Chapter 1

The snow swirled around the quiet cul-de-sac, frosting the meticulously pruned hedges of the Langston estate. A sleek BMW stood idle in the driveway, its glossy surface reflecting the multicolored holiday lights strung across the suburban neighborhood. Will Langston shoved his duffel bag over his shoulder and stared up at the pristine façade of his father's house, the warmth of the season doing little to thaw his apprehension.



The house, all clean lines and immaculate symmetry, spoke of his stepmother Cintia's obsession with perfection. She had moved in two years ago, bringing with her an air of cold sophistication that Will could never reconcile with the home he had once known. The Virginia Slims 120s she constantly smoked gave the house a faint scent of tobacco and something floral—a perfume of indulgence that irritated him no end.

As he stepped inside, the quiet hum of classical music greeted him. The sound of Cintia's heels echoed on the marble floor before she appeared, effortlessly poised in a cream-colored cashmere sweater and tailored pants. Her sharp features softened into a practiced smile.



“Will,” she purred, the cigarette perched delicately between her manicured fingers, “you’re home. Let me guess—finals were a nightmare?”

Will gave her a tight smile, avoiding the faint trail of smoke that spiraled upward. “They were fine.”

“Good. Your father’s working late again, but he promised to join us for dinner.” She gestured to the living room, where a fire crackled beneath a perfectly decorated mantelpiece. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Comfortable wasn’t an option. He murmured something polite and retreated upstairs, the familiar creak of the old staircase under his feet a brief reminder of a time when this house had felt different—warmer, messier, alive. His room remained largely untouched, save for the

faint scent of lavender air freshener that Cintia had undoubtedly sprayed to mask any sign of his existence.

Throwing his bag on the bed, Will settled at his desk and powered on his computer. The faint glow of the screen cast a cool light over the room as he booted up an old film—something he did often to escape into worlds far removed from the sterile reality around him.



Julie's text popped up on his phone: *"Made it home. Call me later?"*

He smiled at the message, his thumb hovering over the screen. But before he could respond, the faint murmur of voices drifted up from below. Will frowned, moving to the doorway. Cintia's voice, low and conspiratorial, carried from the kitchen.

"…a strange client this time, Robert. Don't you think?"

"I don't ask questions," came his father's clipped response, punctuated by the clink of glass. "They pay well."

"You never wonder why they need so much encryption, so much… secrecy?" Cintia's tone was edged with something uncharacteristic—curiosity, maybe even concern.

Will leaned closer, his pulse quickening. His father had always been tight-lipped about his work, but something in Cintia's voice felt off. As he strained to hear more, a sudden knock on the front door broke the tension.

Will hovered at the top of the stairs, listening as his father opened the door. The low murmur of voices followed, too faint to make out but carrying a tone of urgency that put Will on edge.

He descended the stairs slowly, stopping just before he reached the bottom, catching a glimpse of his father speaking to a man dressed in a dark trench coat. The stranger's features were hard to discern under the brim of his fedora, but his posture was rigid, his movements precise.



"I'll grab my things," Robert said, his tone resigned.

"Now?" Cintia interjected, her polished nails clicking against the marble countertop. "Robert, it's Christmas! You promised—"

"I know what I promised," Robert snapped, his rare irritation spilling over. He softened almost immediately, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "I don't have a choice. They need me to oversee this personally. I'll be back before you know it."

Will stepped fully into the living room as his father brushed past him toward his office. "Dad, what's going on? Who's that guy?"

Robert paused, placing a hand on Will's shoulder. "Just work, son. You don't need to worry about it."

"That's not an answer," Will pressed, frowning. "It's Christmas, and you're leaving?"

Robert looked torn for a moment but then sighed. "It's a high-stakes project—classified. I can't explain, Will. But it's important."

"Important enough to ditch your family?" Will's voice rose, frustration spilling out.

"Will." Robert's tone hardened, and for a moment, there was only silence between them. "We'll talk when I get back."

Will clenched his jaw, watching as his father disappeared upstairs. Cintia, leaning casually against the kitchen counter, let out a long, theatrical exhale, the thin plume of smoke from her Virginia Slims 120 curling toward the ceiling.

“Well,” she said, her tone dripping with feigned sympathy, “that’s just the way things are when you’re as in-demand as your father.”

Will turned toward her, his irritation flaring. “Can you not smoke in here? It reeks.”

Cintia’s eyebrows arched delicately, her lips curling into a smirk as she tapped ash into the crystal ashtray beside her. “This house is big enough that I’m sure you’ll survive.”

“I don’t get why you need to do that inside,” Will muttered, crossing his arms. “It’s disgusting.”

“And I don’t get why you think you have any say in how I live my life,” she shot back smoothly, taking another drag. The cigarette, long and elegant, seemed like an extension of her perfectly manicured fingers. “Maybe if you spent less time brooding in your room and more time trying to understand people, you wouldn’t be so unbearable.”

Will snorted, leaning against the doorway. “Understand people like you? Sure. Let me try: you married Dad for his money, spend all day at the spa, and smoke cigarettes like you’re in some 1980s perfume ad. Did I miss anything?”

Cintia laughed, a low, practiced sound that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Oh, you missed plenty. But why bother explaining myself? You’ve already decided who I am, haven’t you?”

Will opened his mouth to respond but stopped as Robert reappeared, his coat slung over one arm and a leather duffel bag in the other. “All right, I’m off,” he announced, his voice brisk. He pressed a kiss to Cintia’s cheek—she barely turned her head—and clapped Will on the shoulder. “Behave yourself, okay?”

“Dad, come on, you can’t just—”

“I’ll call,” Robert interrupted firmly, his eyes meeting Will’s for a brief, loaded moment. Then he was gone, the sound of the front door clicking shut leaving an oppressive silence in its wake.

Will turned back to Cintia, who was perched on a barstool, watching him with a bemused expression. She exhaled another cloud of smoke, her lips painted in an immaculately applied mauve. “Well, this’ll be fun,” she drawled, her voice thick with mock enthusiasm.

“Yeah,” Will replied flatly, already retreating toward the stairs. “A blast.”

Chapter 2

The next day, the muffled hum of conversation floated up the stairs, pulling Will reluctantly from his dreams. It was an odd sound for the Langston household during the holidays, where silence usually prevailed until Cintia's gym or spa plans kicked into gear. Still groggy, he slid out of bed, threw on a sweatshirt, and padded down the hall.

The smell hit him first. Smoke, heavy and cloying, curling through the air. His irritation surged. He hated the smell of cigarettes, especially Cintia's Virginia Slims, but this was different—stronger, somehow more intrusive. Wrinkling his nose, Will descended the stairs, his stomach growling and his mood already sour.

The kitchen door was ajar, the faint click of Cintia's laughter mingling with the low drawl of an unfamiliar voice. Pushing the door open, Will froze in the doorway.

Sitting at the glass breakfast table, next to a half-empty pot of coffee, was a woman unlike anyone Will had seen in person before. Her black hair, teased into an immaculate power perm, framed a face that gleamed with layers of foundation and blush. Heavy blue eyeshadow accentuated eyes that sparkled with sharp calculation, and her lips, a glossy coral, curled around a cigarette longer than any Will had ever seen—its pure white length seemed almost absurd.

Her outfit was a form-fitting taupe leather suit that exuded high fashion and bold 1980s flair. The jacket features extremely structured and exaggerated shoulder pads that could rival a linebacker's. She wore a matching pencil skirt, creating a sleek and commanding look. Her face, smooth and expressionless beneath the makeup, betrayed years of cosmetic interventions. It was impossible to guess her age—she could be anywhere from forty to sixty-five, but her image was frozen in time, like a relic from a glossy 1980s fashion magazine.



And she was smoking indoors.

Cintia, perched beside her with her own Virginia Slims, glanced up at Will, her expression cool as usual. “Good morning, William. You’re up early.” She exhaled a thin stream of smoke, tilting her head toward the stranger. “This is Edna Lacroix. She’s just moved in next door.”

“Charmed to meet you,” Edna trilled, her voice a syrupy contralto that felt as artificial as the rest of her. She extended a manicured hand that sparkled with diamond rings. “Cintia’s been telling me all about her stepson. I simply had to see you for myself. Such a handsome young man.”

Will didn’t move to shake her hand. He was too focused on the haze of smoke pooling around the breakfast table. “You’re smoking inside?” he asked flatly, his tone clipped. “Really?”

Edna's painted-on smile didn't falter. "Oh, darling, don't be such a prude. It's just a little smoke. Adds character to the air." She took a long drag of her cigarette, holding it between two fingers adorned with bright red nails, and exhaled languidly.

"Will, don't be rude," Cintia chided, though her tone carried more amusement than actual reprimand. "Edna's our guest. Besides, this is our house. If it bothers you, you can always eat in your room."

Will stared at them, the familiar irritation at his stepmother bubbling into outright anger. "You know this isn't healthy, right? Or does that not matter as long as everything looks good in your perfect little bubble?"

Edna chuckled, a sound so airy and practiced it could have been piped in from an old sitcom. "Oh, sweetheart, you sound just like my youngest," she said, tapping ash into a glass ashtray. "Always lecturing me about my habits. So endearing."

Will's hands clenched at his sides. He had no words for this—this caricature of wealth and vanity seated at his kitchen table, puffing away like it was a movie set from decades past. He didn't trust himself to speak. Turning on his heel, he stormed back upstairs, slamming his bedroom door behind him.

He flopped onto his bed, his pulse still pounding. The image of Edna's frozen, plastic smile lingered in his mind like the cigarette smoke in his lungs. Reaching for his phone, he fired off a text to Julie, his fingers moving faster than his temper.

"You wouldn't believe the freak show downstairs. Cintia's got some new neighbor over for coffee, and she looks like she got lost on her way back to the 1980s. Her name's Edna Lacroix—seriously, sounds like a character out of a bad reality show. I can't even figure out how old she is because she's got so much plastic surgery and makeup it's like her face is stuck in some weird wax museum limbo. She's ancient—like, I'm surprised she can still walk without creaking—but she's pretending she's twenty-five or something. It's pathetic. And the smoking! She's puffing on this ridiculous long cigarette like she's trying to bring back smoking as a fashion trend or something. It's gross. If this is what aging looks like, I hope I don't live that long."

He hit send before he could second-guess himself, the rush of catharsis momentarily dulling his frustration. Tossing the phone onto his nightstand, Will stared at the ceiling, trying to push the image of Edna's lacquered face out of his head.

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For the next few days, Will's mornings followed an agonizing pattern. Every time he ventured downstairs for breakfast or a coffee, the air was thick with the cloying smell of smoke and laughter. Whether it was in the living room, the garden, or even the front porch, there they were: Cintia and Edna, a pair of immaculately curated relics of indulgence and vanity.

Edna always looked like she had stepped out of another decade. Her wardrobe seemed like an endless parade of pastel power suits with towering shoulder pads, sequined cocktail dresses paired with chunky jewelry, and enormous bows tied into her voluminous, jet-black perm. Even her makeup—heavy rouge, sky-blue eyeshadow, and lips gleaming with a frosty pink sheen—was a caricature of excess. And the cigarettes—those absurdly long white sticks she held between her fingers like a scepter—never seemed to leave her hand.

She would sit beside Cintia, sipping on a Bloody Mary in the morning or a gin and tonic in the afternoon, her sugary, affected voice carrying through the house.

“Oh, Cintia, you simply must come to the club with me next week,” Edna cooed one morning, her tone dripping with insincerity. “It’s been positively dreadful since the Johnsons stopped hosting events. I mean, can you imagine? No champagne at the last luncheon. Utterly tragic.”

Cintia giggled in agreement, flicking ash from her Virginia Slims into a delicate ashtray. Will, standing at the kitchen doorway, grimaced. They were utterly absorbed in their frivolous chatter, oblivious to his presence. Edna’s laugh—high and affected, like a forced trill—grated on his nerves.

He retreated upstairs to escape, firing off another text to Julie:

“I swear, Edna must have some kind of wardrobe time machine. She’s dressed like she got lost on her way to a disco, but not in a fun retro way—more like a desperate, rich widow who refuses to accept that the 80s are over. She’s sitting in our living room, drinking at 10 a.m. like it’s her personal country club and puffing on those ridiculous cigarettes that are so long they’re practically wands. I bet each one costs more than a week of my rent.”

Julie replied quickly, trying to rein him in:

“Babe, you need to chill. So what if she’s a little eccentric? Some people like old-fashioned stuff. It’s not like she’s hurting anyone.”

Will’s thumbs flew across the keyboard, his frustration boiling over.

“Not hurting anyone? She’s polluting the air I’m breathing in my house. And don’t get me started on how she’s flaunting her wealth. Like, we get it—you’re rich, you can afford to look like an outdated mannequin and smoke overpriced cigarettes. Meanwhile, normal people have to worry about things like bills and groceries, but she’s swanning around like a cartoon villain.”

The ellipsis on the screen blinked before Julie responded:

“Will, seriously, it sounds like she’s just living her life. I think you’re projecting a little. Why do you care so much?”

His jaw tightened as he stared at her reply. How could she not understand? To him, Edna represented everything wrong with the world. She wasn’t just a person *“living her life”;* she

was a symbol of excess, someone who had floated through life with nothing to do but spend money and criticize the less fortunate. He launched into another tirade:

“Why do I care? Because it’s disgusting. She’s proof that money only buys this overdone, grotesque display of wealth. She’s like a bad wax figure of a rich person brought to life. It’s not just her smoking, her clothes, or her makeup—it’s the way she carries herself. That fake, syrupy way she talks, like she’s doing me a favor just by existing. And the worst part is, people like her never see the problem. They think the world revolves around them, and everyone else is just here to applaud their lifestyle.”

Julie’s response came more hesitantly this time:

“I think you’re being a little harsh. You don’t know her, Will. Maybe there’s more to her than what you see.”

Will tossed his phone onto the bed, pacing his room. He didn’t care if there was *“more”* to Edna. Everything she was—the excessive clothes, the endless smoking, the performative charm—made his skin crawl. He fired off one last message:

“There’s nothing more to her. She’s shallow, Julie. She and Cintia both. All they care about is their appearances and their gossip. They’ve never had to work a day in their lives, and they look down on anyone who does. People like them think the world exists just to cater to their whims. Honestly, they’re what’s wrong with society. If I ever end up like that, just kill me.”

There was a long pause before Julie replied.

“Will, I love you, but you’re sounding really bitter right now. I think you need to take a step back.”

Her response only frustrated him further. How could she not see it? How could anyone look at Edna—this walking relic of wealth and superficiality—and not feel the same disgust he did?

From the window, he caught a glimpse of the two women in the garden, Edna’s bright teal blazer standing out against the dull gray sky. They were laughing again, their voices light and carefree as if they didn’t have a care in the world. And maybe they didn’t.

Will clenched his fists. Julie might not understand, but he was certain he was right. People like Edna and Cintia—floating through life in their bubble of wealth and vanity—were everything he couldn’t stand.

Will decided to spend most of his time in the bedroom, he didn’t want to deal with his stepmother anymore. He was sure that she was inviting Edna over just to spite him.

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So it came as a surprise, when in one afternoon, Cintia called him over to talk in a serious tone.

The afternoon sunlight poured through the oversized windows of the living room, bathing the space in a warm glow that felt at odds with the tension curling in the air. Will stood at the edge of the room, his arms crossed tightly, his expression locked in a mix of irritation and wariness. Cintia was seated on the plush cream sofa, her legs crossed elegantly, a cigarette dangling between her fingers. In front of her, on the glass coffee table, lay her phone and a thin stack of papers.

“I’m not in the mood for whatever game this is,” Will snapped, not bothering to hide the edge in his voice. “If this is about Edna, I’m not interested.”

“This isn’t a game, Will,” Cintia said, her tone clipped and unusually serious. She gestured toward the seat opposite her. “Sit.”

Will hesitated but eventually slumped into the chair, keeping his arms crossed. He avoided the cigarette smoke curling lazily around her, his irritation deepening with every second. “What’s this about?”

Cintia took a slow drag from her cigarette, her expression unreadable. She exhaled, the smoke billowing between them like a barrier. “Your father, as you know, is a very meticulous man. He’s also paranoid, which is why he installed monitoring software on our home’s Wi-Fi.” She tapped her phone lightly against her palm. “Everything that’s been sent or received while connected to it is logged.”

Will frowned, confused at first, but as her words sank in, a cold weight settled in his stomach. “What are you talking about?”

Cintia picked up the stack of papers and held them up for emphasis. “Your messages to Julie. Every single one of them.”

The blood drained from Will’s face. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not,” Cintia replied smoothly, placing the papers back on the table. “And let me tell you, Will, they don’t paint a very flattering picture of you. Your comments about me, about Edna... I’ve read every word. So has Edna.”

Will’s heart thundered in his chest. “You had no right—”

“Oh, spare me the righteous indignation,” Cintia interrupted, her voice hardening. “You’re the one who wrote those vile things. And don’t pretend you didn’t know better. Julie told you to stop, didn’t she? She tried to reason with you, but you ignored her.”

Will stared at the stack of papers, panic bubbling up in his throat. “What do you want?”

Cintia leaned back, her expression softening just enough to add a mocking edge to her words. “I could send these to your college. Do you know how seriously they take things like this? Ageism, harassment—it could easily cost you your scholarship. Maybe even your place there.”

Will's breath hitched. "You wouldn't."

"I could also show these to your father," she continued, her voice deceptively sweet now. "I'm sure he'd love to see what you really think about me. About how you've been treating our guest."

His fists clenched in his lap, his mind racing. "What do you want, Cintia?" he repeated, his voice trembling with both anger and fear.

Cintia smiled, taking another drag from her cigarette before answering. "You're going to learn something, Will. You've spent all this time looking down on Edna, judging her without ever knowing a thing about her. Well, now you're going to learn about her life—from her point of view."

Will blinked, confused. "What does that even mean?"

"It means," Cintia said, leaning forward now, "that for the next little while, you're going to live like Edna. You're going to understand what it's like to carry yourself with grace, to embrace her style, her way of life. Maybe then you'll stop being so judgmental."

He stared at her in disbelief, his jaw dropping. "You're insane."

"Am I?" Cintia countered. "You've been so quick to ridicule her without ever trying to understand her. You think you're better than everyone, Will, but you have no idea what it means to live in someone else's shoes. Now you'll get that chance."

"I'm not doing this," he spat, rising to his feet. "There's no way."

Cintia's smile didn't waver. "That's your choice. But if you refuse, I'll forward these messages to your college. And to your father."

Will stared at her, his entire body trembling with rage. She had him cornered, and she knew it. Without another word, he stormed upstairs, slamming his door so hard the walls rattled.

Hours later, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Will emerged from his room. The anger had burned itself out, leaving behind a gnawing sense of defeat. He couldn't lose his scholarship. And the thought of his father reading those messages—especially the ones about Cintia—made his stomach churn.

He found her in the dining room, setting out plates for dinner. She looked up as he entered, her expression neutral.

"Is there another way?" he asked, his voice low.

Cintia shook her head, her lips pursed. "This is for your own good, Will. You need this."

He stood there for a moment, his fists clenched at his sides, before finally nodding. “Fine.”

Her smile returned, this time triumphant. “Good. Dinner’s ready. We’ll start tomorrow.”

Will sat down heavily at the table, staring at the plate in front of him. He had no idea what Cintia had planned, but he knew one thing for certain—this was going to be a long, humiliating holiday.

Chapter 3

The next morning, the smell of floral-scented wax and cigarette smoke filled the air as Will stood awkwardly in the living room. The furniture had been rearranged to accommodate the large, folding table that had been brought in, and beside it stood an assortment of tools that made him more nervous with every passing second: jars of wax, strips of cloth, a small portable heater, and an array of creams. Cintia had spared no effort to set the stage for his humiliation, and Edna’s presence only added to the ordeal.

The beautician was a tall, striking woman named Vivienne, with a commanding presence that seemed to fill the room. Her auburn hair was pulled into an immaculate French twist, and her sharp, angular features were accentuated by expertly applied makeup. She wore a fitted black uniform with her name embroidered on the lapel, and her voice was smooth and professional, with just a hint of amusement.



“Good morning,” she greeted, her eyes sweeping over Will with clinical detachment. “You must be William. We’re going to take very good care of you today.”

Will grimaced but said nothing, glancing over at Cintia, who was lounging on the sofa with a lit Virginia Slims 120 between her fingers. Edna was seated beside her, clad in another pastel creation—a lavender skirt suit with a ruffled blouse that seemed to amplify her already larger-than-life persona. She held one of her impossibly long Nat Sherman 164 cigarettes with the poise of an actress in an old movie.

“Oh, William, darling,” Edna cooed, her voice dripping with sugary condescension. “You’re going to feel like an entirely new person after this. It’s absolutely divine.”

“Just remember to breathe,” Cintia added, exhaling a stream of smoke and smirking at his discomfort. “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

Will clenched his fists at his sides, resisting the urge to fire back. He was acutely aware of his position—shirtless and barefoot, standing in front of three women who seemed to delight in his predicament. He thought of his scholarship, of the messages Cintia held over him, and swallowed his pride.

Vivienne gestured to the table. “Shall we begin? Please undress and lie down.”

Will hesitated, his ears burning. “Do I have to—”

“All of it,” Vivienne interrupted, her tone firm but not unkind. “I'm going to wax your whole body.”

He shot a glare at Cintia, who raised an eyebrow but said nothing. With a resigned sigh, he stripped off his remaining clothing, his movements stiff and reluctant. The air felt unnaturally cold against his bare skin as he climbed onto the table, lying flat on his back and staring at the ceiling.

Vivienne approached with the precision of a surgeon, her gloved hands moving efficiently as she prepared the first strip of wax. “You’ve done hair removal before?” she asked, more as a formality than genuine curiosity.

“Yeah,” Will muttered. “I swim, so I shave sometimes.”

“This is a bit different,” Vivienne said with a small smile, spreading the warm wax across his chest. “But you’ll get through it.”

Will flinched as she pressed a strip of cloth onto the wax, smoothing it firmly. He barely had time to brace himself before the sharp rip of the cloth sent a jolt of pain through his chest. He hissed through his teeth, his hands gripping the edges of the table.

“See?” Edna said with a lilting laugh. “It’s not so bad! Beauty has its price, my dear.”

Cintia chuckled, taking a drag from her cigarette. “Now you know what women go through to stay smooth.”

Will gritted his teeth as Vivienne continued her work, moving methodically across his chest and down to his stomach. Each strip brought a fresh wave of pain, and he couldn't help the occasional grunt or flinch. The sound of the wax being ripped away seemed unnaturally loud, punctuated only by Edna's commentary.

"Such a strong young man," she drawled, her voice dripping with mock admiration. "You're handling this so well. I simply can't wait to see the results."

Will's face burned with humiliation, but he said nothing. The process dragged on as Vivienne moved to his arms, his legs, and finally, his more sensitive areas. When she waxed his groin, Will had to hold back the tears from the pain.

By the time she began spreading wax across his face, Will felt like he had been skinned alive. The pain was sharper here, the delicate skin more prone to stinging, and he winced with every strip.

"Almost done," Vivienne said calmly, applying a cool, soothing cream to his reddened skin. "This will help with the irritation and slow the regrowth."

Will's body felt raw, every inch of him hyper-aware of the slightest movement. When Vivienne handed him a pink satin robe, he grabbed it without hesitation, eager to cover himself.

"Perfect," Edna cooed, clapping her hands together. "You look positively radiant already. Doesn't he, Cintia?"

Cintia smirked, blowing out another plume of smoke. "He's getting there."

Will tied the robe tightly around himself, his knuckles white as he sat in the chair Vivienne indicated. "Is this over now?" he muttered, his voice tight.

"Not quite," Vivienne said, pulling out a tray of products. "Now we move on to your hair. We need to give you something more mature looking."

Edna let out another delighted laugh, her Nat Sherman poised elegantly in her hand. "Oh, darling, this is only the beginning. Trust me, you're going to feel like a whole new person by the time we're done."

Will bit the inside of his cheek, his jaw tightening. He thought he had known what he was getting into, but this was something else entirely.

He never dyed his hair before, so this was a new experience to him, one that he wasn't enjoying.

Will sat stiffly in the chair, the pink satin robe clinging uncomfortably to his freshly waxed skin. His scalp tingled as Vivienne applied a bleaching agent to his dark blonde hair, the harsh chemical smell stinging his nose and mingling unpleasantly with the ever-present haze of cigarette smoke in the room.

“This will take a little time,” Vivienne said in her professional tone, carefully combing the bleach through his hair with a precision that felt almost punitive. “We need to strip out all the natural pigment first before we can dye it.”

Will didn’t respond. He was too busy trying to ignore the prickle of shame as Edna and Cintia, perched like two pampered queens on the sofa, watched the process with thinly veiled amusement. Edna held her Nat Sherman 164 delicately between her fingers, blowing out languid streams of smoke as she spoke.

“Oh, Cintia, dear,” she said, her tone dripping with sugary mockery, “I think dark hair will suit him wonderfully. Don’t you? It’s so much more sophisticated.”

