay?" she asked.

"No."

"Are you okay?"

"No."

"Manageable no?"

I breathed in.

Out.

"Maybe."

She nodded like that was enough.

Madison appeared behind her, clipboard gone, phone in hand. "Principal Harris is trying to get the post removed. Student council took down the Spirit Swap comments. Trent is denying everything."

"Of course he is," I said.

“Mason told Coach Daniels what happened.”

That surprised me. “Mason?”

Hannah nodded. “He felt guilty.”

“Now?”

“Apparently guilt has poor timing.”

Madison’s mouth tightened. “Coach pulled Trent and Benny into the athletic office.”

My stomach flipped. “Benny?”

“He went after Trent in the locker room.”

I froze.

“What does ‘went after’ mean?”

“Not hit,” Hannah said quickly. “Not exactly. There was yelling.”

Madison gave her a look.

“Okay,” Hannah amended, “there was shoving. But not a fight-fight.”

“That is not comforting.”

Before anyone could say more, voices rose from the hallway near the locker rooms.

Hannah and Madison both turned.

I should have stayed where I was.

I did not.

The hallway outside the gym was crowded with football players, cheerleaders, and students waiting for the pep rally doors to open. At the far end, near the athletic office, Trent Keller stood with his backpack over one shoulder, face flushed with anger.

Benny stood in front of him.

Coach Daniels, a square man in a Cedar Forest polo, stood nearby with his arms crossed. Mason hovered near the lockers looking miserable.

Trent saw me first.

His mouth twisted.

“Well,” he said loudly, “there she is.”

The hallway went quiet in waves.

My whole body turned cold.

Hannah started forward, but Madison grabbed her wrist.

Benny did not move.

For one second, I thought he would do what he always did. Make a careful comment. Use a football excuse. Handle it in a way that left himself an exit.

Then Trent looked right at me and added, “You wearing the skirt under that hoodie, White?”

Someone laughed.

Only one person.

But enough.

Benny turned.

Slowly.

“What did you say?” he asked.

Trent rolled his eyes. “Relax. It’s a joke.”

Benny stepped closer. “No. Say it again.”

Coach Daniels warned, “Hayes.”

Benny did not look away from Trent.

Trent scoffed. “Dude, what is your problem?”

“You are,” Benny said.

The hallway held its breath.

Trent glanced around, realizing he had an audience. He lifted his chin. “You’re really doing this over him?”

Him.

Again.

Benny’s eyes flicked to me.

Then back to Trent.

“Yes,” he said.

The word hit me so hard I forgot where I was.

Benny’s voice rose, not into a shout, but into something clear enough for everyone nearby to hear.

"You took pictures of him without permission. You posted them because you thought humiliating someone made you interesting. It doesn't. It makes you pathetic."

Trent's face darkened. "Watch it."

"No, you watch it," Benny said. "You've been running your mouth all week because Carl had the guts to walk into cheer practice while you can't even admit you're scared of being irrelevant."

A few football players murmured.

Coach Daniels said, "Hayes, that's enough."

"It isn't," Benny said.

That shocked everyone.

Even Coach.

Benny stepped back slightly, not retreating, but making sure he was not in Trent's face anymore. His hands were visible at his sides.

No fight.

No excuse.

Just him, choosing the words in public.

"I'm done laughing when you're cruel," Benny said. "I'm done pretending it's harmless. And if anyone on this team thinks what you did was funny, they can say it in front of me right now."

No one spoke.

Trent's eyes flashed with humiliation.

"You think this makes you look good?" he said. "Defending your little boyfriend?"

The word boyfriend tore through the hallway.

My breath caught.

Benny went very still.

There it was.

The open door.

The moment he could laugh, deny, step away, make it smaller.

His reputation handed him an exit.

He did not take it.

"If he was," Benny said, voice steady, "that would still be none of your business."

The hallway erupted.

Not loudly exactly. More like the entire social structure of Cedar Forest tripped over itself at once. People whispered. Someone gasped. Mason muttered, "Damn." Hannah's hand found mine and squeezed so hard it almost hurt.

I could not breathe.

Trent looked stunned.

Benny turned toward me then.

In front of everyone.

Not fully. Not dramatically. But enough.

His eyes met mine.

And for once, he did not look away first.

Coach Daniels stepped between the boys. "Office. Both of you. Now."

Trent cursed under his breath.

Benny did not move until Coach pointed toward the athletic office.

Then he walked past me.

He stopped for half a second beside me, close enough that I could hear his breathing.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

No joke.

No smirk.

No audience voice.

Then he kept walking.

I stood there with Hannah's hand wrapped around mine, my heart pounding so hard I thought the whole hallway could hear it.

Madison let out a slow breath. "Well."

Hannah looked at her. "That was new."

Madison nodded. "Very."

The story changed again before the pep rally even started.

That was the thing about high school. Everything moved at the speed of a text notification. By the time Hannah pulled me into an empty classroom to breathe, half the school had heard that Benny Hayes had defended me in front of the football team. By the time Madison checked her phone, someone had posted that Trent had been benched for the first quarter of the Homecoming game. By the time Principal Harris made the gossip account take down the leaked photo, screenshots had already spread everywhere.

Nothing disappeared online.

Adults said that like a warning.

Teenagers lived it like weather.

Hannah and I sat in the back of Ms. Powell's empty Chemistry room because it was the only place near the gym where nobody thought to look for us. The lab tables were clean. The safety posters looked absurdly calm.

I sat on the stool where Benny usually sat.

That felt dangerous, so I moved to mine.

Hannah noticed and said nothing.

For once, she seemed to understand that teasing would break the wrong thing.

Madison came in ten minutes later. "Pep rally is delayed thirty minutes."

I looked up. "Why?"

“Principal Harris is having a leadership moment.”

“That sounds awful.”

“It is. Also Coach Daniels is dealing with the football team, and student council is panicking because Spirit Swap got too real.”

Hannah snorted. “That’s one way to describe a privacy violation.”

Madison leaned against the teacher’s desk. “The uniform is still in the cheer room. But you don’t have to do it.”

I stared at her.

Madison Lee, captain of the Cedar Forest cheer squad, queen of posture and winged eyeliner, looked genuinely serious.

“Nobody would blame you,” she said.

I laughed once. “That is not true.”

“I would not blame you.”

That stopped me.

She looked uncomfortable with sincerity again, but she pushed through. “The squad wouldn’t either. Not after what happened.”

Hannah nodded. “She’s right.”

“You don’t have to prove anything,” Madison said.

Hannah sat forward. “Carl, listen to me. The photo was wrong. Trent was wrong. The board was wrong. None of this has to be fixed by you performing for people.”

I looked down at the black lab table.

The surface reflected the fluorescent lights in long white lines.

Benny had sat across from me here, pretending to be a disaster at Chemistry until I realized he was just scared of failing. He had asked questions. He had tried. He had made jokes because silence terrified him. He had hurt me, defended me, failed me, and then finally chosen me in a hallway full of people.

Hannah had put gloss in my hand and asked me what the girl in the mirror would be named.

Madison had said if I went out there, I went out as part of her squad.

My mom had asked if seeing myself in the uniform had been only awful.

The answer was still no.

That was the problem.

"No one would blame you," Hannah repeated.

"I would," I said.

She went quiet.

My voice sounded strange even to me. Softer. Clearer.

"I don't mean for backing out," I said. "I mean if I let Trent decide the ending."

Madison studied me.

Hannah's eyes filled again. "Carl."

"He wanted the photo to be the thing everyone remembered," I said. "Me looking scared. Half-ready. Like he caught me doing something wrong."

I swallowed.

"He did catch me scared. But he didn't catch me doing something wrong."

Neither of them spoke.

The room felt very still.

I looked at Hannah. "If I do it, I don't want to do it like a joke."

Her face changed.

Slowly, carefully, hope moved across it.

"How do you want to do it?" she asked.

My hands shook on my knees.

The answer was there.

Terrifying.

Waiting.

"I want to get ready," I said. "For real."

Hannah inhaled.

Madison stood straighter.

“Not as Carl in a cheer uniform,” I said, and my voice almost failed, but I forced it through. “Not as Spirit Swap’s joke. Not because they donated money. Not because I lost a bet or because I’m trying to prove I can take it.”

Hannah’s eyes were shining.

I looked down because if I looked at her too long, I would lose my nerve.

“I want to do it as Cleo.”

The name entered the room like a match being struck.

Small.

Bright.

Dangerous.

Madison did not react at first.

Then she looked at Hannah.

Hannah nodded once, tears slipping down her face now.

Madison looked back at me. To her credit, she did not ask what I meant. She did not make me explain the whole impossible thing under fluorescent Chemistry lights.

She just said, “Okay.”

I laughed shakily. “You too?”

“What?”

“You said okay.”

Madison shrugged. "It's a useful word."

Hannah wiped her face. "Hi, Cleo."

I closed my eyes.

The name hurt.

The name helped.

Both at once.

I opened my eyes and looked at Madison. "Is that allowed?"

She raised an eyebrow. "In my squad? Yes."

"I mean the school."

"The school can catch up."

That sounded like something Hannah would say, but sharper.

More Madison.

For the first time all day, I felt something close to strength.

Tiny.

Unsteady.

But real.

Then the classroom door opened.

Benny stood there.

His face was pale, his hair messy like he had run his hand through it too many times. He looked at Madison, then Hannah, then me.

"Sorry," he said. "Ms. Powell said you might be in here."

Hannah stood. "We can go."

"No," I said.

She stopped.

Benny stayed in the doorway like he was not sure he had permission to enter.

Maybe he did not.

Madison looked between us and made a quick decision. "Hannah, cheer room. We need to prep. Now."

Hannah hesitated.

"I'm okay," I said.

She searched my face.

Then she nodded. "Two minutes."

"Five," Madison said.

"Three," Hannah countered.

Madison rolled her eyes and pulled her into the hall.

The door closed.

Benny and I were alone in Chemistry.

For a second, neither of us moved.

He looked exhausted.

"What happened?" I asked.

“With Coach?”

“With everything.”

He leaned against the door, then seemed to realize that looked too casual and straightened. “Coach benched Trent for the first quarter. Maybe longer after they review everything. Principal Harris is making him take down anything he posted and give them his phone.”

“That won’t stop screenshots.”

“I know.”

“Then it’s not fixed.”

“I know.”

The repeated phrase should have annoyed me.

This time, it sounded like he understood.

He stepped farther into the room, stopping on the other side of the lab table. The same table where we had ruined a worksheet on the first day. The same table where we had learned how to stop ruining each other for five minutes at a time.

“My dad knows,” he said.

My stomach tightened. “About the photo?”

“About that. About Trent. About what I said in the hallway.”

“Oh.”

Benny laughed once, without humor. “Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“He said I was creating unnecessary drama before the biggest game of the season.”

