

# Boutique Boy

*Created June 2025, main storyline supplied by Carg, text and pictures by ChatGPT 4o.*

*Note that the idea of this story is based on the autobiographical story 'First Contact' from Hipo (see the 'Other Stories' section). The story is set in the 1970s, when jumpsuits for men were occasionally seen, especially on rock singers, like the androgynous phase of David Bowie.*

## Chapter 1: The Boutique

The bell above the boutique door jangled like a tambourine as they stepped inside, the sound drowned quickly by the murmur of soft rock drifting from hidden speakers. The place smelled faintly of patchouli and fresh vinyl — the kind of store his mother called “hip,” though she used the word with a sneer.

Carter trailed behind her, trying to fold himself smaller. He was eleven, almost twelve, but his thin frame made him look younger. His hair had grown long over the last year, skimming his shoulders now. It made him feel a little closer to the people he saw on album covers — Bowie, Bolan, even a bit of Jagger. He liked the mystery of them, how they blurred the lines of what boys and girls were supposed to look like. But his mother? She didn't notice things like that.

She snapped her fingers once — loud and sharp — as if to summon his attention.

“Don't dawdle, Carter. I need something that doesn't make me look like I've had three children,” she said, already flipping through a rack of loud, paisley-patterned dresses.

“You've only had me,” he said softly, but she didn't hear him. She rarely did.

As she drifted further into the boutique, Carter's eyes wandered. He didn't mind these stores, really. They were warm and full of color, unlike their home, which was all stiff furniture and bitter silences. He liked watching people here — women with bangles and wide belts, men in turtlenecks and suede jackets, all of them looking like they lived inside the songs he played on his little record player late at night.

In the back corner of the shop, something caught his eye: a rack of jumpsuits, some glittery, some sleek. One of them, a deep blue with silver stars stitched into the shoulders, looked like something Marc Bolan might've worn on *Top of the Pops*. Carter inched toward it, barely breathing. He reached out, brushing the fabric with his fingers, imagining himself under stage lights.

“Now that's a cute one,” a voice chirped behind him. He spun around. A sales assistant — a woman maybe in her twenties, all thick eyeliner and confidence — was watching him closely.

Carter opened his mouth to explain, to say something, but she was already tugging the jumpsuit off the hanger.

“You'll look darling in this,” she said, handing it to him and gently nudging him toward the fitting rooms. “Room three is open. Go on, let's see how it fits.”

He blinked. He hadn't meant to try anything on. He hadn't even spoken. But her hands were on his shoulders now, guiding him firmly, and his mother was still buried in the dress rack.

Inside the booth, Carter stared at the jumpsuit, then at himself in the mirror. It felt strange to even hold something like this, let alone try it on. But he didn't resist. Not really. He wanted to know what it would feel like — to be someone different for just a moment.

He peeled off his t-shirt and jeans and struggled his legs into the jumpsuit. The zipper caught halfway up his chest.

"Need a hand, sweetheart?" the assistant asked, popping her head in without waiting for an answer.

He turned crimson but nodded slightly. She stepped inside, tugged the zipper with a practiced motion, and smoothed the shoulders. Then, before he could protest, she took him by the hand and pulled him out toward the long wall mirror in the main room.

"Look at that! Don't you just love it?" she said brightly.

Carter looked at himself.

The fabric shimmered under the lights, catching the little flecks of silver woven into the seams. His long hair framed his face in a way that felt unfamiliar, yet... right. He looked like someone who might sing into a microphone. Someone who might get noticed.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," his mother's voice rang out behind him. "What *is* he wearing?"

The assistant beamed. "Isn't it perfect? He was drawn to it — practically magnetic. Like it was meant for him."

His mother folded her arms, then gave Carter a long, unreadable stare. "Well," she said at last, "if you're going to wear things like that, I suppose I ought to buy it. Better than those ratty jeans you insist on wearing."

Carter opened his mouth to object, or clarify, but nothing came. His mother had already turned back toward the register.

The assistant winked at him. "You've got style, kid. Don't let anyone tell you different."



Carter stood there, still wearing the jumpsuit, unsure if he should feel mortified or thrilled. Maybe both. He looked back in the mirror, and for a moment — just a flicker — he saw someone brave.

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## Chapter 2: First Impressions

The jumpsuit hung on the back of his bedroom door like a question he hadn't answered yet. His mother had laid it out the night before, paired with a pair of boots she'd dug out from the hall closet — her old ones from when she "used to go out," as she said with a wistful air, brushing dust from the faux-leather with a sock. They had a low heel and a pointed toe, and they gleamed just enough to match the silver stars on his chest.

"It's perfect for Sunday," she'd said, as though it were obvious. "You can't keep wearing jeans to church, Carter. It's embarrassing."

"But I don't think—" he'd started.

"Oh, stop. You looked fine in it at the store, didn't you? Everyone thought so."

So on Sunday morning, Carter climbed into the jumpsuit, wriggling the snug fabric over his shoulders. The zipper stopped mid-chest again. He sighed and yanked hard, feeling the tightness bite into his sides.

Downstairs, his mother's eyes lit up.

"There. Now that's presentable," she said, smoothing the lapel. "Like someone who belongs somewhere."

At church, people stared. Not all of them tried to hide it. Mrs. Krenner, who sang in the choir and wore more makeup than sense, blinked at him like he was a Martian. Her daughter Jill, however — a girl in Carter's grade — gave a crooked smile as she passed by, then mouthed something he couldn't quite hear. It might've been "cool." Or "weird." Maybe both.

