WARNING: This story doesn't have a happy ending and there are non-consent scenes.

Chapter 1

The late afternoon sun hung low over the horizon, casting long, amber shadows across the manicured lawns of the estate. It was one of those days where the air felt thick with the promise of summer, the kind of weather that made sitting inside a lecture hall impossible. For Josh Braun, being back in his hometown was a strange mix of nostalgia and displacement. He had spent the last two years deconstructing the past in his history classes at college, analyzing the rise and fall of empires, but here, on the pavement with his board under his feet, the world felt blissfully simple. It was just physics, friction, and the rhythmic clack-hiss of urethane wheels on concrete.

Josh adjusted the sleeves of his oversized, thrifted flannel shirt, his slim frame moving with a practiced, fluid grace as he kicked off. The wind caught his chin-length, dark hair, whipping the punkish strands across his face. He brushed them back with a hand adorned with a few silver rings, his androgynous features set in a look of quiet concentration. He wasn't aggressive like some of the other guys; his skating was more about flow, about finding the line between the architecture and the movement.

"Dude, seriously, look at that ledge," Mark shouted, pointing toward the main entrance of the property. "That is premium marble. We’re wasting time on the driveway."

They were trespassing, technically. The "Old House," as everyone in the neighborhood called it, had sat silent for as long as Josh could remember. It was a sprawling, imposing structure, a relic of a different era that seemed to loom judgmentally over the modern world. The architecture was severe, perhaps a bit too grand for the surrounding suburb, with high pillars and dark, heavy windows that reflected the trees like black mirrors. The gardens were impeccably maintained—the grass cut to a military precision, the hedges shaped into geometric perfection—yet there was never a car in the driveway, never a light on in the upstairs windows. It was a ghost house maintained by invisible hands.

"I don't know, man," Josh said, his voice soft, lacking the abrasive edge of his friends. He kicked his board up into his hand, feeling the rough grit tape against his palm. "The gardeners were here earlier. You know how fast they call the cops in this neighborhood."

"You're such a worrywart, Braun," Tyler chimed in, circling them on his own battered deck. "Nobody lives here. It’s probably some tax haven for a rich guy who lives in Europe. Come on. Just one session on the stairs."

Josh looked up at the house. It gave him a creeping sense of unease, a feeling he couldn't quite articulate. It wasn't just the silence; it was the way the house seemed to absorb the light rather than reflect it. But he was twenty, and the adrenaline of the session was humming in his veins. He didn't want to be the buzzkill. He nodded, dropping his board back to the pavement.

"Fine. Quick hits only. Then we bounce."

They moved toward the grand staircase leading up to the double oak doors. The stairs were indeed perfect—smooth, white stone with a long, sturdy metal handrail running down the center. It was a skater’s dream spot, the kind of architectural feature you usually only saw in videos.

Mark went first, ollieing up the first three steps and grinding the ledge, his trucks barking loudly against the stone. He landed sloppily but cheered, the sound echoing a little too loudly in the stillness of the estate. Tyler followed, bailing halfway down and sliding on his backside, laughing as he scrambled up.

"Your turn, history boy," Mark teased, breathless. "Let's see that frontside board slide. You’ve been practicing."

Josh stared at the rail. It was higher than he was used to, the angle steep. He took a deep breath, centering himself. He thought about Emma for a split second—she would probably tell him this was a bad idea, not because of the danger, but because she respected boundaries. But she wasn't here. It was just him and the rail.

He pushed off, gaining speed. The sound of the wheels rose to a hum. One push. Two pushes. He crouched low, his eyes locking onto the shiny metal of the rail.



Pop.

He snapped the tail of the board against the concrete. He was airborne for a suspended second, his body turning, guiding the board toward the metal. He connected. The

metal-on-metal grind was satisfyingly harsh, a vibration that rattled all the way up to his teeth. He was balancing, sliding down the rail, the wind rushing past his ears.

But as he neared the end of the rail, his weight shifted imperceptibly backward. It was a rookie mistake, a moment of hesitation. The board shot out from under his feet like a missile. Josh slammed onto the stairs, his hip taking the brunt of the impact, sending a shockwave of pain up his side. He gasped, scrambling to catch himself, but his eyes were fixed on his skateboard.

Freed from his weight, the board had launched into the air with terrifying velocity. It spun end-over-end, a wooden projectile hurtling toward the house.

Time seemed to slow down. Josh watched, helpless, as the board arced toward one of the massive, ground-floor bay windows.

CRASH.

The sound was explosive, shattering the tranquil silence of the afternoon. The thick pane of glass didn't just crack; it obliterated, showering the interior of the room with jagged shards that caught the sunlight as they fell. The noise seemed to roll across the lawn, bouncing off the trees, impossibly loud.

"Oh, shit!" Tyler screamed, his face draining of color.

Josh scrambled to his feet, ignoring the throbbing pain in his hip. He stared at the gaping hole in the window. The darkness inside the house seemed to stir, swallowing his skateboard into its depths. For a heartbeat, Josh stood frozen, expecting an alarm to blare, or a security guard to burst out the front door.

But there was nothing. Just the settling silence and the dark, gaping maw of the broken window.

"Run! Go, go, go!" Mark was already moving, tucking his board under his arm and sprinting toward the perimeter fence.

Panic, cold and sharp, flooded Josh’s chest. He looked at the window one last time. He couldn't leave his board—it had his stickers, his setup—but the fear of who owned this place, of the police, of the unknown, was stronger. He turned and ran.

His Converse pounded against the immaculate grass, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He caught up to Tyler and Mark, the three of them vaulting over the low stone wall that separated the estate from the public road. They didn't stop running until they were three blocks away, lungs burning, collapsing onto the curb of a mundane suburban street.

"Dude," Tyler wheezed, hands on his knees. " You obliterated that window. That was... that was insane."

Josh sat on the curb, burying his face in his hands. His heart was hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. He had left his board. His fingerprints were all over it. And worse, he had destroyed something that looked incredibly expensive.

"I left my board," Josh whispered, looking up at his friends, his dark eyes wide with anxiety. "My wallet wasn't in my pocket, was it? No, I left it in the car. But the board... maybe I should go back."

"Are you crazy?" Mark shook his head violently. "You go back there, you're getting arrested. We need to vanish. We were never there."

Josh looked back in the direction of the old house, a knot of dread tightening in his stomach. He had the sinking feeling that this wasn't something he could just run away from. That house, with its silent, dark windows, felt like it had been watching them the whole time. And now, it had his skateboard, a hostage in the dark.

Some time went by and Josh was back at college. The fluorescent lights of the college library hummed with a low, headache-inducing frequency that usually helped Josh focus on his modern history notes, but today, the words were swimming on the page. It had been a week since the incident at the old estate, a week of jumping every time his phone buzzed, expecting the police to drag him away for destruction of property. He had tried to bury the memory of the shattering glass and the loss of his favorite deck under piles of coursework and late-night skate sessions at the campus park, but the guilt was a persistent, gnawing weight in his gut.

When his phone finally did ring, vibrating violently against the wooden table, the caller ID didn’t show the local police department. It was his father.

"Hey, Dad," Josh answered, stepping into the hallway, trying to keep his voice casual. "I was just studying for the—"

"Josh," his father’s voice was tight, stripped of its usual warmth. It was the tone he used when discussing serious budget cuts at the municipal department or an environmental crisis. "We had a visitor today. A lawyer. A man in a very expensive suit asking for you."

Josh felt the blood drain from his face, his stomach dropping to his shoes. "A lawyer?"

"He represents the estate of a Ms. Verena von Hollenberg," his father continued, the worry palpable. "They have your skateboard, Josh. They know you broke the window at the old mansion on the hill. The lawyer said... he said Ms. von Hollenberg wants to meet you personally, or she’s pressing charges for trespassing and vandalism. Josh, what happened? You know we can't afford a legal battle with people like this."

Josh leaned against the cold brick wall of the corridor, closing his eyes. His parents were good people—public servants who spent their weekends organizing recycling drives and attending town hall meetings to fight for better zoning laws. They were honest, hardworking, and lived paycheck to paycheck. The thought of bringing financial ruin or legal shame upon them because he wanted to grind a rail made him feel sick.

"It was an accident, Dad. I swear," Josh whispered, his voice trembling slightly. "I didn't mean to break anything. We were just... I was stupid. Don't worry. I'll handle it. I'll come home."

The bus ride back to his hometown two days later felt like a funeral procession. The familiar landscapes rolling past the window offered no comfort, only a reminder of the carefree childhood he felt he was rapidly losing. He had dressed as presentably as he could—black skinny jeans without holes, a button-up shirt buttoned all the way to the top, and his unruly hair tucked behind his ears—but he still felt like an imposter stepping into a world he didn't understand.

When he arrived at the gates of the estate, the house looked even more imposing than it had from the street. The broken window had already been boarded up with a sheet of plywood that looked stark and ugly against the pristine stone. Josh pressed the intercom buzzer, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird.

The heavy oak doors opened not to an angry homeowner, but to a woman who looked like she had stepped out of a high-end corporate catalog. She was in her early thirties, holding a clipboard, her posture rigid and efficient. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a severe chignon, and her gray pencil skirt suit was tailored to within an inch of its life.



"Mr. Braun," she said, her voice cool and detached, stepping aside to allow him entry. "I am Celeste, Ms. von Hollenberg's personal assistant. Please, come in. We have been expecting you."

Josh stepped over the threshold, and the temperature seemed to drop ten degrees. The air inside smelled of beeswax, lemon oil, and something stale, like old perfume trapped in heavy fabric.

"Is... is she here?" Josh asked, his sneakers squeaking awkwardly on the polished marble floor of the foyer.

"Ms. von Hollenberg is in the solarium," Celeste replied, not looking at him as she began to walk briskly down a long hallway. "You should know, Mr. Braun, that Verena does not live here. This property is part of the von Hollenberg estate. It belonged to her aunt, Claudia von Hollenberg, who passed away in the late nineties."

Josh hurried to keep up with her clicking heels. "Oh. So, nobody lives here?"

"Verena maintains the property exactly as her aunt left it," Celeste explained, her tone suggesting that this was a perfectly normal use of a multi-million dollar asset. "It is a sanctuary to her memory. Every item, every piece of furniture, is cataloged and preserved. Which makes your little stunt with the skateboard particularly... expensive."