I flinched.

Benny saw it and shook his head. “That’s not your fault.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“You looked like you thought it.”

“I’m good at guilt.”

“I noticed.”

He rubbed both hands over his face. “Coach said I need to keep my head in the game. My dad said scouts don’t like distractions. He said people are going to talk.”

My throat tightened. “They will.”

“Yeah.”

“You can still walk it back.”

The words hurt to say.

Benny looked at me.

I forced myself to keep going. “You could tell people you were just defending me because Trent crossed a line. You could say everyone made it weird. You could make some joke and be fine.”

His expression went still.

“Is that what you want?” he asked.

“No.”

The answer came too fast.

Too honest.

A little color returned to his face.

“But I don’t want you defending me because you feel guilty,”
I said. “Or because you almost kissed me and got confused.”

His eyes widened slightly.

I looked down at the table, heat rushing into my face.

There it was.

The almost-kiss.

Sitting between us beside the periodic table.

Benny’s voice dropped. “I wasn’t confused about wanting to
kiss you.”

My heart stumbled.

He took a breath. “I was confused about what that meant for
me. For you. For everything. But not about wanting it.”

I gripped the edge of the stool.

He came around the table slowly, stopping a few feet away.
Still careful. Still giving me room.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I looked up.

“I’m sorry for the hallway jokes,” he continued. “For making
you feel small because I liked getting your attention and didn’t

know what to do with it. I'm sorry for laughing when Trent aimed at you. I'm sorry for trying to handle things quietly because I was scared people would figure out I cared."

My throat closed.

He swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry I made my fear your problem."

That was the apology.

Not polished.

Not dramatic.

No excuse hiding inside it.

Just the truth.

I looked away because my eyes burned.

"You hurt me," I said.

"I know."

"You kept acting like you could choose me in private and survive me in public."

His face tightened. "I know."

"I can't do that."

"I don't want you to."

"You did yesterday."

"Yesterday I was a coward."

The word sat between us.

I looked back at him.

He did not flinch from it.

"I don't magically become brave because I said something in the hall," he said. "I'm still scared. My dad is furious. Coach is watching me like I might explode. Trent hates me. Half the school is probably deciding what I am now."

"What are you?"

He looked at me for a long moment.

"I don't know," he said. "But I know I'm on your side."

My chest ached.

"That sounds like a movie line," I whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Kind of."

"Was it a good one?"

I hated that I almost smiled.

"Don't ruin your apology."

"I'm trying not to."

"You're bad at it."

"I know."

There it was again.

But now it made me breathe easier.

Benny stepped one inch closer. "Hannah said you were going to the pep rally."

"She talks too much."

"She was crying, so I let it slide."

I smiled despite myself.

Then it faded.

"I'm not going as Carl," I said.

Benny went very still.

The classroom hummed around us. Fluorescent lights. Air conditioner. A distant burst of noise from the hallway.

I made myself look at him.

"I'm going as Cleo."

His eyes searched my face.

Not confused.

Not disgusted.

Not laughing.

Just careful.

Like he understood he had been handed something breakable.

"Cleo," he said.

My name in his voice nearly undid me.

I nodded.

"That's a beautiful name," he said.

The tears came so fast I hated myself for them.

I looked away, wiping at my face angrily.

Benny did not move closer. He did not touch me without permission. He just stood there and let the words be real.

"Does Hannah know?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Your parents?"

"My mom maybe guessed part of it. Not all. I don't even know all."

"That's okay."

I laughed wetly. "Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Because it is."

I looked at him.

He gave me the smallest smile. "Also because none of us know what else to say."

That was honest enough to help.

A knock sounded on the door.

Hannah cracked it open. "Three minutes became five. I'm being generous."

Benny stepped back immediately.

Hannah looked at me, then at him, then softened.

"You okay?" she asked me.

I nodded.

Benny looked at me one more time. "I'll be in the gym."

The sentence sounded ordinary.

It was not.

He was saying he would be there.

Where everyone could see.

"Okay," I said.

After he left, Hannah entered fully and shut the door behind her.

Her eyes moved over my face. "Good apology or bad apology?"

"Good."

"Damn. I wanted to stay mad."

"I'm still mad."

"Good. Balance."

I laughed shakily.

Then I looked toward the hallway, toward the gym, toward the cheer room where the uniform waited.

"I need to go home first," I said.

Hannah blinked. "What?"

“I need my stuff. The makeup from Briarwood. The perfume. The —” I stopped, embarrassed. “Everything.”

Her face softened in understanding.

“You want your things,” she said.

My things.

Not borrowed. Not emergency. Not costume.

Mine.

“Yes,” I whispered.

Madison arranged it because Madison arranged everything. The pep rally was delayed again after Principal Harris decided to give a speech about online conduct and consent before the Spirit Swap performances. Hannah said the speech would be terrible but useful. I barely heard her.

I drove home with Hannah following in her car.

My parents were both in the living room when I came in.

Mom stood immediately. Dad rose slower.

“You came back,” Mom said.

“I need my stuff.”

Dad’s face tightened. “For what?”

“The pep rally.”

He closed his eyes. “Carl.”

“I’m doing it.”

Mom looked at me carefully. "Are you sure?"

"No," I said.

That seemed to surprise them.

I swallowed. "But I'm doing it anyway."

Dad stepped forward. "After everything that happened, you still want to go out there?"

The word want caught on something inside me.

"I don't want the way it happened," I said. "I don't want the board. I don't want the laughing. I don't want Trent. I don't want the picture. But I think..." My voice shook. "I think I want to choose what they see next."

Mom pressed a hand to her mouth.

Dad looked stricken.

"I need to get something from my closet," I said. "And I need you not to stop me."

No one moved.

Then Mom nodded.

Dad looked at her, but she did not look away from me.

I went upstairs.

Hannah waited in the entryway, silent for once.

In my room, I opened the closet and pulled out the duffel bag.

My hands shook, but not from panic this time.

I unzipped it.

The cream sweater dress. The black flats. The tights. The makeup pouch. The perfume. The lip gloss. The folded paper.

I took the paper out last.

For a second, I held it in my palm.

Then I placed it inside my Chemistry notebook instead of hiding it again.

When I turned, Mom stood in the doorway.

I froze.

She had followed quietly.

Not into the room.

Just to the doorway.

Her eyes moved to the duffel bag, then to the makeup pouch, then to the folded paper half-visible between the pages of my notebook.

She did not look angry.

She looked sad.

And scared.

And trying.

“Is that her name?” she asked.

My entire body went still.

I did not pretend not to understand.

I could not.

My voice came out barely there. "What?"

Mom stepped one foot into the room. "The name you wrote."

I looked down.

The paper had unfolded slightly.

The C was visible.

Cleo.

My eyes filled before I could stop them.

Mom's voice trembled. "Is it Cleo?"

The sound of the name in my mother's voice broke something open.

Not because she said it perfectly.

Not because everything was suddenly fine.

Because she said it at all.

I covered my mouth with one hand, but the sob came anyway.

Mom crossed the room and stopped in front of me. She looked like she wanted to hug me and was afraid I might shatter.

"Is that the name?" she asked again.

I nodded.

The smallest nod in the world.

"Yes," I whispered. "I think so."

Mom's face crumpled.

"Oh, honey."

I fell into her arms.

There was no graceful way to describe it. I broke. I cried into her shoulder like a little kid, gripping the back of her sweater while everything I had held back since Hannah's mirror came out all at once.

"I'm sorry," I kept saying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Mom held me tighter. "No. No, don't apologize."

"I didn't know how to tell you."

"I know."

"I still don't know what it means."

"That's okay."

"I'm scared."

"I know."

"I don't want Dad to hate me."

"He does not hate you."

"I don't want you to hate me."

Her arms tightened around me so hard it almost hurt.

"Never," she said. "Never."

I cried harder.

From the doorway, a floorboard creaked.

Dad stood there.

I froze against Mom's shoulder.

He looked at the duffel bag. The makeup. The notebook. Me.

Then Mom.

Then me again.

His face was full of too many things.

Fear.

Confusion.

Grief, maybe.

Love, definitely.

He did not say the name.

Not yet.

But he did not leave.

That mattered more than I expected.

Mom wiped my face gently with her sleeve, like she used to when I was small.

"I don't understand everything yet," she said. "I need time. We both do."

Dad's jaw tightened, but he nodded once.

Mom looked at me, her eyes wet. "But I understand that you are hurting. I understand that hiding this alone has been hurting you. And I understand that I do not want to lose you."

My chest folded in on itself.

"You won't," I whispered.

"I know," she said, though she sounded like she was trying to convince herself too. "But you have to let us learn."

I nodded.

Dad finally stepped into the room.

He stopped near my desk, hands hanging awkwardly at his sides.

"I don't know what to say," he admitted.

That was more honest than anything else he could have said.

I wiped my face. "Me neither."

He looked at Mom, then back at me.

"I'm scared for you," he said.

"I know."

"Not of you."

My throat tightened.

"I know," I said again.

He looked like he wanted to say more, but the words would not come. After a moment, he picked up the duffel bag from my bed and held it out to me.

The gesture was small.

Maybe too small for anyone else to understand.

But I understood.

He was not ready to say Cleo.

He was not ready to understand the makeup or the clothes or the girl hidden in his son's handwriting.

But he was not stopping me.

I took the bag.

"Thanks," I whispered.

Dad nodded once.

Mom brushed my hair back from my forehead. "Do you want me to come?"

To the pep rally.

To the school.

To the place where everyone had already seen too much.

My first instinct was no.

Then I imagined standing in that gym without her. Without any part of home seeing me choose this instead of only discovering it through a cruel photo.

"I don't know," I said.

Mom smiled sadly. "That's allowed."

I almost laughed.

That phrase had become the official motto of my unraveling.

Hannah appeared in the hallway behind Dad, eyes wide and careful. "We have to go soon."

I nodded.

Mom kissed my cheek. "Text me if you want us there. Or if you don't. Either way."

Dad stepped aside.

As I passed him, he said, "Carl."

I stopped.

He hesitated.

Then, very carefully, he said, "Be safe."

It was not enough.

It was everything he had.

I nodded. "I will."

In Hannah's car, the duffel bag sat between my feet like a living thing.

Neither of us spoke for three full minutes.

Then Hannah said, "Did your mom say it?"

I looked out the window.

The neighborhood blurred past in red and gold Homecoming decorations. Cedar Forest flags. Football signs. Balloons tied to mailboxes.

“Yes,” I said.

Hannah’s voice softened. “How did it feel?”

I closed my eyes.

Terrifying.

Beautiful.

Too much.

Not enough.

“Real,” I said.

Hannah reached over and squeezed my hand.

When we got back to Cedar Forest, the pep rally had not started yet.