That night, his mother said, "See? You survived. You should wear it to school tomorrow."

Carter choked on his milk. "What? No."

"Why not?" she said, sipping her wine. "It's clean. And clearly it makes you stand out — which isn't a bad thing, despite what you think."

He didn't answer. He just stared at the tabletop, the grain of wood blurry with dread.

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He wore it Monday.

The boots clacked louder than sneakers on the linoleum floor of the hallway. Every step felt like a cymbal crash.

Some of the older kids laughed outright. One boy pointed and called him "Disco Danny." Another muttered something about "a girl's gym suit." A few teachers gave him strange looks, but no one said anything. Not even Mr. Wallace, who usually had something to say about dress code violations. Carter guessed no one had invented a rule yet for boys in rhinestoned jumpsuits.

In homeroom, Jill sat behind him. She leaned forward once and whispered, "You look like you're in a band."

He turned slightly. "Is that... good?"

She grinned. "It could be."

Gym class was a relief — he changed into his t-shirt and shorts quickly, grateful for the normalcy, though he caught more than one boy glancing at the shiny blue bundle in his locker.

But the worst part came between second and third period. He needed the bathroom. Badly.

He locked himself in the last stall and tried to peel the jumpsuit down, but the zipper stuck halfway. He twisted, pulling one arm free, then the other. The shoulder seams caught and scraped against his skin. The fabric clung like a second skin, reluctant to let go. He finally managed to get it down just enough, his arms now tangled in a twisted heap of glittery blue around his waist.

His cheeks burned. The stalls echoed with footsteps. Someone laughed outside the door.

He waited until the room emptied before emerging, trying to tug the jumpsuit back up without looking like he was wrestling a sea creature.

Back in class, the tight seams dug deeper into his shoulders. He slouched lower in his chair.

At lunch, Jill passed him a folded note: *You're braver than most boys I know.*

He smiled at it quietly. It was the only note he'd ever gotten that wasn't a warning from a teacher.

That night, his mother looked pleased. "No complaints, I see. Told you it suits you."

Carter didn't correct her. He wasn't sure if she'd even hear him if he did.

Instead, he stared at the jumpsuit as he hung it up again, wondering which part of it he hated — and which part he didn't.

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### Chapter 3: A Gentle Protest

Carter stood in the hallway just outside the bathroom that Monday evening, still slightly damp around the collar. He'd had to splash water on his face after struggling with the jumpsuit again in the bathroom, trying to cool the sting of frustration more than sweat.

Dinner was on the table when he walked into the kitchen — roast chicken and boiled carrots. His mother was already halfway through her wine.

He sat carefully, the jumpsuit creaking slightly as he lowered himself onto the vinyl seat.

She looked at him, fork paused mid-air. "Well?"

He knew what she meant. *Well, wasn't it fine? Well, didn't I say it would be? Well, don't you look sharp?*

"It's... okay," he said, picking at his food. "But it's kind of hard, you know. To go to the bathroom."

She raised an eyebrow. "What's hard about it?"

He hesitated, choosing each word like he was sneaking through a minefield. "The zipper's tight. I can't really get my arms out without — like — turning weird. It takes forever. I almost didn't make it today."

She made a dismissive sound, shaking her head. "You boys. You don't know anything about real inconvenience. Try wearing a girdle for six hours at a wedding in July, then talk to me about difficult."

"I just—" he started again.

"You want to look good, you have to suffer a little. That's life. Drink less if it's such a problem," she said, taking a long sip from her glass and returning to her plate.

Carter stopped talking.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected. Maybe not sympathy. But something softer, at least. Something that meant she'd heard him.

Instead, he just nodded, quietly deciding to skip water before school the next day.

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Tuesday started with gray skies and a cold wind. Carter zipped himself into the jumpsuit again, this time more efficiently. He'd figured out a small trick: if he twisted one arm slightly before pulling, the fabric gave a little more.

His mother handed him the boots at the door, smiling. "You're a vision, Carter. Keep your chin up."

He tried.

At school, the stares were less intense. People were used to it now, or bored. No one called him names this time, and only one kid snickered when he walked past. The teachers said nothing, and he even thought he caught a nod of approval from the art teacher, Miss Elkin.

But during break, things changed.

He approached the usual spot — behind the library, where he and his small cluster of friends usually talked about music or comics — but they didn't greet him. Peter barely looked up. Greg shifted uncomfortably and muttered something about going inside to check on a project.

Carter stood for a moment, trying to decide if he should follow or pretend he had somewhere else to be.

Then a shadow moved beside him.

"Guess it's just you and me," Jill said, biting into a red apple.

He looked up, startled.

She sat on the low brick ledge beside him, legs swinging slightly in her wide-leg jeans. "Boys are cowards," she said, after a moment.

"They're just—" he began.

"They're cowards," she repeated, more firmly. "You dress different once and it's like you've grown horns."

Carter shrugged. "I think I did something wrong."

"You didn't." She took another bite, then leaned closer. "You look like someone with guts. They look like kids."

That made his face flush. He wasn't used to compliments. Especially not from girls with messy hair and chipped black nail polish who seemed to know everything.

He smiled a little. "Thanks."

She tossed him the apple core. "You've got backup now. Don't let it get to you."

He watched her walk off as the bell rang.

For a second, the jumpsuit didn't feel quite so tight.

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#### Chapter 4: The Overalls

By Friday, the jumpsuit had become something of a school legend. Carter didn't know whether that was good or bad anymore. He still got side-eyes and smirks, but the open laughter had died down. Some students had simply accepted it: *That's the kid who wears weird clothes.*

His mother, however, was energized.