Cintia, dressed in an impeccably tailored cream jumpsuit and puffing on her Virginia Slims 120, tilted her head as if appraising a painting. “Absolutely. It’s such a dramatic change—exactly what he needs.”

Vivienne smirked faintly but said nothing as she adjusted the foils in Will’s hair. She wiped her hands on a towel and turned her attention to his eyebrows, picking up a small pair of tweezers. “While we wait for the bleach to process, let’s clean these up.”

“What’s wrong with my eyebrows?” Will muttered, his jaw tight.

Vivienne chuckled softly. “Oh, nothing a little shaping can’t fix.” Her tone was light, almost playful, but there was a hint of satisfaction in her eyes as she leaned in to pluck the first stray hair.

Will flinched slightly, biting back a grimace as she worked with meticulous care. Each sharp tug was a reminder of how far he was being pushed, but he clenched his teeth and stayed silent.

“Oh, darling, don’t be such a baby,” Edna trilled, tapping ash into a crystal ashtray on the coffee table. “It’s just a few little pinches. I used to do my own brows all the time back in the day. Though, of course,” she added with a sly smile, “it’s much nicer to have someone else do the work for you.”

Will shot her a glare but kept quiet. He had no choice but to endure it, though every pluck felt like another blow to his dignity.

Cintia sipped from a mimosa, the golden liquid sparkling in her crystal glass. “He’ll thank us later,” she said breezily. “Not that he’ll admit it.”

Vivienne finished with his eyebrows and stepped back to admire her work. “Much better,” she said with a nod. “A clean, defined shape does wonders.”

Will reached up to touch them, but Vivienne swatted his hand away. “Don’t smudge the cream,” she said, referring to the soothing gel she had applied.

Before Will could protest further, Vivienne gestured to a basin on the floor. “Feet in here, please,” she instructed. “We’ll let them soak while the bleach finishes.”

Will complied reluctantly, slipping his feet into the warm, soapy water. He leaned back in the chair, staring at the ceiling as the low hum of conversation continued around him.

“You know,” Edna said, lighting another cigarette with a flourish, “this reminds me of the time I had a full makeover in Paris. It was divine—the stylists there simply have a way with transformation. Of course, that was before everyone started rushing everywhere. No patience for true elegance anymore.”

Cintia laughed softly, blowing a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. “Well, Edna, it’s clear you’ve never lost your touch.”

Edna beamed, taking a sip from her glass of something that looked suspiciously stronger than a mimosa. “You’re too kind, darling. But really, I do think young William here will come to appreciate this one day. It’s character-building.”

Will rolled his eyes, biting back a retort as Vivienne returned with a tray of nail polish bottles. “All right,” she said briskly, pulling his feet from the basin and patting them dry. “Let’s give these a little color.”

“What?” Will said, sitting up abruptly. “No way.”

Vivienne raised an eyebrow. “You’re already here, Will. Why stop now?”

“Oh, do relax,” Edna said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “A little polish never hurt anyone. I always say a pop of color does wonders.”

“Dark red,” Cintia suggested, taking another slow drag of her cigarette. “Something bold.”

Vivienne nodded approvingly, selecting a bottle of deep crimson polish. She tilted her head at Will, her expression calm but firm. “Feet up.”

Reluctantly, Will complied, cringing as Vivienne began painting his toenails with careful strokes. The glossy red polish gleamed under the light, each stroke feeling like another small humiliation.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Edna cooed, leaning forward to inspect his toes. “It’s such a striking color. Don’t you think, Cintia?”

“Striking, indeed,” Cintia agreed, her lips curving into a smirk. “It’s amazing how a few small changes can make such a difference.”

Vivienne finished the pedicure with a flourish, setting Will’s feet back in the basin to dry. “Now, let’s rinse your hair and start the dye,” she said, removing the foils from his scalp. “We’re just getting started.”

The coloring process took another half hour, with Vivianne taking a break, and Citia letting Will drink some water and go to the bathroom.

When he was back at the chair, the sharp, acrid scent of hair dye still lingered in the air from the earlier process, mingling with the omnipresent haze of cigarette smoke. Now, his freshly dyed dark hair gleamed under the living room lights, a rich ebony shade identical to Edna's.

"Now, we'll give you some volume," Vivienne said, her tone neutral but edged with amusement as she separated a section of his damp hair. She pulled out a set of tight rollers and held one up for emphasis. "This will give you the perfect power perm."

Will grimaced but stayed silent, clenching the arms of the chair as she began. The sensation of his hair being pulled and wound around the small, plastic rollers was far from pleasant. Vivienne's gloved hands worked efficiently, rolling each strand tightly and securing it with a clip.



"Oh, this is going to be fabulous," Edna gushed from the sofa, holding her Nat Sherman 164 elegantly between her fingers. She exhaled a plume of smoke, her smile saccharine. "I remember when I first got my hair permed back in the day. It changed my entire look. You'll love it, William, darling. Trust me."

Cintia chuckled softly, swirling the remains of her mimosa in its glass. "He's not ready to admit it yet, Edna. Give him time."

Will didn't trust himself to speak. He felt each pull of his hair as Vivienne wound it onto the rollers, her movements precise and practiced. His scalp began to itch from the tension as more and more sections were rolled up and clipped into place, until his entire head was covered in a grid of plastic cylinders.

"There we go," Vivienne said, stepping back to admire her work. "Now for the perm solution."

She grabbed a small bottle from her tray, unscrewing the cap to release a pungent, chemical odor that made Will wrinkle his nose. Vivienne smirked faintly. “It’s strong, I know. But it’s necessary.”

She placed a protective cape around his shoulders and a towel along his hairline to catch any stray drips, then began carefully applying the solution to each roller. The liquid soaked into his hair, the acrid scent intensifying with every pass. Will’s scalp began to itch almost immediately, a prickling, uncomfortable sensation that only added to his growing misery.



“It’s working beautifully,” Edna cooed, leaning forward to inspect him. “Oh, Cintia, just look at him! He’s going to have such elegant curls.”

“I can already see it.” Cintia agreed, taking a drag from her Virginia Slims and exhaling slowly.

Will closed his eyes, trying to block out their voices, but the itching and the strong smell of the perm solution made it impossible to relax. He squirmed slightly in the chair, but Vivienne tapped his shoulder.

“Sit still,” she said firmly. “We don’t want this getting in your eyes.”

While the solution processed, Vivienne turned her attention to his nails. She pulled a portable UV lamp from her kit, along with a selection of gel polish and nail extensions. “Hands on the table, please,” she instructed, her tone brisk.

Will hesitated but complied, reluctantly placing his hands flat on the small table she had set up. Vivienne cleaned his nails and began attaching the gel extensions, filing and shaping them into a smooth, uniform length. The process was tedious, and the faint buzz of the nail file only added to his mounting irritation.

“Red,” Cintia said decisively from her seat. “Same as his toes. It’s bold and dramatic.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Edna agreed, tapping ash into the tray beside her. “It’s such a classic color. Very striking.”

Vivienne nodded and selected a bottle of deep crimson gel polish, applying it to each nail with practiced precision. The glossy shine caught the light as she worked, and Will couldn’t help but glare at the transformation. His hands no longer felt like his own—they looked delicate, polished, and entirely foreign.



“Under the lamp,” Vivienne instructed, gesturing to the UV lamp. Will slid his hands beneath it, the soft glow enveloping his fingers as the gel set. The sensation was strange, almost surreal, and he clenched his jaw to keep from voicing his frustration.

Once his nails were finished, Vivienne returned to his hair, carefully unrolling each tight curl from the rollers. The chemical smell still lingered as she worked, snipping and shaping the curls into a structured style. With each careful cut, the final look began to emerge—a dramatic, voluminous power perm that framed his face with precise, exaggerated curls. Vivienne finished by putting a considerable amount of hair spray on his hairdo, so the curls would be stuck firmly into place.

“All done,” Vivienne announced, stepping back with a satisfied smile. “What do you think?”

Will stared at his reflection in the mirror, his heart sinking further as he took in the absurdity of his new appearance. His hair, once chin-length and messy, was now a dense helmet of tightly coiled curls that framed his face with an exaggerated elegance. The stiffness of the perm made it feel foreign to the touch, like something artificial had replaced his hair. He brushed one of his new crimson-tipped fingers against the curls experimentally, and the glossy red nail shone under the light, an unwelcome splash of color in his already surreal transformation.

He clenched his fists, the sensation of the long nails pressing into his palms a constant reminder of how much he hated this. His thoughts raced, an endless loop of frustration and humiliation. *This isn't me. None of this is me. As soon as this is over, I'm shaving my head. I'll find a way to get rid of these stupid nails. I'll—*

"Perfect timing," Vivienne's voice cut through his thoughts, pulling him back to the present. He looked up as she approached, her tray now filled with neat rows of small syringes. Each one gleamed under the soft lighting, their contents pale and clear.

"What... what's that?" Will asked, his voice tight with apprehension.

"Fillers," Vivienne replied matter-of-factly, setting the tray down on the side table. "Nothing too dramatic, just a touch to plump up your lips. It'll give you a softer, more refined look."

"No," Will said, shaking his head as he leaned back in the chair. "Absolutely not. You're not doing that."

"Oh, darling," Edna interjected, her voice dripping with mock sympathy as she leaned forward, her Nat Sherman 164 poised delicately between her fingers. "It's just a little enhancement. You've come this far—it would be a shame to stop now."

"I agree," Cintia added, exhaling a stream of smoke and eyeing him with a satisfied smirk. "This is about embracing the full transformation, Will. You've already made such progress."

"I didn't agree to this!" Will snapped, his frustration finally boiling over. He started to rise from the chair, but Vivienne placed a firm hand on his shoulder, pushing him back down with surprising strength.

"Relax," she said calmly, her tone carrying a hint of steel. "This won't hurt. Much."

Will glared at her, his jaw tight, but the weight of the situation pressed down on him like a vice. He knew he couldn't fight this, not with Cintia holding his future in her perfectly manicured hands. He sank back into the chair, his body rigid.

Vivienne slipped on a fresh pair of gloves, her movements smooth and efficient as she prepared the first syringe. "I'll start with the top lip," she said, her voice clinical. "Just a subtle lift."

Will gritted his teeth as she leaned in, the needle glinting in the light. He flinched at the first prick, a sharp sting followed by a strange sensation as the filler was injected. It wasn't unbearable, but the discomfort was enough to make him grip the armrests tightly, his crimson nails pressing against the leather.

"See?" Vivienne said with a faint smile as she pulled back, inspecting her work. "Not so bad."

Will didn't respond. He stared at the ceiling, willing himself to focus on anything but the repeated pricks of the needle as she worked her way across his lips. The process was

meticulous, each injection carefully measured and placed. By the time she finished, his lips tingled slightly, the sensation both alien and unsettling.

“There,” Vivienne said, stepping back and peeling off her gloves. “Let’s let that settle while I finish with your makeup.”

Will’s stomach churned as she reached for the tray of cosmetics. He wanted to protest, but the weight of everything—the waxing, the nails, the perm, the fillers—had left him drained. He sat in sullen silence as Vivienne began applying foundation, smoothing it over his skin with practiced ease.

“You’re going to look simply marvelous,” Edna trilled, her voice bright and saccharine. She took another drag from her cigarette, her gaze sparkling with delight as she watched the transformation unfold. “I always say a good makeover can change your entire outlook on life.”

“I don’t think Will’s outlook is ready for that yet,” Cintia said with a smirk, sipping from her glass of sparkling water. “But who knows? Maybe he’ll surprise us.”

Vivienne ignored their commentary, focusing instead on her work. She blended a heavy layer of blush onto Will’s cheeks, the rosy hue standing out starkly against the smooth foundation. Next came the eyeshadow—a bold, shimmering blue that she swept across his lids with precise strokes.

“Close your eyes,” she instructed, her tone brisk. Will obeyed, his lips pressed into a thin line as she applied a thick coat of mascara to his lashes. Each stroke felt like another nail in the coffin of his dignity.

Finally, she picked up a tube of lipstick, the glossy red shade identical to the one Edna wore. She leaned in, her steady hand tracing the plump contours of his newly filled lips with meticulous care. The color gleamed under the light, the perfect finishing touch to the heavy, exaggerated look.

“All done,” Vivienne announced, stepping back and handing him a mirror. “Take a look.”

Will stared at his reflection, his breath catching in his throat. The person in the mirror was unrecognizable. His hair was an immaculate power perm, the dark curls framing a face transformed by heavy makeup and plump lips. His crimson nails gleamed as he held the mirror, and the pink satin robe completed the surreal image.

Edna clapped her hands together, her face lighting up with delight. “Oh, William, darling, you’re absolutely stunning! It’s like looking in at a younger version of myself—don’t you think, Cintia?”

“Definitely,” Cintia agreed, her smirk widening as she took a long drag from her cigarette. “I think we’ve found his look.”

Will's stomach churned as he set the mirror down, his hands trembling slightly. *This wasn't him. It couldn't be.*

"I think we're ready for the pièce de résistance," Edna declared, rising gracefully from her seat. The sharp clack of her tall heels echoed against the hardwood floor, the sound unnervingly commanding.

Will hadn't realized how tall she truly was, he always kept his distance because of the cigarette smoke. Will had a medium stature, and now, looking closer, he came to the strange realization that she had almost the same height as him, but her high heels made Edna look even taller.

"Oh, don't look so glum, darling," Edna trilled, her voice sugary and affected as always. "We're about to make you shine."

Cintia stood nearby, tapping ash from her Virginia Slims 120 into a delicate crystal ashtray. She raised an eyebrow at Will, her smirk as sharp as ever. "Let's get you dressed," she said simply, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Vivienne handed over a neatly arranged set of garments: a dark pinstriped power suit with exaggerated shoulder pads, a black silk blouse and a slim pencil skirt that would fall just above the knees. Beside it lay a pair of tall, dark-colored high heels with a pointed toe, along with a selection of chunky gold jewelry.

"I'll need to make a few adjustments," Vivienne said, holding up a corset and a bra filled with light padding. "But once we're done, everything will fit perfectly."

Will's stomach churned as he stared at the ensemble. "Do I really have to wear all of that?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Oh, absolutely," Edna replied, the corners of her lips curling into a delighted smile. "Trust me, darling, this look is going to be everything. You'll feel so polished, so put-together. It's transformative."

Will's glare shifted between Edna and Cintia, but neither woman wavered. With a resigned sigh, he stood and allowed Vivienne to begin her work.

The corset came first.

Vivienne wrapped the stiff garment around his torso, pulling the laces tight with practiced precision. Will winced as the pressure increased, his breathing becoming shallow as the corset cinched his waist into a defined hourglass shape.

"It's not so bad once you get used to it," Vivienne said, adjusting the fit. "Women wear these all the time."

"But I'm not a woman," Will muttered under his breath, earning a chuckle from Cintia.

“Oh, stop complaining,” she said, lighting a fresh cigarette. “You’re doing fine.”

Next came the padded bra. Vivienne adjusted the straps and added just enough filling to create the illusion of curves beneath the blouse. When she stepped back to inspect her work, she nodded approvingly.

Then, she showed him how to tuck, so he could wear the matching panties. With his long nails, the process was slow and painful, but he eventually got there. Next came the black sheer tights, sending shivers through Will’s neck as he put them on.

“Perfect,” she said. “Now for the suit.”

Will reluctantly allowed Vivienne to help him into the blouse that had a delicate lace trim, adding an extra layer of femininity that made his stomach twist with discomfort.

After that was the dark pencil skirt with the matching blazer. The fabric was soft but structured, the shoulder pads adding a dramatic width that accentuated the slim waist created by the corset. The skirt hugged his hips and thighs, restricting his movements as he shifted awkwardly in place.

When Vivienne handed him the heels, Will hesitated. “Do I really have to wear these?” he asked, his voice almost pleading.

“Of course, darling,” Edna said, her tone dripping with condescension. “The heels make the look. Trust me, once you get used to them, you’ll feel unstoppable.”

Will slipped his feet into the shoes, wincing at the snug fit. The heels forced his posture upright, his balance immediately feeling precarious. He took a tentative step, the click of the heels against the floor unnerving him.

“Don’t worry,” Cintia said with a smirk. “You’ll figure it out.”

The final touch was the jewelry.

Vivienne draped a thick gold chain around his neck, the heavy weight of it settling against the delicate silk of the blouse. Matching earrings clipped onto his ears, their metallic shine catching the light. A chunky bracelet adorned one wrist, while several oversized rings were slipped onto his newly polished fingers.

When it was all done, Vivienne stepped back with a satisfied nod. “There,” she said, her tone triumphant. “Now you’re ready.”

Will turned slowly toward the mirror, his movements hindered by the tight skirt and towering heels. The reflection that greeted him was almost too much to process. He looked like a younger version of Edna, but the outfit, hair, and makeup aged him significantly. The exaggerated power suit and bold accessories gave him the appearance of someone in their early thirties, a confident but outdated professional from a bygone era.

Edna clapped her hands together, her face lighting up with delight. “Oh, William, darling, you’re simply divine! It’s like looking into a mirror, but better. Youthful, fresh—you’re everything I could have dreamed of.”

Cintia laughed softly, her cigarette poised elegantly between her fingers. “You’ve outdone yourself, Vivienne. He’s perfect.”

Will said nothing, his hands awkwardly clenching into fists at his sides, with the long nails pressing into the palms of his hand. The weight of the rings, the stiffness of the curls, the tightness of the corset, the bulkiness of the suit, the height of the heels—all of it felt alien and oppressive.

Will was so focused at not falling, that he didn’t even see when Vivianne left.

He stood near the mirrored cabinet in the living room, his legs awkwardly adjusting to the towering heels, the corset biting into his sides with every shallow breath. The heavy jewelry on his wrists clinked faintly as he shifted uncomfortably, his polished red nails tapping involuntarily against his thighs.

“Now, darling,” Edna purred, stepping into view with a smile as practiced as her every move, “Every polished woman knows how to carry herself with elegance, and nothing says refinement quite like the perfect cigarette.”

Will’s stomach sank. “I’m not doing this.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” Cintia’s voice cut in sharply from the sofa, where she sat lounging with another Virginia Slims 120 between her fingers. The smoke curled lazily above her head. “This is going to be an important lesson. You are always looking down on people who smoke. It is just a habit and now you are going to learn to enjoy it too.”

Will’s plump lips pressed at each other, but he stayed silent. He didn’t need Cintia to remind him of what was at stake. His scholarship. His father. He clenched his jaw as Edna approached, holding out a long, flat box.

“Here we are,” she cooed, presenting the pack of Nat Sherman 164s like a prize. “Aren’t they just exquisite? So sleek, so sophisticated.” The box itself was a pale, metallic gold, embossed with the elegant logo. It was longer than any cigarette pack Will had ever seen, more like a pencil case in size and design.

Will said nothing as Edna handed him the pack. It felt surprisingly light in his hand, the quality undeniable even in its packaging. She beamed, clearly delighted by his discomfort.

“Now,” she continued, her tone syrupy sweet, “let me show you how to open it. With those lovely nails of yours, of course.”

Will glanced down at his long, glossy red nails, his frustration mounting. Edna reached over to guide his hand, her own nails clicking lightly against his as she showed him how to carefully slide open the top of the pack. The cigarettes inside were immaculate—long, pure

white cylinders that gleamed under the light. Each one was nearly twice the length of a standard cigarette, its elegance and absurdity undeniable.



“Pick one, darling,” Edna instructed, stepping back slightly to observe. “And remember, a lady is always deliberate in her movements.”

Will hesitated, but under Cintia’s watchful gaze, he reluctantly reached for one of the cigarettes. The length made it awkward to grasp at first, but Edna corrected him, guiding his fingers to hold it delicately yet securely between his polished fingertips.

“Perfect,” she said with a satisfied nod. “Now, hold it just so—” She adjusted his grip again, ensuring the cigarette was poised elegantly between his middle and index fingers. “There. You look simply marvelous.”

Will gritted his teeth, the absurdity of the situation almost too much to bear. But Edna wasn’t finished. She pulled out a gold lighter, the surface engraved with an ornate floral design, and held it out to him.

“Now, darling, let me show you how to light it properly. These aren’t your average cigarettes, you know. They require a bit more... presence.”

Will stared at the lighter, but before he could refuse, Cintia’s voice cut in. “Go on, Will. We don’t have all day.”

With a sharp exhale, Will took the lighter and flicked it on, the small flame flickering uncertainly. Edna guided his hand, bringing the flame to the end of the long cigarette.

“Take a deep drag, darling,” she instructed. “Because of the length, you’ll need to draw the flame in.”

Will hesitated, but with Cintia’s sharp gaze still on him, he obeyed. He took a deep pull, the flame catching the end of the cigarette as it crackled faintly. The first inhale hit him like a wall—the smoke was denser, the taste richer and far stronger than he had anticipated. His lungs burned as he exhaled sharply, coughing slightly.

“Don’t slouch,” Edna chided, her tone light but firm. “Shoulders back, chin up. And take smaller puffs. You’ll get the hang of it.”

Will followed her instructions, though every drag felt like an eternity. The cigarette’s length made it impossible to ignore, its elegant design and heavy smoke demanding attention with every movement. He could feel the weight of the stares from Cintia and Edna, their satisfaction practically radiating from them.



“Now, darling,” Edna continued, demonstrating with her own Nat Sherman 164, “when it’s time to ash, you simply tap gently—like this.” She extended her hand gracefully, her long nails glinting as she flicked the ash into a nearby tray.

Will mimicked the motion, his long red nails catching the light as he awkwardly tapped the cigarette against the ashtray. The ash fell neatly, but the act felt alien, the sight of his polished nails and the elegant cigarette clashing violently with his sense of self.

“Lovely,” Edna cooed. “You’re a natural.”

The minutes dragged on as Edna continued her coaching. She corrected his posture, his grip, even the way he exhaled the smoke. Each puff felt heavier than the last, the dense clouds filling the air and clinging to his skin and hair. The lipstick on his freshly plumped lips left a faint red print on the filter, a visual reminder of his humiliation.

“See? You’re getting it,” Cintia said, her smirk evident even through the haze of smoke. “Not so bad, is it?”

Will didn't answer, his focus on finishing the cigarette as quickly as possible. But the length was unforgiving—it burned slowly, forcing him to savor every agonizing moment. By the time he reached the end, nearly twenty minutes had passed, though it felt like hours.

"And now," Edna said, her voice filled with delight, "you simply press it out like so." She demonstrated with her own cigarette, twisting it delicately into the ashtray until the embers died. "All done. Wasn't that just divine?"

Will mimicked her actions, extinguishing the cigarette with as much composure as he could muster. But inside, he was seething. The taste lingered on his tongue, the smell clung to his hair and clothes, and the humiliation burned hotter than any drag he had taken.

"Bravo, darling," Edna said, clapping her hands together softly. "You've done beautifully."

Cintia exhaled a final plume of smoke, her eyes glinting with satisfaction. "Welcome to the club, Will."

Chapter 4

Will thought that his humiliation was over, that they would leave him alone after they had their fun. But he was wrong, after their lunch, Edna and Cintia went to the garden and he had to go with them.

It was cold outside, but Will's power suit was surprisingly warm. The garden seemed to grow heavier with the weight of cigarette smoke and idle gossip as the afternoon stretched on. Cintia leaned back in her chair, sipping her third cocktail of the day with a satisfied air. Will sat stiffly between Cintia and Edna, his movements constrained by the corset and pencil skirt. Every drag from the Nat Sherman 164 between his manicured fingers felt like another brick in the wall of humiliation trapping him.

Edna, perched gracefully with her usual poise, tapped ash from her cigarette into the crystal ashtray. "Oh, Cintia," she began, her voice dripping with mock concern. "Did you see dear Veronica recently? At the luncheon?"

Cintia's eyes lit up, a knowing smile curling her lips. "Of course, I did. How could I not? You could see her 'work' from across the room." She drew the word *"work"* out with a sharp edge, her tone full of performative sympathy.

Edna let out a theatrical sigh, taking another drag from her cigarette. "Poor thing. She really thought no one would notice. But honestly, that brow lift is just... too much. She can barely blink now."

"Oh, I know," Cintia chimed in, setting her drink down and reaching for her Virginia Slims 120. "And that filler in her cheeks? She looks like she's storing nuts for winter." Her laughter was light but razor-sharp, cutting through the air like a blade.

Will sat in awkward silence, his freshly painted nails tapping lightly against the glass in his hand. He had no interest in this conversation, but the way Cintia kept glancing at him made him uneasy.

“What do you think, Will?” Cintia suddenly asked, her tone sweet but with a dangerous undertone. “You always have such strong opinions about things like this.”

Will froze, his mind racing. He knew what they were doing. They had read his messages to Julie, seen his unfiltered thoughts about women like Cintia and Edna, and now they wanted to hear those same opinions spoken aloud. He glanced at Cintia, whose sharp gaze held a silent dare, and then at Edna, who was watching him with a saccharine smile that didn’t quite reach her heavily painted eyes.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled, taking a small sip of his drink to stall. “I mean, if it makes her happy…”

“Oh, darling, that’s not what we’re asking,” Edna interrupted, her tone dripping with condescension. “We’re talking about what you really think. Be honest.”