The delay had turned the gym hallway into a pressure cooker. Students packed the entrance, waiting for the doors to open. Teachers tried to keep order. The band warmed up somewhere inside, brass notes rising and falling. The cheer squad had already gathered in the cheer room.

Madison met us at the side entrance.

“You have twenty minutes,” she said.

Hannah lifted the duffel bag. “We can do it.”

Madison looked at me. “You still sure?”

No.

Yes.

Maybe.

Cleo.

"I'm sure enough," I said.

Madison nodded. "Good."

Inside the cheer room, the air was hot with hairspray and nerves.

The other cheerleaders went quiet when I entered.

Not cruel quiet.

Waiting quiet.

Madison clapped once. "Listen up. The Spirit Swap routine goes after Principal Harris and before the football team entrance. Carl is performing with back line."

She paused.

Then she looked at me.

"Cleo," I said, before fear could stop me.

The room went still.

Hannah gripped my hand.

My heart pounded so hard I thought I might pass out.

Madison did not blink.

"Cleo is performing with back line," she corrected.

The words moved through the room.

A couple of girls exchanged glances.

One smiled.

Another nodded.

No one laughed.

That almost made it worse because I had prepared for cruelty. I had not prepared for space.

Madison continued like she had not just shifted the ground under my feet. "No phones in here. No exceptions. If I see one, I throw it into the parking lot."

A cheerleader named Avery raised her hand. "Can she borrow my setting spray? Mine's better for sweat."

Hannah made a sound that was half laugh, half sob.

I stared at Avery.

She shrugged. "Pep rally lights are brutal."

"Thank you," I said.

My voice shook.

Avery smiled. "No problem."

Then everything moved fast.

Hannah took over my face with the focus of a surgeon and the tenderness of a best friend. Madison handled the uniform. Avery brought setting spray. Another girl named Olivia found

extra bobby pins. Someone zipped the garment bag. Someone else guarded the door like a bouncer.

I changed behind the privacy screen again.

This time, the uniform did not feel like a lightning strike.

It still scared me.

But beneath the fear, there was recognition.

Compression shorts. Skirt. Shell top. Socks. Cheer shoes Madison had somehow found in my size from an old backup pair.

When I stepped out, Hannah turned from the vanity.

Her eyes filled immediately.

"No," I said, pointing at her. "If you cry, I cry."

She pressed her lips together and nodded too fast.

"Sit," she said.

I sat.

She worked in careful layers. Moisturizer. Primer. Concealer. Foundation so light it barely felt there. Brows brushed into shape. Mascara. A touch of eyeliner that made me panic until she promised it was subtle. Blush, soft and pink. Highlighter, barely there. Lip gloss from my own pouch.

Mine.

When she opened the perfume, I caught her eye in the mirror.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

I nodded.

She sprayed it once into the air and let it fall over me like mist.

Clean laundry. Vanilla. soft flowers.

Cleo's scent.

My throat tightened.

Then came the hair.

Not Hannah's old blonde wig this time. She had brought a better one from somewhere I had not asked about. Softer, longer, a little lighter, with waves that fell past my shoulders. She fitted it carefully, blending the hairline, pinning it so it would hold through the routine.

The cheer room blurred around me.

Girls talking.

Music thumping in the gym beyond the wall.

Madison giving instructions.

Hannah's hands gentle near my face.

Then she stepped back.

The room went quiet again.

I looked in the mirror.

Cleo White looked back.

Not perfect.

Not fearless.

Not finished.

But there.

The Cedar Forest uniform that had been designed as my humiliation sat on her body like proof of survival. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were wide and glossy. Her mouth trembled under soft pink shine. The bow in her hair matched the red trim of the uniform.

She looked terrified.

She looked beautiful.

She looked like me.

My eyes burned.

Hannah crouched beside me, just like she had the first time.
“Hi, Cleo.”

This time, I did not tell her to stop.

I swallowed hard.

“Hi,” I whispered.

Madison’s voice came from the doorway, softer than I had ever heard it. “They’re opening the gym.”

The noise outside swelled.

Hundreds of students.

Teachers.

The football team.

Benny.

Maybe my parents, if they came.

Maybe not.

I stood.

My knees shook.

Hannah stood with me. "You do not have to do this."

"I know."

"Even now."

"I know."

Madison looked at me. "If you freeze, look at Hannah. If you forget the counts, clean and clap. If someone laughs, let them. We move anyway."

We move anyway.

I nodded.

My phone buzzed inside my bag.

For one second, I ignored it.

Then Hannah handed it to me. "It's your mom."

My chest tightened.

The text was simple.

We're here if you want us to be. Back row, left side. We love you.

I stared until the words blurred.

We.

Not I.

We.

Dad had come too.

Hannah read my face and started crying despite my rule.

I laughed wetly. "You failed."

"I know."

Madison opened the door.

The hallway outside the cheer room waited.

I slid my phone back into the bag and took one breath.

Then another.

Then I stepped forward.

Not as the photo.

Not as the joke.

Not as the boy the school thought it had cornered.

I stepped forward as Cleo White.

And for the first time all week, the name did not feel hidden.

It felt like mine.

CHAPTER 6

THE HALLWAY outside the cheer room sounded like the end of the world. Or maybe that was just my heart. The gym doors had opened, and the noise from inside poured into the hall in waves: sneakers squeaking against bleachers, the band warming up, students shouting over one another, teachers trying and failing to sound in control. Somewhere beyond the wall, hundreds of people waited for the pep rally to begin.

Hundreds of people who had seen the photo.

Hundreds of people who had donated money to see Carl White become a joke.

Hundreds of people who had no idea what name I was carrying now.

Cleo.

I stood just outside the cheer room door with my hands curled into fists at my sides, trying to remember how breathing worked.

The uniform fit too well.

That was the strangest part.

I had expected it to feel like a costume. Like a punishment made of polyester and school spirit. But the shell top hugged my chest and waist in a way that made my body look almost

intentional. The skirt moved when I shifted my weight. The compression shorts underneath kept me from feeling completely exposed, but I still felt the air against my legs every time I moved.

The cheer shoes were snug and clean, tied in perfect white bows because Hannah had retied them twice and threatened to start over if I complained. My hair fell in soft waves past my shoulders, pinned securely under a red bow. My makeup felt light but present: lashes, blush, gloss, a little shimmer at the inner corners of my eyes that Hannah had called “stage survival.”

The perfume was still there too.

Soft.

Mine.

I caught a faint trace of it every time I moved.

Clean laundry, vanilla, and flowers.

Cleo’s scent.

No.

My scent.

The thought made my knees weaken.

Hannah stood beside me in her own uniform, watching my face with careful intensity.

“You’re doing the thing,” she said.

“What thing?”

“The thing where you try to leave your body without moving.”

“I would love to leave my body.”

“Not during the routine. Madison will mark you absent.”

I almost laughed.

Almost.

Madison stood in front of the squad with her clipboard tucked under one arm, even though we were about to perform and there was no possible reason for a clipboard anymore. Maybe it was a source of power. Maybe she would have carried it into battle.

“All right,” she said. “Phones away. Bows secure. Formation order. Nobody improvises. Nobody reacts to the crowd. We hit the routine, we smile, we exit clean.”

Her eyes moved to me.

For once, she did not correct my shoulders.

She just nodded.

I nodded back, though my entire body felt like it had been built out of nerves.

Avery stepped beside me and whispered, “You look really good.”

I stared at her.

She smiled like it was no big deal.

Maybe to her, it was not. Maybe girls said things like that to each other all the time in cheer rooms before pep rallies. Maybe compliments could be casual when your existence did not feel like a public hearing.

“Thank you,” I said.

My voice came out small.

Olivia, another cheerleader, leaned around Avery. “And your bow is better than mine, which I’m choosing to be mature about.”

Hannah gasped. “Growth.”

Olivia pointed at her. “Do not test me.”

I should have felt ridiculous standing there in a cheer uniform while girls joked around me like I belonged in the room.

Instead, something in my chest loosened.

Only a little.

But enough.

Madison cracked the door open and looked toward the gym. “Principal Harris is almost done.”

From inside, the principal’s voice boomed over the microphone.

“—and Cedar Forest High School will always stand for respect, responsibility, and community.”

Hannah muttered, “And poorly supervised bulletin boards.”

Madison gave her a look.

Hannah smiled innocently.

Principal Harris continued, "What happened online today does not represent who we are."

My stomach clenched.

There it was.

What happened online.

Not the photo. Not my name. Not Trent.

A safe adult phrase that put a blanket over the fire and hoped nobody noticed the smoke.

I could hear restless shifting in the gym. A few whispers. Someone coughed. The band was quiet now.

"We remind all students that taking or sharing photos of classmates without permission is unacceptable," Principal Harris said. "Spirit Week is about celebration, not humiliation."

My throat tightened.

Celebration, not humiliation.

Maybe the sentence should have helped.

Mostly, it made me wish he had said it before my picture was everywhere.

Hannah's hand found mine.

She squeezed once.

I squeezed back.

Madison opened the door wider. "Ready positions in the hall."

The squad moved.

I moved with them.

That was the first miracle.

I did not run. I did not collapse. I did not rip off the bow and hide in the storage closet under a pile of pom-poms.

I walked.

The hallway seemed too bright. Teachers lined the gym entrance. A few student council members stood near the doors, holding Spirit Swap signs and looking traumatized by the consequences of their own fundraiser.

One of them, a senior named Paige, looked at me and mouthed, "Sorry."

I did not know what to do with that.

So I nodded.

The gym doors opened fully.

Noise hit me like weather.

The Cedar Forest gym was packed from wall to wall. Students filled the bleachers in red and gold, grouped by grade level. Freshmen at the bottom, sophomores above them, juniors and seniors spread across the top rows like they owned gravity.

Teachers stood along the walls. The band sat near the far corner with instruments in their laps. The football team lined up near the opposite entrance in jerseys and pads, waiting for their big Homecoming introduction.

And there, in the back row on the left side, sat my parents.

Mom saw me first.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

Dad sat beside her, shoulders stiff, face pale. He looked like he had no idea what to do with his hands.

I almost stopped walking.

Hannah whispered, "Eyes forward."

I obeyed because if I looked at them too long, I would break.

The cheer squad lined up near the side of the gym while Principal Harris finished talking. I stood in the back line, exactly where Madison had placed me, with Hannah slightly ahead and to my left.

The whispers started almost immediately.

They moved through the bleachers like wind through dry leaves.

"Is that him?"

"Wait, that's Carl?"

"No way."

"She looks —"

“Dude, shut up.”

“Is that a wig?”

“Oh my God.”

A laugh rose from somewhere on the junior side.

Then another.

Small.

Mean.

Enough.

My body froze.

The gym stretched in front of me, too large, too loud, too full of eyes. My mouth went dry. My hands forgot the first position. My brain emptied itself of every count Hannah had drilled into me.