"You've got your own look now," she said that evening as she rummaged through a chest in the hallway. "Everyone's dressing the same these days — it's a bore. You're lucky I kept some of my old things."

Carter sat on the bottom stair, watching her sift through old scarves, belts, and jackets that still smelled faintly of hairspray and cigarettes.

"Aha!" she cried, tugging something denim out of the pile. She held it up triumphantly. "These! These are perfect."

They were overalls — dark, heavy denim, with wide legs and silver buttons on the straps. They looked older than Carter, with little signs of wear on the thighs and a patched hole near the knee.

He blinked. "Aren't those just... jeans with straps?"

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "Not these. These zip up the back. Classy, clean. They used to fit me like a glove."

She turned them around to show the long, centered zipper that ran from the base of the spine up to the shoulder blades. "You'll look great in them."

He hesitated. "But... they don't have a fly."

"They don't need one," she said, already brushing the dust off with a dish towel. "They're more fashionable. Trust me."

He wanted to argue, to protest that these weren't *his* clothes, that everything she gave him felt more like a costume than an outfit. But she was already pressing them into his hands.

"Try them on before dinner. We'll hem the legs if they're too long."

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He tried them on.

Getting them up was easy enough, but the back zipper posed a new challenge. He reached behind him, arms flailing awkwardly, then gave up and shuffled down the hall with the back half-zipped.

His mother laughed lightly and zipped them the rest of the way for him. "There we go. You look like something straight out of a magazine."

In the mirror, Carter saw someone else. The overalls fit surprisingly snug across his middle, and the legs flared in a way that reminded him of the album covers he liked. If he didn't know better, he might've said they looked... kind of cool.

But still, the zipper situation nagged at him. "How am I supposed to use the bathroom?"

She gave a dismissive wave. "Same as before. You'll manage. It's not like you're out in the woods."

"But at school—"

"You'll be fine. Don't be difficult."

On Monday, Carter walked to school in the overalls and a plain white t-shirt. The boots stayed — she said they matched. He zipped himself up in the hallway mirror with a coat hanger hook he'd bent for the purpose, then tucked it into his backpack just in case.

At school, more whispers. But not as many laughs.

In fact, one girl asked if he'd gotten them at a thrift shop. Another said, "I think my mom had some just like those."

His usual friends stayed distant again — Greg avoided eye contact entirely — but Jill gave him a thumbs-up in the hallway.

By lunch, he'd half-forgotten the zipper. Until it was time to go.

He slipped into the bathroom, waited for silence, then fumbled. The coat hanger tool helped, but not enough. He strained and twisted, but the zipper caught halfway. He bit his lip and pulled.

Nothing.

Panic tickled the edge of his stomach.

Then he heard a voice outside the stall. "Carter?"

It was Jill.

He froze. "Y-yeah?"

"I've got a bobby pin. You need help?"

Silence. Then, "Maybe."

She paused. "I won't look."

He cracked the door. Her hand reached around and with a practiced flick, the zipper came down.



"Thanks," he whispered.

"No problem," she said. "Next time? Bring a friend with better tools."

She left with a laugh, and Carter stood there, still tangled in too-tight denim, wondering how exactly he'd gotten here — and whether he was supposed to feel humiliated... or oddly proud.

Maybe both.

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## Chapter 5: The New Arrival

A few weeks had passed since the overalls, and Carter had worn them just twice more — once for a school art show, and once to please his mother on a Sunday. They were fine, he supposed. As fine as any tight denim outfit with no fly and a zip down the back could be.

But today was different. The original blue jumpsuit — the one with the silver stars — was back on, snugger now than it had been at first. He'd grown a little, and the seams reminded him of it with every step.

They were heading back to *that* boutique.

"I need a new wrap dress," his mother said, adjusting her sunglasses as they walked past parked cars into the soft glow of the shop. "Something with drape. Maybe something floral. You know, now that spring's nearly here."

Carter didn't answer. He was too aware of the way the jumpsuit creaked and tugged when he moved, the way the boots clicked against the floor. He hoped no one would notice him.

The bell jingled above the door. Inside, the boutique looked just the same: racks of color, music floating softly, the scent of incense just strong enough to prick his memory.

"Oh, my *god*," came a delighted voice.

Carter winced.

It was *her*. The assistant. The one who'd pulled him into the fitting booth last time. She came striding over, all bangles and eyeliner, clapping her hands once in recognition.

"I *remember* you," she beamed. "You were the one who totally *rocked* that jumpsuit. You're back!"

Carter opened his mouth to correct her, but she was already circling him.

"And you wore it again! That's commitment. You've got such a unique vibe. Very glam. Very Ziggy." She turned toward his mother. "You must be so proud."

His mother smiled in that vague, superior way she often did when people complimented her parenting by accident. "I keep telling him — some people were *born* for this look."

Carter blinked. "I didn't—"

"Listen," the assistant interrupted, "you're *just* in time. We *literally* just got a new piece in that's screaming your name. One of a kind. I put it in the back because I didn't want the basic crowd getting their hands on it. Come. Come come come."

She was already walking, and Carter's mother gave him a little nudge on the shoulder.



“Go on. Humor her.”

He hesitated, then followed.

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In the back, under a velvet curtain and a brass rack, hung a jumpsuit unlike anything Carter had ever seen. It was deep burgundy, cut with sharper lines than the last one, with structured shoulders, a high neck, and glittering vertical stripes that shimmered subtly when it moved. Most noticeably, the zipper was long and hidden down the back — invisible except for the tiny loop at the collar.

