

# WHERE YOU SEE YOURSELF

CLAIRE FORREST



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# CHAPTER ONE

I look up at the familiar brick building. At the newly cleaned metal door, and my blurry reflection in its surface.

I noticed the area around the flagpole has freshly potted plants. These are the type of things Mill City High School spends money on.

Behind the door, I hear the distinct rise and fall of chatter. I take the deepest breath I've taken all day, like they said to do on that guided meditation they played in health class once, and wait for it to rush over me.

You know, that *this is it* feeling.

I wait.

Focus.

Then I exhale long and slow like letting the air out of a balloon.

As I suspected.

It's the first day of my senior year of high school and I feel nothing.

I hit the door opener. The gears above the door rumble for a second in consideration before pattering out in a guttural whine. The door doesn't even try to open.

Yeah, I'm not gonna miss this place.

I go up to the door and grip the handle, yanking it open and slipping inside, letting the door hit me slightly as it closes.

Taking a look around, I see the scared freshmen with their too-cute outfits and too-big backpacks. I see the sophomore boys who grew a foot over the summer. I see the junior girls with stick-straight hair and leather tote bags for backpacks. And I see the other seniors wearing their yellow-and-black-tie-dye STOMP shirts.

It's only the first day, but I'm ready to move on from this place and on to something bigger. Something that gives me that *this is it* feeling.

In the meantime, *this* is it.

I head to my second locker. I've been testing each component of the two-locker system for the past three years, and on this, the first day of senior year, I'm proud to say I've nailed it.

The locker is one turn down a hallway and a few feet from the side door by the parking lot and within sight of the ramp that leads to the main hub of the school. Looking to my left, I see one unexpected cherry on top. Fellow senior Katie Hollins looks up shyly, her lips forming in a half-hearted smile. Perfect. A locker neighbor who is nice but not chatty.

Yep, nailed it.

I unzip my backpack and pull out my retractable locker shelf. When I can't get it quite even, Katie smiles sympathetically. "Oh, those are tricky."

She looks at me for permission and I nod. She helps me level it and snaps it into place.

I may not have all the excitement of my classmates, but that doesn't mean it won't be a good year.

The first bell rings and I launch into my perfectly executed routine:

1. Take the short ramp through the first-floor Commons. (Swerve around Abe Crawford and Sarah Smith, who unfortunately are still together after the summer, and are resuming their annoying habit of kissing in the middle of the ramp, like it's never occurred to them some people might have a hard time getting around them. Speaking of which, now seems like a good time to address the rumor that I once rammed into Abe's ankles mid-make-out on purpose. To which I say, prove it.)
2. Enjoy the ease of the long glide down the main Commons ramp into the North Wing. (A hall monitor inevitably thinks they're the first person to come up with the "Hey, slow down, you got a license for that thing?" joke, and I inevitably wonder what happened to them to make them so unfunny.)

3. Make a sharp right turn and barrel down the hallway as fast as I can. Looking up, I see there are no STOMP-shirted people around me. Figures, most seniors don't need every second of passing time to get to class.

I, however, manage to get to AP Lit only seconds before the final bell, skidding to a stop and getting into the seat Harper saved for me next to her.

“Hey,” she says. Her short brunette hair covers the side of her face and eyes as she looks at her phone on the desk, savoring the last possible seconds before she has to turn it in. “You made it.”

“Yeah,” I huff. “No thanks to Abe and Sarah.”

“Oh god. Swapping Spit Slope is still a thing? I'm sorry. I was hoping their relationship would bite the dust over the summer. You know, for your sake.” She stands to walk her phone up to the basket in the front of the classroom where Mr. Andersen makes us store them during class time. “You should complain about them, like, to the administration. They can't block your access like that.”

They don't have working door openers on half the entrances to this place, but yeah, sure, let's make Abe and Sarah the hill—or rather, ramp—that I die on.

Just as Harper returns to her seat, Cam plops down in the empty seat on the other side of me, her backpack making a satisfying *thunk* as she throws it to the floor. Today, she's

wearing her green cat-eye glasses that make her red hair and green eyes pop.

I notice that both of them are wearing STOMP shirts.

Harper and I met in fifth grade when we were scrawny kids on the playground getting wood chips in our shoes at recess. I don't know life without her. We had a science class with Cam freshman year, and it was instantly like she was always a part of our friend group. Now I don't know life without her either.

"I got a locker all the way up on freaking third floor. I swear I had to pass through time and space to make it here," Cam explains, clearly annoyed.

"Sucks to suck," Harper says dryly. Harper is always the one to say exactly what she thinks.

"And I have two random sophomores as locker neighbors." Cam mouths "Hello" to me, the much more reserved of my two best friends.

"I have Katie Hollins and three freshmen," I say.

"How do you have four people?" Harper asks.

"My second locker," I reply, bracing myself for what I know is coming next.

"Ugh, you're so lucky." Harper stands, and holds out her hand. I drop my phone in her palm and she walks up to drop mine and Cam's into the basket.

Yep, just me, sitting on my throne of privilege.