As they walked deeper into the house, Josh looked around, his anxiety spiking with every step. The aesthetic was a jarring, overwhelming mix of old-world aristocracy and 80s excess. The architecture was classic—high ceilings with crown molding, wainscoting, and crystal chandeliers—but the decor screamed of a specific, bygone decade.

They passed a formal living room where the furniture was upholstered in heavy, dusty rose velvet, flanked by massive porcelain vases and gold-leafed side tables. A grand piano sat in the corner, covered in a collection of silver framed photographs. The walls were adorned with massive abstract paintings in bold, geometric strokes of teal, pink, and black, clashing violently yet purposefully with the antique rugs. It felt like a museum dedicated to a time when greed was good and subtlety was dead.

"Ms. von Hollenberg pays a considerable sum to ensure the climate control and security of this house are state-of-the-art," Celeste said, pausing by a massive set of double doors. "She visits only occasionally to inspect the preservation. It is unfortunate that her visit coincided with your vandalism."

Josh swallowed hard, looking at the towering ceilings and the sheer scale of the wealth on display. He had grown up in a three-bedroom ranch house. His parents worried about the cost of organic vegetables. This woman, this Verena, kept a mansion the size of a hospital empty just to remember an aunt who died thirty years ago.

The realization hit him with the force of a physical blow. The window he broke wasn't just glass; it was likely custom-made, perhaps vintage. The floor his skateboard had skittered across might have been imported Italian marble. If she wanted to, this woman could probably bury him and his family in legal fees without even noticing the money leaving her account. He wasn't just dealing with a homeowner; he was dealing with a different species of power.

"I... I can pay for the window," Josh stammered, though he knew it was a lie. "I mean, I can work it off. I have savings."

Celeste stopped and turned to him, her expression unreadable, her eyes scanning him up and down with a clinical detachment that made him feel like a specimen under a microscope. "It is not just about the money, Mr. Braun," Celeste said softly, her hand resting on the brass handle of the double doors. "It is about the disruption. The disrespect. Verena takes these things very personally."

She pushed the doors open, revealing a blindingly bright room beyond.

"She is waiting for you inside," Celeste said, stepping back and gesturing for him to enter. "Do not waste her time."

The solarium was a blinding expanse of glass and white marble, a stark contrast to the dim, oppressive hallway Josh had just walked through. The afternoon sun flooded the room, illuminating a jungle of perfectly manicured tropical plants—monsteras with leaves the size of car doors, towering palms, and ferns that looked like they had been dusted with emerald powder. The air here was warm, humid, and smelled faintly of orchid fertilizer and expensive cleaning products.

In the center of the room, seated on a white wicker chair with high, fan-shaped backing, sat Verena von Hollenberg.

She was a striking woman, possessing the kind of ageless, preserved beauty that only extreme wealth could buy. She looked to be in her sixties, though her skin was smooth and taut, the work of excellent surgeons who knew the value of subtlety. Her silver hair was cut into a sharp, geometric bob that framed a face of severe angles and cold intelligence. She wore a cream-colored silk blouse and wide-legged trousers that whispered as she shifted slightly, her posture impeccable, her hands resting calmly on her lap.

On the glass coffee table in front of her sat Josh’s skateboard.

It looked obscenely out of place—battered, covered in stickers for punk bands and skate brands, the grip tape worn down to the wood in patches. It was a dirty artifact of the streets invading a sanctuary of pristine stillness.

"Sit," Verena said. Her voice was dry, lacking any warmth, cutting through the humid air like a scalpel. She gestured to a matching wicker chair opposite her.

Josh swallowed, his throat clicking audibly. He moved stiffly, sitting on the edge of the chair, terrified that his jeans might leave a mark on the white cushion. "Ms. von Hollenberg, I... I want to apologize. It was stupid. I didn't mean to—"

"You didn't mean to trespass?" Verena interrupted, her eyes locking onto his. They were a piercing, icy blue, devoid of sympathy. "You didn't mean to use private property as a playground? I was aware of the skaters, Mr. Braun. The gardeners told me. I allowed it because I was under the impression that you stayed by the perimeter, far from the house. I see now that my leniency was a mistake."

"I can pay for the window," Josh blurted out, his hands gripping his knees. "I have some savings. I can get a job. I know it was a big window, but—"

"The window is irrelevant," Verena said, dismissing the shattered glass with a flick of her hand. She leaned forward, her gaze intensifying. "Glass can be replaced. Wood can be repaired. But what your... toy," she nodded disdainfully at the skateboard, "destroyed inside the room cannot."

Josh froze. "What... what do you mean?"

Verena's expression tightened, a flicker of genuine pain crossing her features before she smoothed it back into a mask of indifference. "Standing by that window was a vase. A prototype ceramic piece from the Memphis Group, gifted to my aunt, Claudia, in 1984. It was her favorite possession. It was unique. Irreplaceable. And now, thanks to your negligence, it is dust."

Josh felt the blood drain from his face. He knew about the Memphis Group from his art history electives—postmodern, expensive, rare. "I... I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't," Verena said coldly. "You are a child playing games. But actions have consequences, regardless of intent." She stood up slowly, her movements graceful and fluid. She walked around the glass table, approaching Josh. She didn't look angry in the traditional sense; she looked calculating.

"My aunt Claudia was a remarkable woman," Verena continued, her voice softening slightly as she looked past Josh, out into the garden. "She was vibrant. Alive. She embodied the spirit of her time—the excess, the glamour, the boldness. I was... different. Quiet. Serious. But I worshipped her. When she died, I dedicated myself to preserving her legacy. This estate is her mausoleum, and that vase... that vase was a piece of her soul."

She stopped in front of Josh, looking down at him. "Stand up."

Josh scrambled to his feet, feeling small and clumsy next to her elegant stature. He was slim, not very tall, with a slight build that he usually hid under baggy clothes.

Verena stepped closer, invading his personal space. She reached out, her cool fingers tilting his chin up. Josh flinched, but he didn't pull away. She studied his face with an unnerving intensity, turning his head slightly to the left, then the right.

"I watched the security footage of your accident," she murmured, her eyes tracing the line of his jaw, the shape of his cheekbones. "Over and over. It was striking. The way you move. Your build. And now, seeing you up close... it is undeniable."

"What is?" Josh whispered, his heart pounding so hard he thought she must be able to feel it through her fingertips.

"You have her structure," Verena said, releasing him and stepping back. "Young Claudia. Before the years took their toll. The same cheekbones, the same delicate chin. Even your eyes... there is a resemblance that I find difficult to dismiss as mere coincidence."

She walked back to her chair but didn't sit. She stood behind it, gripping the backrest like a podium.

"Here is the reality of your situation, Mr. Braun," she said, her voice returning to its business-like cadence. "The value of the object you destroyed is in the seven figures. You have no assets. However, your parents do. I have already had my lawyers look into their finances. They own a home, modest but with equity. They have retirement savings. If I pursue this legally—and I will, if forced—I will take everything they have. They will be destitute."

Josh felt like he was going to vomit. The room spun. "Please," he choked out. "Leave them out of this. It was me. Punish me."

"That is precisely what I intend to do," Verena said. "I have a proposal. A settlement, if you will."

She walked over to a side table and picked up a leather-bound folder. "You will work for me. A contract of two years. You will live here, on the estate. All your expenses will be paid. In exchange, the debt is forgiven. No lawsuit. Your parents remain untouched."

"I'll do it," Josh said immediately, relief washing over him. "I'll do anything. Gardening, cleaning, maintenance—"

"I have gardeners," Verena cut him off sharply. "I have cleaners. I do not need manual labor, Mr. Braun. I need... restoration."

She opened the folder and pulled out a photograph. It was an old, glossy 8x10 from the early 80s. It showed a young woman with blonde hair in a tall beehive, wearing a shimmering, structured cocktail dress, holding an all-white cigarette, laughing at a party. She looked radiant, expensive, and untouchable.



Verena held the photo up next to Josh’s face, her eyes darting between the image and the reality.

"You broke something that helped me remember her," Verena said, her voice dropping to a whisper that was both eerie and commanding. "So, you will take its place. You will become the vessel for her memory."

Josh frowned, confusion warring with his fear. "I... I don't understand."

"For the next two years," Verena said, placing the photo on the table next to his battered skateboard, "you will live as Claudia. You will wear her clothes. You will learn her mannerisms. You will learn to walk, talk, and behave exactly as she did. You will be the living portrait of the woman whose memory you desecrated."

"You... you want me to cross-dress?" Josh asked, his voice rising in disbelief. "For two years?"

"I want you to embody her," Verena corrected him, her face hard as stone. "This is not a game. It is a job. You have the physical potential. My team will handle the rest. You will be trained. You will be molded. And when I visit this house, I will see my aunt again. That is the price of your parents' safety."

She slid a heavy fountain pen across the glass table toward him. Next to it, she placed a thick contract.

"Sign it, Josh," she said, using his first name for the first time, making it sound like a trap snapping shut. "Or go home and tell your father why he is losing his pension."

The silence in the solarium stretched thin, taut as a wire ready to snap. Josh stared at the fountain pen lying on the glass table, its gold nib glinting under the harsh afternoon sun. The proposal hung in the air, absurd and terrifying, a fever dream born of wealth and obsession.

"This... this doesn't make any sense," Josh stammered, his voice sounding small in the cavernous, plant-filled room. He looked up at Verena, searching for a crack in her steely demeanor, a sign that this was a twisted joke. "You want me to drop out of college? I'm studying history. I have a scholarship. I can't just vanish for two years to... to play dress-up."

Verena didn't blink. She remained standing behind her chair, her fingers resting lightly on the wicker, her posture rigid. "You are not vanishing, Josh. You are taking a sabbatical. And let us not pretend that a degree in history guarantees you a future. The world is changing. The von Hollenberg interests include a significant stake in the vintage fashion market and textile archiving. To the outside world, you will be my personal assistant, learning the intricacies of high-end curation and estate management. It is a resume builder that most young men would kill for."

"But I'm not a 'young man' in this scenario, am I?" Josh shot back, a spark of his usual defiance flaring up before being crushed by the reality of his situation. "You want me to live as a woman. As your aunt."