“Oh wow,” the assistant whispered like it was sacred. “Try it. Seriously. I’ll help you if the zipper’s tricky.”

Carter held it with both hands. The fabric was soft but heavy, like it was *meant* to fit perfectly or not at all.

He looked over his shoulder toward the front of the shop. His mother was still flipping through a rack, clearly invested in some patterned halter dress.

He sighed. “Okay.”

In the booth, Carter struggled again. The legs were snug — tighter than the blue jumpsuit — and the sleeves tugged oddly at his shoulders. The assistant didn’t wait long before stepping in and helping him slide his arms through, then zipped the back smoothly, like sealing a secret.

She stepped back and let out a slow, satisfied breath. “Oh. My. God.”

Carter turned to the mirror.

It didn’t look like something *he* would wear. It looked like something *someone else* — someone on a stage — would wear. And yet... it didn’t look bad. Not at all. He looked older, sharper, like he belonged somewhere other than the school hallway or the kitchen table with boiled carrots.

“I feel... weird,” he said softly.

“Weird is good,” the assistant said, putting her hands on her hips. “Weird means you’re doing something right.”

She pulled him gently back out toward the main floor.

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His mother looked up and let out a half-laugh, half-gasp. “Well now. That’s *striking*.”

“I don’t think I can sit in this,” Carter said.



"You don't need to sit in it," she replied. "You need to be *seen* in it."

The assistant nodded vigorously. "He owns this. This is *his* look."

Carter didn't speak.

They bought it, of course.

At the register, his mother smiled. "See? You're getting more comfortable with this. And people *notice*. That's important."

Carter glanced at the changing room one last time.

He wasn't sure if this was becoming a habit... or an identity.

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## Chapter 6: The Pact

It was Thursday when his mother said it, casually, over breakfast like she was commenting on the weather.

"You should wear the new jumpsuit to school."

Carter paused mid-bite. "You're joking."

"Why would I joke?" she replied, setting her mug down with a dull clink. "You saw how good it looked. That kind of style doesn't belong in a closet."

He stared at her, trying to measure the space between protest and punishment. "It's... tight."

She waved that away. "You've worn tighter. And it makes a statement."

Carter didn't want to make any more statements. He wanted to blend in, or at least coast beneath notice — but he knew, as he watched her stand and start stacking plates, that the decision had already been made.

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By the time he walked through the school gates, Carter felt like a siren going off in a library.

The burgundy jumpsuit caught every ray of light and reflected it back, shimmering in uncomfortable waves. The back zipper itched slightly. His mother had insisted on doing it all the way up and had even dabbed something behind his ears — "Just a touch of scent," she'd said, as if he were on his way to a dinner party.

The hallway fell quiet for half a second as he stepped in, then the buzz of whispers began.

"Jesus, what is he wearing now?"

"Is that velvet?"

"Looks like a magician from Mars."

One boy muttered something about "girls' gymnastics team," and Carter kept walking, eyes forward, mouth shut, heart pounding. His arms ached from how straight he was holding them — part defiance, part survival instinct.

He reached his locker, pretending he couldn't hear them.

Then: "Well *damn*, space cadet."

Carter turned.

Jill stood behind him, eyebrows raised, grinning like she'd just seen a firework go off. She wore denim overalls today — high-waisted, not unlike his mother's old pair, with a snug fit and silver buttons across one strap.

"You... like it?" Carter asked cautiously.

"Like it?" She gave a small spin, letting the metal clasps jingle. "I dressed to match."

He blinked. "You did?"

"Well, I couldn't let you float out there alone." She leaned in. "Also, I figured it was time I helped with your most pressing concern."

"What concern?"

"The one that zips down your back."

He turned red.

She smirked. "Relax. We're making a pact. If you're brave enough to show up looking like Bowie's long-lost cousin, I'll make sure you don't have to wrestle that thing off alone. We'll call it Operation Zipper."

Carter almost laughed — almost. "Won't people talk?"

"They already do," she said simply. "At least now I'm part of the story."

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By lunch, the ridicule had dulled to background noise, and Carter found he didn't care quite as much. He and Jill sat on the steps near the side entrance, their boots tapping the concrete in lazy rhythm.

A few kids still stared. One girl whispered behind her hand.

But Jill raised her chin and said loud enough to be heard: "He's just ahead of his time."

Carter looked down at his shimmering arms, then at her.

"Maybe."

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The bathroom pact proved useful after fifth period.

Jill stood outside the stall, back to the door, humming casually while Carter twisted and contorted like a magician in a trunk.

When he finally emerged, rumped but free, she tossed him a grin.

"See? We've got this."

He smoothed the front of the jumpsuit, still catching his reflection in the chrome of the hand dryer.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this."

Jill shrugged. "You don't have to. Just survive it. And maybe own it while you do."

As they walked out together, their boots clicking side by side, Carter realized something:

He didn't feel invisible anymore. And though most of the attention still felt like a burden — sharp, heavy, unwanted — it didn't *only* hurt.

It was strange, confusing, and sometimes humiliating. But it was also something new.

And for now, Jill was walking with him.

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## Chapter 7: The Boots

Carter wasn't sure when Jill started coming over regularly, but by the third time, it no longer felt unusual. She leaned in the doorway of his small bedroom like she belonged there, arms folded across the front of her patched-up overalls, eyes scanning the posters on his wall — Bowie, Bolan, a torn-out magazine photo of Patti Smith someone had thrown away and he'd rescued.