Cintia leaned forward, the end of her cigarette glowing as she took a long drag. “You’ve never been shy about judging others, Will.” She exhaled a plume of smoke, her smile sharpening. “So don’t hold back. Tell us what you really think about Veronica’s little improvements.”

Will hesitated, his fingers tightening around the glass. He knew there was no right answer. If he tried to avoid the question, they would press him until he gave in. If he told the truth, they would twist it against him. Either way, he was trapped.

“I don’t—” he started, but Cintia cut him off.

“No, no, no,” she said, waving her cigarette for emphasis. “That’s not how you do it. If you’re going to have an opinion, you need to say it with conviction. Like this.” She put on a mockingly sweet voice. “‘Oh, Veronica is such a dear, but honestly, she should have stopped after the first procedure. She’s starting to look a little... cartoonish, don’t you think?’”

Edna laughed, clapping her hands together. “Oh, that’s perfect, Cintia. Will, darling, try it. Say it just like that.”

Will’s jaw tightened, but he knew he had no choice. He cleared his throat and tried to mimic the tone, though his words felt like acid on his tongue. “Oh, Veronica is such a dear,” he began awkwardly, “but honestly, she should have stopped after the first procedure. She’s starting to look a little... cartoonish.”

The words hung in the air, thick with discomfort.

Edna raised an eyebrow, tapping ash into the tray. “Not bad, darling, but you need to mean it. You’re too stiff. Try again, and this time, add a little jealousy. As if you’re envious that she had the nerve to get work done at all.”

Will glared at her but forced himself to repeat the line, this time with an edge he hoped would satisfy them. “Veronica is such a dear, but honestly, she should have stopped after the first procedure. She’s starting to look a little cartoonish.” He added a slight sneer, the bitterness seeping into his voice despite himself.

“Much better,” Cintia said with a smile that could cut glass. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

“Exactly,” Edna agreed, lighting a fresh Nat Sherman 164. “It’s all about delivery, darling. You have to make them believe that you’re only saying it out of concern. That’s the trick.”

Will slumped back in his chair, the weight of the corset and the tightness of the skirt making even this small act feel exhausting. He took a deep drag from his cigarette, the dense smoke burning his throat as he exhaled. The red imprint of his lips stood out starkly on the filter, a mocking reminder of how far he had been pushed.

“Good job, Will,” Cintia said, raising her glass in a mock toast. “You’re learning.”

Will stared at the ground, his nails digging into his palm as he struggled to keep his composure.

The conversation paused momentarily as Cintia leaned back in her chair, a wicked gleam in her eyes. She tapped ash from her Virginia Slims 120 into the ashtray and looked directly at Will, her smile both triumphant and calculating.

“Oh, one more thing,” she began, her tone deceptively light. “From now on, we’ll be calling you Cassandra.”

Will’s head snapped up, his polished nails tightening against the glass in his hand. “What?” he blurted, his voice cracking slightly.

“Cassandra,” Cintia repeated smoothly, savoring the moment. “It suits you much better than Will, don’t you think? You’ve already got the look. It’s only fitting you have the name to match.”

Edna let out a delighted laugh, clapping her hands together. “Oh, Cintia, you’ve read my mind! I’ve always wanted a younger sister named Cassandra. It’s such a charming name. So elegant, so refined.” She leaned toward Will, her sugary voice dripping with mock affection. “And you, darling, will make a perfect Cassandra Lacroix.”

Will’s jaw tightened, his pulse pounding in his ears. “You can’t be serious,” he muttered, his voice low and strained.

“Oh, we’re very serious,” Cintia replied, her smirk widening. She took a leisurely sip of her drink, exhaling a plume of smoke with practiced ease. “From now on, you’ll be Cassandra Lacroix. Think of it as a fresh start. A way to embrace this new chapter in your life.”

Will's knuckles whitened as he gripped the glass, his anger simmering dangerously close to the surface. "This is ridiculous," he growled. "You're just doing this to humiliate me."

Cintia's laugh was light but cutting. "Humiliate you? Oh, darling, this is about helping you grow. You've been so judgmental, so critical of everyone else. Now, you'll have the chance to see things from a different perspective."

"And," Edna added, her smile saccharine, "you'll be my lovely little sister, Cassandra. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

Will glared at them, his teeth grinding as he fought to keep his composure. His frustration and humiliation burned hotter than ever, but the constant reminder of what was at stake kept him from lashing out.

"I hate this," he muttered under his breath, his voice trembling with suppressed rage.

"Oh, darling, don't be so dramatic," Edna cooed, lighting a fresh Nat Sherman 164. "You'll grow into it. Trust me."

Cintia raised her glass in a mock toast. "To Cassandra Lacroix," she said with a smirk. "May she learn to appreciate the finer things in life."

Will said nothing, his face burning with anger and shame as he took another drag from his cigarette. The dense smoke filled his lungs, the red imprint of his lips on the filter mocking him with every puff.

As the sun dipped low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the manicured lawns as the air grew colder, Will's heels clicked faintly against the stone path as he followed Edna and Cintia out of the garden and onto the street.

He clutched the pale gold cigarette box in one hand, its weight a mocking reminder of his new "*obligations*." Edna walked ahead with her usual exaggerated grace, her tall frame wrapped in a pastel pink skirt suit with pearls gleaming at her neck. Cintia followed, her smirk evident even without a word as she glanced back at Will.

"Now, Cassandra," Cintia said, her voice crisp with satisfaction, "it's time for the next part of your... education."

Will's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll be staying with Edna for a while," Cintia replied nonchalantly, lighting another Virginia Slims. "No cellphone, no computer. Just good old-fashioned living."

"What?" Will stopped in his tracks, his glossy red nails trembling as he tightened his grip on the cigarette pack. "You can't be serious."

“Oh, but we are,” Edna chimed in, turning to face him with her signature affected smile. “You need this, darling. A little time away from all those distractions. It’s about learning to embrace a simpler, more elegant way of life.”

Will’s jaw clenched, his heart pounding in frustration. “How long?”

“As long as it takes,” Cintia said, her smirk widening. “Until you’ve learned what you need to learn.”

Edna’s house was a monument to opulent excess. Nestled just a block away from Will’s family home, it loomed like a pastel shrine to the 1980s. The exterior was a mishmash of geometric shapes and oversized windows, while the interior was a cacophony of neon accents, mirrored walls, and gleaming surfaces. Framed posters of old soap opera stars adorned the walls, their smoldering gazes forever frozen in dramatic poses.



Will felt a wave of nausea as he stepped inside. The scent of floral air freshener barely masked the constant undercurrent of smoke, and the decor felt suffocatingly artificial.

“Welcome home, darling,” Edna said with a sweeping gesture, her voice as sweet and rehearsed as ever. “We’re going to have so much fun together.”

As the evening wore on, Will found himself seated on a plush mauve sofa in Edna’s living room. The massive television screen glowed with the exaggerated drama of an episode of Dynasty, its characters clad in shoulder pads and dripping with jewels. Edna sat beside him, her legs crossed elegantly as she puffed on a fresh Nat Sherman 164, the plume of smoke rising gracefully above her.

“Isn’t Joan Collins just divine?” Edna cooed, gesturing at the screen. “Such a commanding presence. You could learn a thing or two from her, Cassandra.”

Will scowled, his own Nat Sherman burning between his fingers. He took a slow drag, wincing as the dense smoke filled his lungs. “I don’t know... it’s all so over-the-top,” he muttered.

“That’s the point, darling,” Edna replied, her voice dripping with condescension. “It’s all about the glamour, the drama. Now, tell me—what do you think of that dress?”

On the screen, a character stormed into a lavish living room wearing an emerald green gown with exaggerated shoulder pads. Will hesitated, unsure of what to say.

“Oh, come now,” Edna said, waving her cigarette for emphasis. “You can’t just sit there like a bump on a log. You’re supposed to comment. Be catty, be sharp. Like this.” She affected a high-pitched tone: “‘Oh, she must think she’s going to a masquerade ball with those sleeves. Honestly, the poor dear.’”

Cintia’s voice echoed in his head—*“If you’re going to judge people, do it properly.”* With a resigned sigh, Will tried again. “I mean... it’s a bit much, isn’t it? She looks like a Christmas ornament.”

Edna clapped her hands together, delighted. “Much better! See? You’re getting the hang of it.”

The episode dragged on, punctuated by dramatic slaps and icy stares between characters. Edna insisted on pausing the show at key moments, making Will critique hairstyles, jewelry, and dialogue delivery.

At one point, Edna handed him a fresh drink—a golden concoction with a faint citrus scent. Will wasn’t much of a drinker, but the constant pressure to comply left him little choice. He sipped cautiously, the alcohol burning his throat as Edna leaned in to reapply his red lipstick.

“Always keep your lips fresh, darling,” she said, patting them gently with a tissue. “It’s all about presentation.”

Will’s reflection in the mirror above the bar caught his eye. His heavily made-up face, framed by tight curls, stared back at him, lips glossy and perfect. The sight filled him with a mix of shame and disbelief. How had it come to this?

The smell of smoke thickened as Edna lit another Nat Sherman. Without waiting for instruction, Will picked up his own cigarette, the act now automatic. He lit it with a deep drag, the length of the cigarette forcing him to draw deeply to ignite it.

“Now, now,” Edna said, pointing her cigarette at him. “Straighten your shoulders. And when you exhale, don’t just blow it out like a factory chimney. Let it flow, darling. Like this.” She demonstrated, her smoke curling in an elegant ribbon into the air.

Will copied her begrudgingly, his bitter expression hidden behind the veil of smoke.

“Perfect,” Edna said with a satisfied smile. “You’re almost there, Cassandra. Soon, you’ll fit right in.”

Will’s hands trembled slightly, he felt trapped, every moment a performance he couldn’t escape. But the glint in Edna’s eyes and Cintia’s smirk from earlier reminded him of what was at stake.

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The guest bedroom was a kaleidoscope of excess, a shrine to 1980s opulence. Plush lavender carpeting muffled Will’s hesitant footsteps as he stepped inside, the plum-colored walls adorned with gold-framed mirrors and oil paintings of glamorous women in extravagant gowns. A queen-sized canopy bed stood at the center of the room, draped in layers of satin and lace.



The closet door hung slightly ajar, revealing an array of blazers with exaggerated shoulder pads, sequined dresses, pencil skirts, and fur coats. A row of high heels, neatly arranged by color, sparkled under the dim light of the crystal chandelier.

Edna followed close behind, her heels clicking sharply against the floor. She gestured toward the closet with her usual exaggerated flair, the bangles on her wrist jangling softly. “Isn’t it

just divine, Cassandra? Every woman needs a wardrobe that inspires. And now it's all yours to enjoy."

Will's stomach churned as he took in the sheer volume of clothing, each piece more ostentatious than the last. "I don't need any of this," he muttered, his voice heavy with exhaustion.

"Oh, nonsense," Edna trilled, her Nat Sherman 164 dangling elegantly from her fingers. "You'll see, darling—it's all about embracing the look, the lifestyle. Now, let's get you ready for bed."

Will turned, expecting to see her leave, but Edna stood firmly in place, her painted smile unwavering. In her other hand, she held a plum-colored peignoir, its flowing silk adorned with delicate lace trim. "This is perfect for your first night," she said, draping it over his arm. "Feminine, luxurious, and oh-so-flattering."

"I can't just sleep in my boxers?" Will asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

Edna's laughter was light but condescending. "Darling, no. One must never neglect their nighttime routine. Now, off with the suit. Let's not waste time."

Reluctantly, Will changed into the peignoir, the silky fabric sliding against his skin as he tied the sash tightly around his waist. He caught his reflection in the mirror above the vanity—a strange, alien version of himself stared back, the plum silk pooling around his freshly waxed legs and the curls of his power perm framing his face like a stiff halo.

"Lovely," Edna said approvingly, adjusting the sash slightly. "Now, let's begin. Skincare is the foundation of beauty, after all."

She handed him a bottle of makeup remover, its floral scent overpowering. Will sat at the vanity, staring at the array of creams, toners, and serums laid out before him like an arsenal. Under Edna's watchful eye, he began removing the heavy layers of makeup from his face, the cotton pads quickly stained with foundation and blush.

"Gently, darling," Edna instructed, her tone sweet but firm. "Always upwards motions. Gravity is not your friend."

Will followed her instructions with mechanical precision, his lips pressed tight as he worked. The process felt endless, each step dictated by Edna with the precision of a drill sergeant. Cleanser, toner, serum, moisturizer—all applied in careful succession, the creams leaving his skin shiny and soft.

"Perfect," Edna said, nodding with approval. "Now, the hair."

From a drawer, she retrieved a set of soft pink rollers and a silk cap. "This is essential," she explained, holding up one of the rollers. "We must protect your beautiful curls."

Will grimaced but sat still as Edna worked. She combed through his hair with deliberate care, sectioning it off and rolling each strand tightly around the pink foam cylinders. The tension pulled at his scalp, the unfamiliar weight of the rollers making his head feel uncomfortably heavy.

“There,” Edna said after what felt like an eternity. She secured the silk cap over the rollers, tucking the edges neatly against his hairline. “All ready for bed.”

Will stared at himself in the mirror again, the peignoir and silk cap making him look even more absurd. But before he could say anything, Edna handed him another Nat Sherman 164.

“One last cigarette before bed,” she said, lighting it for him with her gold lighter. “It’s important to let the smell settle. You’ll learn to associate it with comfort.”

Will took the cigarette reluctantly, the familiar weight and length mocking him as he brought it to his lips. The first drag was as harsh as ever, the dense smoke filling his lungs and leaving a bitter taste on his tongue. Edna sat beside him, puffing on her own cigarette with a satisfied smile.



“Now, darling,” she said, exhaling a thick plume of smoke, “tell me—what did you think of today? Wasn’t it just marvelous?”

Will didn’t answer immediately, focusing instead on the slow burn of the cigarette in his hand.

“Fine,” he muttered finally, taking another drag.

Edna laughed, her voice as light and artificial as ever. “You’ll come around, Cassandra. Just give it time.”

When the cigarette was finally finished, Edna showed Will to the bed, fluffing the satin pillows and arranging the neck pillow she insisted he use. “This will keep your curls intact,” she said, positioning it carefully.

Will lay down awkwardly, the stiffness of the pillow and the tightness of the corset making it impossible to get comfortable. The scent of smoke clung to his hair, his hands, and even the

silk of the peignoir. But exhaustion won out, and as his eyelids grew heavy, he stopped fighting. For now, he just wanted to escape the day.

Edna smiled as she dimmed the lights. “Goodnight, Cassandra,” she said sweetly, her voice echoing softly as she left the room.

Will didn’t respond. His mind drifted into uneasy dreams, the day’s events swirling in his subconscious. And for the first time, he didn’t have the energy to care about what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter 5

The room was still and quiet, bathed in the dim glow of the bedside lamp. Will lay motionless on the plush lavender sheets, his breathing slow and steady, his chest rising and falling rhythmically beneath the plum silk peignoir. His hair, tightly rolled and protected under the pink silk cap, framed his face with a peculiar elegance that now seemed disturbingly natural.

Edna stepped carefully into the room, her heels silent on the carpet. She carried a small tray bearing a sleek black mask and a visor that glinted faintly in the soft light. Her Nat Sherman 164 smoldered delicately between her fingers, its signature scent curling through the air. Setting the tray on the vanity, she approached the bedside table and adjusted the half-empty glass of water, her smile curling into something more mischievous. The sleeping pills she had added earlier had done their job; Will was utterly still, trapped in the deep, dreamless void of chemically induced sleep.

“Sweet dreams, Cassandra,” Edna murmured, her voice a sweet, venomous lullaby.

With practiced efficiency, Edna placed the sleek visor over Will’s closed eyes, its curved surface covering half his face. From the tray, she lifted the mask—an intricate device fitted with a small pod at the nosepiece—and secured it gently over his mouth and nose. The pod hissed faintly as it activated, releasing a steady stream of cigarette smoke identical to that of the Nat Sherman 164. The scent was thick and cloying, weaving into the air around him, and with each slow inhale, Will’s subconscious took it in.



The visor flickered, its internal mechanisms activating with precision. Pulsing with faint patterns of light and sound, it fed carefully crafted images into Will's sleeping mind. In his dreams, the smoke and the flickering visuals coalesced into something vivid, detailed, and inescapable.

Will wasn't Will anymore. He was Cassandra Lacroix, and he knew it with a certainty that felt as natural as breathing. He stood in front of an oversized mirror in his opulent dressing room, the frame gilded and dripping with excess. The woman in the reflection was a vision of 80s extravagance: her face, perfectly sculpted with the unmistakable touch of skilled cosmetic surgeons, bore the smoothness of youth in its artificial tightness, through her eyes hinted at her age—early forties, perhaps. Her lips were plump and painted in a deep red hue, matching the manicured nails she held elegantly aloft, the long white cigarette between them trailing a perfect ribbon of smoke.

Cassandra's body was draped in an emerald green dress with bold shoulder pads and a cinched waist that emphasized her hourglass figure. Her hair, a dramatic, voluminous perm, framed her face like a crown of carefully styled curls. Around her neck hung a chunky gold necklace, and her wrists glittered with matching bracelets.



She turned to the chaise lounge beside her vanity, where an array of Nat Sherman 164 cigarette packs lay neatly arranged. Cassandra plucked another cigarette from the nearest pack, lit it with a practiced flick of her gold lighter, and took a deep drag, exhaling the smoke in a graceful stream. The act was automatic, habitual, yet deliberate—as if the cigarette were not just an accessory but a statement of identity.

The days in the dream blended seamlessly into the glamorous haze of Cassandra's life in her extravagant town. The streets were lined with neon lights and postmodern architecture, each corner dripping with 80s nostalgia brought to life. Cassandra attended gala events at luxurious country clubs, her presence commanding attention with every clink of her heels on the polished marble floors.

At horse races, she sipped champagne from delicate flutes, her lips leaving coral imprints on the glass. She chatted with other socialites, her voice laced with false sweetness as she complimented their fashion choices, only to mutter biting critiques under her breath.

“Did you see Lorraine’s outfit today?” Cassandra whispered to her friend, a fellow socialite draped in sequins. “The poor dear thinks sequins are slimming. She looked like a disco ball on legs.”

Her companion laughed, a light, tinkling sound that matched Cassandra’s own forced amusement. The scene was a constant cycle of parties, posturing, and gossip—each moment punctuated by the flick of a cigarette and the delicate tap of ash into crystal ashtrays.

Will’s eyes fluttered open as the early morning light seeped into the room. His head felt heavy, his mind clouded by the vividness of the dream. He sat up slowly, the silk cap slipping slightly on his head, and glanced around the extravagant guest bedroom. Everything was as he had left it—opulent, feminine, and suffocatingly 80s.

He pressed a hand to his forehead, his nails clicking faintly against his skin. The dream lingered at the edges of his consciousness, fragments flashing through his mind: the clothes, the parties, the cigarettes. He shuddered, unsure of where the dream had come from or why it felt so real.

“It’s those damn soap operas,” he muttered under his breath, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. The peignoir clung to his body as he stood, the soft fabric brushing against his freshly shaved legs. “That’s all it is. Just... soap operas.”

As he caught sight of the Nat Sherman 164 pack on the vanity, its pristine gold surface glinting in the morning light, a nauseous wave overtook him. His body lurched forward, and he sprinted to the bathroom. He flung the door open and collapsed in front of the toilet just in time, his stomach heaving violently.

The peignoir clung to his back, and his freshly rolled hair pressed uncomfortably against the rim of the pink silk cap as his body convulsed. Each retch was sharp and painful, leaving him gasping for air.

From somewhere beyond his misery, he heard the clicking of heels growing closer. “Cassandra?” Edna’s voice rang out, its sugary tone tinged with concern. She appeared in the doorway, a fresh Nat Sherman 164 balanced delicately between her fingers.

Her eyes widened slightly at the sight of him bent over the toilet, but her focus immediately shifted to his appearance. “Oh, darling,” she exclaimed, stepping inside. “Are you all right? Did you—” She stopped mid-sentence, inspecting him carefully. “Well, at least you didn’t ruin your hair or break a nail.”

Will wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, too exhausted to respond. His stomach continued to churn, and he slumped back against the wall, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

Edna crouched gracefully beside him, the smoke of her cigarette trailing faintly as she set it in a crystal ashtray on the counter. “Stay right there, darling,” she said, patting his arm lightly. “I’ll get you some water.”

Moments later, she returned with a glass of cool water and a small bottle of pills. She handed them to him with the precision of someone accustomed to such rituals. “Here,” she cooed, her voice soft and coaxing. “Take this—it’ll help with the nausea.”

Will hesitated, but the relentless queasiness left him no choice. He swallowed the pill and sipped the water, the coolness soothing his burning throat.

Edna perched on the edge of the counter, crossing her legs elegantly as she observed him. Her gaze was sharp, calculating, despite the affected sweetness in her voice. “I know exactly what’s happening, darling,” she said, lighting another Nat Sherman. “It’s the nicotine. Your body just isn’t used to it yet.”

Will glared at her weakly, his voice hoarse. “Maybe that’s a sign I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Edna replied with a tinkling laugh, blowing out a stream of smoke. “You’re just adjusting, that’s all. The first few days can be a bit... rough for some people. But trust me, it gets easier. Soon, you’ll wonder how you ever lived without it.”

“Why?” Will croaked, his head resting against the wall. “Why are you doing this?”

Edna smiled, a glint of something almost maternal in her expression. “Because, darling, it’s part of who you’re becoming. Smoking isn’t just a habit—it’s a statement, a lifestyle. You can’t be Cassandra Lacroix without it.”

Will closed his eyes, trying to block out her words, but the smell of the cigarette filled the small bathroom, clawing at his senses. His stomach churned again, though less violently now.

As the medicine began to take effect, Edna stood, her movements graceful and deliberate. She retrieved the ashtray and the pack of Nat Sherman 164s, holding them out to him. “Now, let’s not waste time. You’ll feel better once you’ve had another.”

Will stared at her in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? I just threw up!”

“And now you’re recovering,” she said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “The only way to get used to it is to keep going. Here.” She pulled a cigarette from the pack, its pristine white length glinting faintly in the morning light, and handed it to him.

“No,” he said, shaking his head weakly. “I can’t.”

Edna’s expression hardened slightly, though her tone remained light. “Oh, darling, don’t be so dramatic. One more won’t kill you. Besides,” she added, her voice dipping into a conspiratorial whisper, “you’re doing so well. Don’t ruin it now.”

Will's hands trembled as he took the cigarette reluctantly. Edna lit it for him, the flame flickering as she guided his hand. "Now, take a deep drag," she instructed. "Nice and slow."

He obeyed, the dense smoke filling his lungs once more. It was overwhelming, the bitterness of the nicotine biting at his throat, but he managed to exhale without coughing this time. The room filled with the familiar scent, clinging to his hair, his clothes, his skin.

"See?" Edna said, her smile returning. "You're already improving."

Will said nothing, his gaze fixed on the floor as he took another puff. The cigarette burned slowly, its length ensuring the ritual would stretch on longer than he wanted. Each drag felt like an eternity, but the nausea began to ebb, replaced by a faint sense of calm that unsettled him even more.

"Good girl," Edna murmured, her voice soft and almost approving. "You'll thank me for this one day."

Will doubted it. But as the cigarette burned down to the filter and he stubbed it out with a trembling hand, he realized that he didn't feel quite as nauseous anymore. The realization sent a shiver down his spine.

"Now, let's freshen you up," Edna said, standing and smoothing her skirt. "We have a busy day ahead, Cassandra. There's no time for moping."

A few minutes later, Will sat stiffly on the vanity chair, the cool silk of the plum peignoir brushing against his freshly shaved skin. His stomach still churned faintly from the earlier nausea, but Edna's relentless presence left no room for argument or respite. She bustled about the bathroom with practiced efficiency, arranging various bottles, tools, and an unfamiliar piece of equipment on the counter.

"Now, darling," Edna began, her tone as sugary as ever, "there's one more thing we need to address before your bath. A true lady is always pristine, inside and out."

Will frowned, his unease deepening as he watched her assemble a bag with some liquid inside. "What are you talking about?"

Edna turned to him with a smile that was both patronizing and unwavering. "Your hygiene, Cassandra. Cleanliness is the foundation of elegance, and this"—she gestured grandly to the enema bag—"is an essential part of your new morning routine."

"I don't think I—" Will began, but Edna waved him off with a dismissive laugh.

"Oh, don't be shy, darling. It's perfectly natural. You'll feel so much better afterward, I promise."

Despite his protests, Edna helped him remove the corset and guided Will to the bathroom. There, she made him lean on the counter, bending his waist and leaving his ass high.

Her affected sweetness masking her firm insistence. “Now, just relax,” she said, her manicured hand resting lightly on his shoulder. “The key is to let it happen naturally. Fighting it will only make it worse.”

Will gritted his teeth as she put some lubricant on his anus and pressed the nozzle connected to the bag in.

When the process began, Will felt the warm water entering and a strange fullness spreading through him that was both uncomfortable and foreign. He shifted uneasily, his hands gripping the edge of the counter as Edna continued to coach him.