"I want you to live as Claudia," Verena corrected him, her voice dropping an octave, imbued with a reverence that made Josh's skin crawl. "There is a difference. You are not merely putting on a costume. You are stepping into a legacy. You are concerned about your education. You will learn about culture, about aesthetics, about the power of image. You will learn the discipline required to maintain beauty."

She walked slowly around the table, the heels of her shoes clicking rhythmically on the marble floor. "Think of the alternative, Josh. Picture your father's face when the subpoena arrives. Picture the 'For Sale' sign on that modest lawn he is so proud of. Picture his pension dissolving into legal fees because his son couldn't control a skateboard."

Josh squeezed his eyes shut. The image was vivid and nauseating. His dad, tired after a long shift, sitting at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. His mom crying quietly in the bedroom. They had sacrificed everything for him to go to college, to have a better life. He couldn't destroy them.

"How... how would it even work?" Josh asked, his voice barely a whisper, defeated. "I'm a guy. I don't know the first thing about... any of this."

"That is why you will be trained," Verena said, her tone shifting from threatening to practical, like a CEO outlining a merger. "You will live here, in this house. You will move into the East Wing, into Claudia's suite. It has been preserved exactly as it was in 1989. You will sleep in her bed. You will wake up to her view."

She gestured vaguely towards the ceiling. "Your wardrobe will consist exclusively of her collection. We are talking about archive pieces—Claude Montana, Thierry Mugler, Yves Saint Laurent, Oscar de la Renta. These are not mere clothes; they are architectural marvels

of fabric. You will learn to wear them with the dignity they demand. My team will instruct you on hair, makeup, and deportment. You will learn to walk in heels, to sit without creasing the silk, to speak with modulation."

"And my life?" Josh asked, looking at his hands—calloused from gripping his board, nails bitten short. "My friends? My girlfriend?"

"You will have one night off a week," Verena said, as if she were being incredibly generous. "From Tuesday evening to Wednesday morning. You may leave the estate, provided you are back by 8:00 AM sharp. During your time here, you are on duty. You will be paid a salary, commensurate with a high-level executive assistant role. It is more money than you would make in a decade of teaching history. You can save it, help your parents, or pay for your tuition when you return to your... former life."

Josh looked at the contract again. The paper was thick, creamy, and covered in dense legal jargon. Clause 4: Appearance and Conduct. Clause 7: Confidentiality. Clause 12: Forfeiture of Rights. It read less like an employment agreement and more like a deed of ownership.

"Two years," Josh murmured. "And then the debt is gone? You leave my parents alone?"

"Completely," Verena promised. "If you complete the term, the vase is forgotten. The window is forgotten. Your parents retire in peace. But if you leave early... if you break character... I will destroy them."

She leaned over the table, her perfume—something sharp and floral—filling his nose. "Do we have an accord?"

Josh felt a cold pit in his stomach. He thought about Emma. She would never understand this. How could he explain that he had to become a living doll for a wealthy recluse? He would have to lie. He would have to tell her he got a demanding job, something that required him to live on-site. It would strain everything, maybe break them.

But then he thought of his dad’s tired smile when he came home for the holidays.
Josh reached out and took the pen. The metal was cold against his fingers. His hand trembled as he hovered over the signature line. He felt like he was signing away his soul, trading his identity for his family's survival. He was a skater, a punk, a guy who didn't care about what people thought—but this was different.

He pressed the nib to the paper. The ink flowed dark and permanent. Joshua Braun.
Verena snatched the contract away the moment he finished, snapping the folder shut with a decisive thud. A small, terrifying smile played on her lips—not of joy, but of possession.

"Excellent," she said, her eyes gleaming with a strange, intense light. "Celeste will show you to your quarters. You will surrender your current clothing and your... phone, for now. We need to begin the immersion immediately."

"Wait, right now?" Josh stood up, panic flaring again. "I didn't bring anything. I need to tell people—"

"Celeste has a phone you may use to make the necessary arrangements," Verena said, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. "But you are not going back to your dorm. You are home now, Claudia."

The use of the name sent a shiver down Josh’s spine. It wasn't a request; it was a command. He looked at his skateboard, still sitting on the table—a piece of trash in a palace of glass.

"Can I... can I at least take my board?" he asked weakly.

Verena looked at the skateboard with disdain. "No. That life is paused. Leave it."

She turned her back on him, walking toward the towering tropical plants, already losing interest in him as a person. She had her artifact.

Celeste appeared at the doorway, her face impassive. "Mr. Braun. Follow me."

Josh cast one last look at the sunlight streaming through the glass, feeling the trap snap shut around him. He turned and followed the assistant into the shadows of the hallway.

Chapter 2

The hallway leading away from the solarium was a tunnel of polished mahogany and silence, broken only by the sharp, rhythmic clack-clack-clack of Celeste's heels. Josh jogged slightly to keep pace, his sneakers squeaking on the parquet floor, a sound that felt humiliatingly childish in this cathedral of wealth. His mind was reeling, the ink on the contract barely dry, yet the reality of his servitude was already closing in.

"Look, Celeste... can I call you Celeste?" Josh asked, his voice echoing too loudly. He lowered it to a conspiratorial whisper, hoping to find a human being beneath her corporate armor. "You have to admit this is... well, it's insane, right? I mean, I get that the vase was expensive, and I feel terrible, really, I do. But turning me into a... a living doll? For two years? Doesn't that seem a little excessive to you?"

Celeste didn't break stride. She checked her watch, a sleek silver timepiece that probably cost more than Josh's entire semester of tuition. "Excessive?" she repeated, the word tasting sour in her mouth. She stopped abruptly in front of a white lacquered door, turning to face him with an expression of mild pity mixed with annoyance. "Mr. Braun, that 'vase' was a unique Sottsass ceramic. It was insured for three million dollars, and its sentimental value to Ms. von Hollenberg was incalculable. You destroyed a piece of art history because you wanted to do a... what do you call it? A grind?"

Josh flinched, looking down at his scuffed Converse. "It was an accident."

"And this is the settlement," Celeste said, her tone devoid of warmth. "Verena could have destroyed your family's financial future with a single phone call. Instead, she is giving you a job, a roof over your head, and a salary. You are not a victim here, Josh. You are remarkably lucky. Most people pay for their mistakes with bankruptcy. You are paying with your vanity."

She pushed the door open. "Now, stop complaining. We have a schedule to keep."

Josh stepped inside and was immediately hit by the smell of antiseptic, lavender, and hot wax. The room was a stark contrast to the rest of the house; it looked like a high-end medical clinic or a surgical suite disguised as a spa. The walls were tiled in pristine white, and in the center of the room stood a padded treatment table covered in crinkling paper. Beside it was a stainless steel cart loaded with terrifying instruments, bottles of oil, and a pot of molten wax that hummed ominously.

Standing next to the cart was a woman who looked like she could snap Josh in half. She was stocky, with forearms like a dockworker, wearing a clinical white tunic and a face mask that hid everything but her eyes. Her eyes were dark, efficient, and completely uninterested in pleasantries.



"This is Ingrid," Celeste introduced her, closing the door behind them and leaning against it, crossing her arms. "She is the estate's resident esthetician and masseuse. She will handle your... preparation."

Ingrid nodded once, a sharp jerk of her chin. "Skin is rough," she noted, her voice thick with a heavy, indeterminate European accent. She walked over to Josh, grabbing his wrist and inspecting his arm hair with the clinical detachment of a butcher eyeing a cut of meat. "Too much hair. Follicles are thick. This will hurt."

"Wait, hurt?" Josh pulled his arm back, stepping away. "What are we doing exactly?"

"We are creating a canvas," Celeste said smoothly. "Claudia von Hollenberg had skin like porcelain. You, unfortunately, have the grooming habits of a wild animal. The hair must go. All of it."

"All of it?" Josh repeated, his voice rising in panic. "Like... my legs?"

"Legs, arms, chest, back," Ingrid listed off, ticking them on her fingers. She pointed a gloved finger lower. "And the rest. The bikini area must be pristine."

Josh felt his face burn hot, a flush of shame and fear crawling up his neck. "You want me to... strip? In front of both of you?"

"Mr. Braun, I have seen more bodies than an undertaker," Celeste sighed, checking her phone. "And Ingrid is a professional. Your modesty is irrelevant to the timeline. We need to begin the laser treatments as soon as your skin can handle it to permanently kill the follicles, but for today, to get a clean base, we wax. Now, undress. Everything. Leave your clothes in the bin."

Josh stood frozen for a moment, looking from the formidable Ingrid to the impatient Celeste. He realized with a sinking heart that there was no way out. He had signed the paper. He was their property now. With trembling fingers, he unbuttoned his flannel shirt. He kicked off his shoes. Peeling off his skinny jeans felt like surrendering his last layer of defense. When he was finally standing there in his boxers, he felt incredibly small and exposed.

"Briefs too," Ingrid barked, slapping the paper on the table. "On the table. Face up."

Josh closed his eyes, hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his underwear, and pushed them down. The humiliation was physical, a cold breeze hitting his skin as he shuffled quickly to the table, scrambling up to cover himself with a small, inadequate towel Ingrid had thrown at him.

"You can watch, or you can check your emails, Celeste," Josh muttered, staring at the ceiling tiles, trying to disassociate from his own body.

"I will supervise," Celeste said, her eyes fixed on him like a hawk. "Verena wants a full report on the condition of the 'canvas.'"

The next hour was a blur of tearing agony. Ingrid worked with a ruthless efficiency. She started with his legs, slathering the hot, sticky wax over his shins. It felt pleasant for a split second, warm and heavy, before she smoothed a strip of cloth over it and—RRRIPP.

Josh gasped, his heels drumming against the table. "Ow! Jesus!"

"Breathe," Ingrid commanded, already applying the next strip. "You are tense. Tense makes the skin hold the hair."

She moved up his body like a relentless machine. His thighs, his stomach, his chest. Josh bit his lip until he tasted copper, tears pricking the corners of his eyes. He had never shaved in his life, let alone waxed. His body, once covered in a soft, dark fuzz that he considered masculine, was being stripped bare, leaving behind angry, red, stinging skin. He felt like he was being flayed alive.

But the worst was yet to come.

"Butterfly," Ingrid ordered, tapping the inside of his knees. "Legs apart. Soles of feet together."

Josh clenched the towel over his groin. "No. I can't... I can do that part myself. Just give me a razor."

"Razors leave stubble. Stubble ruins the silhouette of silk," Celeste said from the corner. "Do as she says, Josh. Don't be a child."