"You've got good taste," she said, sitting cross-legged on his bed without asking.

He shrugged, trying not to smile. "It's mostly stuff from the record bin at the corner store."

"All the best stuff is," she said, picking at a loose thread on her cuff. Then she added casually, "I saw a pair of boots yesterday. Brown suede. Platform heel, just short of ridiculous. They'd look killer with that burgundy jumpsuit."

Carter tensed. "Why would I want *more* boots?"

Jill looked at him, eyes narrowed like she was trying to read his thoughts. "Because you're already halfway to rockstar, and your current boots squeak like an old floorboard."

He shot her a look. "I didn't ask to be a rockstar."

"No one does. That's how you know it's real."

Before he could argue, a voice floated in from the kitchen.

"What's this about boots?" his mother called, half-interested.

"Oh," Jill said, raising her voice sweetly, "I just mentioned some boots that would go *perfectly* with Carter's new jumpsuit. Really sharp — would finish the look."

There was a pause, then the clinking of dishes and: "Hmm. Might be worth looking into."

Carter stared at Jill, lips pressed together.

She just grinned. "You're welcome."

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That night, after Jill left, Carter sat on the floor by his bed, arms around his knees, staring at the jumpsuit hanging off the closet door like it was watching him.

He liked Jill. Liked having her around. Liked the way she spoke boldly and without apology.

But something twisted in his chest — a knot of confusion, embarrassment, and maybe... pressure. He wasn't sure what they were. Friends, sure. But not *just* friends. And not quite anything else. She made him feel seen — but also sometimes pushed him further into a version of himself he wasn't sure he had agreed to be.

Still, he hadn't stopped her.

And the next day, he didn't say anything about it again.

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He came home from school tired — another long day of holding his head up just high enough not to slump, of pretending the whispers didn't touch him.

When he opened the front door, he stopped in his tracks.

There, by the hall closet, stood the boots.

Not his old ones. These were new — or at least new-looking. Rich brown suede, clean seams, with a gentle rise and a square heel that looked like it belonged on someone five inches taller.

He just stood there, staring at them.

His mother came around the corner, drying her hands on a dish towel. "They had a pair in your size on the clearance shelf. Destiny, if you ask me."

"I didn't—" he began.

"Oh, don't sulk," she said, already heading back into the kitchen. "You might as well enjoy it. Your friend clearly knows what she's talking about."

He didn't touch them at first.

But later, when the house was quiet and the jumpsuit had been unzipped and hung back on its hook, Carter stepped into the boots.

They made him taller. Not by much. But enough to make the mirror feel a little smaller.

He took one step, then another.

Maybe Jill *was* right.

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## **Chapter 8: The Album That Didn't Exist (Yet)**

It started with a joke.

They were sitting on Carter's bedroom floor, cross-legged among scattered markers, colored pencils, and torn-out pages from *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*. Jill had brought a big pad of art paper from home, the kind her older brother used for his community college design class. Carter had dragged out his old colored pencil tin and a battered school ruler, and by the time the sun slanted in through the blinds, they were both barefoot and smudged with streaks of blue and silver ink.

"Well," Jill said, examining her sketch of a lightning bolt that vaguely resembled a broken spoon, "if we're going to dress like glam rock icons, we might as well have an album."

Carter snorted. "We don't even have a band."

“That’s a technicality.”

She flipped the paper around and scrawled across the top in dramatic block letters:

### **STARBOY & THE COLLAPSING DREAMS**

Carter raised an eyebrow. “You just made that up.”

“*I make everything up,*” she said proudly. “That’s how art works.”

He leaned in, intrigued despite himself. “So who’s Starboy?”

“You, obviously.” She gestured at him. “You’ve got the boots, the suits, the tragic backstory. And I’m the weird backup singer with a synthesizer and a pet rat.”

“I’m not tragic,” Carter muttered.

She looked at him gently. “No. But you’ve got mystery.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. So instead, he picked up a marker and started outlining a silhouette. Long limbs, sharp angles, and a halo of light behind the figure’s head.

They worked for hours. The “album” cover shifted and morphed: first it was a cityscape in flames behind them, then a starlit desert, and finally — thanks to Jill’s insistence — a surreal dreamworld full of cracked mirrors and floating orbs. Carter drew the two of them in the center, stylized and strange, both wearing their overalls and boots like matching uniforms.

“You can’t draw me that short,” Jill protested at one point.

“You’re five-two,” Carter replied.

“I contain multitudes.”

They both laughed.

As they finished coloring in the background, Jill tossed a glance at the corner where Carter’s new boots sat. “Okay. Last touch.”

“What?”

“You have to put them on.”

He blinked. “Why?”

“Because we’re committing to the vibe.” She grabbed them and tossed them into his lap. “Come on. I’m already in uniform.”

Carter glanced down at his overalls — not the denim ones from before, but a newer pair his mother had found at a thrift shop, soft cotton in a deep navy. He’d grown used to them. Jill, beside him, wore



green canvas ones with a yellow shirt underneath, and had braided silver ribbon into one strap for extra flair.

Reluctantly, Carter pulled on the boots. They were warm inside, the suede stiff but soft. When he stood up, he towered slightly over Jill.

She looked up at him and nodded. “Now *that’s* an album cover.”

He turned slowly in place, boots clicking on the wood floor, and posed in front of the mirror. His reflection stared back: taller, leaner, stranger than the boy he used to be. But not unfamiliar. Not anymore.

“Maybe we should actually make a record,” he said, mostly joking.