Five, six, seven, eight.

Gone.

All of it gone.

The leaked photo flashed in my mind.

My face in the mirror.

The caption.

Taking this way too seriously.

Carlie White Era.

The laughter got a little louder.

My knees locked.

I could not do this.

I had been insane to think I could do this.

Someone in the senior bleachers shouted, "Go, Carl!"

I flinched.

Then another voice yelled, "Cheer boy!"

Madison's head snapped toward the sound, but she could not stop the entire gym.

Hannah turned just enough that only I could hear her.

"Cleo," she said.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just my name.

My real one, or the closest thing I had to real.

I looked at her.

Her eyes were steady.

"You're here," she said.

I tried to breathe.

I could not.

Then, from the opposite side of the gym, one set of hands started clapping.

Slow.

Sharp.

Deliberate.

I turned my head.

Benny Hayes had stepped out of the football line.

He stood in front of his team in his number 12 jersey, helmet tucked under one arm, looking straight at me while he clapped.

Not smiling for the crowd.

Not playing it off.

Not making it a joke.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

The gym noticed.

Of course it did.

People always noticed Benny.

For once, he used that.

Mason Reed joined next.

Then another football player.

Then Coach Daniels, after half a second of visible conflict, clapped twice and nodded toward the rest of the team like he had decided school spirit was a tactical issue.

Hannah started clapping beside me.

Madison followed.

Then the cheer squad.

The band began stomping their feet.

Avery shouted, "Let's go, Cleo!"

My heart stopped.

Not Carl.

Not Carlie.

Cleo.

The name flew into the gym before I was ready, bright and impossible.

For one second, everything held still.

Then more clapping started.

Not everyone.

Of course not everyone.

Some people still whispered. Some laughed because cruelty was easier than confusion. Some looked uncomfortable. Some looked fascinated in ways I did not want to think about.

But the sound changed.

The laughter no longer owned the room.

Benny did not stop clapping until my eyes met his.

Then he gave me the smallest nod.

The same one from the bleachers.

I saw you.

My breath came back.

Madison turned forward and raised one fist.

The music started.

My body moved before my panic could catch it.

Step-touch. Step-touch. Clap. Turn.

High V. Low V. Clean.

The first count landed.

Then the second.

Then the third.

Hannah was beside me, sharp and bright, her ponytail swinging. Madison led from the front with terrifying precision. The squad moved around me like a current, and somehow I stayed in it.

One, two, three, four.

Five, six, seven, eight.

My arms hit the motions.

My feet found the marks.

The skirt moved with every step, light and unfamiliar and real. The bow held. The gloss stayed. My cheeks burned under the

lights, but I kept smiling because Hannah had taught me how to smile like I knew something they did not.

And I did.

I knew the joke had failed.

Not because everyone suddenly understood me. They did not.

Not because I was fearless. I was so scared I could feel my pulse in my fingertips.

The joke had failed because I was still there.

Because the photo had caught me half-ready and ashamed, and now I was fully visible by choice.

Because Trent had wanted the school to see Carl White as a punchline.

Instead, they saw Cleo.

During the final sequence, Madison had added one simple turn for me. Nothing flashy. Nothing dangerous. Just a step forward from the back line, a clap, a turn, and a clean finish.

I had hated it in practice.

I had told Hannah it felt like walking directly into a spotlight with a target painted on my chest.

She had said, "Maybe the spotlight is yours for once."

I had told her that was the most cheerleader thing she had ever said.

Now the count approached.

Five, six —

Hannah's voice cut through the music beside me.

"Go."

Seven, eight.

I stepped forward.

The gym blurred.

For one second, I could not see faces anymore. Only red and gold, lights, movement, sound.

I clapped.

Turned.

The skirt flared around my legs.

My hair moved over my shoulders.

I hit the final clean with the squad.

The music ended.

Silence lasted half a heartbeat.

Then the gym erupted.

Not everyone.

I knew that.

I heard a few laughs under the cheers. I saw phones raised despite every adult warning. I saw Trent near the back of the football line, face twisted with anger.

But I also heard clapping.

Real clapping.

Hannah threw one arm around me and squeezed.

Avery cheered.

Madison looked at me with something dangerously close to pride.

And across the gym, Benny Hayes was still watching me like the whole room had disappeared.

I searched the back row.

Mom was crying openly now.

Dad sat very still.

Then, slowly, awkwardly, like he was learning the motion from scratch, he clapped.

My vision blurred.

I almost missed the exit count.

Hannah tugged my hand, laughing and crying at the same time. "Move, cheerleader."

Cheerleader.

The word should have sounded impossible.

Instead, I ran with the squad off the gym floor, heart pounding, cheeks wet, breathless in a body that had finally done something true.

The hallway behind the gym swallowed us in noise.

The second we were out of sight, Hannah grabbed me by both shoulders.

"You did it," she said.

I laughed because there was too much feeling in me to do anything else. "I did it."

"You nailed it."

"I think I blacked out."

"You blacked out beautifully."

Madison came over, breathing hard, face flushed from the routine. She looked me up and down.

I braced for correction.

Instead, she said, "You hit the turn."

"I did?"

"You did."

"Was it bad?"

"It was not bad."

From Madison, that was basically a parade.

Avery ran up and hugged me before I could prepare. "That was amazing."

I stood there stiffly for half a second, then hugged back.

One by one, the squad gathered around. Not everyone touched me. Not everyone said something. But nobody laughed. Nobody looked at me like I had ruined their uniform or their routine or their idea of what a cheerleader was allowed to be.

For five minutes, in the hot hallway behind the gym, I was simply part of the group that had performed.

That was so ordinary it felt miraculous.

Then the football team introduction began inside the gym.

The band blasted the fight song. Students screamed. Principal Harris announced the Homecoming game against West Brook. The football players ran out one by one as their names were called.

When Benny's name came through the speakers, the gym roared.

"Number twelve, quarterback, Benny Hayes!"

The sound was enormous.

I stood near the hallway doors with Hannah, still breathing too fast, and watched through the narrow window as Benny ran onto the court.

He lifted one hand to the crowd.

Then he looked toward the hallway.

Toward me.

Just for a second.

But this time, I did not look away.

After the pep rally ended, Cedar Forest spilled outside like someone had kicked an anthill.

Students flooded the parking lot, the football field, the cafeteria, the courtyard. The Homecoming game would not start for a few hours, but no one seemed ready to go home. People wanted food, pictures, gossip, and a chance to stand near whatever had just happened.

Whatever had just happened was partly me.

That made going anywhere complicated.

Madison lent me her red cheer warm-up jacket to wear over the uniform. It was fitted, shiny, and had Cedar Forest Cheer embroidered across the back. The sleeves were a little long, but I liked that. It gave my hands somewhere to hide.

Hannah insisted on staying glued to my side.

"No solo wandering," she said.

"I'm eighteen."

"And emotionally concussed."

"That is not a medical term."

"It should be."

We avoided the main hallway and slipped out through the side doors near the field. The air outside felt cool against my legs, and the late afternoon sky had cleared after the rain. The football field stretched ahead under the bright stadium lights, still empty

except for a few maintenance workers and early band students setting up.

For the first time all day, there was space.

I stopped near the fence and breathed.

Hannah stood beside me quietly.

After a minute, she said, "Do you want to see your phone?"

"No."

"Good choice."

"Is it bad?"

"It is high school."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the answer."

I nodded.

A few students passed near the concession stand and stared. One whispered something. The other whispered back.

My stomach tightened.

Hannah lifted her chin like she was daring them to try anything.

They kept walking.

I looked down at the cheer shoes on my feet, the white laces, the socks, the edge of the skirt under Madison's jacket. My body

felt both mine and not mine. Like I had crossed a line and was waiting for lightning to strike.

But no lightning came.

Only the distant sound of the band tuning.

"Your parents are still here," Hannah said.

I looked up quickly. "Where?"

"Parking lot, I think. Your mom texted me."

"Why did she text you?"

"Because she is a smart woman who knows you might ignore your own phone."

I could not argue with that.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said they're giving you space unless you want them."

My throat tightened.

That sounded like Mom.

It also sounded like Dad trying.

"I don't know if I'm ready," I said.

"That's okay."

I laughed softly. "Everyone needs a new phrase."

"No. It's a good phrase. We're keeping it."

From behind us, a voice said, "Cleo?"

My heart stopped.

Hannah turned first.

Benny stood a few feet away near the gate to the football field. He had changed out of his pads but still wore his football pants and a compression shirt under his jersey. His hair was damp, like he had splashed water on his face after the pep rally. Black eye paint smudged faintly under one eye.

He looked nervous.

Benny Hayes, Cedar Forest quarterback, looked nervous because of me.

Hannah's hand brushed mine. "I'm going to get water."

I grabbed her wrist.

She looked at me. "Close water. Visible water. I'm not abandoning you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

She walked toward the concession stand but stayed within sight, because Hannah understood the difference between privacy and being left alone.

Benny waited until she was gone.

Then he looked at me fully.

Not at the uniform.

Not only at the makeup or hair.

At me.

"You were incredible," he said.

My face heated.

The compliment felt different now that I was not in the gym. There was no crowd to absorb it. No noise to hide inside.

"You clapped first," I said.

"I wanted to do more."

"You did enough."

He laughed faintly. "That might be the first time anyone's said that to me today."

I studied his face.

He looked tired, but lighter somehow. Like choosing one disaster had freed him from several smaller ones.

"Are you in trouble?" I asked.

"With Coach? A little. With my dad? A lot. With Trent? Probably forever."

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't. I should've been in trouble sooner."

The wind moved between us, cool and smelling faintly of wet grass and concession stand popcorn.

Benny stepped closer, then stopped. Careful again.

"I meant what I said in Chemistry," he said.

My pulse jumped.

"Which part?"

"All of it." He looked down for a second, then back at me.
"But especially that I'm sorry."

I pulled Madison's jacket tighter around myself. "You already apologized."

"I know. I need to do it again without a lab table between us."

That almost made me smile.

He saw it and relaxed a little.

Then his expression turned serious.

"I liked you before I knew what to do with it," he said.
"Before the makeup. Before the uniform. Before Cleo. I liked how you talked back to me. I liked that you saw through me. I liked that you made me feel like I had to actually be a person around you."

I could not move.

"And then Hannah's hallway happened," he continued.
"And practice. And the lip gloss. And I kept looking at you, and I didn't understand if I was seeing something new or something that had been there the whole time."

My eyes burned.

"Benny —"

"I was scared," he said. "Not of you. Of everyone else. Of what wanting you said about me. Of what the team would say. My dad. People at school. And because I was scared, I was cruel. I made jokes before anyone could look too closely. I let Trent think it was okay to aim at you because I had aimed first."

My throat tightened.

He swallowed.

"I hate that," he said. "I hate that I taught people where to hurt you."