Ingrid didn't wait. She ruthlessly yanked the towel away. Josh instinctively tried to cover himself with his hands, but Ingrid swatted them away with a stern look. "Hands behind head. Do not move, or you will tear skin."

Josh squeezed his eyes shut, his face burning hotter than the wax. He lay there, spread-eagled, completely vulnerable, his most private parts exposed to the harsh fluorescent lights and the gaze of two women who looked at him with zero desire and total scrutiny.

"So much hair," Ingrid tutted, stirring the wax pot. "This will be... very sensitive."

She applied the wax. The heat in that area was shocking, alarming. Josh whimpered, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the edge of the table.

"One, two..." Ingrid didn't even get to three.

RRRIIIPPPP.

A scream tore out of Josh's throat, high-pitched and ragged. He arched his back off the table, his vision spotting with white light. It felt like he had been branded. The pain was sharp, immediate, and lingering, a throbbing pulse of fire in his groin.

"Stillness!" Ingrid scolded, pressing a cool, oily hand against the raw skin to soothe it, though her touch felt clinical, not comforting. "We are not done. The back. The crack. Flip over."

Josh rolled over, burying his face in the crook of his arm to hide the tears that were now leaking out. He felt stripped of everything—his dignity, his masculinity, his agency. He was just a slab of meat being prepped for processing.

"The laser will be better," Celeste's voice drifted over, sounding bored. "In a few weeks, once the inflammation goes down, we will start the sessions. By month three, you will be permanently smooth. Like a statue."

Josh lay there, shivering as the cool air hit his raw, hairless skin, listening to the swish-slap of Ingrid applying more wax. He realized then that the window and the vase were just the beginning.

After the waxing ended, Josh sat on the edge of the table, his skin glowing a furious, blotchy red, vibrating with a residual stinging sensation that covered nearly every inch of his body. He felt raw, stripped, and strangely lighter, a sensation that made him feel ghost-like in his own skin.

Celeste didn't give him time to process the trauma of the waxing. She returned to the room carrying a large, flesh-toned object that wobbled slightly in her grip.

"Stand up," she commanded, placing the object on the counter next to the terrifying wax pot. Josh slid off the table, his legs trembling. He looked at the object. It was a breastplate—a high-neck silicone prosthetic that extended from the collarbones down to the ribcage, featuring a pair of heavy, pendulous breasts that looked to be a solid D-cup. They were aggressively feminine, defying gravity with a perkiness that felt mocking.

"You're joking," Josh whispered, crossing his arms over his bare, red chest. "I have to wear that?"

"Claudia was a voluptuous woman," Celeste said, picking up a bottle of baby powder. "She had a silhouette that commanded a room. You, currently, have the silhouette of a teenage boy. We need to add the architecture."

She dusted the inside of the silicone with powder. "Arms up. We pull it over your head like a sweater. It is tight, and it will be claustrophobic at first. You will get used to it."

Josh raised his arms, squeezing his eyes shut as the cold, rubbery material slid down over his head. It was suffocating for a moment, a tight seal forming against his neck and chest before settling into place. The weight of it was shocking. It pulled at his shoulders, the artificial breasts swaying with a disconcerting realism against his ribcage. When he looked down, his flat chest was gone, replaced by a deep cleavage and pale, synthetic skin that blended disturbingly well with his own neck.

"Now, the lower half," Celeste said, handing him a small scrap of fabric that looked like a thong made of industrial-strength elastic. "This is a gaff."

Josh held it by a string, looking at it with horror. "A gaff?"

"To hide... the anatomy," Celeste explained, her tone as clinical as a doctor discussing a fracture. "You cannot wear Claudia’s tailored trousers or pencil skirts with a bulge, Josh. It ruins the lines."

She proceeded to explain the mechanics of tucking with a terrifying lack of embarrassment. She used terms like "inguinal canals" and "compression" while Josh turned a shade of crimson that matched his irritated skin.

"I can't do that," Josh protested, backing away, clutching the gaff. "That sounds... dangerous. Painful."

"It is uncomfortable, not dangerous, if done correctly," Celeste countered, stepping into his personal space. "Do you want me to call Verena? Do you want to explain to her that you cannot fulfill the contract because you are shy?"

The threat was a sledgehammer. Josh swallowed his pride. He turned his back to them, fumbling with the garment, following Celeste’s detached instructions. It was a humiliating, awkward struggle, a physical denial of his own biology. When he finally pulled the gaff up, the compression was intense, a tight, flat pressure that made him want to walk with his legs crossed.

"Turn around," Celeste ordered.

Josh turned. He looked down. He was smooth. Flat. The combination of the breastplate and the tuck created an hourglass illusion that made his brain short-circuit.

"Better," Celeste nodded, satisfied. She reached into a garment bag hanging on the door. "Now, the undergarments."

She tossed him a set of lingerie in a deep, regal purple. The panties were high-waisted lace, designed to go over the gaff, and the bra was a matching purple satin, wired and sturdy.

"Put them on," she said. "The bra will help anchor the plate and hide the edges."

Josh dressed in the lingerie with fumbling, numb fingers. The satin felt cool and slippery against his skin. The bra straps dug into his shoulders, supporting the weight of the silicone breasts. When he looked in the mirror, he didn't recognize the body reflecting back at him. It was a collage of male and female, artificial and organic.

"And finally," Celeste said, holding out a robe.

It was purple satin, matching the lingerie, with wide sleeves and a sash. Josh slipped his arms into it, tying it tightly around his waist, grateful for the coverage even if the fabric felt too soft, too luxurious for him.

"Sit," Ingrid barked, patting the leather seat of a salon chair that had been swiveled around to face a large, lighted mirror.

Josh sat, the robe falling open slightly to reveal his waxed, smooth legs. Celeste placed a pair of shoes on the footrest. They were mules—backless, purple velvet, with a kitten heel adorned with a fluff of feathers.

"Footwear," Celeste noted. "Claudia never walked flat-footed. Even in the house. These are low. Training wheels. Put them on."

Josh slid his feet into the mules. His arches cramped immediately, his calf muscles tightening to compensate for the lift. He felt precarious, teetering on the small heels even while sitting down.

Ingrid pulled a rolling stool over and grabbed Josh’s hand. Her grip was iron-clad. "Nails," she grunted. "Man hands. Dirty. Cuticles are a disaster."

She began to work with files and buffers. She didn't extend the nails—that would have been too permanent for the "one night off" rule Verena had established—but she shaped them aggressively. She filed them into soft ovals, pushed the cuticles back until the nail beds looked long and elegant, and buffed the ridges away until they shone.

"Clear coat," Ingrid announced, uncapping a bottle that smelled of chemicals and pear drops. She painted a layer of high-gloss clear polish over his nails.

Josh watched his hands transform. They were still his hands, but they looked... pampered. Soft. The clear polish caught the light, making them look wet and feminine. It was subtle, but to Josh, it felt like a neon sign.

"Hair," Ingrid said, spinning the chair around so Josh faced the mirror.

He stared at his reflection. The breastplate created a heavy curve under the purple robe. His face was pale, eyes wide and terrified.

"Verena said no dye," Celeste said, monitoring from the corner. "He needs to be able to blend in on Tuesdays. So, we keep it dark. But the cut needs to change. That shaggy, skater mess is unacceptable."

Ingrid picked up her scissors. *Snip, snip.*

She didn't cut much length, but she changed the architecture of his hair. She trimmed the back shorter, creating a bob that angled sharply towards his chin. She cut layers into the sides to frame his face, softening his jawline. It wasn't an overtly female cut, but it was styled with a precision that read as "expensive."

Then came the hairspray. Clouds of it. The smell was suffocating, a chemical floral scent that screamed 1980s. Ingrid teased the roots with a comb, building volume, lifting the hair away from his scalp until it sat in a structured, immobile helmet of dark gloss.

"Eyebrows," Ingrid muttered, leaning in close with tweezers.

This pain was sharper, more precise than the waxing. She plucked swiftly, thinning out the arches of his brows, removing the stray hairs, creating a defined, lifted shape. It opened up his eyes, making him look perpetually surprised and slightly haughty.

"Makeup," Ingrid announced, opening a tackle box of cosmetics that looked like it contained enough paint to restore a fresco. "This is a lesson. Pay attention. You will have to do this yourself eventually."

She started with a heavy, tacky primer. Then came the foundation—a thick, full-coverage liquid that she stippled onto his skin with a sponge, erasing his pores, his freckles, his natural redness. She painted him into a blank, beige canvas.

"Contour," she explained, taking a brush dipped in a dark, cool-toned powder. "We carve the face. Hide the male bone. Make the cheek pop."

She swept the brush aggressively under his cheekbones, along his jawline, and down the sides of his nose. Josh watched as his face changed shape in the mirror. His jaw looked softer, his cheeks higher.

Then came the color. And there was so much of it.

"Eyes," Ingrid said. She applied a bright, shimmering violent purple shadow from his lash line all the way up to his brow bone—a technique that hadn't been popular for thirty years. She lined his eyes with thick black kohl, top and bottom, and coated his lashes in layers of mascara until they felt heavy and sticky.

"Blush," she said, grabbing a bright fuchsia powder. She didn't apply it to the apples of his cheeks. She swept it high, from his temple down to his cheekbone, a harsh stripe of color that was aggressive and severe.

"Lips," she finished, outlining his mouth with a dark liner before filling it in with a frosted, metallic pink lipstick.

Ingrid stepped back, wiping her hands on a towel. "Done. For now."

Josh stared at the mirror. The person looking back wasn't Josh Braun. It wasn't even a guy in drag. It was a severe, terrifyingly polished woman from 1987. The heavy makeup, the structured hair, the fake breasts heaving under the purple satin robe... he looked like a stranger. He looked like a woman from another era.



"He looks," Celeste said, stepping up behind him and resting a hand on the back of the chair, "like a very young, very dark-haired Claudia. It is... unsettling."

"I look like a clown," Josh whispered, his lips feeling sticky and heavy with the product.

"No," Celeste corrected him. "You look like money. You look like power. Now, stand up. We need to get you into the clothes. The real clothes."

As he walked following Celeste, every step was a negotiation with gravity and shame. The purple velvet mules, despite their modest "training" height, forced Josh’s feet into an unnatural arch, throwing his center of gravity forward. To compensate, he had to engage muscles in his calves and lower back that he didn't even know existed. The result was a halting, precarious gait—a mix of a toddler learning to walk and a giraffe on ice.