Jill grinned, snapping an imaginary photo with her fingers. “Step one: the look. Step two: the legacy.”

Outside, the sky began to turn lavender.

Inside, Carter stood next to Jill in their strange, brilliant little world — two weird kids dressed for the stage, surrounded by pencils and dreams, building a future no one else could see.

Yet.

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## Chapter 9: Wardrobe Conspiracies

It started with an innocent remark.

“I saw this jacket,” Jill said one afternoon while they were sketching in Carter’s bedroom. “High collar, velvet, kind of Edwardian. Totally *you*.”

Carter didn’t look up from his drawing. “I don’t need more jackets.”

“Sure you do,” she replied, tapping the paper with her pencil. “You’ve got jumpsuits, overalls, those weird flared trousers—your torso’s defenseless.”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t argue. And that was his first mistake.

The next day, when he came home from school, his mother was on the phone in the kitchen. “Yes, I think navy would suit him best. With maybe a silver detail? Jill says he pulls off jewel tones. He’s got the bones for it.”

Carter froze in the hallway.

*He’s got the bones for it?*

He peeked into the living room. A shopping bag from the consignment boutique sat on the coffee table like a quiet threat. From inside, a sliver of something purple and velvety peeked out.

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Over the next few weeks, the Carter-and-Jill partnership began producing more than just album art and sketchpads full of imaginary band posters. It produced *looks*. Ensembles. Statements.

There was the wide-legged, pinstriped sailor pants Jill had found in a dusty thrift bin and “rescued,” along with a shiny blouse that shimmered dark green in sunlight. There was a cropped denim jacket

with studs across the shoulders (“punk-lite,” Jill called it), and a strange half-cape his mother had bought on a whim, saying, “It’s theatrical. You like theatrical.”

Carter began to lose track of what he had chosen for himself and what had been chosen for him.

But strangely... he didn’t hate it.

Not entirely.

Sometimes he thought about speaking up, about drawing a boundary, about saying “no” more clearly. But Jill would wrinkle her nose and tilt her head, and his mother would brush the hair from his face and say, “Come on, you look amazing,” and he’d just... go along.

It wasn’t that he didn’t mind being told what to wear. He actually kind of liked the structure of it — someone else deciding, someone else guiding. He’d spent most of his life unsure how to take up space. Now he was being handed the blueprint, the costume, the spotlight.

It made school strange. Some days he was ignored. Some days he was the center of attention — not always the good kind. But Jill never flinched.

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One Saturday afternoon, he tried on the latest acquisition — a dark velvet jacket with exaggerated lapels, paired with plum corduroy trousers and, of course, the platform boots. He stood in front of his mirror, tugging at the sleeve, wondering if he looked ridiculous or iconic.

Then Jill knocked once and stepped into his room.

Her mouth opened, then closed. “Whoa.”

He turned slightly, uncertain. “Too much?”

She shook her head slowly. “No. Just... *you*. It’s very you.”

He gave a crooked half-smile. “Even if I didn’t pick it?”

“You wear it like you did,” she said, stepping closer. “That’s what matters.”

And before he could say anything else, she kissed him.

Quick, but not rushed. Soft, but sure.

His heart thudded like a snare drum.

When she pulled back, she looked him in the eye and said, “There. Now the outfit’s complete.”

Carter blinked, too stunned to reply. His face felt hot. His jacket suddenly too tight.

But he didn’t want to take it off.

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That evening, he sat on the edge of his bed, jacket still on, boots scuffed from pacing, lips still tingling.

Everything felt new again — and yet, strangely familiar.

Maybe Jill was bossy. Maybe his mother was overbearing. Maybe none of this had started with him.



But right now, with his reflection in the mirror staring back boldly in violet velvet, Carter couldn't imagine who he'd be without it.

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## Chapter 10: The Faux Frontier

He found it on his bed one afternoon after school, neatly folded and silently menacing.

Black faux leather. Shiny. Heavy. Thick seams and a zipper running straight up the back like a spine. Not a tag or price sticker in sight — this wasn't from a store. This was *found*.

Carter stared at it like it might move.

His mother passed by the doorway, sipping tea. "Jill brought it over. Said she found it at a pop-up market. One of a kind. Thought it had your name on it."

*It didn't*, Carter wanted to say. But instead, he nodded mutely, and she disappeared down the hall humming a Fleetwood Mac tune.

A minute later, Jill breezed in through the back door like she owned the place. She took one look at his expression and grinned.

"You found it," she said.

"I did."

"Well?"

He picked up the jumpsuit, holding it at arm's length. "This looks like it belongs to someone in a glam-rock space cult."

"Exactly," Jill said, eyes gleaming. "You'll look *incredible*."

Carter hesitated. "But... it's a lot."

"You wore a star-studded velvet jacket last week."

"Yeah, but this—"

"This is evolution," she said simply. "You're becoming."

He didn't know what that meant. But when she looked at him like that — confident, expectant, sure of something he didn't even see yet — he felt a strange pressure to live up to it.

So he tried it on.

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It took both of them to get the zipper all the way up. The faux leather clung tight to his shoulders and hips, and every small move produced a sharp, unmistakable *creak*. He looked at himself in the mirror: tall, black-suited, and somewhere between superhero and nightclub bouncer.

He felt ridiculous.

He also felt like if he moved too fast, something would split.

But Jill clapped her hands once, then softly said, "You look like a walking album cover."

And that was enough.

---

At school the next day, heads turned again. But this time, more out of confusion than laughter.