The ding-ding-ding of morning announcements on the PA takes the pressure off wondering how to respond. Harper's

comments sometimes make me feel like maybe she might never fully understand that those things don't exactly make me *feel* lucky.

“Hello, Mill City High School!” The voice of our assistant principal, Ms. Ross, fills the classroom. “A happy first-day-of-school greeting to you all, and especially to our freshman class!”

A low, loud boo rumbles through our classroom.

Mr. Andersen looks up from shuffling papers at his desk. “Be nice, guys,” he warns. “You were them once, too.”

Ms. Ross continues. “And of course, congratulations, seniors!” This time, a loud roar fills the room. Several boys bang their fists on their desks, which earns us another glare from Mr. Andersen.

“We know you all will accomplish great things this year as you soar toward opportunities, milestones, and personal progress.”

Harper snorts a bit too loudly.

I may not be feeling super stoked about senior year, but judging by their matching shirts, apparently my friends and all my peers are.

Every year, the seniors at my high school sell these shirts in the school colors, emblazoned with the word SENIOR on the back and some secret acronym on the front. This year, it is STOMP.

If any of the underclassmen ask what the acronym stands for, the answer is the same every year: “We can't tell you.”



Truth is, I don't think any of the seniors truly know. *Soaring Toward Opportunities, Milestones, Progress* was the official line fed to the administration, but everyone knows what it actually stands for is way more . . . sexual than that.

The idea behind the shirts is that the money raised is supposed to go to the Student Council's endowment fund, but seeing as I'm on the Student Council, I know the money goes directly toward a party fund for a select few popular seniors.

The whole concept is pointless and representative of senior year: None of us know what it is supposed to signify anyway.

"Do you know what it stands for?" I whisper.

"I heard Snatching—" Cam guesses.

"No, it's Slurping—" tries Harper.

*Make it Shudder.*

The announcements carry on. "And this seems like the opportune time to remind you that our first college-application workshop will be on September fifteenth."

"—Which, might I add, you are required to attend as part of my class," Mr. Andersen interjects.

Harper, of course, groans loudly, and I see Cam's shoulders slump a bit.

As for me, I wonder what it would be like to be so cavalier about the whole college thing. What would it be like to narrow your list simply by name alone, or because you just thought it would be cool to live there?

I open my planner and circle the date.

“And she’s at it again with the lists!” Cam says.

“Yeah, seriously,” Harper agrees. “You don’t even need to go to the workshop. We both know you’ve had your list of schools to apply to since junior year.”

Sophomore year, actually.



The rest of the day is pretty typical first-day stuff: reminders of the grading scale, warnings about turning homework in late. And, of course, there is a ton of talk from teachers across all six periods that this is our senior year. If we really get it together and work hard, who knows what could happen? We hold the keys, and our final year of high school is our oyster.

We just have to STOMP all over it, I guess.

As I reach my second locker, my hand goes for the lock, which I quickly realize is severed, hanging through the clasp. When I move the top part back in place, I see it’s a clean, perfect cut. And then I notice the note taped to the door: *Unassigned locker. Please see main office to claim your things.*

Sure enough, inside the locker I see that I’ve been cleaned out from top to bottom. I slam the door so that it echoes through the empty hallway. Going down the ramp is a lot faster with no lovebirds blocking my way. I also pick up a lot of speed when I’m just plain pissed off.

I ride the elevator up to the second floor and open the door to the main office. There's no door opener, so I grip the handle and pull it down, but I don't give myself enough of an angle between the door and the doorframe. The door falls shut, leaving me wedged between.

The secretary looks up from her computer and stands up quickly. "Can I help you with the door?" she asks just as I squeeze my way through and the door shuts behind me.

"I got it," I huff, and look her in the eyes. "You cut the lock off my locker? I'm here to claim my stuff."

She lets out a *tsssk* sound.

Five minutes. Five minutes was all it would have taken to realize the locker was assigned to me, and would be properly logged by the end of the day. Instead, they called a janitor to get the metal cutter. They found a paper bag somewhere. They hauled all my stuff up here. That must've taken multiple people at least half an hour.

"Why?" I manage to get out.

"That locker wasn't assigned to your name," she says. "We can't have students storing items in lockers and not know the combination to open them. It's against school security policy. You gave your combination to your advisor for a locker on third floor. This locker was on first floor."

"I'm allowed to have two lockers, though," I explain. "It's part of my IEP—never mind. Anyway, it's part of my accommodations. It's so I don't have to lug all my stuff around for the whole day."

Her brow creases and she sounds stern. “Well, I’m sorry, if it was part of your official accommodations, it should have been logged by the student accommodations coordinator, and as of this afternoon, it wasn’t.”

She walks around her desk and knocks on the door that belongs to one of our hall monitors. The door opens partway. “Sorry to interrupt, but the girl in the wheelchair is here to claim her things.”

They both go inside to gather all the items removed from my locker, and I’m left sitting alone in front of the main desk.

“Effie,” I correct her, barely above a whisper. “My name is Effie.”