"Shoulders back, Josh," Celeste commanded from two steps ahead, her voice echoing in the grand corridor. "You are hunching. Claudia commanded space; she didn't shrink from it. Let the robe flow."

Josh gritted his teeth, the taste of the metallic pink lipstick chemical and foreign on his tongue. He tried to straighten his spine, but the movement caused the heavy silicone breastplate to shift slightly against his chest, a suffocating, alien weight that felt like a permanent panic attack. Beneath the purple satin robe, the gaff was a tight, constricting misery, compressing his anatomy in a way that made every stride feel wrong, as if his body was screaming that parts of it were missing or misplaced.

As they turned the corner toward the main staircase, a door opened, and a young maid stepped out, carrying a stack of linens. She froze. Her eyes went wide, darting from Josh's feathered heels up to the heavy makeup, the structured hair, and the undeniable, voluptuous curve of his chest beneath the satin.

Josh wanted to die. He wanted to dissolve into the floorboards. He instinctively pulled the robe tighter, trying to cover himself, his face burning hot beneath the layers of foundation.

"Eyes forward," Celeste snapped, not even acknowledging the maid. "You are Ms. von Hollenberg's aunt now. You do not cower before the help. Keep moving."

The stairs were a nightmare. They were polished mahogany, slippery and steep. Josh gripped the banister so hard his knuckles turned white beneath the clear polish. He had to place his feet carefully, sideways, terrified that the backless mules would slide off or that he would catch a toe on the hem of the robe and tumble to his death. *Click. Wobble. Step. Click. Wobble. Step.* It was an agonizingly slow ascent, performed under the silent, watchful gaze of the maid below and the unyielding pressure of Celeste above.

"The East Wing," Celeste announced as they finally reached the landing, gesturing down a hallway lined with portraits of stern-faced ancestors. "This entire section is climate-controlled specifically for the preservation of the collection."

She led him to a set of double doors at the end of the hall. She punched a code into a discreet keypad on the wall, and the locks disengaged with a heavy, expensive thunk. Josh stepped inside, and his breath hitched—not from awe, but from the sheer, overwhelming excess of it.

It wasn't a closet. It was a department store. The room was massive, bathed in soft, museum-quality lighting that eliminated shadows. The air was cool and smelled of cedar, lavender, and old money. Rows upon rows of clothing racks stretched out before him, organized by color and designer, protected by clear, garment-grade plastic covers.

"Verena employs a textile conservator who comes in once a month," Celeste explained, walking briskly down the center aisle. "Everything here is cataloged. Everything is vintage. Late 70s to late 80s. The peak of the era."

Josh walked slowly, his fingers brushing against the plastic covers. He saw labels that had no meaning to him: Claude Montana, Thierry Mugler, Yves Saint Laurent, Oscar de la Renta. But all looked expensive.

Up close, the reality of the clothes hit him. They were aggressive. The shoulders were padded out to linebacker proportions, creating jagged, sharp silhouettes. The waists were impossibly tiny, structured with boning and stiff fabrics. There were dresses made of heavy velvet, skirts of stiff taffeta, and power suits in jarring, electric colors—teal, fuchsia, cobalt blue.

"This is..." Josh whispered, "insane. There are hundreds of thousands of dollars here."

"Millions," Celeste corrected him. "And you will wear all of it."

She stopped in front of a section that made Josh’s stomach turn. Fur.

There were dozens of them. Mink. Fox. Chinchilla. Sable . Heavy, voluminous coats that hung like dead weights. To Josh, a strict vegan who didn't even wear wool, it looked like a slaughterhouse on hangers. The sight of the soft, animal pelts, preserved to look as shiny as the day they were skinned, made bile rise in his throat.

"I can't wear those," Josh said, his voice shaking. "I'm vegan. That's... that's dead animals. It's murder."

"It is fashion," Celeste said coldly, reaching out to stroke the sleeve of a white fox fur coat. "And in the 1980s, fur was the ultimate symbol of status. Claudia loved her furs. You will not be exempt from this, Josh. Your personal ethics are not part of the contract. You are a canvas, remember? The canvas does not object to the paint."

She turned away from his horrified expression and gestured to the center island—a massive cabinet with glass-topped drawers.

"Accessories," she said.

The drawers were filled with an Aladdin’s cave of 80s excess. There were belts as wide as wrestling championship titles, made of patent leather and snakeskin with buckles the size of dinner plates. There were scarves of hermès silk. There were sunglasses with frames so large they looked like welding goggles.

And the jewelry.

"Costume and fine," Celeste noted, pulling open a drawer that glittered blindingly. "Clip-on earrings, mostly, since your ears aren't pierced yet—though we may change that. Heavy gold chains. Pearls. Chunky bracelets. In the 80s, more was more."

Josh looked at the walls, which were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling, filled with shoes. Stilettos in patent leather, knee-high boots in suede, pumps in every color of the rainbow. Every single pair had a heel. There wasn't a sneaker or a flat sole in sight.

"It's all so... wasteful," Josh muttered, looking around the room. The silence of the preserved clothes felt heavy, oppressive. "All this money, locked away in the dark. It could feed a city. It could save the rainforest. And she keeps it for... ghosts?"

"She keeps it for legacy," Celeste said, closing the jewelry drawer with a sharp snap. "And now, she keeps it for you. Verena wants you dressed for dinner. She wants to see the silhouette. We need to find something that accommodates the... enhancements."

She turned to the rack of dresses, her eyes scanning the fabrics with predatory efficiency. "Claude Montana," Celeste announced, holding up the hanger. "Fall 1987. This was one of Claudia's signature daytime looks. It demands posture. If you slouch in this, the dress will punish you."

Josh stared at the garment. It was a structured dress in a stark, aggressive white and black zebra print. The fabric looked stiff, unforgiving. The neck was high, a mock-turtle style that promised to choke him, and the shoulders... the shoulders were enormous. They extended outward like architectural wings, padded and sharp.

"Put these on first," Celeste said, tossing a small, flat package onto the velvet ottoman. "Sheer nylons. Sandalfoot. Shade: Barely There."

Josh picked up the package with trembling fingers. He had seen his mother wear pantyhose for church, but the idea of pulling them onto his own body felt surreal. He sat on the ottoman, the purple robe falling open to reveal his smooth, waxed legs. The nylons were cool and synthetic to the touch. As he rolled them up his legs, the sensation was maddeningly strange—a tight, sheer second skin that hissed softly as he smoothed it over his calves and thighs. They squeezed him, creating a uniform, plasticized texture to his lower half.

"Stand up," Celeste ordered. She was holding a wide, black elastic garment with hooks. "The dress requires a specific waist-to-hip ratio. The breastplate gives you the top, but your waist is too boxy. We need to cinch it."

"A corset?" Josh asked, eyeing the device with dread. "I already can't breathe with this silicone thing on my chest."

"It’s a waist cincher," Celeste corrected, stepping behind him. "Arms up."

Josh raised his arms, the heavy prosthetic breasts lifting slightly. Celeste wrapped the cincher around his midsection, right over the gaff and the top of the nylons. She began to hook it from the bottom up. It was tight. Uncomfortably tight. But then she reached for the laces at the back.

"Take a deep breath," she instructed.

Josh inhaled. Celeste pulled.

The air was squeezed out of his lungs in a rush. Josh gasped, grabbing the edge of the wardrobe for support. The pressure on his ribs was intense, a vice-like grip that forced his spine straight.

"Too tight," he wheezed.

"Beauty is pain, Josh," Celeste muttered, tying off the laces. "Now you have a waist."

Next came the dress. It had to be stepped into. Josh shimmied the zebra-print fabric up his body. It was heavy and stiff, lined with something that felt slippery against his skin. When he pulled it up over his hips and the cincher, it fit like a glove. Celeste zipped the back, the sound a long, final *zzzzzip* that sealed him inside.

The high neck clamped around his throat. The shoulder pads sat heavy on his frame, extending his silhouette inches past his natural shoulders. The skirt ended just above his knees, exposing his nylon-clad legs.

"Belt," Celeste said, handing him a wide, dark brown leather belt with a massive gold buckle. She cinched it over the dress, right at his newly manufactured waist. It dug in, adding another layer of pressure, emphasizing the flare of the hips and the swell of the fake breasts above.

"Boots," she pointed to the floor.

They were knee-high, made of rich, chocolate-brown leather that matched the belt. The heels were stiletto-thin and at least four inches high—significantly higher than the "training mules" he had been wearing.

Josh sat back down, his corset digging into his ribs, and struggled to pull the boots on. The leather was stiff, hugging his calves tightly. When he stood up, the world tilted.

He wobbled violently, his center of gravity completely thrown off. The heels forced his feet into a steep arch, pushing his weight onto the balls of his feet. He shot up in height, towering over Celeste now. The boots pinched his toes, forcing them into a narrow point.

"Gloves," Celeste said, not waiting for him to stabilize. She slid a pair of soft brown leather gloves onto his hands, covering his manicured nails and his masculine knuckles.
"And finally... the armor."

She began to drape him in gold. Thick, chunky gold chain bracelets were clamped over the gloves. A massive, geometric gold collar was fastened around the high neck of the dress, cold and heavy. Huge, clip-on gold earrings—disks the size of coasters—were snapped onto his lobes, pinching the skin immediately.

"Turn around," Celeste commanded. "Look at her."

Josh turned slowly, afraid he would topple over in the boots. He faced the full-length mirror.



The breath he was struggling to take caught in his throat.

Josh Braun was gone. In his place stood a terrifying, imposing woman of the 1980s.

The transformation was absolute. The massive shoulder pads of the zebra dress squared off his frame, making him look broad and powerful. The corset and the belt sucked his waist in so tightly that the silicone breasts looked enormous and heaving in contrast. The high-cut skirt and the tall boots elongated his legs, making them look endless.

He looked aggressive. He looked wealthy.

"I look..." Josh started, his voice sounding strange to his own ears, muffled by the collar and the weight of the persona. "I look scary."

"You look authoritative," Celeste corrected, adjusting one of the shoulder pads. "Claudia didn't walk into a room; she invaded it. This silhouette is designed to intimidate. It says, 'I am here, and I am expensive.'"