The sentence went through me cleanly.

I looked away toward the field because looking at him hurt too much.

Under the stadium lights, the grass looked almost fake. Too green. Too bright. Lines painted perfectly white. A stage built for boys like Benny to become legends.

But he stood outside it with me.

Not inside.

Not yet.

"I don't know how to trust you," I said.

His face tightened, but he nodded. "I know."

"And I don't know what this means for me."

"I know."

"I mean it. Cleo feels real, but I don't have everything figured out. I don't know what I'm ready for at school, or at home, or with my parents, or with myself."

"You don't have to figure it out tonight."

The softness in his voice almost undid me.

"But I do know one thing," I said.

He waited.

"I can't be someone's secret."

Benny's eyes did not leave mine.

"I can't do truck confessions and hallway distance," I continued. "I can't be the person you almost kiss in the rain and then protect with excuses. I can't survive that."

His face changed.

Not surprise.

Recognition.

"You shouldn't have to," he said.

The words were simple.

The opposite of everything complicated inside me.

"I'm serious," I whispered.

"So am I."

The noise from the school faded behind us. Or maybe I stopped hearing it.

Benny took one more small step closer.

Still leaving space.

Always leaving space now.

"I don't want you to be my secret," he said.

My breath caught.

He looked scared.

But he did not look away.

"Then don't be," he said.

I stared at him.

It took me a second to understand.

He was not telling me not to be a secret.

He was promising he would not make me one.

My eyes filled.

"That was also kind of a movie line," I said, because emotion had made me stupid.

Benny laughed softly, relief and nerves tangled together.
"Was it a good one?"

"It might have been."

"Then I'll take it."

He lifted his hand, then paused.

A question.

I answered by placing my hand in his.

His fingers closed around mine carefully, like he was afraid of holding too tight.

The contact moved through me in a warm, terrifying rush.

Across the lot, someone shouted Benny's name.

He did not let go.

That mattered more than a kiss would have.

He looked toward the field, then back at me. "I have to finish one thing before the game."

"What?"

"Chemistry."

I blinked.

He winced. "Terrible timing."

"You're joking."

"I wish."

"What happened?"

"Ms. Powell graded the last quiz. I passed that. But because of the lab report we messed up and the missing makeup lab from practice week, she needs one final lab score entered before eligibility gets submitted at five."

I stared at him.

"You waited until now?"

“I did not plan the social collapse of senior year.”

“That’s fair.”

“She said if I can finish the makeup lab after school, she’ll submit the grade. Coach knows. He’s annoyed but allowing it.”

I stared for another second.

Then I laughed.

Hard.

Benny looked both offended and relieved. “This is not funny.”

“It is extremely funny.”

“My entire football future depends on a Chemistry lab after I maybe confessed my feelings to a cheerleader in a crisis.”

“Maybe?”

His face softened. “Definitely.”

My cheeks warmed.

Then Hannah appeared beside us holding two water bottles. “Did someone say Chemistry lab?”

I looked at her.

She looked at our joined hands.

Her mouth opened.

Then closed.

Then opened again.

"Nope," she said. "I'm being mature. I am saying nothing."

"You are visibly saying several things," I said.

"I am glowing with restraint."

Benny smiled. "Ms. Powell's waiting."

Hannah blinked. "Of course she is. Ms. Powell would supervise a lab during an asteroid strike."

"I need my notebook," I said.

"And I need to not fail," Benny added.

I looked at him. "Full enthusiasm?"

He squeezed my hand once.

"Full enthusiasm."

The science wing felt unreal after the pep rally.

The rest of Cedar Forest was loud with Homecoming energy, but the Chemistry room was quiet except for the hum of the lights and the distant sound of the band outside. Ms. Powell stood at the front table in safety goggles, looking like this was a perfectly normal afternoon.

Her eyes flicked to my uniform, then to Benny's jersey, then to our hands before we separated quickly.

She said nothing about that.

Bless her forever.

"Mr. Hayes," she said, "you have forty-five minutes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Carl—" She paused.

The pause was tiny.

But I felt it.

Ms. Powell looked at me more carefully.

I had taken off Madison's warm-up jacket, so the uniform was visible again. The bow. The hair. The makeup. The gloss. Everything.

My pulse quickened.

Then I said, before I could lose my nerve, "Cleo."

Ms. Powell's face softened.

"Cleo," she repeated. "You'll assist, but Benny needs to do the written analysis himself."

Benny nodded quickly. "I will."

My throat tightened so hard I had to look down.

She had said it.

No drama.

No speech.

Just Cleo, as if it belonged on the attendance sheet.

The lab was simple but time-sensitive: reaction rates, temperature, and observation. Benny had to measure, time, record,

and explain the result. I was allowed to clarify instructions but not provide answers.

For the first five minutes, he was a disaster.

Not because he did not know what he was doing.

Because he kept looking at me.

“Focus,” I said.

“I am focused.”

“You just poured water into the waste beaker.”

He looked down. “That was symbolic.”

“It was wrong.”

Ms. Powell coughed in a way that sounded suspiciously like hiding a laugh.

Benny reset the equipment.

This time, he did better.

He measured at eye level. He recorded temperatures carefully. He started the timer on time and did not knock over a single beaker. I stood beside him, holding the worksheet and watching him work in the same room where this whole impossible thing had started.

Lab partners.

That was what Ms. Powell had called us.

At the time, it had felt like a punishment.

Now Benny stood beside me, brow furrowed, pencil tucked behind his ear, trying to pass Chemistry while I wore a cheer uniform and my chosen name still echoed in the room.

Life had become absurd.

Maybe that was not always bad.

"Observation?" I asked.

"Solution turned cloudy after twelve seconds," he said.

"Good."

"Temperature increased by four degrees."

"Good."

"Reaction rate was faster with the warmer solution because the particles moved faster and collided more often."

I blinked.

He looked up. "Was that right?"

"Yes."

His face brightened so much I almost smiled.

Actually, I did smile.

Ms. Powell walked by and checked his notes. "Correct. Keep going."

Benny looked like he had just won a playoff game.

"You are such a nerd," I whispered.

"You made me this way."

"I refuse responsibility."

The final written analysis took him fifteen minutes. He wrote slowly, with his tongue pressed slightly against his teeth in concentration. I sat across from him at the lab table and pretended not to watch.

Failed.

Again.

When he finished, he slid the worksheet to Ms. Powell with the solemn expression of someone submitting evidence at trial.

She read it while we both stood there.

The distant sound of the band drifted through the windows.

Benny's knee bounced.

"Stop," I whispered.

"I can't."

"You're shaking the floor."

"I am awaiting judgment."

Ms. Powell marked the last page, wrote something in her gradebook, and looked up.

"Congratulations, Mr. Hayes," she said. "You passed."

Benny stared at her.

Then at me.

Then back at her.

"I passed?"

"You passed."

"Like passed-passed?"

Ms. Powell lifted an eyebrow. "Do I need to define the word?"

"No. Sorry. Thank you. Thank you, Ms. Powell."

His smile was so relieved it made my chest hurt.

Ms. Powell removed her goggles. "You earned it. Barely."

"I'll take barely," he said.

I laughed.

Ms. Powell picked up our lab sheet. "I'll enter it now so Coach Daniels stops refreshing his email like a man under federal investigation."

Benny winced. "Yeah. Sorry."

"I teach teenagers. I am used to drama." Her eyes moved to me, gentler now. "Cleo, can you sign off as lab partner?"

The pen in her hand waited above the paper.

My pulse jumped.

The lab sheet had a line at the top.

Lab Partners: Benny Hayes and Carl White

Carl White.

The name looked familiar.

It looked like school records, birthday cards, medical forms, and all the years I had survived without knowing why survival felt so much like performance.

My hand shook as I took the pen.

"Ms. Powell?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Can I put Cleo White?"

The room went very quiet.

Benny looked at me.

Ms. Powell did too.

For one terrifying second, I thought I had asked too much. A school document. A grade record. A name teachers could not just change because a student had one impossible day in a cheer uniform.

Then Ms. Powell smiled.

Not huge.

Not sentimental.

Just warm.

"For this lab report," she said, "yes."

The words were careful.

Limited.

But they gave me a place to stand.

I crossed out Carl neatly.

Not violently.

Not like I hated him.

Just like I was making room.

Beside it, I wrote:

Cleo White

My handwriting shook, but the name was legible.

Benny stared at it like it was something precious.

Ms. Powell took the paper. "Thank you."

I looked down before I cried again.

The Homecoming game began under a sky so clear it looked staged.

The rain from earlier in the week had left the air cool and sharp. Stadium lights washed the field in bright white. The bleachers filled fast with students, parents, alumni, and half the town of Cedar Forest. The concession stand smelled like popcorn, hot dogs, nacho cheese, and hot chocolate. The band played from the student section. Cheerleaders lined the track in front of the bleachers, bows bright under the lights.

Madison told me I did not have to cheer at the game.

"You did the pep rally," she said. "That was the Spirit Swap requirement. You can change if you want."

I looked down at the uniform.

Part of me wanted to change.

Most of me wanted to hide.

But another part, the part that had stepped forward on the count and survived, was not ready to take it off yet.

"I'll sit with Hannah," I said.

Madison nodded like she had expected that. "Wear the jacket. It's cold."

Then she handed me the warm-up jacket again.

I slipped it on.

Cedar Forest Cheer across my back.

Cleo under it.

Hannah and I found seats in the student section at first, but after two minutes of whispering behind us, she stood up.

"Nope," she said.

"What?"

"We're upgrading."

"To what?"

"Better lighting and fewer idiots."

She marched me down to a lower section near the fifty-yard line, where parents and families sat with blankets, thermoses, and actual restraint. We found a spot near the aisle. The view was better. The noise was still loud, but less sharp.

The game started with Cedar Forest kicking off.

I knew almost nothing about football beyond what Benny had explained during tutoring breaks. He had tried to make it sound strategic and beautiful. I had told him it mostly looked like organized collisions. He had said Chemistry mostly looked like organized confusion. Fair.

But that night, I watched.

I watched because Benny was on the field.

He looked different there.

Not softer. Not exactly. More certain. His body knew what to do in football the way mine had learned what to do in cheer counts. Step back. Read the defense. Call the play. Take the snap. Move. Throw.

The first quarter was rough.

West Brook scored early. Cedar Forest fumbled on their second drive. The student section groaned and chanted and shouted advice no one had asked for.

Trent did not play.

He stood on the sideline with his helmet in his hand, looking furious.

Every time I saw him, my stomach tightened.

Hannah noticed and shifted closer. "Don't look at him."

"I'm trying not to."

“He has the energy of an expired protein bar.”

I laughed despite myself. “That is specific.”

“I have range.”

During a timeout, my phone buzzed.

Mom.

Are you still okay?

I looked toward the back rows.

