

Eloise Perkins sat on the floor of the back hallway, her knees curled up into her chest. She took heaving breaths. Her eyes were screaming to let the tears come down, but she fought the urge to sob in public. Eloise looked desperately for a distraction.

The back hallway of Anderson Senior High School was silent. Most of the teachers had long since gone home, and the few students who remained in the dreary building leaned against the brick walls in their own little worlds.

“Is everything okay?” A figure peered down at her.

“I’m fine.” Eloise took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes before she looked up at the curious person near her.

The girl was tall. Six feet, at least. Her long dark hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, and her perfectly shaped eyebrows were lowered in what appeared to be genuine concern. Her thin hand was resting on the wall, and her painted blue nails stood out against the brick. She bent her knees to bring herself down to Eloise’s level.

“Do you want to go somewhere?” the girl asked.

Eloise thought for a moment. Where would she go? She ran a list of places through her mind. She couldn’t stay here forever, after all. This seemed as good an opportunity as any.

“Sure.”

The girl held out her hand and helped Eloise to her feet. She smiled, and Eloise managed to reciprocate.

“I’m Karen.”

“Eloise,” she muttered.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Eloise.”

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Karen led Eloise through the maze of hallways in the high school until they came upon one that Eloise had never been in before. The door was coated in a layer of peeling blue paint, and a movie poster for the Breakfast Club covered the window.

“Who’s classroom is this?” asked Eloise.

“Mr. Marshall. He teaches economics, I think. Hopefully, he’s still here.” Karen pulled on the silver door handle, and the door squeaked open.

“Mr. Marshall?”

Mr. Marshall was an exceptionally tall man in his late fifties or early sixties. His hair was a stark white, and a thin scar ran from his left eyebrow to his hairline. Mr. Marshall wore a brown blazer with elbow patches and a pair of worn slacks. Behind the desk he’d hung a variety of posters, among them Led Zeppelin, Bob Ross, and one detailing how the hundred dollar bill had changed through the years. He sat with his feet resting on the corner of an untidy metal desk with a stack of papers waiting to be graded. He turned in his leather office chair to face the two girls standing in the doorway.

“Weren’t you heading home, Karen?”

“I changed my mind. Is it okay if we stick around for a bit?”

“Sure. Just don’t break anything.” He winked. “Who’s your friend?”

After Karen made introductions, Mr. Marshall left the classroom to grab something from the copy room. Karen walked to the corner of the room and started grabbing items from a bookshelf, which was packed with precariously stacked items that had nothing to do with each other. A ceramic vase and a glass blown spider were among the things that caught Eloise’s eye the most.

“Do you play?”

“What?”

“Chess. You play?”

Eloise finally registered the items Karen was retrieving from the shelf. They were a wooden chess board and plastic bag of pieces. It reminded her of the ancient one on the floor in the back of her closet. She used to play, laying on her stomach in her bedroom. Her brother had given it to her as a birthday present. Eloise hadn't taken it out in years.

“I know the basics.” Eloise walked toward a circular table in the back of the room. “Why are you so nice to me?”

“Why wouldn't I be?”

“Most people would ignore an ugly freshman girl crying in the back hallway of a crappy high school.”

“Most people are asshats. Let's leave it at that, okay?”

Eloise nodded and sat herself in a metal chair. She pulled it up to the table until her ribcage touched the thin rubber strip attached to the side of the table. Eloise liked the pressure against her chest. It kept her grounded, in the classroom, with this strange girl. She could feel it with every breath. It was a reminder that she was still breathing.

Karen dropped the board on the table, and opened the bag of chess pieces. She turned it upside down. The pieces tumbled out of the bag, hit the table, and rolled onto the floor.

“Well, shit.” Karen dropped her knees and scrambled after the runaway pieces. She looked like an uncoordinated giraffe. A laugh burst out of Eloise's mouth before she could stop it.

“Want some help?” Eloise pushed her chair away from the table. Karen gave a nod.

Eloise climbed down on her hands and knees. She picked up a two white pawns and a black knight and set them on the table. Karen had four or five pieces in each hand, and was struggling to keep them from falling out.