But internally, Josh was screaming. The sensory overload was a nightmare. The corset was a constant, crushing hug that made panic flutter in his chest. The heavy breastplate dragged his skin down, hot and sweaty against his chest. The dress restricted his arms; he couldn't raise them past his shoulders. The boots were torture devices, sending shoots of pain up his shins with every micro-adjustment he made to stay upright.

He felt trapped. Encased in leather, boning, and heavy fabric. He was a doll inside a box, unable to move freely, forced to stand in this hyper-feminine, hyper-sexualized posture just to keep his balance.

"Try to walk," Celeste said, stepping back to observe. "Heel to toe. Swing the hips. The dress is tight; you cannot take long strides. You must mince, but with power."

Josh took a step. The heel of the boot struck the wood floor—CLACK. The sound was loud, authoritative. He tried to move his leg forward, but the skirt was tight, forcing him to take a smaller step. He wobbled, throwing his arms out—the leather gloves sliding against the air—and almost twisted his ankle.

"Smaller steps!" Celeste barked. "Keep your core tight. Use the corset. The boots are part of your legs now. Do not fight them."

Josh tried again. *Clack. Clack. Clack.*

It was exhausting. Every step was a calculated effort. The heavy earrings swung against his neck, bruising him. The belt dug into his stomach. But in the mirror, the reflection didn't show the pain. It just showed a tall, powerful woman in zebra print and leather, stalking across the room like a predator.

The final touch was a cloud of scent that felt like a physical assault. Celeste picked up a faceted glass bottle—Dior Poison, the heavy, intoxicating fragrance that defined a decade of excess. She sprayed it generously into the air and made Josh walk through the mist, then dabbed it behind his ears and on his wrists, right over the leather gloves.

"Sweet, spicy, and aggressive," Celeste noted, capping the bottle. "Just like her."

She then draped a massive, slouchy brown leather bag over his right shoulder. It was heavy, filled with god-knows-what to give it the proper weight and drape. The strap dug into the shoulder pad of the zebra dress, adding yet another layer of pressure to his frame.

"Walk," Celeste commanded. "We have twenty minutes before dinner. You need to learn to coexist with the boots."

For the next half hour, the bedroom became a runway of torture. Celeste didn't care about grace yet; she cared about survival. She taught him to trust the heel, to lock his core so the corset could do the work of holding him up, and to counterbalance the weight of the breastplate and the purse.

"Don't look at your feet," she snapped every time Josh’s gaze drifted downward. "The ground isn't going anywhere. Chin up. You are looking at the horizon, at your next conquest. Not at the rug."

Josh tried to zone out. He focused on the mechanics: lift, extend, place, shift weight. But the sensory experience was overwhelming. The smell of the perfume was dizzying. The sound of the leather rubbing against itself—the gloves against the bag, the boots against the nylons—was a constant reminder that he was wrapped in the skin of dead animals. For a vegan who checked the ingredients on every bag of chips, wearing this amount of leather felt like wearing a suit made of guilt. He felt dirty, complicit in a cruelty he had spent his adult life fighting against.

"Good enough," Celeste decided, though her tone suggested it was barely passable. "Verena is waiting."

The walk to the dining room was a gauntlet. They had to descend the main staircase again. This time, there was no hiding. A butler was polishing the banister in the hall below. A maid was arranging flowers on a side table.

Josh stood at the top of the stairs, his heart hammering against the silicone breastplate. The boots felt like stilts. The dress, with its tight skirt, restricted his legs so much that he had to take each step sideways, gripping the rail with his gloved hand. *Click... wobble... step.*

He saw the staff look up. He saw the shock in their eyes, quickly masked by professional indifference. They saw a man in a dress, painted like a doll. The humiliation burned hotter than the wax had. He wanted to scream, to rip the wig off, to scrub the makeup from his face. But he thought of his parents' house, of the debt, and he swallowed the scream. He kept walking, the heels ringing out his shame with every step.

When he finally navigated the marble floor of the foyer and entered the dining room, the scene was set for an intimate, high-stakes interrogation. The room was dimly lit by a massive crystal chandelier, the table set with enough silverware to perform a surgery. Verena stood by the fireplace, holding a crystal glass of sparkling water. When Josh entered, she turned.

Silence hung in the room for a long moment. Verena's eyes scanned him from the tips of his feathered hair to the points of his stiletto boots. She took in the aggressive shoulders of the Montana dress, the cinched waist, the way the leather accessories caught the light.
A slow, genuine smile spread across her face. It was the first time Josh had seen her look anything other than cold or calculating.

"Remarkable," she breathed, setting her glass down. "The posture... it's terrified, yes, but the silhouette? The silhouette is perfect."

She walked over to him, circling him like a buyer inspecting a thoroughbred. "The zebra print. It was always one of my favorites on her. It captures the wildness, the untamable nature. And you... you wear it well, Josh."

"I can barely walk," Josh muttered, his voice sounding rough compared to the elegance of the room.

"You will learn," Verena dismissed, gesturing to the table. "Please. Sit."

This was the next hurdle. The chair was high-backed, heavy, and upholstered in velvet. Josh approached it, unsure of how to navigate the mechanics of sitting in a skirt that ended above his knees and a corset that fused his spine into a straight line.

"Not like a truck driver," Verena snapped as Josh began to lower himself. "Knees together. Smoothly. Perch on the edge, then slide back."

Josh corrected himself, squeezing his legs together—painfully aware of the gaff—and lowered himself gingerly. The corset dug into his hips. The breastplate pushed up, creating a shelf of cleavage under his chin.

Dinner was served immediately by a silent waiter. It was a single plate, covered by a silver cloche.

The waiter lifted the cover.

Josh stared down at the plate. It was a veal cutlet. Pale, tender meat swimming in a dark reduction sauce, accompanied by buttery mashed potatoes and glazed carrots.

His stomach turned. "I... I can't eat this."

Verena, who had taken her seat at the head of the table, paused while unfolding her napkin. "Excuse me?"

"It's veal," Josh said, looking up at her, pleading with his eyes beneath the heavy purple eyeshadow. "It's a baby cow. I told you, I'm vegan. I don't eat meat. I definitely don't eat veal."

Verena picked up her knife and fork, her movements precise. "Josh, let us be clear. You are an actor in a role. The role requires maintenance. Claudia was a carnivore. She loved red meat. She believed it gave her vitality. A vegan diet will not sustain the muscle tone or the skin quality required for this look. You will become gaunt. I need you curvaceous."

"But it's against my beliefs," Josh insisted, his hands gripping the edge of the table, the leather gloves creaking.

"Your beliefs are suspended for the duration of the contract," Verena said, her voice turning icy. "You are eating what I provide. It is calculated by a nutritionist to maintain your weight at exactly 130 pounds while keeping your energy up for the training. Eat the meat."

She stared at him, unblinking. The threat was unspoken but loud: *Eat the meat, or lose your parents' house.*

Josh looked at the veal. He felt tears prick the corners of his eyes, threatening to ruin Ingrid’s masterpiece of makeup. With a trembling, gloved hand, he picked up the heavy silver fork. He cut a small piece of the meat. He put it in his mouth.

It tasted like ash. It tasted like defeat. He chewed mechanically, trying not to gag, and swallowed.

"Good," Verena said, taking a sip of her water. "Now, your legs. Look at them."

Josh looked down. His legs were slightly apart under the table.

"Cross them," Verena instructed. "At the knee. Not the ankle. The knee."

Josh tried to lift his right leg over his left. The boots were heavy. The skirt was tight. The gaff made the movement excruciatingly uncomfortable. He grunted with effort, finally hooking his knee over.

"Higher," Verena critiqued. "The calf must not squash against the knee. It must drape. Point the toe of the top boot down. Elongate the line."

Josh pointed his toe, his shin muscle cramping.

"And your hands," she continued, watching him take another bite of the potatoes. "You are holding the fork like a shovel. Lightly. Balance it. And mind your lipstick. Do not drag the food across your lips. Open wide, place the food inside, close the lips around the utensil without smudging the outline."

It was a nightmare of micromanagement. Every bite was a puzzle. Every movement was corrected. Josh sat there, encased in leather and whalebone, sweating under the wig, eating dead animal, being told how to sit, how to chew, how to exist.

Chapter 3

The dining room doors closed behind them, shutting away the remains of the veal, but the night was far from over. Celeste led the way, her heels silent on the plush carpet of the hallway, while Josh followed, his boots striking the floor with a heavy, uneven rhythm that betrayed his exhaustion. He hoped, desperately, that he would be allowed to collapse into a bed, to peel off the suffocating layers of silicone and leather, but Verena turned right, leading them into a room that felt less like a home and more like a high-end nightclub frozen in 1985.

It was a private wet bar, a shrine to nightlife constructed in black marble, smoked glass, and chrome. The lighting was low and moody, emanating from neon strips hidden behind crown molding that cast a sickly, violet glow over the room. A curved leather sofa dominated the center, facing a massive, mirrored bar stocked with bottles that looked like they had been gathering dust for decades.

"Sit," Verena commanded, pointing to the sofa.

Josh lowered himself carefully, the corset biting into his ribs as he bent. The zebra-print dress rode up his thighs, the stiff fabric crinkling, forcing him to keep his legs pressed tightly together to maintain even a shred of modesty. He adjusted the heavy leather purse on his shoulder, the strap digging into his collarbone, but before he could relax, Celeste placed a crystal flute in front of him.

"Chablis," Celeste announced. "1986. Crisp. Oaky."

"I don't drink wine," Josh murmured, staring at the pale yellow liquid. "Especially not after... that meal."

"Claudia drank a bottle a day," Verena said, settling into an armchair opposite him, crossing her legs with an elegance Josh knew he was expected to mimic. "It greases the wheels of social interaction. Drink. It will help you relax the tension in your shoulders. You look like a frightened linebacker."

Josh picked up the glass with his gloved hand, the brown leather contrasting sharply with the delicate crystal. He took a sip. It was dry, acidic, and burned going down. He suppressed a grimace, setting the glass down quickly.

"Now," Verena said, leaning forward, her eyes gleaming in the dim light. "The centerpiece."

Celeste stepped out from behind the bar, carrying a long, rectangular object that looked like a sleek pencil case made of gold-plated metal. She placed it on the black glass coffee table with a heavy clink.