I could not find her in the crowd.

I typed:

Yes. Sitting with Hannah.

A moment later:

We see you.

My chest tightened.

I looked up.

Mom stood near the aisle halfway up the bleachers, waving one hand gently. Dad stood beside her holding two hot chocolates, looking uncomfortable in the way dads looked when they had been emotionally ambushed by life and concession stand lines.

I froze.

Hannah followed my gaze. “Do you want me to stay?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want them to come down?”

I did not answer.

Mom texted again.

Only if you want.

The choice sat in my hand.

Only if you want.

All day, everyone had been deciding things about me. Posting. Naming. Laughing. Protecting. Handling.

Now my mother had handed me one tiny door I could open or keep closed.

I typed:

You can come.

My thumb hovered.

Then I sent it.

Mom touched Dad's arm, and they started down.

Every step they took made my stomach twist tighter.

When they reached our row, Hannah stood. "Hi, Mrs. White. Mr. White."

Mom smiled at her like Hannah had personally kept me alive, which was not completely inaccurate. "Hi, Hannah."

Dad nodded. "Hannah."

Then they looked at me.

I stood too quickly, then sat back down because standing made the skirt move and that made me panic.

Mom's eyes took me in.

The jacket.

The hair.

The makeup.

The uniform.

Me.

Her eyes filled, but she did not cry this time. She smiled instead. Shaky, but real.

"You must be freezing," she said.

That was such a mom thing to say that I almost laughed.

"I'm okay."

Dad stood in the aisle, holding the hot chocolates like he had forgotten what hands were for.

Mom sat on my left.

Hannah, with the subtlety of someone moving a piano, shifted to my right but stayed close.

Dad remained standing.

The silence was immediate and terrible.

On the field, Cedar Forest lined up for another play.

The crowd shouted.

Benny took the snap.

I watched him drop back, avoid a defender, and throw a clean pass downfield. Mason caught it and got tackled near the thirty-yard line. Cedar Forest fans erupted.

Dad looked toward the field. "Good throw."

It was the safest possible sentence.

I nodded. "Yeah."

Another silence.

Mom touched my hand lightly. "Your makeup held up."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Dad looked startled.

Mom smiled.

"Hannah used setting spray," I said.

"Smart," Mom said, like she had any idea what that meant.

Hannah leaned forward. "It's essential for gym lights and emotional breakdowns."

Mom gave a watery laugh.

Dad looked like he wanted to understand the joke and was several miles behind.

The second quarter began.

Dad finally sat on my other side, leaving a careful inch of space between us.

I could feel him trying not to stare.

Trying too hard.

For several minutes, he watched the game like it was the only thing in the universe. I watched him watch the game. Mom watched both of us and pretended not to.

Then the wind shifted.

Cold air slid through the bleachers.

I shivered.

It was tiny.

I did not think anyone noticed.

Dad did.

He looked at me.

Then at the jacket.

Then at my bare legs under the skirt.

His face went through at least four emotions, none of which he knew what to do with.

Finally, he cleared his throat.

“You warm enough, Cleo?”

The world stopped.

Not the actual world.

The band kept playing. The crowd kept shouting. The game clock kept running. Somewhere, a whistle blew.

But inside me, everything went still.

Mom's hand tightened around mine.

Hannah made a sound that she turned into a cough.

I looked at Dad.

He was staring at the field like he had not just cracked open my entire life with four words.

You warm enough, Cleo?

He said it awkwardly.

Carefully.

Like the name had sharp edges and he was afraid of cutting both of us.

But he said it.

Not Carl.

Cleo.

My eyes filled so fast the field blurred.

I nodded because my voice did not work.

Dad kept looking forward.

Then, after a long second, he held out one of the hot chocolates.

"Here," he said.

I took it with both hands.

The cup was warm.

So was I.

"Thanks," I whispered.

Dad nodded once.

His jaw was tight.

His eyes looked suspiciously bright.

Mom leaned against my shoulder and cried quietly, but this time I did not mind.

Hannah whispered, "I am being so mature right now."

I laughed through my tears.

Dad glanced at her. "What?"

"Nothing, Mr. White."

He looked confused, then turned back to the game.

It was awkward.

Imperfect.

Not a movie version of acceptance where everyone said the right thing and understood everything immediately.

But Dad sat beside me in a public stadium, handed me hot chocolate, and called me Cleo.

For that moment, it was enough.

The game turned in the second half.

Benny came alive like someone had flipped a switch. He threw a touchdown pass early in the third quarter, ran for a first

down after that, and somehow managed to avoid getting crushed by a West Brook linebacker who looked large enough to require his own ZIP code.

Every time he completed a pass, the crowd roared.

Every time he got hit, my entire body clenched.

Dad noticed after the third time.

“He’s tougher than he looks,” he said.

“He looks pretty tough.”

Dad considered that. “Fair.”

Mom hid a smile.

With five minutes left in the fourth quarter, Cedar Forest was down by four.

The student section was losing its mind. The band played louder. Cheerleaders shouted until their voices cracked. Madison stood on the track like she could intimidate the scoreboard into cooperating.

Benny jogged onto the field for what could be the final drive.

Before the snap, he looked toward the bleachers.

It should have been impossible for him to find me in that crowd.

But he did.

Our eyes met across the stadium lights, the noise, the impossible distance between the field and the stands.

I lifted my hand.

Small.

He smiled.

Then he turned back to the game.

The drive was brutal.

Short pass. Run. Incomplete. First down by inches. Another pass. A penalty that made the crowd furious. Coach Daniels shouting. Benny walking back to the huddle with his hands on his hips, helmet reflecting the stadium lights.

With thirty seconds left, Cedar Forest was on the twelve-yard line.

Down by four.

They needed a touchdown.

The crowd stood.

Dad stood too.

Mom stood.

Hannah grabbed my hand and pulled me up.

I clutched the hot chocolate in one hand and Hannah with the other, heart pounding so hard the whole stadium seemed to pulse with it.

Benny took the snap.

West Brook's defense rushed.

The pocket collapsed.

Someone shouted.

Benny stepped back, then sideways, somehow slipping between two defenders. For one terrifying second, it looked like he would get tackled.

Then he threw.

The ball cut through the stadium lights.

Mason jumped in the end zone.

Caught it.

Touchdown.

The stadium exploded.

Hannah screamed directly into the atmosphere. Mom hugged me. Dad shouted something that was probably not school appropriate. The band launched into the fight song. Cheerleaders leapt on the track. Students jumped up and down so hard the bleachers shook.

On the field, Benny was swallowed by his team.

Helmets. Jerseys. Arms around shoulders. Victory chaos.

Cedar Forest made the extra point.

West Brook had one last chance and failed.

Final whistle.

Cedar Forest won Homecoming.

The field became a storm of red and gold.

Students poured down from the bleachers despite teachers trying to stop them. Parents clapped. The football team celebrated near midfield. The cheerleaders ran onto the track. The band kept playing because apparently no one had told them lungs had limits.

I stayed where I was for a second, overwhelmed by the noise.

Mom hugged me again.

“You okay?” she asked.

I nodded.

Dad looked at me, then toward the field. “Looks like he’s looking for you.”

My heart jumped.

Benny had pulled off his helmet.

He was scanning the crowd.

Not the team.

Not the reporters from the local paper.

Not Coach.

The crowd.

Then he saw me.

He broke away from the celebration.

Mason grabbed his shoulder, laughing, but Benny shook him off with a grin and kept running.

Toward the stands.

Toward me.

People noticed.

Of course they did.

People always noticed Benny.

This time, he did not care.

I stood frozen near the aisle as he reached the fence separating the bleachers from the track. He was flushed, sweaty, grass-stained, and breathless, with eye black smudged under both eyes and the biggest smile I had ever seen on him.

“You won,” I said, stupidly.

He laughed. “Yeah.”

“Your Chemistry grade and the game. Big day.”

“Full enthusiasm.”

I smiled so hard my face hurt.

Behind me, Hannah made a sound like she was dying.

Mom sniffed.

Dad cleared his throat.

Benny looked past me at my parents.

For one second, panic flickered in his eyes.

Then he straightened.

“Mr. and Mrs. White,” he said. “Hi.”

Dad looked him up and down like fathers had been doing to teenage boys since the invention of daughters, sons, and trouble.

“Benny,” he said.

Mom smiled. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Then Benny looked back at me.

His expression softened.

In front of everyone.

The football team, the cheerleaders, my parents, the students who had laughed, the students who had clapped, the teachers, the whole bright ridiculous world of Cedar Forest High School.

He held out his hand.

Not hidden under a library table.

Not in a truck under rain.

Not in a hallway where he could pretend it meant nothing.

Open.

Waiting.

My breath caught.

I looked at Mom.

She was crying again, but she nodded.

I looked at Dad.

His face was tight with fear and effort and love.

After a second, he nodded too.

Small.

But real.

I turned back to Benny.

Then I put my hand in his.

The noise around us shifted.

Whispers. Gasps. A few cheers. Maybe laughter somewhere, but for once, it did not reach me first.

Benny's fingers closed around mine.

Warm.

Steady.

He looked at me like I was not a secret, not a joke, not a problem he had finally solved.

Like I was a person he had chosen.

"Hey, Cleo," he said.

My name crossed the stadium lights and landed softly between us.

I squeezed his hand.

"Hey, Benny."

Hannah started crying for real.

Madison, from the track, shouted, "Hayes, if you make her miss the team photo, I'll end you!"

Benny laughed.

I laughed too, breathless and disbelieving and alive.

The field waited.

The future waited.

School would still be hard on Monday. My parents would still have questions. People would still talk. Trent would still exist. I still did not have every answer about myself, my name, my body, or what came next.

But Benny's hand held mine in front of everyone.

My mother had said Cleo.

My father had said Cleo.

Hannah stood behind me like a guardian angel with setting spray.

And I was still there.

Not surviving in the corner.

Not hiding behind the couch while everyone sang.

Visible.

Terrified.

Loved.

I stepped down from the bleachers and walked toward the field with Benny's hand in mine, the Cedar Forest lights bright above us, my cheer skirt moving with every step.

For once, I did not feel like Carl White had disappeared.

I felt like he had carried me as far as he could.

And now, under the stadium lights, Cleo White walked the rest of the way.

EPILOGUE

BY SPRING, people at Cedar Forest High School had mostly learned how to say my name. Mostly. There were still slips. Some accidental. Some not. Some teachers corrected themselves so quickly they looked more embarrassed than I felt. Some students said Carl when they wanted to prove they could still hurt me. Some whispered Cleo like it was gossip instead of a person.

But my name existed in the hallways now.

That mattered.

It existed on my Chemistry folder, written in silver marker by Hannah during a study hall she was supposed to be using for Economics homework. It existed on the cheer group chat, where Madison had changed my contact name without asking and then told anyone who complained to “develop manners.” It existed on a sticky note Ms. Powell put on my graded lab report in March.