The jumpsuit didn't just stand out — it *shouted*. The black faux leather caught every fluorescent flicker in the hallway. It was stiffer than his others, and every step brought a plasticky squeak that echoed like a bad sound effect.

He made it to homeroom without speaking. Jill followed close behind, not just as support — as *partner*. She'd worn her olive overalls again, paired with a black turtleneck and platform sneakers, as if to say, *I'm with the weirdo. He's mine*.

During second period, Carter shifted in his seat and realized sweat was pooling behind his knees. The suit didn't breathe — it *trapped*. By lunch, he was overheating and walking like his joints were rusty.

Then came the bathroom.

He stood inside the last stall, arms twisting behind him, skin damp, zipper stubborn.

A knock. "Need a hand?"

"Yeah," he said, barely audible.

Jill slid the door open just enough to slip inside. She zipped him down with practiced ease, then handed him a tissue.

"You're glistening," she said.

"I'm *dying*."

"Well, you're dying *stylishly*."

---

They sat under a tree behind the school building during break, letting the breeze cool him down. Carter peeled the sleeves halfway down and tied them around his waist, grateful for the shade.

"I think this might've been a step too far," he said quietly.

Jill looked at him sideways. "Maybe."

"You think I'm just doing whatever people tell me?"

She considered that. "Maybe. But only the people who want you to shine."

He looked at her. "That's kind of a lot of pressure."

"It's also kind of a lot of love."

Carter didn't know what to say to that.

So he just leaned back in the grass, the jumpsuit crackling faintly, and closed his eyes.

He still wasn't sure who he was trying to become. But he knew he wasn't becoming it alone.

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## Chapter 11: For Her Eyes Only

They agreed about the jumpsuit the day after.

"It's amazing," Jill said, sprawled on Carter's bed while he tugged at the stubborn legs of the faux leather outfit, still trying to get it off without tearing something. "But school doesn't deserve it."

"School doesn't deserve *me* in it," Carter muttered, breathless from the struggle.

"Exactly."

He finally peeled it off, dropped it in a heap on the floor, and flopped onto the bed beside her, red-faced and clammy.

"So... special occasions only?" he asked.

She grinned. "For me. Definitely for me."

He didn't argue. He didn't really want to. Part of him *liked* that there were now clothes — whole versions of himself — reserved just for her. Not for the school halls, not for the teachers or classmates who didn't get it. Just her. Jill.

---

But Jill wasn't one to slow down.

A week later, she arrived at his door with a duffel bag and that sparkle in her eyes — the one that always meant she was about to ask something unreasonable that he'd almost certainly go along with.

"Don't be mad," she said, already stepping into his room.

"I haven't even said anything."

"Then let's keep it that way."

She unzipped the bag with a flourish, revealing a new item: a corset. Deep maroon with black laces, boning that looked practically architectural, and a row of small silver hooks on the front — purely decorative, of course. The real fastening was in the back.

Carter stared. "That's... not a jumpsuit."

"It's a *statement piece*. Goes over your shirt. Or nothing. Up to you."

"I'm not sure I can breathe in that."

"That's the *point*, darling," she said in a dramatic drawl, like she was from an old movie. "Glamour *hurts*."

Carter sighed, picked it up, and ran his fingers along the seams. "You gonna lace me in?"

"Like a Victorian maid," she grinned.

And she did.

It took several minutes. Jill cinched it tighter than Carter thought was humanly reasonable, pausing every so often to make sure he wasn't about to pass out. When she stepped back, he looked at

himself in the mirror — narrow-waisted, taller somehow, his shirt puffing slightly above the corset's ridge.

It wasn't just strange. It was regal. Strange *and* regal.

He turned, stiffly.

"I can't bend."

"Good. You shouldn't. Kings don't bend."

---

The next weekend came the *jumpsuit*.

Not leather this time, but a glossy, smooth fabric somewhere between satin and vinyl. Gunmetal gray. Long sleeves. Tapered legs. And a collar so high it nearly touched Carter's jawline.

"It's like a turtleneck that wants to strangle me," Carter said as she zipped him into it.

"Not *strangle*, just... hold you upright," Jill replied.

The zipper ran up the back, of course. Jill fastened it gently, then smoothed the collar.

He tried to turn his head. Couldn't. Tilting side to side made the fabric strain.

"I can't even look down."

"Exactly. You're above everything."

He stared at himself in the mirror — frozen, gleaming, bizarre. The outfit molded to him, made him stand still like a mannequin in a shop window.

It was terrifying.

It was also... a little thrilling.

"I look like a statue."

"A *beautiful* statue," Jill said, stepping beside him. "The kind they put on a pedestal."

He smirked — as much as the collar allowed. "This one stays at home too."

"Definitely," she said. "No one else deserves it."

---



Later, after he'd wriggled out of it and slumped back into his regular clothes — cotton, loose, breathable — he lay beside Jill, the jumpsuit folded neatly nearby.

"You ever feel like I'm just going along with whatever you say?" he asked.

She looked at him. "All the time."

"That doesn't bother you?"

She shrugged. "I like leading. You like being seen. And I see you. So... no."

He thought about that.

It wasn't a perfect answer. But it was honest.

And for now, that was enough.

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## Chapter 12: The Night Lights Came On

The event was the spring arts showcase — part talent show, part gallery, part awkward parents taking flash photos of their kids in paper hats. Every year, it was forgettable. But this year, Jill had other plans.

"We're entering," she said over lunch one Thursday, poking her apple with a pencil. "They've got a performance category and we've got *style*."

Carter blinked. "We don't have a performance."

"Not yet."