“Breathe, darling,” she said soothingly, her voice dripping with mock concern. “This is good for you. It’s all about discipline—holding it long enough to ensure a proper cleanse.”

The cramps followed soon after, sharp and insistent, radiating through his core. Will bit back a groan, his body instinctively tensing as he struggled to endure the sensation. His mind raced with indignation and embarrassment, but Edna’s presence loomed over him, her soft voice never ceasing.

“Hold it, Cassandra,” she murmured, her tone both commanding and encouraging. “Just a little longer. You’re doing so well.”

Each second felt like an eternity, the pressure building until it was impossible to ignore. Finally, when Edna deemed it acceptable, she allowed him to release, her voice lilting with approval. “There we go,” she said, patting his shoulder lightly. “Doesn’t that feel better?”

Will’s face burned as he finished, his sense of dignity eroded further with each passing moment. But before he could gather himself, Edna’s voice cut through his thoughts once more.

“Since it’s your first day, darling, we’ll repeat the process,” she said, already preparing another round. “We must be thorough, after all.”

Will’s heart sank, but he knew better than to argue. The second time was no less humiliating, though the process was slightly more bearable now that he knew what to expect. The fullness returned, accompanied by the same sharp cramps, and Edna’s incessant instructions made it impossible to retreat into his thoughts.

“Almost there,” she crooned, her cigarette perched delicately between her fingers. “You’re doing beautifully.”

When it was finally over, Will collapsed onto the edge of the tub, his body and mind drained. Edna handed him a glass of water, her smile as bright and artificial as ever. “See? That wasn’t so bad. Tomorrow, it’ll be even easier.”

As Will stepped into the bath, the warm water easing his tension, he couldn't shake the lingering discomfort—not just from the process itself, but from the knowledge that this was only the beginning.

Chapter 6

The morning light streamed through the gauzy curtains of Edna's house, catching on the glittering gold accents of the vanity where Will now sat, fidgeting in discomfort. The corset Edna had laced him into again pinched painfully at his ribs, cinching his waist into an exaggerated hourglass that made every breath a challenge. His dress—a garish explosion of fuchsia and teal with oversized shoulder pads and a gold belt that emphasized his restricted frame—felt like a costume for a bad sitcom. But it wasn't the clothes, the corset, or even the tall, white patent leather heels that were the worst part. It was the sheer inevitability of what came next.

"Now, Cassandra," Edna chirped, puffing on her Nat Sherman 164 as she hovered behind him, her perfume mixing with the dense, acrid smoke that filled the room. "A lady's appearance doesn't just happen by accident. It takes effort—artistry! And that starts with your makeup."

Will groaned softly, shifting in his seat. The long gel nails on his fingers—crimson talons that glittered whenever they caught the light—made even the simplest tasks feel Herculean. He had already struggled to hold his morning cigarette without looking like a fumbling idiot, his lips coated in the same bright red lipstick Edna insisted on.

"I can't do this," he muttered, staring at the array of brushes and palettes laid out before him. "I don't even know where to start."

Edna's eyes widened in mock shock, and she tapped her cigarette delicately against the edge of the ashtray. "Nonsense, darling! You're a Lacroix now. And the Lacroix women are nothing if not impeccably groomed. Now, pick up that foundation brush."

Will reached for the brush awkwardly, his long nails clicking against the surface of the vanity. The simple act of gripping it felt foreign, and he fumbled, nearly knocking it to the floor.

"Careful!" Edna admonished, taking a long drag from her cigarette and exhaling dramatically. "You've got to move your hands differently now. Those nails aren't just an accessory—they're an extension of your elegance."

"Or my torment," Will muttered under his breath, earning a sharp look from Edna.

"Stop that sulking," she snapped, though her tone remained syrupy sweet. "If you're going to complain, at least do it properly. Like this." She perched herself on the edge of the vanity, her cigarette balanced delicately between two fingers. "Oh, these rollers are just ruining my life," she said in an exaggerated drawl, pouting as she waved her hand dramatically. "And can you believe the state of the service of the house staff these days? Simply dreadful. That's how you moan, darling. With class."

Will sighed, gripping the foundation brush as carefully as he could. He began dabbing the thick, creamy product onto his face, his movements stiff and clumsy. His nails kept getting in the way, smudging the makeup he had just applied.

“Use the pads of your fingers, not the tips,” Edna instructed, leaning in closer. “And for heaven’s sake, don’t press so hard. You’ll ruin the finish.”

“I’m trying,” Will grumbled, glaring at his reflection. The annoyance on his voice caused by the cigarette Edna had insisted he keep lit, the long white shaft balanced precariously between his fingers as he worked.

Edna watched him for a moment, shaking her head. “No, no, no,” she said, plucking the cigarette from his hand and taking a drag herself. “You’ve got to multitask, Cassandra. A lady doesn’t stop smoking just because she’s applying her eyeliner. Here.” She handed the cigarette back to him, forcing him to hold it delicately between two fingers. “Now, try again.”

Will struggled to hold the cigarette and the brush at the same time, his hands trembling as he dabbed foundation onto his cheeks. The smoke curled around his face, making his eyes water, but he didn’t dare complain again—not after Edna’s earlier lecture.

Once the makeup was finally applied to Edna’s satisfaction, it was time for the hair. Will stared at himself in the mirror, his head still covered in rollers that made him look like a caricature of a mid-century housewife.

“Now, this is where the magic happens,” Edna said, removing the rollers one by one with deliberate precision. Each curl sprung free, forming tight, glossy spirals that framed his face. “You’ve got to learn to do this yourself eventually, Cassandra. A lady doesn’t rely on others for everything.”

Will bit back a retort as she handed him a can of hairspray. “Now, fluff it out gently—gently, darling—and spray liberally. Volume is everything.”

He picked up the can, his nails slipping against the smooth surface before he managed to get a grip. When he pressed down on the nozzle, a cloud of hairspray erupted, causing him to cough.

“Careful!” Edna exclaimed, snatching the can from his hand. “You’re not dousing a car engine. Like this.” She demonstrated, misting the curls with a practiced motion. “Small bursts. Controlled. Go on, try again.”

Will took the can back, his hands trembling slightly as he mimicked her movements. The scent of the hairspray mingled with the ever-present smoke, creating a cloying, chemical haze that made his stomach churn.

“Lovely,” Edna cooed, taking another drag from her cigarette as she surveyed his work. “Now, stand up and let me see you.”

Will rose awkwardly, wobbling slightly in the tall heels as the pencil skirt restricted his movements. Edna circled him like a hawk, her eyes narrowing as she assessed every detail.

“Not bad for your first morning,” she said, finally nodding. “You’re starting to look the part. But remember—being Cassandra isn’t just about appearances. It’s about attitude. Poise. Grace.”

“And smoking,” Will muttered, taking a reluctant drag from his cigarette.

Edna laughed, her voice tinkling like wind chimes. “Exactly, darling. And you’ve got a long way to go before you’re truly one of us.”

At the breakfast table, the clinking of cutlery against porcelain mingled with the faint hum of the television, where grainy footage of an 80s catwalk flickered across the screen. Models glided down the runway in exaggerated silhouettes, their angular, shoulder-padded ensembles shimmering under the bright lights. The television's sound was low, but the rhythmic beat of synth-heavy music played faintly beneath Edna’s steady commentary.

Will was sitting staring down at the food before him. A small bowl of sliced fruit, a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, and a steaming cup of black coffee, without sugar. Normally he would be happy with the healthy food that was at the table, but he didn’t like coffee, especially without sugar. And the other thing that was making it look unappetizing, was his lit Nat Sherman 164 resting in the nearby ashtray.

He picked up the cup reluctantly, the heat of it prickling against his long red nails.

“Oh, don’t give me that face, Cassandra,” Edna said, perched regally at the head of the table with her ever-present Nat Sherman 164 balanced between her fingers. She took a slow drag, her lips curling into a smoky smile. “Coffee and cigarettes are a match made in heaven. You’ll see.”

Will grimaced, taking a tentative sip of the coffee. The bitterness was overwhelming, the acrid taste coating his tongue like a punishment. He coughed softly, setting the cup down as he reached for his glass of juice to wash it down.

“No, no, no,” Edna chided, waving her cigarette in disapproval. “You need to savor it, darling. The bitterness of the coffee complements the richness of the smoke. Take a sip—then a drag. Let the flavors mingle. Trust me, it’s divine.”

Will rolled his eyes but obeyed, lifting the cigarette she had insisted he light the moment he sat down. The long white shaft felt awkward and light in his hand, and he hated the way the smoke curled around his face when he took a drag. He followed it with another sip of the coffee, the combined tastes making him wince.



“See?” Edna said, her tone dripping with mock encouragement. “A perfect pairing. Give it time, darling. Soon, you won’t be able to have one without the other.”

Will doubted that, but he kept his mouth shut, knowing any protest would only invite more of her theatrical scolding. Instead, he turned his attention to the television, where a model in a Thierry Mugler creation strutted confidently in an asymmetrical black gown adorned with shimmering metallic accents.

“Now, that is fashion,” Edna declared, gesturing toward the screen with her cigarette. “Mugler was a genius. The sharp lines, the bold shoulders, the unapologetic drama. He knew how to dress a woman who wanted to command a room.”

Will stared at the screen, unimpressed. “It looks… uncomfortable.”

Edna gasped theatrically, clutching her chest as if he had struck her. “Uncomfortable? Darling, it’s not about comfort. It’s about making a statement. Fashion isn’t just clothing—it’s art, power, and identity.”

“It’s superficial,” Will muttered, taking another reluctant sip of coffee. “Just a bunch of rich people showing off.”

Edna arched an eyebrow, leaning forward with a conspiratorial smile. “Oh, sweetie, you’re missing the point entirely. Fashion is a language. It tells people who you are before you even open your mouth. And in your case, it’s telling them you’re clueless.”

Will scowled, but Edna ignored him, turning back to the television. The screen now displayed a Claude Montana collection, the models striding confidently in their structured suits, all sharp angles and commanding presence.

“Look at that tailoring,” Edna said with a dreamy sigh. “So strong, so fierce. Montana understood that a woman didn’t have to sacrifice power for femininity. That’s what I’ve been trying to teach you, Cassandra. You’re not just wearing clothes—you’re wearing authority.”

Will couldn’t suppress a groan. “Why do I even need to know this stuff? I don’t care about fashion. It’s just… shallow.”

Edna narrowed her eyes, her smile taking on an edge. “Oh, really? Because you seemed to care quite a bit when you were sending those nasty little messages about me and my wardrobe. ‘A melted Barbie doll,’ wasn’t it? If you’re going to criticize, darling, at least educate yourself.”

She gestured toward a stack of 80s fashion magazines on the table, their covers graced by glamorous models in sequins, fur, and elaborate accessories. “Start with these,” she said, tapping the top of the pile. “Learn the difference between Mugler and Montana. Understand why Oscar de la Renta’s evening gowns are legendary. And if you insist on complaining, then do it properly.”

Will slumped back in his chair, the weight of the corset digging into his ribs as he reluctantly picked up the nearest magazine. The cover featured a model in a red velvet evening gown, her hair styled in an impossibly voluminous updo, her face framed by statement earrings that sparkled like chandeliers.

“What am I even supposed to say about this?” he muttered, flipping through the pages.

Edna took another long drag from her cigarette, exhaling a plume of smoke with exaggerated elegance. “Think like a socialite, darling. Envy is your fuel. Critique the models, the cut, the fabric. Imagine you’re at a cocktail party, trying to impress the other women with your ‘insight.’”

Will stared at her, dumbfounded. “You’re kidding.”

“Not at all,” Edna said, her voice bright and cheery. “Here, I’ll start.” She pointed to a photo of a model in a sequined blazer and matching skirt. “Ugh, sequins again? They’re so overdone. And that neckline—what is she thinking? It makes her look like she’s been swallowed by a glittering abyss.”

She turned to Will expectantly. “Now you.”

Will sighed, glancing down at another photo, this one of a model in a fur-lined coat. “I… guess the fur looks… fake?”

Edna groaned, shaking her head. “No, no, no. Put some feeling into it! Say it like you mean it. Here, try this: ‘That coat is positively vulgar. She looks like a Siberian yeti trying to pass as society’s elite.’”

Will repeated the line halfheartedly, his cigarette dangling from his lips as he tried to mimic her tone. Edna clapped her hands, grinning. “Much better, darling! You’ve got potential yet.”

The rest of breakfast passed in a haze of smoke, coffee, and relentless fashion critique. By the time the plates were cleared and the magazines set aside, Will’s head throbbed from the combination of caffeine, nicotine, and Edna’s unrelenting enthusiasm.

“Another successful morning,” Edna declared, rising gracefully from her chair and smoothing her leopard-print robe. “Now, let’s work on your walk again. Those heels aren’t going to master themselves.”

Will groaned inwardly, knowing the day was far from over.

He spent the rest of the morning practicing on how to walk, sit and how to place his hand in an elegant manner. It was tiring, and Will was bored by it, but Edna didn’t care, she kept pushing him to do it in the right way.

After lunch, Will was hoping for a break, but Edna had other plans, they were going back to Cintia’s house.

The afternoon sunlight gleamed against the glossy black paint of the car as Edna guided Will toward Cintia’s front door. The sound of their heels clicking on the pavement echoed through the still suburban street, a strange, synchronized rhythm that felt out of place amidst the cookie-cutter houses. Both were dressed to the nines in their respective 80s ensembles, each an exaggerated ode to the era. Edna wore a bold magenta suit with a dramatic peplum jacket and sky-high heels, while Will was wrapped in a garish explosion of fuchsia and teal dress with oversized shoulder pads and a gold belt that emphasized his restricted frame. His makeup was impeccable, his black perm teased into a halo of volume, held firmly in place with enough hairspray to defy gravity.

And, of course, both of them held lit Nat Sherman 164s, the dense smoke trailing behind them like a signature.

Cintia had been watching for their arrival from the bay window and met them at the door, practically beaming with glee. She opened it just as they reached the porch, stepping out in a silk wrap dress that shimmered in the light, her own cigarette already lit and dangling between her fingers.

“Darlings!” she cried, spreading her arms wide. “You both look positively divine. It’s like the 80s walked right up to my door.”

Edna let out a tinkling laugh, exhaling a plume of smoke. “Well, you know me, dear. I always aim to please.”

Cintia turned her attention to Will, her eyes glittering with amusement as she took in every detail—the overdone makeup, the crimson nails, the exaggerated curves sculpted by the corset. “And Cassandra! My, my, you’re practically glowing.”

Will hesitated, unsure how to respond, but Edna nudged him gently with her elbow. “The kisses, darling,” she whispered. “Like a proper lady.”

Suppressing a groan, Will leaned forward, offering the customary air kisses that Edna had drilled into him. One beside Cintia’s left cheek, then the right. The scent of Cintia’s floral perfume mingled with the heavy smoke already clinging to his own skin, creating a heady, almost overwhelming cocktail of odors.

Cintia pulled back, her grin widening. “Oh, I love your smell, Cassandra. The perfume, the hairspray, the makeup—and, of course, the cigarettes. It’s all so… you.”

Will gave a tight-lipped smile, his freshly plumped lips catching the light. “Thanks,” he muttered, though the word felt hollow.

“Now, come in, both of you,” Cintia said, stepping aside. “We can relax in the living room. And since my dear stepson isn’t here to moan about it, we can smoke to our hearts’ content.”

In the living room, Cintia settled onto the couch with a practiced grace, crossing her long legs and taking a drag from her cigarette before gesturing for Edna and Will to join her.

Edna claimed the armchair, perching elegantly with her knees crossed, her cigarette balanced delicately between two fingers. Will sank into the far end of the couch, his pencil skirt riding up slightly as he adjusted his posture, the corset digging into his sides.

Cintia leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “This is perfect. My two favorite ladies, and not a single dull man to ruin the mood.”

Edna let out a delighted laugh, flicking her ashes into the nearest tray. “Hear, hear! Honestly, I could do without men entirely most days. They’re either too demanding or too dull.”

Cintia nodded, turning her attention to Will. “And you, Cassandra? How are you enjoying your new life? Isn’t it liberating to leave all that nonsense behind?”

Will hesitated, his fingers tightening around his cigarette. He hated the way they spoke about him as if he weren’t there, but Edna’s sharp gaze reminded him of the rules. He took a drag, the bitter smoke filling his lungs before he exhaled slowly, trying to mirror Edna’s languid movements.

“It’s… different,” he said finally, his voice soft.

Edna tsked, shaking her head. “Oh, darling, you’ve got to do better than that. Come now, if you’re going to speak, do it properly. Channel your inner diva.”

Will’s jaw tightened, but he nodded, forcing himself to sit up straighter. He glanced at Cintia, his expression carefully composed. “It’s certainly… an adjustment,” he said, his voice tinged with an exaggerated air of disapproval. “But I suppose one must make sacrifices for beauty.”

Cintia clapped her hands in delight, her laugh bright and sharp. “Now that’s the spirit, Cassandra!”

It didn’t take long for the conversation to drift into gossip, the three of them sitting in a cloud of smoke as they dissected their social circle. Cintia brought up a neighbor’s disastrous dinner party, while Edna recounted a particularly amusing “incident” involving an overambitious hostess and an undercooked soufflé.

Will listened in silence at first, dragging on his cigarette and letting the smoke curl lazily from his lips. The taste of the Nat Sherman 164 had become familiar by now, though he still hated the way it lingered on his tongue and in his throat. But when Edna nudged him, her eyes gleaming with expectation, he realized he was expected to contribute.

“Um,” he began, glancing at Cintia. “I suppose it’s better than that charity event you went to last week. What was it? The one with the mismatched centerpieces?”

Cintia laughed, her voice ringing out like a bell. “Oh, you have been paying attention! Yes, dreadful, wasn’t it? Honestly, some people just don’t understand aesthetics.”

Edna gave him an approving nod, tapping her cigarette against the ashtray. “See, Cassandra? You’re a natural. With a little more practice, you’ll be running the social scene in no time.”

Will managed a weak smile, though the weight of the moment pressed heavily on him. Every drag of his cigarette, every exaggerated critique, every forced laugh—it all felt like another nail in the coffin of his old self.

As the afternoon progressed, Will's impatience with all of this was becoming apparent.

His heels clicked sharply against the hardwood floor as he paced back and forth, his cigarette trembling between his crimson-tipped fingers. His face was flushed, his carefully applied makeup smeared slightly from where he had rubbed his temples in frustration. He had enough, and Cintia needed to understand this.

“I’m done,” he muttered, the words spilling out before he could stop himself. “I can’t do this anymore. The clothes, the makeup, the heels—it’s insane. All of it.”

Cintia and Edna, seated on the velvet couch with their legs crossed elegantly, exchanged knowing glances. Edna adjusted the shoulder pads of her magenta blazer, a thin smile playing on her lips as she flicked the ash from her cigarette into the ashtray. “Oh, Cassandra,” she cooed, her voice dripping with mock sympathy. “Drama is so unbecoming of a lady.”

Will ignored her, spinning on his heel to face Cintia directly. “You’ve made your point. I get it. I’ll apologize or whatever you want, but I can’t keep living like this. It’s suffocating!”

Cintia leaned back in her chair, her own cigarette poised delicately between her fingers. Her smile was calm, almost indulgent, like a teacher about to deliver a particularly cutting lesson. “Suffocating, is it?” she asked, her voice low and measured. “I wonder if you’ve ever considered what real suffocation feels like.”

Will frowned, confused. “What are you talking about?”

She took a slow drag from her cigarette, letting the smoke curl from her lips as she fixed him with a piercing gaze. “You can’t stand being a woman for a few days, William. A few days. Do you have any idea what that says about you?”

He opened his mouth to retort, but she held up a hand, silencing him.

“Let me paint you a picture,” she continued, her tone sharp but not unkind. “Every morning, women like Edna and me—and millions of others—go through hours of grooming, styling, and preparation just to be considered ‘presentable.’ Do you think we enjoy it? The corsets, the heels, the makeup that cakes your skin and clogs your pores? It’s not fun, William. It’s work. It’s a performance. And yet, you’ve barely done it for two days, and you’re already falling apart.”

“I never asked to do this,” he said through gritted teeth. “This whole thing is—”

“Humiliating?” Cintia interjected. “Is that what you were going to say? Because I seem to recall you had no problem humiliating me in those messages you sent to Julie. You called me vapid and shallow. A gold digger. You reduced me to my appearance, to my choices, without ever stopping to ask why I make them.”

Will’s mouth snapped shut, guilt creeping into the edges of his expression.

“And let’s talk about smoking,” she continued, leaning forward now, her tone softening but remaining pointed. “You hate it, don’t you? The taste, the smell, the way it lingers on everything. It’s disgusting to you.”

“It is,” he admitted, his voice tight. “It’s awful.”

“And yet,” Cintia said, her eyes narrowing slightly, “you can’t bring yourself to empathize with people who are addicted to it. You complain about having to light up a few cigarettes a day, but what about the people who’ve been doing it for decades? People who can’t stop, no matter how much they want to?”

Edna chimed in, her voice dripping with faux concern. “Oh, darling, if you hate it that much, why don’t you just quit? Hmm? It sounds annoying, doesn’t it? As if it was that simple.”

Will’s hands clenched into fists, the cigarette between his fingers bending slightly under the pressure. He knew they were mocking him, but their words stung in a way he couldn’t quite brush off.

“And finally,” Cintia said, her voice softening further, “let’s talk about judgment. You have no problem passing it out, do you? Not just to me, but to Edna, to anyone who doesn’t fit into your narrow little worldview. But the moment the spotlight turns to you, the moment you’re the one being seen and judged, you fall apart. You want it to stop. You want to escape. But do you ever think about the people you’ve judged? The people who don’t get to escape?”

Will stared at her, his chest tightening. “It’s not the same,” he said weakly.

“It’s not?” she challenged. “You told Julie I was shallow. That Edna was a caricature. But did you ever stop to think about why we live the way we do? Why we make the choices we make? Or were you too busy sitting on your high horse, feeling superior?”

Edna let out a dramatic sigh, taking another drag from her cigarette. “Cassandra, darling, you’ve spent so much time looking down on us. But now that you’re here, walking in our shoes—quite literally, I might add—you can’t handle it. Maybe it’s time you asked yourself why.”

Will felt his face flush with shame, the weight of their words pressing down on him like the corset constricting his ribs. He wanted to argue, to defend himself, but he couldn’t find the words. Everything they said rang painfully true, and the guilt gnawed at him, relentless.

Cintia leaned back again, her expression softening. “In the end, William, it’s just clothes. Hair. Makeup. Smoking for a week won’t kill you, and trying to understand why two women you clearly don’t respect live the way they do won’t kill you either. What will kill you, though, is staying in your little bubble, refusing to learn, refusing to grow.”

The room fell silent, the only sound the faint crackle of Edna’s cigarette as she flicked her ashes into the tray. Will sat down heavily on the couch, his cigarette still burning between his fingers. The bitterness he had been clinging to felt hollow now, replaced by a sinking sense of guilt that he couldn’t shake.

Edna smiled faintly, her voice soft and sweet as she broke the silence. “Don’t worry, darling. We’ll make a proper socialite of you yet.”

Will took a long drag from his cigarette, the smoke burning his throat as he exhaled slowly. For the first time since this nightmare began, he didn’t argue. He didn’t complain. Instead, he stared at the floor, the weight of his guilt heavy on his shoulders.

Chapter 7

The week passed in a haze of routines, cigarettes, and relentless transformation. Each day began with the same humiliating rituals: the enema, the bath, the makeup lessons, and the corset-laced outfits that left Will breathless and restricted. Edna and Cintia hovered over him constantly, their critiques sharp but never outright cruel, molding him inch by inch into the image of Cassandra Lacroix.

The cigarette was between his fingers before he even realized it, its long white body glowing faintly at the tip as he inhaled. The once-acrid taste of smoke no longer made him wince; it was becoming tolerable, even familiar. Will had stopped coughing when he smoked, his body slowly acclimating to the dense clouds of tobacco that Edna insisted on filling every room with.

"Darling, you're holding it wrong again," Edna said, her voice sweet but firm as she leaned over his shoulder. She placed her hand lightly over his, adjusting the angle of the cigarette until it rested between his fingers just so. "Always with elegance. You're not lighting a fire in the wilderness, Cassandra."

Will sighed but complied, bringing the cigarette to his lips and inhaling. His hand, adorned with crimson nails, now moved with a semblance of grace as he exhaled a plume of smoke that mingled with Edna's own. The cravings had begun, subtle at first—a faint itch when he went too long between cigarettes—but undeniable. He hated it. And yet, every time Edna lit up, she made sure he followed suit, the ritual as much a part of his new routine as the corset and heels.

Cintia watched from the couch, her sharp eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "You're coming along beautifully," she said, taking a sip of her martini. "Soon, no one will know the difference between you and Edna."

Edna let out a delighted laugh, patting Will's arm. "Oh, he's got a way to go, but the potential is there. It's all in the details, darling—the way you walk, the way you speak, the way you hold yourself. Remember, a socialite doesn't just exist; she commands."