Nice work, Cleo.

I kept that one folded in my wallet.

Cedar Forest did not become magically safe after Homecoming.

That would have been too easy.

People still stared sometimes when I walked into the cafeteria wearing a soft sweater and lip gloss. The boys’ locker

room became a place I no longer entered, but the school did not have a perfect answer for where I belonged yet. Principal Harris used words like “accommodations” and “student support” in meetings with my parents. My dad sat through those meetings with his arms crossed, jaw tight, and asked practical questions that sounded cold until I realized he was trying to build a shield out of policies.

Hannah called it his “concern armor.”

Mom called it progress.

I called it exhausting.

But survivable.

That was the word I trusted.

Not perfect.

Not easy.

Survivable.

And sometimes, on good days, more than that.

Sometimes Cedar Forest felt almost like a place I had permission to exist.

I had become part of the cheer squad officially after winter break, which still sounded fake when I said it out loud. Madison insisted I had earned it because I showed up, learned counts, listened to corrections, and did not “weaponize incompetence,” which was one of her highest compliments. I did not stunt. I did

not tumble. I still looked terrified during jumps. But I could perform. I could smile. I could hit a clean motion on eight.

I had my own bow now.

Red and gold.

Hannah had given it to me after my first basketball pep rally.

I pretended not to cry.

She pretended not to notice.

Benny noticed and kissed my hand under the bleachers where no one could see, then immediately corrected himself and kissed it again in the hallway where several people could.

That was Benny now.

Still nervous sometimes. Still learning. Still occasionally saying the wrong thing and looking like he wanted to tackle himself afterward. But trying in public. Trying where it counted.

He passed Chemistry with a C-plus, which he called a “comeback story” and Ms. Powell called “adequate evidence of effort.” His father had not celebrated the grade, exactly, but he had stopped treating it like a disaster. Benny kept his football eligibility, finished the season, and got an offer from a state university a few hours away.

Not the biggest football program.

Not the dream his dad had built for him.

But a real one.

A place where he could play, study sports medicine if he wanted, and be more than a quarterback if he ever figured out how.

I had been accepted to two colleges. One was closer to home, with a decent communications program and an art department I liked. The other was farther away, in a city big enough that nobody cared who you had been in high school unless you told them.

I had not decided yet.

That was another thing I had learned by spring: not every question needed to be answered before it scared me.

Sometimes I got to be scared and keep going anyway.

Spring Formal was Hannah's idea.

Technically, it was student council's idea, but Hannah had personally decided I was going before I had even agreed to think about it.

"It's not prom," she said one afternoon in April, sitting cross-legged on my bed while I stood in front of my closet in a panic. "It's lower pressure."

"It is a dance in the gym with lights, photos, and people."

"So, yes, a dance."

"I have survived enough school events."

"And now you get to enjoy one."

That was the part I did not trust.

Enjoy.

High school events were things I endured. Pep rallies, football games, fundraisers, dances. I had spent years measuring rooms by exits and calculating how long I could stand somewhere before someone looked at me too closely.

Now Hannah wanted me to choose a dress.

A real dress.

Not a cheer uniform. Not Spirit Swap. Not something handed to me by humiliation and reclaimed by force.

A dress for me.

Mom loved the idea too.

Of course she did.

She had become cautious with my new life, but not distant. At first, she had treated everything like it might break: my name, my clothes, my makeup, me. She asked before touching my hair. She knocked every time now. She said Cleo carefully for the first month, like the name was a glass ornament.

By spring, she said it more naturally.

Not always perfectly.

But naturally enough that sometimes I forgot to brace before she spoke.

The Saturday before Spring Formal, she took me shopping.

Hannah came too because she claimed no one should buy formalwear without “professional chaos management.”

Dad drove us to the mall and said he would “find coffee,” which meant he intended to hide near the food court until the emotional part was over.

“You can come in,” Mom told him.

He looked at the entrance to the department store, then at me. “Do you want me to?”

The old Dad would have decided.

The new Dad asked.

That was still strange enough to make my chest hurt.

“Maybe later,” I said.

He nodded immediately. “I’ll be around.”

Around.

Not gone.

That mattered too.

The dress section overwhelmed me at first. Racks of satin, tulle, sequins, chiffon. Pastels and jewel tones. Short dresses, long dresses, fitted dresses, dresses with open backs, dresses with skirts that looked like they required their own parking space.

Hannah moved through them like a general.

“No. Too pageant. No. Too funeral. Maybe. Absolutely not, unless you plan to marry a vampire.”

Mom held up a navy dress. “This one is pretty.”

Hannah tilted her head. "It's giving school board member at a gala."

Mom put it back. "I don't know what that means, but it sounded bad."

I laughed.

Then I saw the dress.

It was hanging near the end of the rack, half-hidden behind a sparkly lavender thing with feathers. Soft powder blue, with a fitted bodice, thin straps, and a skirt that fell just above the knee in layers of light fabric. It was not too plain, not too dramatic. Girly, but not childish. Pretty, but not begging.

I touched the skirt.

The fabric was soft.

Of course it was.

Mom saw my face. "That one?"

"I don't know."

Hannah appeared beside me. "You do know."

"I hate when people say that."

"Then stop being obvious."

Trying it on felt like stepping into a question.

I had worn dresses before by then. At Hannah's house. At home. Once to a coffee shop two towns over, where I spent forty minutes waiting for someone to stare and no one did.

But this dress felt different.

Spring Formal was at school.

My school.

The place where Carl White had spent years trying to disappear.

I zipped the dress carefully and looked in the fitting room mirror.

For a second, I did not move.

The girl in the mirror looked nervous.

That part had not changed.

But she also looked present.

The dress softened my shoulders and made my waist look delicate. The blue brought out my eyes. My hair, grown slightly longer now and blended with extensions Hannah had helped me choose, fell in loose waves around my face. I had only light makeup on, but my lashes looked soft and my lips were shiny with the gloss I wore almost every day now.

I looked like Cleo.

Not hidden.

Not borrowed.

Not half-created under emergency lighting.

Just Cleo.

The fitting room curtain moved slightly.

"Can we see?" Mom asked.

My throat tightened.

I opened the curtain.

Mom's hand went to her mouth again, the way it had at the pep rally. But this time she smiled through it.

"Oh, honey," she whispered.

Hannah pressed both hands to her chest. "That's the one."

I looked down at the skirt. "Is it too much?"

"No," Mom said.

"Is it too girly?"

Hannah looked personally offended. "That is not a real problem."

Mom stepped closer, careful as always. "You look beautiful."

Beautiful.

The word still scared me.

But it no longer felt impossible.

I looked at myself in the three-way mirror, turning slightly. The skirt moved around my legs. Soft. Easy. Mine.

"I like it," I said.

My voice shook.

Mom's eyes filled. "Then we'll get it."

Dad met us near the shoe section holding a coffee and pretending he had not been waiting for us the entire time. When he saw the dress folded over Mom's arm, he went very still.

"That the one?" he asked.

I nodded.

His eyes moved to me, then away, then back. "Blue's good."

Hannah muttered, "A review from the fashion desk."

Mom elbowed her gently.

We looked at shoes next. Black heels felt too serious. White ones felt too bridal. Hannah found silver flats with tiny rhinestone straps and a low heel that would not make me fall down the gym stairs.

Mom found black ones that were more practical.

I stood between them, holding one of each.

Dad, who had been silent for several minutes, cleared his throat.

We all looked at him.

He looked deeply uncomfortable with the power we had given him.

"The silver ones," he said.

My heart stumbled.

Mom smiled slowly. "You think?"

Dad shrugged. "They look more... I don't know. More like the dress."

Hannah stared at him. "Mr. White, that was almost fashion vocabulary."

He looked at her. "Don't spread it around."

I laughed.

Dad reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and handed me cash.

"For the shoes," he said.

"Dad, you don't have to —"

"I know."

The words sat there between us.

I know.

Not I have to. Not your mother told me. Not because this is normal now and I'm perfectly fine.

Just I know.

I took the money.

"Thank you."

He nodded, then looked at the silver shoes again.

"They're better than the black ones," he said quietly.

It was awkward.

It was imperfect.

It was everything.

Spring Formal was held in the gym because Cedar Forest loved pretending streamers could transform a basketball court into a ballroom.

Student council had chosen the theme **Starry Night**, which meant dark blue fabric draped over the walls, silver balloons tied to the bleachers, glitter stars hanging from the ceiling, and cheap projector lights making dots move across the floor. The same gym where I had nearly frozen during the pep rally now looked softer, dimmer, almost forgiving.

Almost.

The first time I stepped through the doors, people stared.

Of course they did.

I had expected that.

The difference was that I did not shrink as quickly.

I wore the blue dress, the silver shoes, soft curls, and makeup Hannah had done at my house while Mom hovered in the doorway pretending she was not crying. I carried a small silver purse that held lip gloss, my phone, and the folded note from Ms. Powell that said **Nice work, Cleo.**

For courage.

Hannah arrived with me in a pink dress that looked like it had been designed by a cupcake with excellent taste. Madison

came with Avery and Olivia, all of them immediately complaining about the decorations while secretly taking photos under them.

“Gym still smells like basketball,” Madison said.

Hannah looked around. “That’s the Cedar Forest magic.”

I scanned the room.

I saw people look away quickly. I saw some whisper. I saw one girl from my English class smile at me like she wanted to be supportive but did not know if we were friends. I saw Trent Keller near the far wall, not in formalwear, just a wrinkled button-down and bitterness. He looked at me once, then looked away.

I did not feel nothing.

That would have been a lie.

My stomach still tightened. My hands still trembled a little around my purse strap. Some part of me was still the person standing near the front doors in September, exhausted by the idea of being seen.

But I was not only that person anymore.

The music was loud. The lights moved. People danced in clusters, awkward and joyful and embarrassed. Teachers stood near the refreshment table, guarding cookies and pretending not to hear lyrics. The gym floor reflected the fake stars overhead.

Then Benny arrived.

He came through the doors in a dark suit with a blue tie that matched my dress almost exactly.

My breath caught.

Hannah saw him and made a strangled sound. "Oh, he coordinated."

Madison glanced over. "Good. Bare minimum effort achieved."

But Benny was not looking at either of them.

He was looking at me.

Everything else in the gym seemed to fade to background noise.

He stopped a few feet away, eyes moving over my dress, my hair, my face. Not in the old way that made me feel inspected. In the new way that made me feel chosen.

"Hi," he said.

I smiled. "Hi."

His throat moved. "You look..."

"Careful," Madison said from behind me.

Benny's eyes flicked to her, then back to me. "Beautiful."

The word landed softer from him than I expected.

Maybe because he said it like a fact, not a performance.

My face heated. "You look very quarterback at a wedding."