"Open it," Verena instructed.

Josh reached out, his leather-clad fingers fumbling with the clasp. It sprang open. Inside, resting on a bed of red velvet, were ten cigarettes. But they were unlike any cigarettes Josh

had ever seen. They were absurdly, impossibly long—pure white wands that seemed to stretch on forever.

"Nat Sherman 164s," Verena whispered, the name rolling off her tongue like a prayer. "They stopped manufacturing these years ago. But I have a source. A town... a place that understands the value of tradition. I had them imported specifically for you."

"They're huge," Josh said, staring at the white cylinders. "And I don't smoke. I hate the smell. It makes me sick."

"Irrelevant," Verena snapped. "Smoking was Claudia's punctuation. It was how she paused a conversation, how she flirted, how she asserted dominance. A woman holding a Nat Sherman 164 isn't just smoking; she is extending her reach. She is occupying space." She gestured to the case. "Pick one up."

Josh hesitated, looking at Verena's stern face, then at the cigarettes. He knew resistance was futile. He plucked one from the case. It felt light and fragile, yet the length was intimidating. It was almost seven inches long.

"In the V of your fingers," Verena coached, her voice dropping to a clinical drone. "Index and middle. Not at the base, Josh, you aren't a construction worker on a break. Hold it near the center. Let it balance. Let your wrist go limp. Show the vulnerability of the wrist, but the strength of the hold."

Josh adjusted his grip, the leather of his gloves creaking softly. He held his hand up, his wrist bent awkwardly.

"Better," Verena nodded. Celeste appeared at his side with a heavy gold lighter. She flicked it, a tall flame dancing in the violet light.

"Lean into it," Verena ordered. "Don't bring the cigarette to the flame frantically. Bring the tip to the fire slowly. Suck. gently. Cheeks in."

Josh leaned forward, the huge shoulder pads of the dress rising up around his ears. He put the filter between his lips—which felt sticky with the metallic pink lipstick—and touched the tip to the flame. He inhaled.

Smoke, hot and acrid, flooded his mouth.

He pulled back immediately, his throat closing up in panic. He tried to exhale, but the smoke caught in his windpipe.

Cough. Cough. HACK.

Josh doubled over, his hand flying to his chest, the breastplate heaving. The coughing fit was violent, shaking his entire frame. The long cigarette wobbled dangerously in his trembling fingers, ash falling onto the black carpet.

"Pathetic," Verena sighed, watching him struggle for air. "But expected. Control yourself, Josh. Tears ruin the mascara."

Josh wheezed, his eyes watering, the taste of burnt tobacco coating his tongue. "I can't... I can't do this. It's poison."

"It is atmosphere," Verena corrected him. She inhaled deeply through her nose, her eyes closing for a second. The room was filling with the heavy, cloying scent of the tobacco mixed with the aggressive floral notes of the Dior Poison perfume. "That smell... it's her. It's the smell of my childhood. Of her parties. You need to inhale, Josh. You are merely puffing."

"I'll vomit," Josh gasped, wiping his eyes carefully with the back of his gloved hand so as not to smudge the eyeliner.

"You will not," Verena said. "Again. This time, inhale the smoke into your lungs. Hold it for a heartbeat. Then, exhale through pursed lips. A thin stream. Upwards. Blow it towards the ceiling, like you are bored with the world."

Josh looked at the smoking wand in his hand. He hated it. He hated the way it looked, the way it smelled, the way it represented everything he was fighting against. But he looked at Verena, and he saw the obsession in her eyes. She wasn't seeing Josh choking; she was waiting for Claudia to emerge from the smoke.

He brought the cigarette to his lips again. The taste of the filter was bitter. He took a drag. The heat hit the back of his throat. He forced himself to override the gag reflex, pulling the smoke down into his virgin lungs. It burned like fire. His head spun immediately, a rush of nicotine dizziness hitting him.

He held it, his chest tight against the corset.

"Chin up," Verena instructed softly. "Exhale."

Josh tilted his head back, the structured bob swinging slightly. He pursed his painted lips and blew. A long, thin stream of blue smoke shot upwards, catching the neon light.



"Beautiful," Verena murmured, watching the smoke curl. "The way you hold it... with the gloves. It’s perfect. Again."

"I'm dizzy," Josh whispered, the room tilting slightly.

"That is the rush," Verena said, taking a sip of her wine. "Claudia lived on that rush. You will finish the cigarette, Josh. All of it. And then, we will work on the ash flick. It must be dismissive. Like you are flicking away a pest."

Josh took another drag, the nausea rising in his stomach to meet the veal. He sat there in the dim light, a prisoner in leather and lace, poisoning himself one breath at a time, while Verena watched with the rapt attention of a devotee at an altar.

An hour had passed in the dim, neon-lit bar. The air was thick with a blue haze that burned Josh’s eyes. He was on his second glass of the oaky, acidic wine and beginning his third Nat Sherman 164. His head was swimming with a toxic cocktail of nicotine, alcohol, and adrenaline. Every time he tried to lean back to relieve the pressure on his corset, Verena would snap her fingers.

"Posture, Josh. You are collapsing into yourself. Claudia never slumped. She reclined. There is a difference. Engage the core. Drape the arm."

Josh was trembling. The nicotine rush was making his hands shake, which made the act of holding the seven-inch cigarette "elegantly" near impossible. He felt sick, his stomach churning around the veal he had been forced to eat.

"Please," Josh rasped, his voice rough from the smoke. "I need... I need to call my parents. It’s late. They’ll be freaking out. If I don't call, my dad might drive down here."

Verena swirled her wine, considering him. She looked at the clock on the wall—a geometric, Memphis-style piece. "A valid point. We don't want a scene at the gate."

She nodded to Celeste. "Bring him the phone."

Celeste produced a bulky, black cordless phone from behind the bar—the kind with a long, retractable antenna. She handed it to Josh.

"Thank you," Josh said, reaching for it with both hands.

"Ah-ah," Verena tutted, stopping him with a raised hand. "Do not put down the cigarette."

Josh froze. "What? I can't smoke and talk to my dad. That's... disrespectful. And he'll hear it."

"Then you will have to be very discreet," Verena said, her eyes narrowing with amusement. "This is a test of your poise, Josh. Can you maintain the persona while dealing with the mundane stresses of your former life? Can you be Claudia on the outside, while being Josh on the inside?"

She gestured to his legs. "Cross them. Higher. Good. Now, phone in the left hand. Cigarette in the right. Keep the cigarette away from the receiver, or the smoke will make you cough. Begin."

Josh felt a bead of sweat trickle down his temple, cutting through the heavy foundation. He felt absurd. He was sitting in a dim, 80s nightclub, wearing a zebra-print dress, leather gloves, and fake breasts, about to lie to the man who taught him how to ride a bike.

He dialed the number with a gloved finger. The keys beeped loudly. He brought the phone to his ear, the hard plastic pressing against the massive gold earring.

Ring. Ring.

"Hello? Josh?" His father's voice was frantic. "Where are you? We've been calling for hours."

"Hey, Dad," Josh said, trying to keep his voice steady, though the corset was restricting his breath. "I'm... I'm okay. I'm at the estate. With Ms. von Hollenberg."

"Is that lawyer there? Josh, listen, your mother and I are looking into legal aid. We can't let them bully you. We can fight this."

Josh watched Verena. She was staring at him intently, mimicking a smoking motion with her hand. *Take a drag*, she mouthed.

Josh felt panic rise in his throat. He couldn't. Not while his dad was talking about saving him. But Verena's expression hardened. She pointed to the cigarette, then to his mouth.

With a trembling hand, Josh raised the long, white wand to his lips. He took a drag, the smoke hitting his raw throat. He squeezed his eyes shut, holding the smoke in his lungs as his father continued.

"I don't care how rich she is, Josh. It was an accident. We can put a lien on the house if we have to, but—"

Josh exhaled the smoke slowly, turning his head away from the phone, blowing a thin stream toward the neon lights as he had been taught. He felt like a traitor.

"No, Dad," Josh interrupted, his voice slightly strained as he suppressed a cough. "No lawyers. You can't... you can't afford that. And neither can I."

"Are you okay? You sound... breathless," his father asked, suspicion creeping into his tone.

"I'm fine," Josh lied, taking a sip of wine to soothe the tickle in his throat. The leather glove creaked against the glass. "I'm just... tired. Look, we made a deal. A work settlement. I'm going to stay here. For a while."

"Stay there? For how long?"

"Two years," Josh whispered.

"Two years?!" His father's voice cracked. "Josh, your degree. Your life. You're going to be a servant for two years over a window?"

"It wasn't just a window, Dad. It was... artwork. Look, it's a good job," Josh forced the words out, looking down at his stiletto boots. "I'm going to be a... personal assistant. It pays well. I can save up. And the debt gets wiped clean. Please. I signed the contract. It's done."

Verena tapped her own knee. Josh looked up. She gestured for him to re-cross his legs; they had slipped slightly. He shifted his weight, the gaff pinching painfully, the leather skirt rustling. He felt grotesque.

"I don't like this, son," his father said, his voice heavy with defeat. "It feels wrong. Are you sure you're safe? Is she... is she treating you okay?"

Josh looked at his reflection in the mirrored bar. The purple eyeshadow, the helmet of hair, the aggressive shoulder pads. He looked like a stranger. A victim dressed as a predator.

"I'm safe, Dad," Josh said, taking another drag of the cigarette, the nicotine making the room spin. "She's... she has specific standards, but I'm safe. I have a room. Food." *Veal*, he thought bitterly.

"Okay," his father sighed. "Okay. But you call us. Every week. If anything weird happens, you come home. We'll figure out the money."

"I know, Dad. I love you."

"Love you too, kid."

Josh lowered the phone, his hand shaking so badly the antenna rattled. He placed it on the table.

"Excellent," Verena said softly, a look of perverse satisfaction on her face. "You handled that with surprising grace. And you didn't drop the ash."

She pointed to the end of his cigarette, where a long, grey worm of ash was defying gravity.

"Flick it," she commanded. "Dismiss the conversation. Dismiss the guilt. Flick it."

Josh stared at the ash. He felt a tear cut a track through the powder on his cheek. He tapped the cigarette against the crystal ashtray. The ash fell.

"Now," Verena said, standing up and smoothing her skirt. "Finish the wine. It’s time for bed. You have an early start. A lady must always be rested to face her public."