Will didn't respond. He was too busy concentrating on balancing in his heels, his pencil skirt restricting his steps as he practiced walking across the room. The heavy perfume clung to him, mixing with the faint scent of hairspray that lingered from his morning routine. He felt like a doll being moved and posed, every gesture scrutinized and corrected.

The nights were worse. Each time he drifted off, exhausted from the day's lessons, the dreams came in vivid, disorienting detail. They started innocuously enough—he would find himself standing at the edge of a grand ballroom, the chandeliers casting golden light over a sea of glamorous figures. Women in shimmering gowns and men in sharp tuxedos milled about, their laughter and chatter filling the air.

In the dream, he was Cassandra Lacroix. His reflection in the ballroom's mirrored walls showed a woman in her early forties, her face a masterpiece of cosmetic enhancements. Plump lips painted a deep red, sharp cheekbones framed by thick black curls, eyes framed

with exaggerated liner and shadow. She wore a floor-length gown in a bold shade of emerald, its dramatic neckline plunging just enough to command attention. Around her neck hung a diamond necklace that sparkled with every movement.

The dream shifted. Suddenly, he was hosting a gala at a nautically themed club, the scent of saltwater mingling with the ever-present smoke from his—her—cigarette. Guests swirled around him, praising the event, complimenting his taste, his style. Cassandra—no, he—smiled graciously, lifting a martini glass as if the praise were nothing less than deserved.

Another shift. He was at the racetrack, seated in a private box with a group of older socialites. They sipped champagne and placed bets, their conversation peppered with gossip and thinly veiled barbs. Cassandra joined in effortlessly, her voice tinged with envy and disdain as she critiqued the outfits of the other patrons, the horses, even the weather.

Each dream blurred into the next, the transitions seamless and unsettling. The locations changed—gilded salons, country clubs, high-end boutiques—but the essence remained the same. Cassandra Lacroix was the center of it all, her presence commanding, her wit sharp, her cigarettes ever-burning.

When Will woke each morning, his heart raced with confusion. The dreams felt so real, so vivid, that it took him a moment to remember who he truly was. Or who he had been.

He tried not to be worried by it, blaming on all the training to behave like Edna and the soap operas, but deep down, he was starting to feel unease about how real some of the dreams felt.

And by the end of the week, things started to get weirder for Will.

The sun had barely risen when the scent of Edna's Nat Sherman 164 drifted through the air, signaling the start of yet another day. Will sat stiffly at the breakfast table, his corset cinched tighter than ever beneath a lavender dress with oversized shoulder pads. His hair, freshly teased into its signature 80s perm, shimmered under the morning light, locked in place with layers of hairspray. The table was neatly set with slices of fruit, steaming cups of black coffee, and a small stack of 80s fashion magazines. On the television, a Claude Montana runway played, the models strutting down the catwalk like Amazonian warriors.

Will took a sip of his coffee, the bitter liquid no longer making him grimace as it once had. His cigarette, lit as per Edna's insistence, burned between his fingers, the filter already marked with faint lipstick stains. He puffed absently, the ritual now second nature, as Edna flipped through the magazine beside him.

"Now, look at this piece," Edna said, holding up a glossy page that displayed a dramatic black-and-gold evening gown. "Isn't it simply divine? Mugler understood how to highlight a woman's power without diminishing her femininity."

Will tilted his head, his eyes narrowing slightly. “It’s a bit… gaudy, don’t you think?” The words spilled out before he could stop them, his voice tinged with disdain. “All those metallics—it’s like she’s auditioning to be a trophy on someone’s mantel.”

Edna’s eyes sparkled with amusement as she took a drag from her cigarette. “Oh, Cassandra,” she said with a laugh. “I do love it when you get catty.”

Will blinked, the realization hitting him like a slap. Cassandra. He’d called the gown gaudy, critiqued it as if he were an aging socialite at a charity gala. The bitterness in his tone, the cadence of his words—it was like listening to someone else. He glanced down at his cigarette, the long white stick balanced delicately between his manicured fingers, and felt a wave of unease.

“I didn’t mean—” he started, but Edna cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“Don’t be shy, darling,” she said, her voice dripping with affected sweetness. “You’re entitled to your opinions. After all, a woman of taste like you should never be afraid to speak her mind.”

The afternoon sun bathed Cintia’s expansive living room in warm light, illuminating the gold accents and velvet furnishings. Will sat primly on the edge of the couch, his pencil skirt riding up slightly as he crossed his legs—right over left, as Edna had taught him. His hands rested delicately in his lap, the crimson polish on his nails catching the light whenever he moved. Across from him, Cintia and Edna sat in their usual spots, sipping iced tea and puffing on their cigarettes.



“Oh, did you hear about the Petersons?” Cintia began, her tone laced with mock concern. “They had to cancel their fundraiser. Something about zoning permits. Can you imagine?”

Edna let out a theatrical gasp, her cigarette pausing midair. “How dreadful! And after all that talk about how they were going to ‘revitalize the community.’ Please, it was always about their image.”

Will opened his mouth, intending to stay silent, but the words tumbled out before he could stop them. “The Petersons have been trying to buy their way into society for years. All that money from their little start-up, and they think it makes them tasteful.” He scoffed, flicking ash into the tray with a practiced motion. “You can’t buy class, no matter how many fundraisers you throw.”

The room fell silent for a moment before Cintia burst into laughter, her eyes alight with delight. “Oh, Cassandra,” she said, using the name without hesitation. “You’re perfect.”

Edna joined in, clapping her hands lightly. “You’ve got the tone, the delivery—everything. You could run circles around those Petersons.”

Will froze, the realization sinking in. He hadn’t meant to say any of it. Those weren’t his thoughts, weren’t his words. And yet, they’d come so easily, spilling from his lips like second nature.

“I—I wasn’t going to say that,” he stammered, his cheeks flushing.

Cintia waved her hand dismissively. “Nonsense. You’ve always had a sharp tongue, Cassandra. Don’t apologize for it.”

By evening, Will found himself seated once again in Edna’s smoky living room, this time Cintia was with them. Dynasty was playing, its over-the-top drama and glittering costumes captivating the room. Edna reclined in her chair, her cigarette balanced in one hand, a martini in the other. Will mirrored her movements without thinking, his own cigarette smoldering between his fingers as he watched the screen.

“Can you believe Alexis wore that to the charity gala?” Edna said, gesturing to the screen with her cigarette. “Honestly, the nerve of that woman.”

Will shook his head, his response immediate. “She’s just trying to steal the spotlight. As if anyone would take her seriously in sequins.”

Edna and Cintia both turned to him, their smiles wide with amusement.

“There she is,” Cintia said, raising her glass in mock toast. “Our Cassandra, always ready with a critique.”

Will frowned, the weight of their words settling over him. He hadn’t even realized he’d spoken, the bitterness in his voice slipping out like a reflex. It was happening more often now—these moments where Cassandra’s voice overpowered his own, where the sharp, envious commentary felt as natural as breathing.

“I don’t why I said—” he started, but Edna cut him off with a gentle laugh.

“Oh, darling, don’t overthink it,” she said, leaning forward slightly. “You’re simply finding your voice. And what a voice it is! So full of wit, so… you.”

Will stared at her, the cigarette trembling between his fingers. He just couldn’t understand why he was saying these things. He started to fear that it was his dreams.

He wanted to ask someone about it, to look into his computer, to talk to his girlfriend, but Cintia had cut all his access to those things.

—

The next day, he knew he had no other choice but to talk to Cintia and Edna about his worries, to see if they could help him.

The living room in Cintia's house was bathed in soft afternoon light, the faint hum of air conditioning mingling with the ever-present haze of smoke that hung in the air. Will sat perched on the edge of the couch, his legs crossed awkwardly in his pencil skirt. The heels of his tall pumps rested neatly on the plush carpet, but his discomfort radiated from every tense line of his body. Across from him, Cintia reclined luxuriously, her cigarette balanced between her fingers, while Edna, ever poised, sat with her legs elegantly crossed in the armchair, puffing thoughtfully on her Nat Sherman 164.

Will exhaled a shaky breath, the smoke from his own cigarette curling around his face. He had barely noticed when Edna had lit it for him earlier; the habit had become almost automatic now. His mind was elsewhere, consumed by the strange dreams that had plagued him every night. He couldn't hold it in any longer.



“I’ve been having… these dreams,” he said, his voice hesitant, the words tasting foreign on his tongue. “Every night. They’re always the same.”

Edna and Cintia exchanged a glance, their eyes sparkling with intrigue.

“Oh, do tell, darling,” Edna cooed, leaning forward slightly, her cigarette poised delicately in her hand. “What sort of dreams?”

Will shifted uncomfortably, his fingers tightening around the cigarette. “They’re weird. I’m… someone else. An older woman. Cassandra Lacroix.”

Edna let out a delighted laugh, clapping her hands lightly. “Cassandra, you say? How wonderfully fitting!”

Cintia smirked, taking a slow drag from her cigarette before exhaling a plume of smoke. “And what’s this Cassandra like? Is she glamorous? Elegant?”

Will hesitated, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “She’s… she’s nothing like me,” he muttered. “She’s shallow and judgmental. All she cares about is what people are wearing or who they’re seen with.”

Edna’s eyes gleamed as she leaned back, her voice dripping with mock concern. “Oh, my poor dear. That sounds just dreadful. Tell me, what does she wear? Surely something fabulous?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Will snapped, his voice rising slightly. The humiliation of describing the extravagant gowns, the glittering jewelry, the towering heels—it was too much.

Cintia, undeterred, smiled slyly. “Come now, William. We’re just trying to understand. Does she smoke, like you?”

Will glanced down at the cigarette in his hand, his lips pressing into a thin line. “Yes,” he admitted reluctantly. “She smokes constantly.”

Edna let out a tinkling laugh, tapping her cigarette against the ashtray. “Oh, how delightfully decadent! A proper socialite always has a cigarette in hand.”

“And the events?” Cintia pressed, her voice casual but her gaze sharp. “The balls, the parties, the galas—are they glamorous?”

Will swallowed hard, his discomfort growing. “They’re ridiculous. Over the top. Everyone’s competing to outdo each other.”

“And you—Cassandra—what do you do at these events?” Edna asked, her tone sweet but insistent.

“I…” Will hesitated, the words catching in his throat. “I judge people. I criticize their outfits, gossip about their lives. It’s awful.”

Edna and Cintia both burst into laughter, their amusement filling the room.

“Oh, Cassandra,” Edna said between giggles, waving her cigarette for emphasis. “You truly are the life of the party, aren’t you?”

Will’s face burned with shame, the laughter cutting through him like a blade. “It’s not funny,” he said, his voice tight. “I don’t want to be like that.”

Cintia leaned forward, her expression softening just enough to seem sincere. “But maybe that’s who you really are, William. Or should I say, Cassandra?” She smiled faintly, taking another drag from her cigarette. “You’ve always been quick to judge others by their appearance and behavior. Maybe these dreams are just… revealing your true self.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Will shot back, shaking his head. “I’m nothing like her.”

“Aren’t you?” Cintia countered smoothly. “You certainly had no problem judging me. Or Edna. Remember those messages to Julie? All the things you said about how we dress, how we live. Sounds a lot like Cassandra to me.”

Will fell silent, his chest tightening with guilt. He hated how her words wormed their way into his thoughts, sowing doubt where there had been none before.

Edna took a long drag from her cigarette, her eyes gleaming as she exhaled. “Oh, darling, don’t fight it. Embrace it. Cassandra Lacroix is simply fabulous. Bitter, yes. Judgemental? Certainly. But fabulous nonetheless.”

Will shook his head, his voice rising in frustration. “That’s not who I am!”

“But it’s who you’re dreaming of,” Cintia said softly, her tone almost sympathetic. “Every night, without fail. Maybe it’s time to stop running from it.”

The room fell silent, the weight of her words settling over Will like a heavy blanket. He stared down at his hands, the crimson polish on his nails glinting in the afternoon light. The cigarette in his hand burned steadily, the faint trail of smoke curling upward as if mocking him.

“I just don’t understand why it’s happening,” he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

Edna leaned forward, her smile wide and bright. “Oh, Cassandra, my dear. Perhaps you’re simply… waking up to who you’ve always been.”

Chapter 8

The morning sun filtered through the lace curtains of Edna’s guest room, casting a warm glow on the pastel walls. Will stirred, the familiar discomfort of the satin scarf tied around his

head making his scalp itch. He groaned, reluctant to face another day as "Cassandra." His nights were always plagued by surreal dreams, making him experience the life of an older bitter, envious socialite. Waking was no relief—he was still trapped in Edna's world, wearing her clothes like an ill-fitting costume.

Rolling out of bed, he shuffled toward the vanity. The tight curls from the rollers perched stiffly atop his head, refusing to move even as he leaned forward to inspect his reflection. The heavy creams he was forced to slather on every night gave his skin an unnatural sheen. He expected to see his usual face, even under the garish remnants of this forced transformation.

What he saw instead made his stomach drop.

Soft wrinkles appeared into his forehead and around his eyes. His cheeks looked slightly sunken, and the corners of his mouth were etched with a small sag. It was subtle—but for him it was grotesque, as if years had been stolen from him overnight.

Will's scream echoed through the house.

The sound of heels clicked against the floor moments later, followed by Edna's affected, singsong voice. "Darling, what on Earth is the commotion?" She entered the room, trailing a thin stream of smoke from her Nat Sherman 164. Her gaze fell on Will, still frozen in horror before the mirror.

"Look at me!" Will shouted, jabbing a finger at his reflection. "I'm twenty-one years old! Why do I look like this?"

Edna took a languid drag from her cigarette, tilting her head to examine him with a practiced air of detachment. "Oh, darling, don't be so dramatic. It's probably just a little reaction to the creams. Your skin's just adjusting."

"Adjusting?" Will snapped, his voice cracking. "I look like I'm fifty!"

Edna exhaled a plume of smoke, the cloud curling lazily between them. "Oh, please. You're being ridiculous. It's nothing a little care and attention can't fix." She plucked a fresh cigarette from her pack and handed it to Will, her tone growing sterner. "Now, Cassandra, light up. A lady doesn't lose her composure over something so trivial."

Will snatched the cigarette, his hands trembling as he fumbled with the lighter. The acrid taste filled his mouth as he inhaled, though it did little to calm him. He paced the room, the heels of his slippers slapping against the hardwood floor.

"This isn't normal," he muttered, more to himself than to Edna. "I need this fixed. Today."

Edna's eyes widened slightly, the corners of her mouth twitching in what might have been the start of a smile. "Well," she said, drawing out the word as she exhaled, "there's always... Botox."

Will froze. “Botox? Are you kidding me?”

“Not at all,” Edna replied, her tone syrupy sweet. “It’s what every woman of a certain age uses to maintain her youth. It’s quick, effective, and, frankly, it’s about time you experienced what we go through to look presentable.”

Will stared at her in disbelief. “I’m not getting Botox.”

“Suit yourself, darling,” Edna said with a shrug. “But unless you want to walk around looking like an old leather handbag, I’d reconsider.”

Half an hour later, Cintia arrived, her designer handbag slung over one shoulder and her expression poised somewhere between concern and amusement. “What’s going on?” she asked, surveying the scene. Will was seated on the edge of the bed, still smoking the Nat Sherman Edna had insisted he light, while Edna reclined in a nearby chair, idly ashing her cigarette into a crystal tray.

“It’s his face,” Edna explained, gesturing to Will. “A few wrinkles have him in an absolute tizzy.”

Cintia stepped closer, tilting her head to inspect him. Her brow furrowed slightly, though her composed demeanor didn’t waver. “Well, it’s not ideal,” she admitted, her voice measured. “But these things happen when you’re trying new skincare routines. It might settle on its own.”

“Might?” Will barked, rising to his feet. “This can’t wait. I can’t go back to college looking like this!”

Cintia’s lips curved into a faint smile, her eyes glinting with something dangerous. “You’re right, of course,” she said smoothly. “We wouldn’t want this to linger.”

“Exactly,” Will said, relieved to have her agreement. “So what do we do?”

Cintia exchanged a glance with Edna, who raised an eyebrow and took another drag from her cigarette. “I think Edna’s idea has merit,” Cintia said. “Botox is the most practical solution.”

“No,” Will said firmly, shaking his head. “I’m not letting anyone stick needles in my face.”

“Oh, Cassandra,” Edna chimed in, her tone patronizing. “Don’t be such a baby. It’s hardly painful, and you’ll look divine afterward. Isn’t that what you want?”

Will hesitated, the thought of looking "divine" making his skin crawl. But the alternative—walking around with a face full of wrinkles—was even worse. He rubbed his temples, feeling the weight of their stares. “I don’t know…”

Cintia stepped closer, her voice soft and coaxing. “This is a valuable experience for you,” she said. “It is time for you to understand what it’s like for women like Edna. This is part of it. The sacrifice, the effort—this is how we maintain ourselves.”

Before he could argue, Edna reached for her phone. “I’ll call Dr. Patel,” she said breezily, dialing without waiting for Will’s response. “He always fits me in at the last minute. You’ll be in and out in no time.”

“Wait!” Will protested, but Cintia placed a hand on his arm, her grip firm.

“Trust me, Cassandra,” she said, her voice like velvet. “This is the right choice. You’ll thank us later.”

As Edna finalized the appointment, Will sat back down, his cigarette burning low between his fingers. He wanted to scream, to throw the damn thing across the room, but he didn’t want to be seen with that face, his imagination making it look worse than it really was.

He couldn’t believe he would be getting botox injected on him like he was some vapid influencer, but it was the only way to resolve this quickly.

The spa's exterior was understated, its pale cream walls and gold-trimmed sign oozing exclusivity. The name A New Woman was etched in sleek cursive above the double doors, promising transformations that only the most elite could afford. Will’s stomach churned as he stared at the entrance, flanked by manicured hedges and polished stone steps. He felt an overwhelming urge to turn and run, but Edna and Cintia flanked him like sentinels, ensuring there was no escape.

“You’re going to feel so much better after this,” Edna cooed, placing a hand on his arm. Her Nat Sherman 164 was already lit, the faint trail of smoke curling toward him. “This place is the best. Dr. Patel is an artist.”

Will glanced down at his own cigarette, which he’d reluctantly accepted moments earlier. The long white cylinder felt absurd in his hand, its pristine paper now smudged with ash. “I don’t need an artist,” he muttered. “I just need these wrinkles gone.”

“And they will be,” Cintia said smoothly, her tone firm but soothing. She adjusted the strap of her Hermès bag and gestured toward the doors. “But only if you trust us, Cassandra. You’re doing the right thing.”

Inside, the spa was a vision of luxury. Soft lighting bathed the room in a golden glow, and the faint scent of lavender lingered in the air. The receptionist greeted them warmly, her perfectly sculpted face a testament to the establishment’s work.

“Welcome back, Mrs. Lacroix,” she said, her smile unwavering as she addressed Edna. “And this must be…?”

“Cassandra,” Cintia answered before Will could protest. “She’s here for a full treatment with Dr. Patel.”

The receptionist nodded, her gaze flicking briefly over Will. “Of course. Right this way.”

Will followed reluctantly, the sound of his heels clicking against the polished floor a constant reminder of his altered appearance.

Before leaving Edna’s house, they gave him some Xanax, since he was clearly too anxious about all this. Now, the tranquilizer had already begun to dull his anxiety, but it wasn’t enough to banish the creeping unease that crawled up his spine.

The treatment room was pristine, its walls lined with shelves of gleaming instruments and neatly labeled bottles. Dr. Patel entered moments later, his tailored suit and calm demeanor exuding confidence. Beside him was a tall woman in scrubs, her expression neutral but efficient.

“Mrs. Lacroix,” Dr. Patel said warmly, addressing Edna. “And you must be Cassandra. A pleasure to meet you.”

Will opened his mouth to correct him, but Edna cut him off with a lilting laugh. “Oh, Doctor, Cassandra’s feeling a little shy today. She’s new to all this, you know.”

“Understandable,” Dr. Patel replied, his tone patient. “Let’s make you comfortable, shall we?”

The assistant guided Will to a reclined chair, her movements brisk but gentle. The tranquilizer dulled his resistance further, and he found himself sinking into the plush upholstery, his body limp and compliant.

“This won’t take long,” Dr. Patel assured him, slipping on a pair of gloves. “We’ll start with some Botox to address those fine lines.”

Will nodded vaguely, his limbs heavy. The first injection was a small prick near his forehead, almost imperceptible. But as the minutes passed, the pricks multiplied, each one a brief but sharp intrusion. Forehead. Crow’s feet. Cheeks. Chin. The assistant dabbed each site with gauze, her hands steady and precise.

“Just a few more,” Dr. Patel said, his voice calm and practiced. “You’re doing wonderfully.”

Will lost track of time as the procedure continued. The tranquilizer made it hard to focus, but he was dimly aware of the countless injections mapping his face. At one point, Dr. Patel mentioned a buccal lipectomy—a minor procedure to remove fat pads from the cheeks—and Will’s sluggish protests were dismissed with a reassuring pat on his shoulder.

“Trust the process,” the assistant murmured. “You’ll look amazing.”

When the procedure finally ended, Will felt groggy but relieved. The assistant handed him a mirror, and for a brief moment, he was hopeful that the nightmare was over.

Then he saw his reflection.

It was worse than he'd imagined. His face was smooth—too smooth—lacking the natural contours of youth. His cheeks were unnaturally plump, his lips swollen to a caricature of fullness. His forehead gleamed, frozen in a state of perpetual calm. The changes had obliterated the wrinkles, but they'd also obliterated him.

He didn't look younger. He didn't even look like himself. He looked like a woman in her forties—an older socialite addicted to cosmetic procedures.

"What… what did you do to me?" His voice cracked, though the tautness of his lips made it difficult to convey the depth of his rage.

Cintia stepped forward, her expression perfectly composed. "Cassandra," she said gently, "it's just the tranquilizer talking. You're not seeing the final result yet. Give it time."

"Time?" Will demanded, his voice rising. "I look older than you!"

Edna, seated in the corner with her cigarette, exhaled a plume of smoke and waved a hand dismissively. "Darling, it's just a misunderstanding. They thought the procedure was for me. An honest mistake."

Will turned on her, his anger bubbling beneath the surface. "An honest mistake? You called them! You set this up!"

Edna pouted theatrically, ashing her cigarette with a flick of her wrist. "Oh, sweetie, don't be so unkind. I'm just trying to help."

"Help?" Will shouted. "You've ruined my face!"

Cintia placed a hand on his arm, her touch firm and grounding. "Enough, Cassandra," she said, her voice low and commanding. "We'll fix this. Edna knows people who specialize in corrections. Her town is renowned for its focus on appearances. In a few days she will take you there and you'll look exactly the way you want."

Will stared at her, his chest heaving. The weight of her words was suffocating, as was the faint scent of lavender and cigarette smoke that clung to the air. He wanted to fight, to claw his way out of this nightmare, but the tranquilizer left him dazed and powerless.

"Fine," he muttered, his voice hollow. "But this better work."

"Oh, it will," Edna assured him, her smile widening. "Trust me, darling. You'll be the perfect Cassandra in no time."

—

A few minutes later, Will saw that Cintia and Edna were talking to the receptionist, apparently both of them had an appointment at the beauty salon in the spa.

Will was tired of all this Cassandra nonsense, he just wanted to go home and be left alone on his computer. But Cintia had other plans for that night.

“You can’t stay home,” she said, her voice low and soothing, like a serpent’s hiss. “Not after this morning. What if you have another allergic reaction? Or worse, what if something happens, and you’re alone?”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Will muttered. His voice sounded strange even to his own ears, his lips struggling to move against the stiffness of the Botox.

“Cassandra,” Cintia said, her tone hardening. “You’re coming to the New Year’s Eve party with us. Edna and I have been planning this for weeks, and you’re not ruining it with your tantrum.”

“You don’t need me,” he shot back, though the energy in his words had dulled.

“Oh, but we do,” Edna interjected, her voice lilting as she exhaled a plume of smoke. “It’s New Year’s Eve, darling! Everyone will be there. And you…” She gestured to him with her cigarette. “You’ll be my lovely younger sister, turning heads and making everyone jealous.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Will growled, though the words felt hollow.

Cintia leaned forward, her sharp eyes locking onto his. “You should,” she said simply. “Because right now, you don’t look like Will. You look like Cassandra Lacroix—an elegant woman in her prime. Do you really want to risk someone seeing you and putting the pieces together? Can you imagine one of your friends discovering that you enjoy looking like an aging socialite in your spare time?”

Will opened his mouth to argue, but her words struck a chord. This was all their fault, but she was right. He couldn’t risk being recognized—not like this.

“So,” Cintia continued, leaning back with a satisfied smirk, “if you don’t want to be discovered, you’re going to need to finish the transformation. Properly.”

The technician arrived minutes later, a tray of tools in her hands and a practiced smile on her face. “Mrs. Lacroix said you’d need the full package,” she said brightly, addressing Will as if this were routine. “We’ll have you ready for tonight in no time.”