After what felt like eternity, they got the pieces on the table and set them up. Eloise was white. Her move first. She moved her pawn two spaces forward on the board.

“So, you’re a freshman this year?” Karen moved a pawn.

Eloise nodded, but didn’t look Karen in the eye. There wasn’t a point. This game would end soon enough.

“What’s your favorite class? Mine was English.”

“Science,” Eloise murmured. She considered her next move for a moment before she picked up the bishop and placed it gently diagonally across the board.

Karen studied the board. After a moment, she picked up another pawn and moved it forwards two spaces. She glanced at Eloise.

“Really? I hated that shit. Too much math for me.”

“I like math too. There’s a right answer. No unknowns.”

“What’s wrong with unknowns?”

“They burn everything until there’s nothing left,” Eloise whispered and moved her knight.

“We’re not talking about class subjects any more, are we?” Karen moved her bishop diagonally one space.

“No.” Eloise placed her queen two spaces directly forward.

“What, then?” Karen furrowed her brow and moved her hand towards the board, but set it back on the table before she touched any pieces.

Eloise said nothing for a long time. She looked at Karen, begging her to make a move. Eloise needed an excuse not to answer. She could focus on the game. She shouldn't talk about personal topics in the classroom of an eccentric economics teacher with some girl she just met.

"Secrets," Eloise conceded.

"Who's keeping secrets?" Karen finally moved a piece across the board.

"Forget it, it doesn't matter." Eloise looked at the board and studied the gentle curves of her queen. It was well crafted, sleek. She stood tall and towered over others. No one kept things from her, and she had complete control over her own life. A ruler in a war she had the power to win.

"Come on, don't give me that shit," Karen said bluntly, "Who's keeping secrets?"

"The government."

"Please tell me you're not a fucking conspiracy theorist."

"I'm not." Eloise castled with her rook on the left side of her board. She looked at Karen with her best *I don't want to talk about this anymore* face.

Karen backed off a bit. She looked intently down at the board before making a move. She clumsily picked up her rook and castled. They made several moves in near silence. Eloise set her pieces down gently, but Karen's always made a distinct click even when she tried to put it down quietly and deliberately.

"You want to know why I cared that a freshman girl I didn't know was crying in the hallway of a shitty high school?" Karen said as Eloise moved a pawn toward the opposite side of the board.

"Why?"

"Because I used to be a freshman girl crying in the hallway of a shitty high school."

“Really?” Eloise raised an eyebrow. “You don’t seem like the type.”

Karen laughed and brushed a hair back behind her ear. “Does it really seem that unlikely?”

“You’re practically a model.” Eloise gestured to Karen’s long hair and defined features.

“Looks aren’t everything.” Karen moved her knight and shifted in her seat before she continued. “When I was fourteen, I came home to find my dad packing his shit into a duffel bag. Turns out he’d been sleeping with one of the ladies from my mom’s book club. A month later, my mom and I had all of our stuff packed in boxes and we moved two hundred miles away. It was the middle of the damn school year.

“I didn’t know one *fucking* person, and believe it or not, I had a hard time making friends. I used to sit alone in the hallway, eat my lunch, hate my dad, and cry. Mr. Marshall happened to see me one day, and he told me to come with him. I thought he was going to call my parents. Tell them how I couldn’t make friends, how I sat alone and sobbed during my lunch period.

“We got in his classroom, and I prepared for the worst. Instead, he pulled out a damn chess board. *This* chess board. He saw a crying girl in the hallway, and the bastard thought ‘Hey, I think maybe it would make her feel better to play chess with an overly enthusiastic economics teacher!’” Karen laughed, but her eyes were tearing up.

“Thing is, the dude was right. It made me feel better to play chess during lunch with a guy four times my age. And, in a completely predictable series of events, I joined the fucking chess club. I made my first friends in a town two hundred miles from the place I used to call home because I learned to play chess in this room.”

Eloise stared at Karen. What could she possibly say? That not having friends is awful? That she was glad things had worked out? It was stating the obvious. A redundant statement. She

sat in stunned silence for what felt like eternity. Eloise looked back at the chess board and moved a piece without bothering to care whether or not it put her former plan in jeopardy.