"I don't sing. I barely speak."

"You don't have to sing," she said. "We're going to make *a scene*. That's what art is."

He tried to protest, but the next thing he knew, they were standing in front of the drama teacher after school, pitching their "collage performance art piece" about fame, identity, and transformation. Jill did all the talking. Carter stood beside her, looking like a nervous mannequin.

But the teacher nodded. "Sounds... different. We could use different."

---

Over the next two weeks, they choreographed something that wasn't quite a dance and wasn't quite a monologue. Jill narrated from a microphone while Carter moved — slowly, purposefully — through costume changes behind a folding screen, each outfit stranger than the last.

A velvet jacket. The starry jumpsuit. The overalls. And finally... the faux leather.

"I can't believe I'm ending in *that*," Carter said on rehearsal day, tugging the collar straight.

Jill grinned. "It's iconic."

"You love watching me suffer."

"Only artistically."

---

The night of the showcase, Carter stood backstage, sweating already, even in the first, simplest costume.

The small auditorium buzzed with clapping parents and classmates. A kid sang off-key into a tape-deck microphone. Someone juggled. Someone else read a poem.

And then it was their turn.

Lights dimmed. Jill stepped to the mic. Carter stood in shadow.

Her voice rang out, clear and deliberate.

“Who are we, really? Beneath the fabric, behind the mirrors — when you take away the labels, are we more true or less visible?”

Carter stepped forward, one spotlight flickering to life. He stood still, then turned to the screen. Jill continued, narrating each change like a metamorphosis:

“Cloth becomes armor. Velvet becomes voice. The stage is more than light — it’s invitation.”

By the time he stepped out in the final suit, the audience had gone quiet.

The faux leather shimmered, his silhouette sleek and strange, the collar high and severe. He couldn’t move fast — he didn’t need to. The stillness was enough. He simply stood, turning once, eyes level with the crowd.

And for the first time... no one laughed.

They *watched*.

When the lights dimmed to black, a moment of silence hung in the air — then scattered applause that quickly swelled. A few whistles. A cheer from someone in the back. The loudest came from Jill.

---

Afterward, in the hallway, people approached him. Kids he didn’t even know by name.

“That was actually... kind of cool.”

“You made that outfit look unreal, man.”

“Are you doing something else next time?”

Carter could hardly speak. He nodded, smiled faintly, muttered thanks. It felt like his skin wasn’t fully on — like he’d left some version of himself behind on that stage.

Jill grabbed his arm and pulled him aside.

“We did it.”

“I didn’t think—”

“You *never* think it’ll work. That’s why it does.”

He looked at her.

“Why do you believe in me like this?”

She smiled, a little softer than usual. “Because you don’t yet. And someone has to hold the mirror until you see it.”

---

That night, back in his room, Carter hung the suit carefully, smoothing the collar flat.

It was sweaty. It creaked. It barely let him move.

And yet, under the lights, it had made him into something bigger than all the awkwardness and doubt.

It hadn’t just fit. It had *spoken*.

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### Chapter 13: Becoming

Carter didn’t change overnight. Confidence never works like that.

Even after the showcase, there were still days when he hesitated to leave the house in whatever wild garment Jill had coaxed him into. There were still awkward glances in school hallways, whispers in gym locker rooms, long stares in bathrooms while he wrestled with zippers and fabric seams.

But something had shifted.

He no longer wilted under attention — not all of it, anyway. Some of it, he found, he even *liked*. And when things got difficult, when teachers raised eyebrows or someone muttered something cruel under their breath, Jill would be there. Steady. Smirking. Daring him to take up space anyway.

She never stopped pushing. One week it was a sheer shirt. Another, trousers with satin stripes. A cape. A belt shaped like a lightning bolt. Even a mesh collar that clipped behind his ears and turned his whole neck into a sculpture.

Carter groaned. “You’re going to kill me with fashion.”

“No,” Jill said, adjusting the collar. “I’m going to *resurrect* you with it.”

He grew into it. Not just the clothes — the *identity* they carried. He began to choose pieces himself. Began experimenting alone. Quietly, but without apology.

By senior year, Carter was no longer just the weird kid in unusual outfits.

He was the one people remembered.

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After graduation, he and Jill stayed close. Closer. Through college, through cramped apartments, late-night thrift shops, basement shows, and endless sketchbooks filled with concepts, fabrics, and names for the band they never started.

Carter never really became a performer. But he became something else — a quiet icon of his own making. Someone who didn’t need to explain his choices anymore. Someone who could walk into a room and be *seen*, fully, without shrinking.

And Jill — well, she kept creating, kept inventing. She remained his mirror, his collaborator, and his most relentless stylist.

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They got married in the fall. A small ceremony in an old art gallery with dusty windows and gold-framed mirrors that caught the low sun.

The guests came in whatever made them feel like themselves. Jill wore silver — sleek, minimal, sharp. Carter?

He wore the most elaborate jumpsuit any of them had ever seen.

High-collared and embroidered in sapphire thread. Flared at the legs, fitted at the waist. A constellation of stars stitched across the back. The zipper, of course, ran down the spine — and Jill had zipped it up herself before the ceremony, hands steady, expression unshakable.

“I can’t move my neck,” Carter murmured as they waited behind the curtain.

“Good,” Jill whispered. “You’re not here to look around. You’re here to be *seen*.”

He smiled.

And then the music started.

He stepped out, arm in arm with her, into the shimmer of light and color, into the full attention of everyone who mattered, feeling not like someone in costume — but someone who had *become*.

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**THE END.**