Will’s stomach churned as the technician began her work. The first step was the breastplate—a seamless, silicone piece designed to mimic the weight and feel of a natural

bosom. The cool material pressed against his chest as the technician adjusted it, smoothing the edges around his collarbone with precision.

“There,” she said after a moment, stepping back. “Perfect fit.”

Will glanced down reluctantly. The curves of the breastplate rose prominently beneath his robe, the skin tone perfectly matched to his own. He felt the weight immediately—a constant, foreign pressure that made him want to rip the thing off.

Edna clapped her hands together in delight. “Oh, Cassandra, you’re absolutely stunning!” She took another drag from her cigarette, then held out her pack. “Here, darling. You need to relax.”

Will’s fingers trembled as he accepted the cigarette. The technician lit it for him, her movements efficient, and he inhaled mechanically, the dense smoke filling his lungs. It didn’t relax him; it only added to the weight of his growing humiliation.

Next came the prosthetic that looked like a vagina, a carefully designed piece that obscured his male anatomy and created a smooth, feminine silhouette. Will flinched as the technician applied it, her hands methodical as she ensured the edges blended seamlessly into his skin.

“Almost done,” she said, stepping aside to retrieve the final piece.

The voice modulator was small and discreet, fitted beneath the edge of the breastplate at his throat. The technician adjusted it, testing its placement before nodding in approval. “Try saying something,” she instructed.

Will hesitated. The weight of the breastplate, the suffocating cigarette smoke, and the modulator felt like too much. “I—” he began, stopping abruptly as the sound of his own voice startled him. It was higher, raspier, with a distinct smoky edge that made him sound like a lifelong cigarette devotee.

Edna clasped her hands in mock delight. “Oh, my dear, you sound marvelous! Like a proper woman of the world.”

“I hate this,” Will said, his voice trembling with suppressed anger. But even his anger sounded foreign in the modulated tone. He felt trapped in someone else’s body, someone else’s life.

“Of course, you hate it now,” Cintia said, standing behind him with her arms crossed. “Change is hard. But you’ll get used to it. Trust me, no one will recognize you tonight.”

Will turned to glare at her, but the Botox rendered his expression flat. “That’s the problem,” he muttered. “I don’t want to get used to this.”

Cintia tilted her head, her lips curling into a thin smile. “And yet, you will.”

By the time the transformation was complete, Will barely recognized the figure in the mirror. The hair, the face, the voice—all of it screamed Cassandra Lacroix. The breastplate and prosthetics only completed the illusion, turning him into a woman whose polished exterior masked years of cosmetic obsession.



“Stunning,” Cintia said, her voice low with satisfaction. “Absolutely stunning.”

Will felt a surge of anger rise in his chest, but it was swallowed by the growing despair of his situation. He looked at Edna, who smiled at him through a haze of smoke.

“Ready for the party, darling?” she asked, her voice syrupy sweet.

“No,” he replied, his voice hollow. “But I guess I don’t have a choice.”

Cintia’s laughter was soft, almost triumphant. “That’s the spirit.”

Chapter 9

The car ride to the party was a surreal experience. Will sat sandwiched between Edna and Cintia in the back seat of the sleek black sedan. Edna, resplendent in an electric blue sequin gown with dramatic shoulder pads and layers of chunky gold jewelry, was already smoking her second Nat Sherman 164 of the night. The cigarette's long, elegant length seemed to be an extension of her, the glowing tip flaring each time she took a drag.

Will was drowning in the weight of his ensemble. The metallic gold dress hugged his frame uncomfortably, the sharp angles of its oversized shoulder pads rising high around his neck. The massive fur coat draped over him felt like a living thing, its heavy pelt brushing against his skin and adding to his mounting claustrophobia. His tall gold heels pinched his feet, and the ever-present weight of his breastplate and prosthetics served as a constant reminder of how far he'd fallen into this charade.

Cintia, in stark contrast, sat poised and relaxed in a sleek black evening gown. Her minimalist, modern look exuded sophistication, a deliberate counterpoint to the ostentatious decadence of Edna and Will. She glanced over at Will, her red lips curling into a smile as she reached into his golden clutch purse and pulled out a pack of Nat Sherman 164s.

"Here, Cassandra," she said, holding the pack out to him. "You don't want to arrive at the party without one."

Will hesitated, his heavily manicured nails clicking awkwardly against the golden cigarette case in his lap. "Do I have to?" he muttered, his voice soft but carrying the raspy edge of his new modulated tone.

Edna turned to him with an exaggerated pout, smoke curling from her lips. "Darling, of course you do! A woman like you always has a cigarette. It's part of the image, the allure."

Cintia arched a brow, her tone turning icy. "You've come this far, Cassandra. Don't ruin the illusion now."

Resigned, Will plucked a cigarette from the pack and allowed Edna to light it for him. The dense, bitter smoke filled his lungs as he inhaled, and he exhaled slowly, watching the plume drift toward the car ceiling. Cintia's smile returned, satisfied.

"Perfect," she said. "Now, let's make sure you act the part."

The venue was a sprawling estate, its grand façade illuminated by strings of golden lights that twinkled like stars. The air was crisp, the December chill biting at Will's cheeks as they stepped out of the car. He adjusted the fur coat around his shoulders, its overwhelming size dwarfing his frame.

Inside, the scene was one of opulence and indulgence. Crystal chandeliers bathed the ballroom in a warm glow, and the polished marble floors reflected the light in shimmering

patterns. Guests in tailored tuxedos and glamorous evening gowns mingled, their laughter and conversation filling the air alongside the clink of champagne glasses.

Will felt every eye on him as they entered. His heels clicked against the marble, the sound unnervingly loud in his ears. The massive fur coat and metallic dress made him stand out even more, but it wasn't just his appearance that drew attention—it was the aura he exuded, the practiced air of wealth and entitlement that Edna and Cintia had drilled into him over the past week.



"Cassandra, darling," Edna said, looping her arm through his. "Let's make the rounds."

The evening was a blur of introductions and small talk, each interaction more surreal than the last. Edna led him from group to group, her laughter loud and theatrical as she puffed on her cigarette and traded gossip. Cintia followed at a slight distance, her sharp gaze assessing every moment, ensuring Will didn't falter.

"Did you hear about Margot, Fredderic's new wife?" Edna asked a cluster of women as she ashed her cigarette. "She bought another Birkin bag last week. That makes five this year. And she has the nerve to act like she's still self-made."

The women laughed, their voices dripping with schadenfreude. Will stood beside Edna, his cigarette poised delicately between his fingers, unsure of what to say.

"Don't you think it's tacky?" Edna prompted, nudging him with her elbow. "All that money, and no taste."

Without thinking, Will replied, "It's beyond tacky. It's desperate. She's trying so hard to prove she belongs, and it's just embarrassing."

The words rolled off his tongue effortlessly, and the women erupted into delighted laughter. For a moment, Will felt a strange sense of accomplishment—until he realized what he'd said. His stomach churned as he recognized the bitterness in his tone, the same venomous energy he'd channeled in his dreams as Cassandra Lacroix.

Cintia's voice cut through his panic. "Well said, Cassandra," she murmured approvingly. "You're fitting right in."

Will's lips tightened around the cigarette filter, his mauve lipstick leaving a faint mark. He hated how natural it felt, how easily he'd slipped into the role.

As the night wore on, Will found himself falling further into the persona of Cassandra. He mingled with guests, sipping champagne and trading barbs with ease. Each time he spoke, his voice carried the raspy authority of a seasoned socialite, and his carefully rehearsed gestures—flipping his hair, adjusting his coat, flicking ash from his cigarette—added to the illusion.

At one point, he caught sight of his reflection in a gilded mirror. The woman staring back at him was unrecognizable: her power perm perfectly in place, her makeup immaculate, her gold dress shimmering under the light. She looked like she belonged here, among the wealthy and decadent.

But beneath the layers of artifice, Will's mind screamed in protest. This wasn't him. It couldn't be.

"Cassandra, are you even listening?" Edna's voice jolted him from his thoughts. She was seated beside him on a plush sofa, her cigarette poised elegantly in her hand.

“Sorry,” he muttered, forcing a smile. “What were you saying?”

Edna leaned closer, her voice dripping with faux concern. “I was just saying how proud I am of you, darling. You’ve come so far. Why, just last week, you’d have been stumbling over your words. And now—look at you! The belle of the ball.”

Will felt his cheeks burn, though his Botoxed face betrayed no emotion. He took a long drag from his cigarette, the smoke filling his lungs as he struggled to suppress the rising tide of despair.

Cintia approached then, her sleek silhouette cutting through the crowd like a blade. “It’s almost midnight,” she said, her voice soft but commanding. “Shall we toast the new year?”

Will nodded numbly, his fingers tightening around the stem of his champagne flute. As the countdown began, he felt the weight of his transformation pressing down on him, suffocating and inescapable.

“Three… two… one…”

The room erupted in cheers, the sound echoing through the grand ballroom. Will raised his glass mechanically, the cheers and laughter around him fading into white noise. He forced a smile, the taste of champagne mingling with the bitter residue of cigarette smoke on his tongue.

“Happy New Year, Cassandra,” Edna whispered, her lips curling into a satisfied smile.

Edna’s words made Will feel a small shiver. It was a new year and he started stuck as Cassandra Lacroix in a high society party. He knew that this couldn’t be a good sign.

As the hours passed, time blurred for Will. Every moment felt surreal, a kaleidoscope of laughter, smoke, and champagne. The heavy fur coat draped around his shoulders, the glittering gold of his dress catching the light, the clinking of glasses—it all seemed to meld together in a haze of discomfort and dread.

The sharp click of heels against marble broke through the din of the party, and Will turned to see Cintia approaching. Her sleek, modern black gown hugged her figure, the simplicity of her attire a sharp contrast to his gaudy 80s ensemble. Her eyes gleamed with the predatory satisfaction she always exuded when she was fully in control.

“Cassandra,” she said, her voice low but insistent, “your father just arrived.”

Will froze, the cigarette in his hand momentarily forgotten. His heart began to race, his breath catching in his throat. “What?” he whispered.

Cintia gave him a thin smile. “Robert just got back from his trip and came straight here. Naturally, I’ve introduced you as Edna’s younger sister.”

Will’s mouth went dry. “You what?”

“Relax,” she said, her tone soothing but sharp. “As long as you keep up the act, he won’t suspect a thing. Just be the Cassandra you’ve been practicing all week.”

Before he could protest, Edna appeared at his side, her Nat Sherman 164 leaving a trail of smoke in her wake. “Oh, isn’t this exciting!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “I can’t wait to see him again.”

Will swallowed hard, lifting his cigarette with trembling fingers. He took a long drag, letting the thick, bitter smoke fill his lungs, and exhaled slowly. The plume curled elegantly around him, masking his growing panic.

Robert entered the room with an air of quiet confidence, his tailored suit impeccable as always. He scanned the crowd, his expression softening when he spotted Cintia. She moved toward him gracefully, greeting him with a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek.

“Robert,” she said, her voice a perfect blend of affection and subtle authority. “I wasn’t expecting you back so soon.”

“Finished earlier than expected,” he replied, his voice deep and steady. His gaze shifted to Edna, then to Will, lingering for a moment. “And who are these lovely ladies?”

Cintia stepped back, gesturing toward them. “You remember Edna Lacroix, our neighbor,” she said smoothly. “And this is her younger sister, Cassandra. She’s visiting from out of town.”

Robert extended a hand, his smile polite. “A pleasure to meet you, Cassandra.”

Will hesitated, his heart pounding, before taking Robert’s hand. “The pleasure is all mine,” he said, his voice soft and smoky.

The four of them moved to a quieter corner of the room, champagne flutes in hand. The chatter and laughter of the party faded to a dull hum, leaving an uneasy silence between them. Will adjusted the fur coat draped around his shoulders, its heavy folds enveloping him like a shield. The glass of champagne in his hand felt cold and fragile, much like his composure. He kept his gaze low, avoiding his father’s searching eyes, and took a long drag from the Nat Sherman 164 elegantly balanced between his fingers. The dense smoke filled his lungs, momentarily calming his frayed nerves as he exhaled a graceful plume.

Robert was the first to speak, his deep voice tinged with concern. “So,” he said, his eyes darting to Cintia, “where’s Will tonight? I thought he’d be here.”

Cintia tilted her head, the corner of her mouth twitching into a faint smile. “Oh, Robert,” she said with a sigh, “it’s been a complicated week.”

Robert’s brow furrowed. “Complicated how? Is he alright?”

Edna, seated nearby with her cigarette poised delicately between her lips, let out a theatrical sigh. “Oh, Robert, it’s been quite the ordeal,” she said, exhaling smoke as she spoke. “Poor Cintia has been beside herself.”

Robert’s frown deepened, and he turned to Cintia. “What’s going on? Where is he?”

Cintia hesitated for a moment, her eyes glinting with calculated concern. “Well,” she began, her voice measured, “Will… stormed out of the house earlier this week.”

“Stormed out?” Robert repeated, his tone sharp. “Why?”

She glanced briefly at Will before continuing. “He was… upset,” she said, her voice softening. “He said some very hurtful things.”

Robert’s expression darkened. “Hurtful? What did he say?”

Cintia sighed, lifting her champagne flute to her lips for a slow sip before answering. “He called us shallow, vapid, and obsessed with appearances. He couldn’t stand the way Edna, Cassandra, and I smoke, or the way we laugh and gossip. He said we’re addicted to cosmetic procedures, that we’re—” she paused, her voice catching just enough to sound genuine, “—a reflection of everything wrong with the world.”

Robert’s face twisted with disbelief. “Will said that? About you?”

“And about Cassandra and Edna,” Cintia added, gesturing subtly toward the two women. “It was… cruel, Robert. It really was.”

Edna gave a soft sniffle, dabbing at the corner of her eye with a lace handkerchief. “He doesn’t understand the effort it takes to maintain this lifestyle,” she said, her voice quivering with exaggerated emotion. “We’ve tried so hard to make him feel welcome, but he just… he doesn’t see it.”

Robert shook his head, his disappointment palpable. “I can’t believe this,” he muttered. “I raised him to be better than that.”

Will felt a lump rise in his throat. The weight of his father’s disappointment pressed down on him, suffocating and inescapable. He took another drag from his cigarette, using the act to mask his unease. His hand trembled slightly as he exhaled the smoke, the gesture elegant despite his inner turmoil.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Robert said finally, his voice heavy. “Edna, Cassandra, I apologize on his behalf. You didn’t deserve that.”

Will forced a bitter smile. “Oh, Robert,” he said, his words dripping with mock sweetness, “you don’t have to apologize for him. Some people just… lack refinement. They don’t understand what it means to carry oneself with grace.”

The words tasted like ash in his mouth, but he pushed through, afraid of what might happen if he faltered.

Edna leaned closer, her Nat Sherman 164 trailing smoke as she spoke. “She’s right, Robert,” she said with a small, pitying smile. “We don’t hold it against him. Youth is… such an awkward phase, isn’t it?”

Robert’s shoulders slumped slightly, his gaze dropping to the floor. “I never thought Will would say something so cruel,” he murmured.

Cintia placed a hand on his arm, her touch light but firm. “It’s not your fault,” she said softly. “He’s just… struggling to find his place. But we forgive him.”

Robert straightened, his gaze flicking between Edna and Cassandra. “For what it’s worth, you both look beautiful tonight,” he said, his tone earnest. “Truly. Your 80s aesthetic—it suits you. It complements your natural beauty.”

Will felt a wave of nausea wash over him. The compliments were meant to ease the tension, but they only deepened his humiliation. He forced a laugh, the sound brittle and hollow. “Thank you, Robert,” he said, his voice smooth and smoky. “You’re too kind.”

Edna giggled, flicking ash from her cigarette. “Oh, Robert, you charmer. But remember,” she said with a wink, “you’re already married to Cintia.”

The group laughed, but for Will, the sound was deafening. He smiled tightly, lifting his champagne flute in a mock toast, and took a long sip to drown his growing despair.

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The night air was cold as Will stepped onto the balcony. The heavy fur coat he wore was meant to shield him from the chill, but its oppressive weight only added to his discomfort. He pulled it tighter around himself, his fingers trembling slightly as he adjusted the long Nat Sherman 164 between them. He took a deep drag, the dense, unpleasant smoke curling into his lungs and then spilling out into the night as he exhaled.

But the air didn’t feel fresh—it was tainted by the cigarette smoke clinging to his skin, his hair, his very existence.

Will leaned against the balcony railing, staring down at the estate’s manicured gardens. The laughter and music from the party behind him seemed distant, like a scene from another life. He felt suffocated, trapped not just by the absurd costume he wore but by the persona he had been forced to inhabit. Cassandra Lacroix, a bitter, envious socialite obsessed with appearances and status—everything he had always despised.

He flicked the ash from his cigarette with a precise, elegant motion, his gel-manicured nails gleaming in the soft light. Every movement felt rehearsed, unnatural, but he coldn’t be discovered, so he executed it flawlessly.

The sound of the balcony door opening startled him. He turned, his heart sinking as he saw Robert step outside. His father's silhouette was imposing against the warm light of the ballroom, but his expression was gentle, curious.

"Cassandra," Robert said, closing the door behind him. "I hope I'm not intruding. Cintia mentioned you'd stepped out and thought I should check on you."

Will's stomach churned. Of course, Cintia had sent him. She was always pulling the strings, always ensuring he stayed under her control. He forced a smile, the corners of his mauve-stained lips barely moving thanks to the Botox. "Not at all, Robert," he replied, his modulated voice smooth and smoky. "I just needed a moment to myself. These parties can be… exhausting."

Robert chuckled, stepping closer. "I can imagine. Edna seems to thrive on this sort of thing, but you seem a little more reserved."

Will turned back to the railing, his fingers tightening around his cigarette. "Oh, Edna lives for this," he said, the bitterness in his tone startling even himself. "She loves the attention, the gossip, the chance to flaunt her latest ensemble. I suppose I've always been the quieter one—though I do enjoy reminding her that her wardrobe is at least five years behind the times."

Robert laughed, a deep, genuine sound. "Sibling rivalry, huh?"

Will let out a brittle laugh, he didn't know where that answer came from. He took another drag from his cigarette to avoid answering. The smoke burned in his throat, but it gave him a moment to collect himself.

Robert leaned against the railing beside him, his breath visible in the cold night air. "So, Cassandra," he began, "what do you do?"

Will froze. His mind went blank, panic surging through him. What did Cassandra do? He couldn't very well say he was a college student coursing journalism.

He forced himself to think, grasping at any detail that might fit the persona. Then it came to him: Edna's father. She had mentioned that he had been a wealthy banker, and if Cassandra were Edna's sister…

"I suppose you could call me a socialite," Will said, his voice measured and tinged with disdain. "I inherited my father's estate, so I spend my time managing his legacy—ensuring his name remains untarnished and reminding the world of our contributions to high society."

Robert raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "A socialite," he mused. "That's… interesting. Must be a demanding lifestyle."

Will took another drag from his cigarette, exhaling slowly as he considered his next words. "Demanding? Hardly. It's more… tedious than anything. Endless galas, charity events, hosting insufferable people who think their money makes them interesting." He waved his

cigarette dismissively, the red tip glowing in the dark. “But someone has to maintain the family’s reputation. It’s a thankless job.”

Robert chuckled again, shaking his head. “You sound like you’ve been doing it for decades.”

Will’s stomach turned. In a way, he had been. In his dreams, he was Cassandra, navigating the glittering but hollow world of wealth and power. He flicked his cigarette into the ashtray on the railing, watching the embers die out. “It does feel that way sometimes,” he admitted, his voice soft.

Robert’s gaze lingered on him, curious and searching. “Where are you from, Cassandra? You mentioned earlier that you were visiting Edna.”

Will’s heart skipped a beat. He hadn’t thought that far ahead, but as he searched for an answer, memories from his dreams flooded his mind. The extravagant 80s town—the neon lights, the sprawling mansions, the endless parties. It felt vivid, real, as if he had lived there for years.

“From a strange city,” Will said carefully, taking another cigarette from his golden case and lighting it with a practiced flick. He inhaled deeply, the act buying him time to gather his thoughts. “You wouldn’t have heard of it. It’s… unique. Frozen in time, in a way.”

Robert tilted his head, intrigued. “What do you mean?”

Will glanced at him, forcing a wry smile as he exhaled a cloud of smoke. “It’s like stepping into a time capsule. Everything’s trapped in the 80s—the fashion, the music, the architecture. It’s absurdly ostentatious, but there’s a charm to it, I suppose. You’d either love it or hate it. There’s no in-between.”

Robert chuckled, his breath visible in the cold air. “Sounds… eccentric. But looking at you,” he gestured to Will’s metallic golden dress and fur coat, “I’d say it suits you perfectly.”

Will’s fingers tightened around his cigarette, his nails pressing into his palm. He forced another laugh, the sound brittle. “I suppose it does.”

For a moment, they stood in silence, the cold air biting at their skin. Will felt his father’s gaze on him, warm and genuine, and it made him feel sick. He wanted to scream, to rip off the fur coat and the prosthetics and the false persona, but he couldn’t. Not now. Not here.

“Well,” Robert said finally, clapping him lightly on the shoulder, “it was nice talking to you, Cassandra. You’re an interesting woman.”

Will managed a smile, his cigarette poised elegantly between his fingers. “And you’re a charming man, Robert,” he said, his voice smooth and practiced. “I can see why Cintia is so fond of you.”

Robert laughed, shaking his head as he turned to leave. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

As the balcony door closed behind him, Will sagged against the railing, the weight of the night pressing down on him. He took one last drag from his cigarette, the smoke burning in his lungs, before flicking it into the ashtray.

And so, he turned back toward the party, forcing himself to step back into the role he had come to loathe.

Chapter 10

In the morning of the first day of the year, the soft clatter of porcelain broke the silence of Edna's pastel-clad dining room. Morning sunlight filtered through the lace curtains, casting a golden glow over the polished mahogany table, set with delicate china and a crystal ashtray at its center. Will sat stiffly, one hand gripping a slender coffee cup, the other balancing a freshly lit Nat Sherman 164 between his manicured fingers. His movements were slow, deliberate, mimicking the elegant gestures Edna had drilled into him over the past week.

The dry taste of black coffee lingered on his tongue, mingling with the dense bitterness of the cigarette smoke. He despised both, but the bitterness was becoming familiar now, the taste less jarring with each passing day. He took a slow drag, the long cigarette poised gracefully between his fingers, and exhaled a stream of smoke into the quiet room. It curled upward, mixing with the haze from Edna's own cigarette as she sat across from him.

She was, as always, a vision of excess: her teased black hair formed an immaculate halo around her heavily made-up face, her silk dressing gown shimmering in soft pastel hues. A Nat Sherman 164 rested elegantly in her hand, its ember glowing faintly as she gestured animatedly with the other. Her smile was bright, her mood buoyant, and her voice carried that syrupy, affected sweetness that grated on Will's nerves.

"Oh, Cassandra," she said, her tone dripping with delight, "you were absolutely marvelous last night. Truly. You had everyone fooled."

Will's jaw tightened. He set the coffee cup down with a soft clink, his fingers brushing the edge of the saucer. "Everyone, including my father," he muttered, his voice low and tinged with bitterness. He took another drag from his cigarette, letting the smoke fill his lungs before exhaling slowly.

Edna laughed, a lilting, tinkling sound that felt more mocking than genuine. "Well, of course he didn't recognize you, darling. Look at you! You're perfection."

Will scowled, though the Botox smoothed out most of the expression, leaving only the faintest trace of annoyance on his face. "That's not a compliment, Edna."

"Oh, but it is," she insisted, leaning forward as she ashed her cigarette into the crystal ashtray. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to achieve what you've done? You've become Cassandra Lacroix in every way. The look, the voice, the mannerisms—it's all flawless. Even Robert couldn't see through it."

“That’s the problem,” Will snapped, his voice rising slightly before he caught himself. He leaned back in his chair, taking a calming drag from his cigarette. “He couldn’t see through it. My own father. Do you know how disturbing that is?”

Edna waved a hand dismissively, a plume of smoke trailing after the motion. “Oh, darling, you’re overthinking it. This is a triumph! You should be proud of yourself.”

“Proud?” Will repeated, his voice dripping with incredulity. He gestured to his reflection in the gleaming surface of his coffee cup. “I look like I’m forty. My father complimented my appearance last night. Do you have any idea how humiliating that was?”

Edna gave him a pitying look, though her smile remained unwavering. “It’s not humiliating, Cassandra. It’s validation. You’ve mastered the art of transformation. And honestly,” she added with a sly smirk, taking another drag from her cigarette, “you do look stunning.”

Will stared at her, his jaw tightening as he took another drag from his cigarette. The ember flared bright against the faint morning light, its smoke curling lazily between them. “I don’t want to look stunning, Edna,” he said through clenched teeth. “I want to look like myself.”

The silence that followed was broken only by the soft hum of the grandfather clock in the corner. Edna tapped her cigarette against the ashtray, her nails clicking softly against the crystal. “And you will,” she said finally, her tone soothing but firm. “Once we’re back in my hometown, everything will be fixed.”