“I’m sorry.” Eloise refused to look up from the board.

“No big deal. It wasn’t your fault.” Karen maneuvered her rook into a position a few meager spaces from Eloise’s king. “Check.”

There was only one move left for Eloise to make. She moved her King one space to the left, setting it on the white square without a sound. She had few pieces left now, and none could come to the aid of her king. Eloise could only watch as Karen moved her piece into position and set it down with a small *clack*.

“Checkmate.” Karen looked up from the board. “Good game.”

“He died.” Eloise tipped over her piece.

“The king? That’s kind of how the game works. The king dies.”

“Not the king,” Eloise said, barely above a whisper, “My brother.”

“Damn, Eloise. I’m sorry.”

Despite every voice inside of her head screaming not to, Eloise sat up in her seat, folded her hands in her lap, and opened her mouth.

“His name was Jared. He was in the army.” Eloise’s voice was shaky and cracked every few words. She pressed her fingernails into the palm of her hand and took a deep breath. Karen gave her a small nod. *Keep going*.

“They sent him overseas seven months ago. We got the news last night. He’s dead.” Her voice was louder now, rising in volume with every word.

“He loved games like this, you know. Jared was a strategist. I think that’s why he joined the army in the first place. Military history was practically his favorite subject.” She forced the words out like bullets. They came in quick succession, but she had to pause and reload.

“When they told my mom and me, they said that the government couldn’t disclose why he’d died. What he’d been doing. Confidential. My brother’s death is *confidential*” She spat the words with such ferocity that she could feel their heat as they left her mouth. Eloise’s vision blurred. She wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

“Every time I close my eyes I picture what could have happened. What he was doing, why he was doing it. I picture him getting ripped apart over and over again. And every time, I think that maybe there was something he could have done to avoid it. Maybe there was something I could have done to avoid it.”

Karen stood and made her way around the table. She bumped it on the way, and the wooden soldiers toppled off the board. Karen wrapped her thin arms around Eloise. After a minute, Karen relaxed her grip a bit and looked Eloise straight in the eyes.

“You were a world away, Eloise. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know.”

The door burst open. Eloise jumped and hastily wiped her cheeks again. She took a breath. She turned to face the door.

Mr. Marshall stood in the doorway. In his arms, he held stacks upon stacks of precariously placed colored paper. The top was tucked underneath his chin. Mr. Marshall shut the door with his left foot before he walked to his desk and tried to make a space for the ludicrous amount of worksheets he’d made in the copy room. The problem was, he couldn’t use

much of his hands without dropping the paper, so he stood at his desk, pushing papers aside with a singular finger.

Karen muttered something Eloise couldn't quite catch before she went to help Mr. Marshall and his stack of rainbow colored paper. Eloise turned away from them and picked up chess pieces, placing them into their bag one by one.

"No wonder it took so long." Karen raised an eyebrow at the pile.

"It's every worksheet I needed printed for the rest of the semester." Having cleared a spot, he plopped the paper onto his already overcrowded desk.

Karen asked Mr. Marshall for something, but Eloise wasn't sure what it was until Mr. Marshall dug through a desk drawer and pulled out a pad of sticky notes and a pen. Karen scribbled something on it and walked across the room to Eloise. She stuck the note out for Eloise to grab.

Eloise glanced down at the note. The handwriting was barely legible across the green square of paper in her hand. Near the top, Karen had written her phone number. The numbers crowded into each other, and it was written at an awkward slant. Below the number was a date.

"What's on May 24th?" Eloise looked up from the note.

"The next chess club meeting. Think about it, yeah?" Karen gave a small smile.

"Sure."

Eloise and Karen finished putting the chess pieces in their bag rather quickly after that. Karen looked for a place on the shelf in the back of the room to shove the board, and Eloise walked to the door.

"Hey, Karen?"

"Yeah?" Karen turned away from the shelf for a moment.

“Thanks for listening.”

“It was my pleasure.”

With that, Eloise walked out the door, and shut it quietly behind her.