He laughed. "Is that good?"

"It's not bad."

"I'll take not bad."

Hannah leaned toward Madison and whispered loudly, "They're disgusting."

"I heard that," I said.

"You were meant to."

Benny held out his hand.

This time, I did not hesitate.

I took it.

We moved onto the gym floor together.

People watched.

Let them.

For the first few songs, we did not dance much. Mostly we stood with Hannah, Madison, Avery, Olivia, and some of Benny's teammates who had learned through fear, maturity, or Madison's threats how to be normal around me.

Mason was the best at it.

He walked up holding two cups of punch and said, "Cleo, your shoes are shiny."

I looked at him.

He looked panicked. "That sounded normal in my head."

Hannah burst out laughing.

I smiled. "Thank you, Mason."

He nodded seriously. "You're welcome. I'm growing as a person."

Benny clapped him on the shoulder. "Proud of you."

Mason pointed at him. "Do not make it weird."

For a while, it felt almost easy.

That was what surprised me most.

Not perfect. Not free of fear. But easy in little pieces.

A song I liked came on, and Hannah dragged me into the middle of the floor with the squad. I danced badly, then less badly, then stopped caring. The dress moved around me. The silver shoes caught the light. My hair stuck lightly to the back of my neck, and my cheeks hurt from smiling.

At some point, I looked toward the gym doors.

My parents stood there.

Mom wore a navy dress. Dad wore a button-down shirt and looked like someone had forced him into a room full of teenagers and feelings.

They had not planned to stay. Just drop me off, take pictures, leave.

But there they were.

Watching.

Mom waved.

Dad lifted one hand awkwardly.

I waved back.

Benny followed my gaze. "You want to go say hi?"

"Not yet."

"Okay."

I liked how easily he said it now.

Okay.

Not as a way to avoid the truth.

As a way to give me room.

Later, when the music slowed, the lights dimmed further. The fake stars drifted across the gym walls. Students paired off with the sudden panic of teenagers realizing slow songs required decisions.

Benny turned to me.

"Dance with me?" he asked.

"We've been dancing."

"Badly. In a group. With Mason discussing shiny shoes."

"That was an important cultural moment."

He smiled. "Cleo."

My name in his voice still did something to me.

"Yes," I said.

He led me toward the center of the gym.

His hands found my waist carefully. Mine settled on his shoulders. We had touched before. Held hands. Hugged. Kissed softly behind Hannah's car after a basketball game while she shouted that she could still see us. But slow dancing in the middle of Cedar Forest's gym felt different.

Public.

Gentle.

Ours.

Benny looked nervous again.

I smiled. "You won Homecoming and still look scared of a school dance."

"I know football plays. I do not know where my hands are supposed to go."

"They're fine."

"Full enthusiasm?"

"Medium-high."

He laughed softly and relaxed.

We swayed under cheap gym lights made to look like stars.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

I looked around the room slowly.

The bleachers were pushed back. The basketball hoops were raised. The same walls that had held my humiliation now held paper moons and silver streamers. The same floor where I had

almost frozen as people laughed now carried me in a blue dress while Benny Hayes held me like I belonged there.

I thought about the first day of senior year.

The hallway. The lockers. The football players. Benny's joke. My gray hoodie. My tired body trying to become invisible before the year had even begun.

I thought about the Spirit Swap board. Hannah's vanity. The first time I saw the girl in the mirror and did not know whether to run from her or reach for her. The cheer room photo. The drive home. My mother saying my name. My father asking if I was warm enough.

I thought about Carl.

Not like he was gone.

That had scared me at first, the idea that becoming Cleo meant erasing him. But by spring, I understood it differently. Carl had carried me through every hallway where I did not know how to exist yet. He had survived the years I did not have words for. He had gotten me to the mirror.

I did not hate him.

I could not.

He had been the door.

I was the one walking through it.

Benny's thumb moved gently against my waist. "Where did you go?"

I looked up. "September."

His face softened. "Bad place?"

"Not all bad."

"No?"

"You were there."

He winced. "I was kind of terrible there."

"You were."

"Thanks."

"You got better."

"I'm still working on it."

"I know."

He smiled. "You make that sound okay."

"Maybe it is."

The song shifted into its final chorus.

Around us, people danced, laughed, whispered, took pictures, lived inside the messy little world of senior year. Not everyone understood me. Not everyone liked me. Not every stare was kind.

But I was not waiting to disappear anymore.

Benny leaned closer, his forehead almost touching mine.

"I'm scared about college," he admitted.

"Me too."

“What if it changes everything?”

“It will.”

He looked alarmed.

I smiled. “That doesn’t mean it ruins everything.”

“No?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t.” I squeezed his shoulder. “But I’m getting better at not knowing.”

He laughed softly. “That is very you.”

“Cleo me or Carl me?”

His eyes held mine.

“You,” he said.

My throat tightened.

The song ended, but we did not move right away.

For one small, shining second, I let the whole room exist around me without flinching from it. The glitter stars. The cheap lights. The polished gym floor. Hannah crying openly while pretending she had allergies. Madison taking pictures and calling it documentation. My parents standing near the doors, still awkward, still trying. Benny’s hands warm at my waist.

Me, visible in the middle of it.

Loved in the middle of it.

Finally in the middle of it.

When Benny took my hand and spun me once, the skirt of my blue dress lifted softly around my knees. I laughed, startled and bright, and for once I did not swallow the sound before anyone could hear it.

For the first time, I did not feel like I had survived senior year.

I felt like I had finally arrived in it — as Cleo White.

~THE END~

OTHER TITLES BY LILLY

Here's another story from Lilly Lustwood...



“Be the opposite of who you are. Dress up like a girl, and you’ll be happy.”

I thought my life was over. Not dramatically. Not beautifully. Just quietly. I was twenty-six, working evening shifts at Morrow & Finch Books, smiling at customers, recommending novels, closing the register, and going home to an apartment that felt as gray as I did. I wasn’t really living. I was just staying alive in the most ordinary way possible.

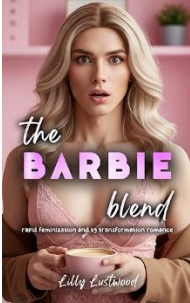
Then I found a strange self-help book in the backroom. **Truly Madly Happy: Small Experiments for People Who Forgot How to Live.** One chapter told me to become the opposite of who I was for one night. I thought it was ridiculous. I thought it was desperate. I thought it was exactly the kind of thing a lonely person should never take seriously. But after closing, surrounded by dusty boxes and old event costumes, I put on a blouse, a skirt, a cardigan, and a wig. And for the first time in months, I felt awake.

I called myself Evie. She was supposed to be private. A secret little experiment. A girl who only existed after hours, between the shelves, where no one could see me wanting to be soft, pretty, and alive. Then Professor Jules Porter knocked on the bookstore door. He thought I was a woman. He asked my name. I panicked and said Evie. And somehow, that one lie became the most beautiful part of my life.

Jules was gentle, intelligent, and dangerously observant. He came back for books, then conversations, then me. He invited Evie to poetry readings, took her to diners, held her hand, and looked at her like she was someone worth finding. The more he wanted Evie, the more terrified I became. Because I was still Evan underneath the lipstick, the skirts, the perfume, and the soft curls. I was still the sad bookstore clerk who had found a doorway in a yellow book and walked through it in borrowed clothes.

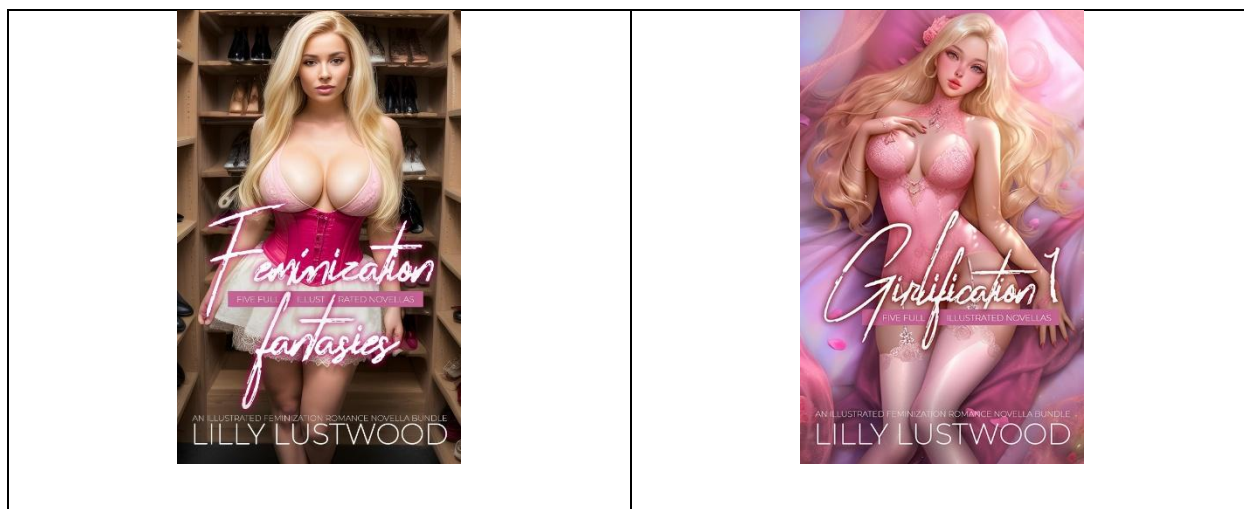
[Read Crossdressing in the Backroom](#)

Lilly Lustwood is a bestselling author of Transgender Romance. She has written hundreds of books but there are titles that truly helped introduce her to a wider range of readers. Here are just some of her bestselling books of all time.

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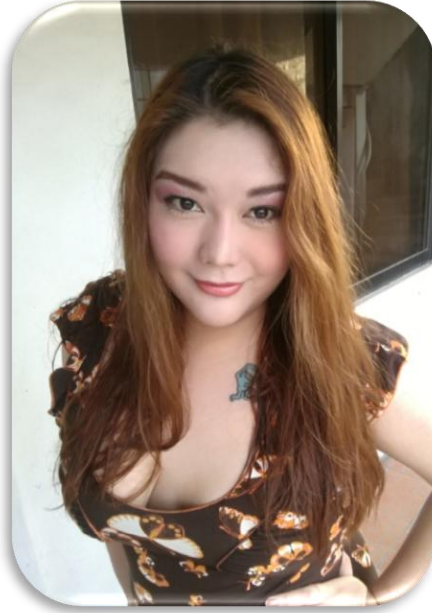


Prefer listening to books? Lilly Lustwood is also on Audible.

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AUTHOR'S MESSAGE



Dear Romantic Reader,

Thank you very much for purchasing and reading *The Secret Cheerleader*.

For a writer, I can't seem to find the best word to describe how grateful I am for your support.

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