Will raised an eyebrow, skepticism flickering across his frozen features. “You’re sure about that?”

“Positive,” she said, her smile widening. “They’re experts, darling. They’ll have you looking just the way you want in no time. But for now,” she added, her voice turning teasing, “you should enjoy this moment. You’ve accomplished something extraordinary.”

Will let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head as he stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. “Extraordinary? Acting like the kind of woman I’ve always hated? Lying to my father, letting him believe I’m some bitter, self-absorbed socialite? That’s not extraordinary, Edna. It’s horrifying.”

Edna tilted her head, her eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re being far too dramatic, darling. What you hate is irrelevant now. What matters is survival. And you’ve proven you can do it.”

Will didn’t reply. He picked up another cigarette from his golden case, lighting it with a smooth flick of the lighter. The smoke filled the space between them once more, heavy and oppressive, much like the weight of his situation. He took a long drag, the ember glowing bright, and exhaled slowly, his movements automatic.

He didn’t want to admit it, but Edna was right about one thing: he had mastered the role of Cassandra Lacroix. The thought only deepened the pit in his stomach.

The morning stretched on, the sound of Edna's voice filling the room as she prattled on about the party, the guests, and the compliments they had received. Will nodded along, his responses curt but polite, each word tinged with the bitterness of Cassandra's practiced persona.

He took another drag from his cigarette, the smoke burning his throat as he exhaled. The thought that he could recall vivid details about Cassandra's life, details from dreams that felt disturbingly real, gnawed at him.

Edna's laughter jolted him from his thoughts. "Cheer up, Cassandra," she said, her smile bright and false. "In a couple of days, we'll be back in my town, and all your worries will disappear."

Will nodded, though the pit in his stomach remained. He clung to the hope that Edna's promise would hold true, that he could somehow undo the nightmare he had been forced into.

Two days later, the limousine rolled smoothly down the endless highway, its windows tinted to obscure the world outside. Will sat in silence, the fur collar of his coat brushing against his cheek as he gazed out at the distorted scenery. Beside him, Edna puffed on a Nat Sherman 164, the plume of smoke curling elegantly upward before dissipating into the air. Her face was serene, her movements precise, as if she were settling back into a life she had missed.

For Will, the journey felt surreal. Each mile they traveled brought an inexplicable weight pressing down on him, a growing unease that gnawed at the edges of his thoughts. Retroville—Edna had described it as a place where his problems would be solved, where his face could be restored, and he could finally return to college. But the closer they got, the less certain he felt.

"You've been so quiet, darling," Edna remarked, her tone as sweet and rehearsed as ever. She tapped her cigarette into the crystal ashtray mounted between their seats. "Nervous?"

Will turned to her, his hand tightening around the golden cigarette case resting in his lap. "I guess," he admitted, his voice raspy from both the modulator and the cigarettes he had been forced to smoke. "I just… I don't know what to expect."

Edna smiled, the kind of smile that held secrets. "Oh, you'll love it. Retroville is… extraordinary. Truly unlike anywhere else."

Will said nothing, his gaze returning to the window. His fingers fumbled with the case, pulling out one of the long Nat Sherman 164s. The act had become second nature now. He lit it with a flick of the lighter, the flame briefly illuminating his taut, unnatural face. Inhaling deeply, he let the smoke fill his lungs before exhaling a plume through his painted lips. The bitterness on his tongue mirrored the unease in his chest.



When they finally arrived, the sight of Retroville sent a jolt through Will. The sprawling city stretched out before them, glittering under the afternoon sun. Its skyline was a mix of postmodern towers and retro-themed buildings, their neon lights blinking in the daylight. Palm trees lined the streets, their fronds swaying gently in the breeze. Everything about it felt surreal, exaggerated, like a memory dredged up from a dream.

And then it hit him.

The dreams.

Will’s breath caught in his throat, his grip on the cigarette tightening. This was it. The town he had dreamed of night after night—the extravagant parties, the neon glow, the endless

parade of 80s decadence. He had dismissed those dreams as a bizarre side effect of Edna's influence, but now, seeing Retroville in the flesh, a strange familiarity washed over him.

"This… this is it," he whispered, his voice trembling. He turned to Edna, his eyes wide. "I've dreamed about this place."

Edna's smile widened, her Nat Sherman 164 poised elegantly between her fingers. "Have you now?" she asked, her tone dripping with feigned surprise. "Well, isn't that fascinating?"

Will's chest tightened. "How is that possible? How could I—"

"Dreams are funny things," Edna interrupted, her voice smooth. She took a long drag from her cigarette, the tip glowing brightly. "Sometimes, they show us what we truly desire. Or, perhaps, what we're destined for."

Her words sent a chill down Will's spine, but he had no time to dwell on them. The limousine slowed, turning onto a private road flanked by manicured hedges. At the end of the drive stood a grand estate, its opulent façade gleaming white against the night sky. Massive columns framed the entrance, and the perfectly landscaped grounds stretched as far as the eye could see.



Will's unease deepened as they approached. The estate wasn't just familiar—it was intimate. He knew it. He had walked its halls in his dreams, stood on its balcony overlooking the pool,

sipped champagne in its parlor. He even knew the names of the staff, though he had no idea how.

The limousine came to a stop, and a line of staff emerged to greet them. Each person was dressed immaculately, their expressions warm but reserved. One of them, a middle-aged man with slicked-back hair, stepped forward and opened the door for them.

“Welcome back, Mrs. Lacroix,” he said, addressing Edna. His gaze shifted to Will, and he added with a polite smile, “And welcome home, Miss Cassandra.”

Will’s stomach twisted. He stepped out of the car, his heels clicking against the stone driveway, and forced himself to smile. “Thank you,” he said, his voice trembling.

Inside the estate, the sense of familiarity only grew stronger. Every room, every piece of furniture, every detail felt as though it had been plucked straight from his dreams. The staff moved about as if he were a permanent fixture in their lives, addressing him as “Miss Cassandra” with the same deference they showed Edna.

“This is insane,” Will muttered under his breath as he followed Edna into the parlor.

She glanced over her shoulder, her smile never wavering. “Is it?” she asked lightly, taking a seat on the plush sofa. She gestured for him to join her, and he did so reluctantly, adjusting his dress.

A staff member appeared moments later with a silver tray, offering them champagne and fresh cigarettes. Will hesitated before taking both, his fingers trembling as he lit the Nat Sherman 164. The act felt automatic now, the long cigarette resting perfectly between his fingers as he inhaled deeply.

“You’re doing beautifully,” Edna said, her tone syrupy. She took a drag from her own cigarette, her movements precise and practiced. “See how natural it all feels? You were made for this life, darling.”

Will’s stomach churned at her words, but he said nothing. Instead, he focused on the cigarette in his hand, the smoke swirling around him like a cage. The bitterness he felt inside mirrored the tone that slipped into his voice when he finally spoke.

“This place,” he said, his words slow and deliberate, “is so… gauche. All the neon and the glitz. It’s like someone tried to recreate the 80s but forgot to leave out the tackiness.”

Edna laughed, a tinkling sound that grated on his nerves. “Oh, Cassandra, you’re as sharp as ever.”

Will froze. The way he had spoken, the words he had chosen—it was Cassandra, not him. The persona he had been forced to inhabit was bleeding into his reality, and he didn’t know how to stop it.

He turned to Edna, his voice trembling. “What’s happening to me?”

She smiled, tapping ash from her cigarette. “Nothing you can’t handle, darling. Now, let’s get settled. We have so much to catch up on.”

Will took another drag from his cigarette, the smoke burning in his throat. As he exhaled, watching the smoke dissipate into the air, he couldn’t shake the feeling that Cassandra Lacroix was no longer just a role.

Will sat at the edge of the parlor, his hands trembling slightly as he held the Nat Sherman 164 between his manicured fingers. The smoke curled lazily upward, dissipating into the ornate crystal chandelier above. The heavy fur coat draped around his shoulders felt suffocating, yet he couldn’t bring himself to remove it. Everything about Retroville seemed to tighten its grip on him, the familiar yet alien environment drawing him further into a reality that wasn’t his.

Or was it?

The thoughts gnawed at his mind, the line between who he was and who he appeared to be blurring with every passing moment. His voice, his movements, his very words—they weren’t his own anymore. They belonged to Cassandra Lacroix, the bitter and envious socialite he had mocked in his dreams. Or had he become her?

Edna entered the room with her usual air of composed elegance, a fresh Nat Sherman 164 poised between her lips. She moved with practiced grace, her sequined housecoat shimmering in the soft light as she took a seat opposite him. “Darling, you look positively divine today,” she purred, exhaling a plume of smoke. “Have you been practicing? You’re carrying yourself so… effortlessly.”

Will’s stomach churned. “I’m fine, Edna,” he said, his voice rasping with the smoky cadence of Cassandra. The sound sent a chill down his spine, but he couldn’t stop it. His lips curved into a faint smirk as the next words spilled out. “Though I must say, this estate could use a bit of updating. It’s so dreadfully… dated. All this rococo nonsense—it’s charming in a museum, but to live in it?” He waved his cigarette dismissively. “A touch pedestrian.”

Edna laughed, her expression a picture of delight. “Oh, Cassandra, you never fail to entertain. You’re such a sharp wit.”

Will cringed inwardly, but the expression didn’t reach his face. The Botox ensured that his features remained perfectly serene, a polished mask hiding the turmoil beneath. He took a long drag from his cigarette, the smoke filling his lungs as he tried to steady himself.

He needed answers. He needed to leave this place.

When Edna left the room, Will seized his chance. He stood abruptly, the heels of his gold pumps clicking against the marble floor as he made his way to the mirror. His reflection greeted him with an almost mocking familiarity. The face staring back was Cassandra’s—a

woman in her forties, her skin taut and polished, her lips plump and glossy, her eyes framed by heavy eyeliner and perfectly shaped brows. She looked like someone who had spent her life chasing youth through cosmetic procedures and expensive indulgences.

But she wasn't him.

"God," he whispered, his voice cracking. He pressed a hand to the mirror, his nails clicking against the glass. "This isn't me."

The reflection didn't falter, didn't crack under his scrutiny. Instead, the face in the mirror tilted her head slightly, the corners of her lips curving upward. "Perhaps just a little lift," the words escaped before Will could stop them, his voice laced with the smoky elegance of Cassandra. "To keep those dreadful wrinkles from creeping back."

He froze, horrified. He hadn't meant to say that—hadn't even thought it. But the words came so naturally, as though they had been plucked from the subconscious of someone who wasn't him.

The urge to act like Cassandra was growing stronger, harder to resist. Every time he opened his mouth, her venomous, backhanded comments spilled out. Every gesture he made—the delicate flick of ash from his cigarette, the way he adjusted his coat, the way he crossed his legs—was hers.

When Edna returned, Will turned to her, his chest heaving with panic. "Edna," he said, his voice trembling but still tinged with Cassandra's rasp. "Something's wrong. I… I need to leave. We need to fix my face and—"

Edna waved a hand dismissively, her cigarette trailing smoke as she moved toward the settee. "Fix your face?" she repeated, her tone laced with mock surprise. "Darling, there's nothing wrong with your face. You're exquisite. Truly."

Will's stomach tightened. "No," he insisted, his voice rising. "This isn't me. This isn't who I am."

Edna settled into her seat, crossing her legs elegantly as she ashed her cigarette into a crystal tray. "Oh, Cassandra," she said with a knowing smile, "you're exactly who you were always meant to be."

The words hit him like a punch to the gut. He shook his head, his hands gripping the fur coat draped over his shoulders. "You don't understand. I can't stop—" He faltered, unable to finish the thought. "I can't even say my own name anymore."

Edna tilted her head, studying him with a mix of amusement and feigned sympathy. "Why would you need to, darling? Cassandra suits you so much better."

Will's lips parted, but no sound came out. He felt the weight of her words pressing down on him, suffocating him. "Why are you doing this to me?" he finally managed, his voice trembling.

Edna took a slow drag from her cigarette, her smile widening. “Because you loved to judge us, didn’t you?” she said, her voice soft but cutting. “All those nasty little comments you sent to Julie—mocking our looks, our habits, our choices. You thought you were better than us.”

She leaned forward slightly, her eyes glinting with satisfaction. “But that’s the beauty of it, darling. Socialites like you—like Cassandra Lacroix—they do exactly what you did. They judge others, make cruel comments, all while envying what they can no longer have. The youth, the beauty, the attention.”

Will felt his throat tighten, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe. “This is your revenge,” he whispered, his voice barely audible.

Edna laughed, a light, tinkling sound that sent a shiver down his spine. “Oh, darling, it’s not revenge. It’s justice. You don’t need to hide your venom in private messages anymore. Now, as Cassandra, you can wield it openly. At parties, at galas, at every high-society event.”

Will stared at her, his hands trembling. He felt the urge rising again, the need to speak, to comment, to judge. It clawed at him, consuming him from the inside out.

And for the first time, he understood.

This was who he had become. Cassandra Lacroix wasn’t just a role—they had made her his reality.

Chapter 11

The limousine pulled up to the entrance of the Retroville Grand Track, the polished chrome and neon signs glinting in the midday sun. Crowds of impeccably dressed socialites milled about, their laughter and chatter filling the air. The aesthetic was unapologetically 80s: extravagant hats, oversized sunglasses, sequins and fur, and sharp shoulder-padded silhouettes. For most of them, it was an opportunity to flaunt their wealth and status under the guise of enjoying the races.

Will stepped out of the car, his heels clicking sharply against the pavement. The wide-brimmed hat perched on his head shielded his heavily made-up face from the sun, though the oversized 80s sunglasses obscured much of his expression. His hair had been styled into a sleek bun, held in place with rhinestone pins, while his metallic teal dress shimmered in the light. The fabric clung tightly to his figure, accentuating every curve the breastplate had given him. Puff sleeves and a dramatically cinched waist completed the look, turning him into a caricature of high-society elegance.



A few weeks ago, Will would have been horrified to wear something so garish. Now, the discomfort was still there, clawing at the edges of his mind, but it was dulled by the ever-present urges. As much as it made his skin crawl, the outfit felt… fitting. Cassandra Lacroix would wear nothing less.

Edna appeared beside him, her electric purple suit and matching feathered fascinator commanding attention. She adjusted her Nat Sherman 164 in its golden cigarette holder, taking a long drag as she surveyed the scene. “Ah, the tracks,” she purred, her voice lilting. “The perfect blend of decadence and competition. Don’t you agree, Cassandra?”

Will hesitated, the words coming unbidden. “Oh, absolutely,” he said, his tone dripping with mock enthusiasm. He reached for his own cigarette, lighting it with a deliberate flick of his lighter. The smoke curled around his fingers as he exhaled, the gesture so practiced it felt natural. “Though I must say, half the people here wouldn’t know a thoroughbred if it trampled them. They’re just here to be seen.”

Edna laughed, delighted. “Darling, that’s what makes it fun.”

As they moved through the crowd, Will couldn’t shake the eerie familiarity of the faces around him. Socialites with sharp cheekbones and even sharper tongues; businessmen in pastel suits; women in fur stoles and glittering jewels. He recognized them all, though he couldn’t explain how. They had been in his dreams, mingling at galas and sipping champagne at the Nautica. And now, in reality, they treated him as if he had always been one of them.

“Cassandra!” A voice called out, and Will turned to see a woman approaching, her sequined red dress catching the sunlight. Her name surfaced unbidden: Vivienne Bancroft, the wife of a real estate mogul.

“Vivienne,” Will replied smoothly, extending a gloved hand. She took it with a wide smile, her eyes flicking to his cigarette. “Still addicted to those Nat Shermans, I see.”

Will let out a brittle laugh, exhaling smoke in a practiced plume. “Better than those dreadful menthols you insist on, darling. I’ve always said they’re for amateurs.”

Vivienne laughed, shaking her head. “You’re incorrigible, Cassandra. Come, the others are dying to see you again.”

The group Vivienne led them to was a collection of Retroville’s elite. Will recognized them all from his dreams: Harold Greaves, the portly owner of the Retroville Marina; Margot Fields, a jewelry heiress with a penchant for over-accessorizing; and Lucas Dalton, a hedge fund manager who wore his wealth as loudly as his neon-pink tie.

“Cassandra,” Lucas greeted, tipping his glass toward him. “You’re looking radiant as ever. That dress—perfectly you.”

Will tilted his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Flattery suits you, Lucas. It almost makes up for that atrocious tie.”

The group burst into laughter, their reactions fueling the strange compulsion that guided Will’s behavior. He sipped his champagne, the bubbles tickling his throat, and took another drag from his cigarette. His words flowed effortlessly, cutting and judgmental, each one dripping with Cassandra’s signature venom.

As the conversation shifted, Will found himself slipping further into the role. He spoke of the horses with disinterest, commenting on the ostentation of the other attendees and the laughable attempts of some to appear cultured.

“Did you see Eleanor Spencer’s hat?” he said at one point, gesturing subtly toward an older woman in an elaborate feathered monstrosity. “It’s as if she skinned Big Bird and decided to wear the remains.”

Vivienne gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, before dissolving into laughter. “You’re terrible, Cassandra.”

Will smirked, the act of lighting another cigarette buying him a moment to collect himself. But the bitter satisfaction that came with the comment wasn't his own. It was Cassandra's—sharp, envious, and relentless.

As the afternoon wore on, the dissonance between his actions and his thoughts grew unbearable. Every laugh, every backhanded compliment, every judgmental remark felt like a betrayal of who he was. And yet, he couldn't stop. The urges were too strong, pulling him deeper into Cassandra's world.

At one point, as the crowd shifted toward the race track, Will caught sight of himself in a gilded mirror on the clubhouse wall. The reflection staring back at him was poised and elegant: the wide-brimmed hat, the dark sunglasses, the shimmering dress, and the cigarette poised delicately between his fingers. But behind the polished veneer, he could see the cracks—his desperation, his growing sense of entrapment.

"You're doing wonderfully," Edna said from beside him, her voice honeyed and approving. She leaned in, her cigarette holder glinting in the sunlight. "Everyone adores you, Cassandra."

Will forced a smile, the words spilling out before he could stop them. "Of course they do. They wouldn't dare do otherwise."

Edna's laughter rang out, a tinkling sound that made his skin crawl. But as they turned back toward the crowd, he realized with growing dread the effortless way that these words came out of his mouth, as if he had been speaking this way for decades.

The crowd at the tracks buzzed with excitement as the next race drew near, but Will barely noticed. He stood near the railing, his wide-brimmed hat shading his face from the afternoon sun. The metallic teal of his dress shimmered under the light, and his long Nat Sherman 164 rested delicately between his fingers, a thin ribbon of smoke curling into the air. Around him, the chatter of Retroville's elite was a constant hum—comments about the horses, bets placed, and, of course, thinly veiled insults about anyone not in their immediate circle.

Will took a slow drag from his cigarette, letting the dense smoke fill his lungs before exhaling with practiced elegance. The bitterness of the tobacco mirrored the taste of his own words as they spilled out of him, sharper and more cutting with every passing moment.

But then he saw him.

Rupert Sinclair stood across the way, his tall frame cloaked in a tailored charcoal suit that spoke of understated luxury. His silver hair was impeccably styled, catching the sunlight as he laughed at something one of his companions had said. A vintage pocket watch gleamed against his waistcoat, and his polished shoes reflected the marble of the clubhouse floor. Everything about him exuded charm and wealth, from the slight smirk on his face to the confident way he held his champagne flute.



Will froze, his fingers tightening slightly around the cigarette. He knew that face, that laugh. He had seen it before—in his dreams.

Rupert Sinclair had been a recurring figure in Will's dream of Cassandra Lacroix's life, an older gentleman who seemed tailor-made for Retroville's opulent world. He was a man of refinement, sharp wit, and impeccable manners. But he was also Cassandra's weakness, a figure from her past who knew exactly how to disarm her. Their history had been a tangled web of passion, bitterness, and fleeting reconciliation. In every dream, Rupert had swept Cassandra off her feet, only for their relationship to collapse under the weight of her jealousy and his wandering eye.

Will's stomach churned at the memory. He had always tried to shake it off when he woke, telling himself it was just a figment of the strange dreams he had in Edna's house. But now, seeing Rupert in the flesh, he was certain that everything in those dreams were made to create fake memories in his mind.

“Cassandra,” Edna’s voice broke through his thoughts, honeyed and amused. She was standing at his side, her cigarette poised delicately in her hand. “You’ve gone pale. You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

Before Will could respond, Rupert turned his head and spotted them. His eyes lit up with recognition, and a slow, confident smile spread across his face.

“Cassandra,” he called out, his voice rich and smooth. “It’s been far too long.”

Rupert approached with the ease of a man who had never known rejection, his presence commanding attention as he navigated the crowd. By the time he reached them, Will had already taken another drag from his cigarette, the act buying him precious seconds to steady himself. He forced a smile, the corners of his mouth barely moving under the effects of Botox.

“Rupert,” Will said, his voice carrying a smoky rasp. “I would say it’s a pleasure, but we both know I’ve never been one for falsehoods.”

Rupert laughed, a deep, genuine sound that made Will’s skin crawl. “Still as sharp as ever, I see,” he said, reaching for Will’s hand. He lifted it to his lips, pressing a kiss to the back of his glove. “You’ve been missed, my dear.”

Will stiffened at the gesture, pulling his hand back as smoothly as he could. “Missed?” he repeated, arching a brow behind his oversized sunglasses. “Surely not. You’ve always been one to fill the void with… distractions.”

Edna chuckled softly, clearly enjoying the exchange. She took a drag from her cigarette, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Oh, Cassandra, don’t be cruel. Rupert’s always had a soft spot for you.”

Will’s lips curved into a bitter smile. “A soft spot? Please, Edna. Rupert’s soft spots extend to half the women in Retroville—and a few beyond it, I’m sure.”

Rupert tilted his head, his smile never wavering. “And yet, none of them could ever replace you.”

The words made Will’s stomach turn, but the urges compelled him to respond. “Spare me the flattery, Rupert,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. He took a long drag from his cigarette, exhaling the smoke slowly as he continued. “We both know your love of variety is what ended things between us.”

Rupert sighed, a faint note of regret slipping into his tone. “You always did know how to wound me, Cassandra.”

Will’s jaw tightened. He wanted to scream, to tell Rupert that he wasn’t Cassandra, that this was all a cruel farce. But the words wouldn’t come. Instead, the bitterness flowed unchecked. “Wound you?” he said, laughing softly. “Darling, if you’re wounded, it’s only because you tripped over your own ego.”

The exchange might have ended there, but Rupert was nothing if not persistent. He stepped closer, his gaze softening. “I didn’t come here to argue,” he said. “I came to see you. Retroville hasn’t been the same without you, Cassandra.”

Will faltered, the sincerity in Rupert’s voice throwing him off balance. He took another drag from his cigarette, the smoke clouding the air between them. “Spare me the theatrics, Rupert,” he said, though his voice lacked its usual venom. “I’m sure Retroville has managed just fine without me.”

Rupert smiled, a knowing look in his eyes. “Perhaps. But I haven’t.”

For a moment, Will was silent, the weight of Rupert’s words settling over him. The man’s charm was as disarming as ever, and despite himself, Will felt the faintest flicker of something—an echo of Cassandra’s history, her weaknesses, her desires. It made him feel sick.

Edna chose that moment to intervene, her laughter cutting through the tension. “Oh, Rupert, you do know how to stir things up. Cassandra, darling, why don’t you let him buy you a drink? You can trade barbs while the rest of us enjoy the race.”

Will opened his mouth to protest, but the words that came out weren’t his own. “Fine,” he said, his tone begrudging but laced with amusement. “But don’t think for a second that this changes anything.”

Rupert’s smile widened. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The bar at the Retroville Grand Track was a vision of 80s decadence—glittering gold accents, mirrored walls, and a neon sign proclaiming Club Lux in bold, looping letters. A small jazz band played in the corner, their music muted under the hum of conversation and the clinking of crystal glasses. Will sat stiffly on one of the plush stools, his back straight and his wide-brimmed hat angled just so. His dark sunglasses remained perched on his nose, masking the unease in his eyes.

Rupert sat beside him, effortlessly at ease. His charcoal suit looked as if it had been tailored by angels, and his silver hair gleamed under the low lights. He leaned against the bar, his posture casual, yet his gaze remained fixed on Will—warm, amused, and tinged with something deeper.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” Rupert said, his voice smooth as silk. “Still the most striking woman in any room.”

Will scoffed, lifting his Nat Sherman 164 to his lips with a graceful flick of his wrist. The smoke billowed from his mouth in a slow, deliberate exhale. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Rupert,” he said. “You’re as transparent as ever.”

Rupert chuckled, lifting his glass of whiskey. “I missed that sharp tongue of yours.”

Will shifted uncomfortably, the urges clawing at him, compelling him to stay even though every part of him wanted to walk away. Or did he? The thought was muddled, hazy, as though his feelings weren’t entirely his own.

The conversation meandered through familiar territory, Rupert’s charm weaving a web that Will struggled to untangle himself from. Rupert recounted stories from their supposed past—dinners at exclusive clubs, midnight drives in his vintage Aston Martin, stolen moments at secret rendezvous.

“You remember that night at the Nautica,” Rupert said, his lips curling into a fond smile. “The champagne, the moonlight on the water. You insisted on taking the helm, even though you had no idea how to steer the yacht.”

Will froze, the memory surging through him as vividly as if he had lived it. In his dreams, Cassandra had laughed as she fumbled with the controls, Rupert’s arms around her as he guided her hands. She had reveled in his touch, his whispered reassurances.

He hated that he could feel it now—the warmth of those memories, the way they made his chest tighten. “How could I forget?” he said bitterly, taking another drag from his cigarette. “You spent the entire night hovering, as if I couldn’t figure it out on my own.”

Rupert’s laughter was low and genuine. “Because you couldn’t, my dear. But you were magnificent anyway.”

Will looked away, the urge to smile at the compliment barely restrained. His thoughts strayed to Julie, the anchor he had clung to in his old life. He missed her—missed her warmth, her grounding presence. But that yearning had become twisted, redirected by the suffocating urges into something he couldn’t control. That someone he longed for wasn’t Julie anymore—it was Rupert.

The drinks flowed, and with each sip, Will felt himself slipping further into Cassandra’s skin. He hated how natural it felt to respond to Rupert’s teasing, to meet his lingering gaze with a smirk, to let his voice dip into that familiar cadence of bitter amusement.

“You haven’t changed much yourself,” Will said at one point, his lips curving into a sly smile. “Still chasing after women who are far too good for you.”

Rupert tilted his head, his gaze softening. “Perhaps. But there’s only ever been one I couldn’t forget.”

Will’s breath caught, and he quickly masked it with another drag from his cigarette. The words were like a hook, pulling him deeper into something he didn’t understand.

Rupert reached out, brushing a stray curl that had escaped Will’s bun. The gesture was tender, his fingers lingering for just a moment too long. “You’ve been lonely,” he said softly. “I can see it in your eyes.”

Will stiffened, his heart pounding. He wanted to snap at him, to deny it, but the words wouldn't come. Because it was true. He was lonely. This nightmare of a life had left him adrift, with no one to turn to, no one who truly saw him. And now, against his will, Rupert was stepping into that void.

The warmth of Rupert's hand lingered on his cheek, and Will found himself leaning into it ever so slightly. The act felt foreign, but also painfully right. The urges whispered to him, coaxing him to close the distance, to let Rupert fill the ache in his chest.

"You're insufferable," Will muttered, his voice lacking its usual venom.

"And yet, you're still here," Rupert replied, his smile growing.

The exchange grew more intimate with each passing moment. A lingering touch on Will's hand. A gentle brush of his shoulder. Words that carried unspoken promises. He hated how much he yearned for the connection, how much he wanted to lose himself in the fantasy of being seen, desired, understood.

"Come back with me," Rupert said finally, his voice low and inviting. "We don't have to rush. Just a quiet evening, the two of us."

Will hesitated, the conflict raging within him. He wanted to say no, to push him away, but the words that came out betrayed him. "Fine," he said, his tone sharp. "But don't think this means anything."

Rupert chuckled, taking his hand as they left the bar. "It always means something with you, Cassandra."

As they stepped into the night, Will felt the weight of the decision settle over him. The Nat Sherman 164 still burned between his fingers, the smoke swirling around them as they walked. He didn't understand why he was doing this, why he couldn't resist.

Rupert's penthouse was a testament to his wealth and taste—expansive glass walls offered sweeping views of Retroville's neon-lit skyline, while sleek black marble floors reflected the warm glow of golden lamps. Plush furniture in deep jewel tones was arranged with effortless elegance, and the faint sound of jazz floated from unseen speakers.

Will stepped inside hesitantly, his heels clicking against the marble. The vast space was both inviting and intimidating, a world far removed from his old life. The city lights shimmered like a distant dream through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting faint reflections of his transformed self in every polished surface.

Rupert moved with confident ease, setting his keys on the glass coffee table before turning to Will with that familiar, disarming smile. "Make yourself comfortable," he said, his voice low and warm. "Can I get you a drink?"

Will hesitated, his hand instinctively lifting the Nat Sherman 164 still perched between his fingers. He had been smoking it for what felt like hours, the act soothing and maddening in equal measure. He took a slow drag, the smoke curling around him as he exhaled, buying time to answer.

“Something strong,” he said finally, his voice rasping with Cassandra’s practiced edge.

Rupert nodded, moving to the bar in the corner of the room. As he poured, Will let his gaze wander, taking in the understated opulence of the space. The urges whispered to him, coaxing him to relax, to let go, to sink deeper into the role he had been forced to play. But beneath it all, a part of him still resisted, still clung to the memory of who he was.

When Rupert returned, handing him a crystal glass filled with amber liquid, their fingers brushed. The touch was brief but charged, and Will felt a strange mix of discomfort and yearning flood his chest. He hated the way Cassandra’s emotions bled into his own, twisting his thoughts, his desires.

They sat on the plush velvet sofa, the city lights casting faint shadows across their faces. The conversation began with a practiced ease, Rupert’s charm filling the silences as he recounted more stories of their supposed past. Will played along, the bitter and envious tone of Cassandra slipping from his lips without hesitation.

But the distance between them grew smaller with each passing moment—a subtle lean, a shared laugh, a lingering touch on his arm. The warmth of Rupert’s presence was undeniable, and the urges made him irresistible to Will.

Later, in the dim light of the bedroom, the moment unfolded with a quiet intensity. The city lights framed them in the darkness, the hum of Retroville below a distant murmur. The warmth of Rupert’s hand on his cheek, the press of lips against his own—it all felt surreal, inevitable.

The urges guided him, made him move and respond in ways that felt both foreign and familiar. His bitterness melted into something softer, something he couldn’t name but couldn’t resist. For that brief time, the chaos of his life faded, replaced by a need he didn’t understand.

When it was over, and the silence of the penthouse enveloped them, Will lay staring at the ceiling, the weight of what had happened settling over him. Rupert slept beside him, his presence steady and calm, but Will’s mind was a storm.

He reached for the Nat Sherman 164 on the bedside table, lighting it with trembling fingers. The first drag was sharp, grounding him as the smoke filled his lungs. He exhaled slowly, the plume swirling in the faint light.

The moment had passed, but its echoes lingered, threading through his thoughts like a melody he couldn't forget.

The morning sunlight streamed through the tall windows of the Lacroix estate, casting soft golden patterns on the parquet floor of the drawing room. Will sat perched on the edge of a tufted chaise lounge, his wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses replaced by the elegance of a silk robe cinched tightly around his waist. The metallic teal of his dress from the previous day hung on a valet stand nearby, a garish reminder of the role he couldn't escape.



A lit Nat Sherman 164 rested between his fingers, its faintly bitter smoke curling upward in lazy spirals. He took a drag, inhaling deeply, the weight of the moment settling over him like an oppressive fur coat. Across from him, Edna reclined in her usual effortless poise, her electric purple robe matching the feathers of her fascinator from the previous day. She held her own cigarette, her movements practiced and graceful, as she watched him with a knowing smile.

"Well?" she prompted, her tone syrupy sweet. "Are you going to tell me about your night with Rupert, or do I have to pry it out of you?"

Will stiffened, his hand tightening slightly around his cigarette. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to think about it. But the memories were already clawing their way to the surface: Rupert's touch, his charm, the way he had made Will feel seen, desired, and utterly vulnerable.

“I’d rather not,” Will said curtly, his voice rasping with the smoky edge of Cassandra. He exhaled a plume of smoke, the gesture deliberate and practiced. “It’s none of your concern, Edna.”

Edna let out a soft, tinkling laugh, her Nat Sherman poised elegantly between her fingers. “Oh, darling, don’t be so shy. You know I live vicariously through you. Spare me the suspense.”

Will’s jaw tightened, but the words spilled out before he could stop them, twisted by the ever-present urges. “It was a mistake,” he said bitterly, taking another drag from his cigarette. “Rupert is… my weakness. He always has been.”

Edna’s eyes lit up with delight. “Oh, Cassandra, do go on.”

Will felt the shame burning in his chest, but it wasn’t his own. It was Cassandra’s shame, reframed and repurposed by the urges that controlled him. “I let myself fall for him again,” he continued, his voice laced with bitterness. “Just like I always do. He knows exactly how to charm me, to disarm me, to make me forget why I swore I’d never let him back into my life.”

“And did you?” Edna asked, leaning forward slightly, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Let him back in?”

Will hesitated, the memories from the night before flooding his mind. Rupert’s hands, his voice, the way he had filled a void that Will hadn’t realized was there. He had felt a release, a fleeting moment of pleasure so intense it had left him breathless. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before, and the realization only deepened his shame.

“I did,” he admitted, his voice softening for a moment before the bitterness crept back in. “And for what? So he can disappear again, off to chase the next pretty little thing that catches his eye? He’ll charm her the same way he charmed me, and I’ll be left to pick up the pieces, as always.”

Edna clapped her hands together, her laughter light and melodious. “Oh, Cassandra, you’re hopelessly dramatic. But that’s why we love you.”

Will glared at her, though the Botox kept his expression eerily serene. He flicked ash from his cigarette with a sharp motion, the embers glowing briefly before falling into the crystal ashtray. “It’s not dramatic, Edna. It’s reality. Rupert will never change. He’s a liar, a cheat, and a scoundrel. And yet…” His voice faltered, the words sticking in his throat.

“And yet?” Edna prompted, her smile widening.

Will took another drag from his cigarette, the smoke burning his lungs as he exhaled. “And yet, I can’t seem to quit him,” he said finally, the admission dripping with venom. “He’s always been my undoing.”

Edna sighed contentedly, leaning back in her chair as she ashed her cigarette with practiced ease. “Oh, darling, you’re perfectly hopeless. But don’t worry—Rupert will come back. He always does. And when he does, you’ll fall for him all over again.”

Will’s stomach churned at her words, but he couldn’t bring himself to deny them. The urges wouldn’t let him. They twisted his shame into something Cassandra could understand, something bitter and self-deprecating. He hated how easily the words left his lips, how natural it felt to speak as if this life, this identity, was truly his own.

“It’s disgusting,” he muttered, though his tone lacked conviction. “Falling for the same lies, the same empty promises. I should know better by now.”

Edna laughed again, taking a long drag from her cigarette before exhaling a cloud of smoke. “Oh, Cassandra, you’re not disgusting. You’re human. And Rupert… well, he’s the kind of man who can make even the most jaded woman believe in fairy tales.”

Will scoffed, though the faintest trace of a smirk tugged at his lips. “Fairy tales? Please, Edna. The only thing Rupert believes in is his own reflection.”

Edna raised her glass in a mock toast. “To Rupert Sinclair, the man who never fails to keep things interesting.”

Will clinked his glass against hers reluctantly, the champagne fizzing softly as he took a sip. He felt the weight of his reality settling over him, heavier than ever. This life as Cassandra Lacroix wasn’t just about social events and cutting remarks—it was about relationships, about yearning, about vulnerability. And it terrified him.

Chapter 12

The afternoon sun bathed the manicured grounds of Retroville’s most exclusive country club in a golden glow. The air was thick with the scent of freshly cut grass, faint traces of perfume, and cigarette smoke. The soft murmur of polite conversations and the occasional clink of cocktail glasses formed a backdrop to the pristine scene.

Will sat alone at a table beneath a striped umbrella, his manicured nails tapping idly against the armrest of his chair. He wore a floral tea dress, its exaggerated puffed sleeves and cinched waist reminiscent of a bygone era, paired with a wide-brimmed sun hat adorned with silk roses. He reached for his Nat Sherman 164, already smoldering in the ashtray, and lifted it to his lips with practiced ease. The long, white cigarette fit perfectly in his manicured hand, an extension of his persona.



Three months. It had been three months since he'd arrived in Retroville, and not a single day had passed without the urges guiding him, warping him into something unrecognizable.

He had fought them at first, but they were unrelenting. Each choice he made, each word he spoke, was dictated by the invisible force that tethered him to the persona of Cassandra Lacroix. He had gone under the knife twice in the past three months, enduring a facelift, a breast augmentation to replace the prosthetic, and another round of Botox and fillers. His reflection in the mirror was now one he could barely stomach: taut skin, plump lips, and exaggerated cheekbones that screamed of a woman desperately chasing her lost youth.

The worst part was that he hadn't wanted any of it. Yet the urges—those cruel, insidious compulsions—made it impossible to resist. Cassandra Lacroix was meant to be shallow, vapid, bitter, and envious, and Will's own judgmental nature had created the perfect trap.

He took a long drag from her cigarette, the smoke curling elegantly as he exhaled. He hated this. He hated Cassandra.

“Darling!” Edna’s voice rang out, sugary and grating as always.

Will turned to see her approaching, resplendent in a cobalt blue power suit with gold accents, her Nat Sherman 164 already lit. But Edna wasn’t alone. Beside her was a figure that made Will’s stomach tighten: Cintia.

It took a moment for the recognition to settle. Cintia’s usual sleek and modern elegance had been replaced with a garish 80s ensemble—a magenta dress with oversized shoulder pads and a plunging neckline. Her hair, once smooth and chic, had been teased into an elaborate bouffant. Chunky gold earrings dangled from her ears, and her lips were painted a bold crimson. She looked completely at home in Retroville, her transformation as striking as Will’s own.

Cintia’s smile widened as she approached, her eyes scanning Will with thinly veiled satisfaction. “Cassandra,” she said, her voice dripping with calculated warmth, “look at you. What a delight seeing you this way, you look stunning.”

The words landed like a weight on Will’s chest, the subtext clear: This is who you are now. There’s no going back. He felt the familiar pull of the urges rise, silencing his true thoughts before they could form. Instead, he lifted his Nat Sherman 164 to his lips, exhaling a plume of smoke with practiced elegance.

“Oh, Cintia, darling,” he replied, his voice laced with mock disdain, “still enamored by my appearance, I see. I thought you might have tired of fawning over me by now. But then again,” he added with a sharp smile, “you’ve always had impeccable taste.”

Cintia’s laughter rang out, soft and triumphant. “Why would I tire of you, Cassandra? You’ve never been more… radiant. Edna and I have been saying for months: you’ve truly come into your own.”

Will’s stomach churned at her words, but the urge to play along took over. He tilted his head, a smirk playing on his mauve-stained lips. “Naturally. But then, I’ve always had a knack for rising to the occasion. Haven’t I?”

Edna clapped her hands together in delight, her cigarette holder glinting in the sunlight. “Oh, absolutely, darling. You’re the very picture of elegance and charm.”

Cintia took a seat, her movements slow and deliberate, as if savoring the moment. “I must say,” she began, her eyes gleaming, “you look… perfect, Cassandra. Exactly as you should.”

Will forced a tight smile, lifting his cigarette to his lips and taking a deliberate drag. The taste of the smoke was bitter, but it gave him something to focus on besides the seething anger roiling beneath the surface. “Well,” he said, exhaling slowly, “it’s not as though I had much of a choice, is it? Retroville has a way of molding people into what they were always meant to be.”

Cintia's smile widened. "I couldn't agree more. Now, tell me—what have you been up to these past three months? I'm dying to hear all about your… adventures."

Edna leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. "Oh, where to begin?" she said, her tone effervescent. "There was the gala at the Nautica—Cassandra was the star of the evening, of course. Everyone adored her."

"Adored me?" Will interjected with a scoff, waving her cigarette dismissively. "Hardly. They adored my dress. I swear, half the women there spent the night trying to find out where I bought it, and the other half were praying I'd spill champagne on it."

Edna laughed, delighted. "And then there was the luncheon at the Greaves estate," she continued. "Such a dreadful affair. Harold's wife insisted on serving that horrid imitation caviar."

Cassandra rolled her eyes, her lips curling into a sneer. "Oh, don't remind me. It tasted like rubber dipped in salt water. And her dress—did you see that monstrosity? Who wears polka dots to a luncheon? She looked like a circus tent."

Edna's laughter joined Cintia's, the two women exchanging knowing glances. "And what about Rupert?" Cintia asked, her tone turning teasing. "I hear he's been quite the… distraction."

Will stiffened, his heart pounding. The memory of Rupert's touch, his charm, his undeniable presence surged to the forefront of his mind. He hated how the thought made his chest ache with a yearning he couldn't explain.

"Rupert," he said bitterly, exhaling a plume of smoke. "What is there to say? He's as insufferable as ever. Charming, of course, but we both know how fleeting that is. He'll be off chasing the next pretty thing before long."

Cintia's smile widened, her satisfaction evident. "Oh, Cassandra, you're hopeless. But that's what makes you so… entertaining."

Will forced a laugh, though it felt hollow. The truth of his situation was unbearable, but the urges twisted his bitterness into a performance, a role he couldn't escape. As Edna and Cintia continued to laugh and chatter, he took another drag from his cigarette, the smoke filling his lungs as he tried to steady himself.

The conversation shifted as Cintia leaned forward, her eyes narrowing slightly in mock curiosity. "Cassandra, darling," she began, her tone light but with an unmistakable edge. "Have you had a little… work done recently? You're looking particularly polished."

Will stiffened, his manicured fingers tightening around the stem of his martini glass. The question struck a nerve, though he couldn't show it. Instead, he forced a brittle smile and brought her cigarette to his lips, taking a deliberate drag. The smoke swirled elegantly as he exhaled, giving him a moment to compose himself. "Well," he drawled, his voice dripping

with practiced nonchalance, “a woman of a certain age must stay vigilant. Can’t let the years get the better of me, can I?”

Edna let out a delighted laugh, ashing her Nat Sherman 164 with a graceful flick of her wrist. “Oh, Cassandra, you’re positively radiant. Honestly, I think you’ve surpassed me. Those cheekbones! And your skin—flawless.”

Will tilted his head slightly, the brim of his wide sun hat casting a shadow over his taut face. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Edna,” he said, her tone laced with mock humility. “Though I’ll admit, the new lift has done wonders. Those dreadful jowls were starting to creep in, and I simply couldn’t have that.”

Cintia watched the exchange with a satisfied smirk, her eyes gleaming. “Well, whatever you’ve done, it’s working,” she said smoothly. “You look… perfect.”

The compliment stung more than Will cared to admit. He took another drag from his cigarette, the act a soothing ritual now, and exhaled slowly. Inside, Will was screaming. He hadn’t wanted any of this—the surgeries, the Botox, the endless transformations—but the urges had made it impossible to resist. He had become the very thing he had once mocked, a bitter and envious socialite clinging desperately to the illusion of youth.

Cintia crossed her legs elegantly, her magenta dress shimmering in the sunlight. “You know,” she began, her tone deceptively casual, “Robert’s been quite worried about Will.”

Will’s chest tightened at the mention of his father’s name, he was hoping that Robert would discover what happened after noticing that he was missing. “Oh?” he asked, tilting his head slightly. “And why is that?”

“Well,” Cintia continued, a faint smile playing on her lips, “he’s been wondering where Will has disappeared to. I told him not to worry, of course. Our friends here in Retroville found him—or rather, they found a new Will.”

Will’s fingers trembled slightly as he ashed his cigarette, but his voice remained steady. “A new Will?” he repeated, his tone carefully indifferent.

“Yes,” Cintia said, leaning forward slightly, her eyes glinting with triumph. “One who knows the opportunity he’s been given. One who’s well-behaved, respectful, and—most importantly—thankful for his new stepmother.”

Edna chimed in with a tinkling laugh, waving her cigarette for emphasis. “Oh, Robert will be so proud. Isn't it amazing how things work? While he found his lost son, I found my lost sister.”

Will forced a smile, though his heart felt like it was being squeezed in a vise. “Well,” he said, his voice sharp and mocking, “it’s about time for the Lacroix’s name to have someone who truly understands refinement and elegance.”

Cintia's smile widened. "And you're thriving," she said, her tone syrupy sweet. "Look at you now. Sister to Edna Lacroix, a fixture of Retroville's high society. Isn't this what you were always meant to be?"

The words cut deeper than Will cared to admit. He took another long drag from his cigarette, the smoke filling her lungs as she struggled to suppress the rising tide of despair. "I suppose," he said finally, his tone dripping with sarcasm, "it's a far cry from my humble beginnings. But who am I to argue with fate?"

Edna clapped her hands together, her smile radiant. "Oh, darling, you've exceeded all expectations. Truly."

They spend the afternoon, gossiping, smoking and drinking, but as the encounter closed to its end the air seemed heavier.

Cintia adjusted her chair, crossing her legs with practiced elegance. She rested her hand on the armrest, her nails tapping lightly as she regarded Will with a look that was equal parts triumph and feigned affection.

"Cassandra," Cintia began, her voice dripping with false sweetness, "I wanted to let you know that this will be my last visit to Retroville for the foreseeable future. I have too many commitments outside this charming little bubble to return anytime soon."

Will felt his chest tighten. For a brief, fleeting moment, Will wanted to scream, to demand an explanation, to beg for some semblance of a reprieve. But the urges gripped him, their invisible chains keeping him locked in the persona of Cassandra Lacroix. "Oh?" he said instead, his voice carrying that perfect mix of disdain and indifference. "I can't say I understand you, darling. The world outside Retroville must be so dreadfully dull without all this… extravagance."

Edna giggled softly, her Nat Sherman 164 poised delicately between her fingers. "Oh, Cassandra, you always know how to make me laugh. But she's right, darling—Cintia has a life to tend to. And so do I, for that matter."

Will turned sharply to Edna, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You're leaving too?" he asked, the bitterness in his voice almost slipping into genuine anger.

Edna nodded, taking a long drag from her cigarette before exhaling a plume of smoke that seemed to hang in the air like a curtain. "Oh, of course, darling. I've been terribly negligent these past few months, spending so much time here. My house needs tending, my social calendar has been piling up, and now that I have you here to take care of the Lacroix's estate, I can travel freely once again."

Will's fingers tightened around his own Nat Sherman 164, the long cigarette balanced elegantly between her manicured nails. He brought it to his lips, inhaling deeply as he tried to suppress the storm of emotions threatening to break through the surface.

“Don’t look so glum, Cassandra,” Cintia said, her voice taking on that patronizing edge that Will had always hated. “You wouldn’t want to leave Retroville anyway. You’ve settled in beautifully. This is your world now—the parties, the opulence, the high society. You adore it.”

Will let out a brittle laugh, exhaling a stream of smoke that curled around her face. “Adore it?” he repeated, his voice dripping with mock incredulity. “Well, I suppose someone has to keep these dreadful people in line. Heaven knows they’d be lost without me.”

Cintia leaned forward slightly, her gaze sharp and calculating. “And let’s not forget your beloved Nat Shermans,” she added, her tone deceptively light. “I can’t imagine you giving those up. You’re practically inseparable.”

Edna chimed in with a knowing smile, ashing her cigarette with a practiced flick. “Oh, absolutely. Cassandra without her Nat Sherman 164s? It’s unthinkable. Why, you’ve become quite the icon, darling. I hear half the women at the club have started smoking them just to emulate your… charm.”

Will’s lips curved into a smirk, the kind that hid the turmoil raging beneath the surface. “Well,” he said, her voice carrying that familiar edge of privileged arrogance, “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, isn’t it? Though I doubt any of them can pull it off quite like I do.”

Inside, Will wanted to scream. The irony was unbearable. Months ago, he had mocked Edna’s smoking habits, her gaudy outfits, her obsession with appearances. Now, he was her reflection—a shallow, vapid socialite addicted to the very things he had once despised. The Nat Sherman 164 felt like an extension of his hand now, the taste of its smoke as familiar as air.

And the worst part? He couldn’t stop.

Cintia rose from her chair, smoothing the skirt of her dress as she looked down at Will with a satisfied smile. “Well, Cassandra,” she said, her voice syrupy and insincere, “I must say, you’ve exceeded all my expectations. There’s nothing left of that sulky person I once knew. Your judgmental behavior and bitterness are perfect for the socialite you are now.”

Will lifted his cigarette to his lips, taking a slow, deliberate drag. The smoke curled elegantly from his lips as he exhaled, his expression perfectly composed. “Well,” he said with a faint smile, “it’s about time someone appreciated my efforts.”

Edna laughed, rising from her chair and adjusting her feathered hat. “Oh, darling, don’t sell yourself short. You’ve become a true gem of Retroville. We’ll be hearing about your exploits for years to come.”

Will watched them both, his heart pounding in his chest as realization settled over him like a suffocating blanket. They were leaving him here. Stuck. Trapped in a world of endless extravagance and shallow pursuits, unable to escape the persona they had crafted for him. He wanted to shout, to beg, to plead for some way out. But the words wouldn’t come. The urges held him firmly in their grasp, forcing him to play his part.

“Goodbye, Cassandra,” Cintia said, her voice soft but final. “Enjoy your new life.”

As they walked away, Cassandra remained seated, her cigarette burning low in his fingers. The weight of the moment pressed down on him, suffocating and inescapable. He lifted the cigarette to his lips once more, inhaling deeply as he stared out at the manicured lawns of the country club.

This was his life now. The bitter, envious remarks, the endless social events, the suffocating opulence—it was all he had left. And as much as he hated it, he knew there was no escape.

He was Cassandra Lacroix.