Josh looked at the half-full glass of wine, then at the cigarette burning down toward his gloved fingers. He felt hollowed out, as if the phone call had severed the last line to his reality. He brought the glass to his lips and drank, praying that sleep would come quickly and that, for a few hours at least, he wouldn't dream of leather and smoke.

The climb to the second floor was a blur of vertigo and stumbling. The combination of the empty stomach, the potent 1986 Chablis, and the treacherous stiletto boots turned Josh’s legs into jelly. He leaned heavily on Celeste, his arm draped over her shoulder, the heavy leather purse sliding down to his elbow, dragging him down like an anchor.

"Easy," Celeste muttered, practically hauling him up the last few steps. "You need to build a tolerance, Josh. Claudia could drink a sailor under the table and still walk a straight line in four-inch heels."

They reached the East Wing, and Celeste pushed open the double doors to the master suite. Even through his drunken haze, Josh blinked in awe. It was vast, a cathedral of feminine luxury. The walls were upholstered in padded silk of a pale, dusty pink. A massive four-poster bed dominated the center, draped in layers of cream lace and satin, looking more like a wedding cake than a place to sleep. A vanity table the size of a desk sat near the window, crowded with crystal perfume bottles and silver-backed brushes.

"Stand here," Celeste commanded, guiding him to a dressing screen in the corner. "Let’s get you out of the armor."

The undressing process was the single greatest moment of Josh’s life, a spiritual experience of physical release.

First, the boots. Celeste unzipped them, and Josh stepped out, his feet cramping as his arches finally touched the flat carpet. He groaned, wiggling his crushed toes. Next, the belt and the zebra-print dress. The zipper hissed down his spine, and the heavy, stiff fabric fell to the floor, taking the massive shoulder pads with it.

Then came the torture devices. Celeste unlaced the corset. As the pressure released, Josh took a massive, gasping breath, his ribs expanding painfully as they remembered their original shape. His skin was marked with angry red indentations from the boning.

"Breastplate," Celeste said, helping him peel the sweaty, heavy silicone from his chest. The cool air hitting his skin felt like heaven.

Finally, the gaff. Josh turned away to remove it, peeling the tight elastic down. The relief was immediate and overwhelming, a dull ache slowly fading as his anatomy was allowed to return to its natural state. He stood there for a moment, naked and shivering, feeling battered, bruised, and incredibly small.

"Bath," Celeste said, handing him a robe. "Ten minutes. Don't drown."

The bathroom was all pink marble and gold fixtures. Josh sank into the sunken tub, the hot water soothing his aching muscles. But he couldn't escape the aesthetic. The water had been prepped with bath oils—rose and jasmine—a cloying, floral scent that coated his skin, marking him.

Scrubbing the makeup off was a battle. He used cotton pads soaked in oil to dissolve the heavy foundation and the stubborn waterproof mascara. It took time, rubbing until his skin was raw, but eventually, Josh stared back from the mirror. He looked exhausted, his eyes bloodshot, dark circles forming, but it was him. For a second.

"Time's up," Celeste called from the bedroom. "The night ritual."

Josh walked out, drying his hair with a towel. He looked for something to wear that didn’t look too feminine, but Celeste had other plans.

"This is a peignoir," she said, holding up a garment of sheer, plum-colored chiffon. "It is what she slept in. You are in character, Josh. Even in your dreams."

She made him slip into the nightgown. It was light as air, trimmed with ostrich feathers at the cuffs, feeling disturbingly sensual against his clean skin. On his feet, he was forced into a pair of matching plum satin mules with a kitten heel.

"Sit at the vanity," Celeste ordered.

Josh slumped onto the velvet stool. He was so tired he could barely keep his head up. Celeste stood behind him, brushing his damp, dark hair. She applied a leave-in conditioner that smelled of almonds, then began to section his hair.

"Rollers," she explained, twisting a section of his hair and wrapping it around a pink foam cylinder, snapping it shut against his scalp. "To ensure volume in the morning. Sleeping on them takes practice."

She covered his face in a thick, expensive night cream, patting it into his skin until he felt greasy and shiny.

"And now, the insurance," Celeste said.

"Insurance?" Josh mumbled, his eyes closing.

"Lean forward."

Josh leaned toward the mirror. He felt Celeste's cool hands on his bare back, just below the shoulder blade. Then—slap, smooth. Slap, smooth.

"What was that?" Josh asked, reaching back to touch the two square patches adhering to his skin.

"Nicotine patches," Celeste said, wiping her hands. "High dose. Verena wants the craving to be real. By next week, you won't be choking on the cigarettes; you'll be asking for them."

Josh stared at her in the reflection, horror cutting through his drunkenness. "You're... you're drugging me. You're making me an addict."

"We are building a habit," Celeste corrected. She picked up the gold lighter and the pack of Nat Shermans. She pulled one out and placed it between Josh's lips.

"One last puff," she whispered. "To seal the day."

Josh wanted to spit it out. He wanted to scream. But his body was heavy as lead, and the patches were already starting to tingle on his skin, sending a confusing signal of alertness mixed with exhaustion to his brain. He let Celeste light it.

He took a drag, his eyes half-closed. The smoke curled up, mixing with the scent of rose bath oil and the almond hair product. It was the smell of the room, the smell of the house, the smell of his prison.



He smoked it down to the filter, his hand shaking, ash falling into a crystal dish.

"Good girl," Celeste said—a slip of the tongue, or perhaps not. She extinguished the cigarette. "Lights out."

She helped him to the massive bed. Josh climbed in, the satin sheets cool and slippery. The foam rollers dug into his scalp no matter how he turned. The patches itched on his back. The smell of stale smoke lingered in his nose.

As the room went dark, Josh curled into a ball, pulling the plum peignoir tight around him. He felt the darkness of the house pressing in, the weight of the contract, the debt, and the clothes. He closed his eyes, praying that when he woke up, he would be back in his dorm room.

Chapter 4

The morning sun that filtered through the heavy cream drapes didn't bring warmth; it brought a pounding, rhythmic throb to Josh's temples. He woke up with a groan, his mouth tasting like an ashtray, his stomach churning with a violent nausea that made the room spin before he even opened his eyes. The foam rollers Celeste had forced him to sleep on had dug into his scalp all night, leaving his head tender and sore.

"Rise and shine," Celeste's voice cut through the fog, sharp and unyielding.

She was already there, standing by the bed, looking infuriatingly fresh in her grey suit. She held a silver tray. On it sat a glass of water, two white pills, and the gold lighter.

"I think I'm going to throw up," Josh mumbled, pulling the plum peignoir tighter around himself, his voice raspy. "My head is splitting."

"Nicotine withdrawal mixed with a mild hangover," Celeste diagnosed without sympathy. "Your body is processing the patches. It gets worse before it gets better. Sit up."

Josh struggled to a sitting position, the room tilting. "This can't be withdrawal, I'm not addicted. I can't... I can't do this today."

"You can, and you will," Celeste said, handing him the pills and the water. "Take these. They will settle the stomach and kill the headache. Verena expects you downstairs in forty minutes."

Josh swallowed the pills, the water cool against his parched throat. He barely had time to set the glass down before Celeste was holding out a fresh Nat Sherman 164.

"No," Josh pleaded, recoiling. "Please. I feel sick."

"The quickest way to fix your situation is to feed your need," Celeste said. Her tone left no room for argument. She flicked the lighter. "Inhale. Deeply. It will steady your hands."

It was a nightmare logic, but Josh was too weak to fight. He took the cigarette with trembling fingers. The first drag made his stomach lurch, but as the smoke filled his lungs, a strange, calming numbness washed over his nerves. The shaking in his hands stopped. The headache dulled slightly. He hated himself for it, but he smoked it down to the filter, sitting in the satin sheets, feeling the trap of addiction clicking shut around him.

"Good," Celeste said, taking the butt away. "Now, the armor."

The morning routine was a repetition of the previous day's humiliation, but with the added misery of sore skin. Celeste reapplied the adhesive for the breastplate, the cold silicone settling onto his chest like a parasite. Then came the gaff. Josh winced as he tucked himself away again; the area was tender from the waxing and the previous day's constriction. Being forced to flatten his manhood for a workout felt particularly cruel.

"Gym attire," Celeste announced, opening a drawer he hadn't seen yesterday.

She pulled out a high-cut leotard in a blinding shade of teal spandex. Along with it came shiny, flesh-tone tights, pink leg warmers, and a white headband.

"You have to be kidding me," Josh stared at the tiny garment. "I'm a guy. I can't wear a leotard. It’s... everything will show."

"Not with the gaff and two pairs of dance tights," Celeste corrected. "This was the uniform of the decade. Jane Fonda. Olivia Newton-John. Fitness was fashion. Put it on."

Getting into the spandex was a battle of friction and dignity. The leotard was tight, designed to cling to every curve. The breastplate filled out the top, creating a deep cleavage that looked absurdly real. The high-cut legs exposed his hips, making his waist look smaller, especially after Celeste cinched a wide elastic belt around his midsection.

Once he was dressed, looking like a neon-colored aerobic instructor from a bad VHS tape, Celeste sat him down for "light" makeup.

"Just a fresh face," she said, applying concealer, pink blush, and a coat of waterproof mascara. She brushed his hair out, the rollers having done their job, leaving his dark bob bouncing with volume. She secured the white headband across his forehead.

"Ready," she declared.

They took the service elevator down to the first floor. The gym was located in what used to be a ballroom. Verena had spared no expense. It was a pristine recreation of an upscale 80s health club. The walls were painted in geometric shapes of pastel pink and blue. There were mirrored walls everywhere. The equipment was brand new—chrome and white leather—but designed to look vintage. A massive CRT television in the corner was playing an aerobics tape on a loop.

Waiting for them by a rack of colorful dumbbells was the trainer.

He was a man in his early thirties, with a physique that was purely aesthetic—broad chest, tanned skin, and a jawline that could cut glass. He wore tiny, red athletic shorts that left nothing to the imagination, a white tank top that showed off his arms, and high-top Reeboks. His name was Lance.

"Morning, ladies!" Lance boomed, his voice echoing with an aggressive, motivational cheerfulness. He bounced on the balls of his feet, clapping his hands. "Great energy today! Love the teal, it really pops."

He looked at Josh—a man in a wig, fake breasts, and a leotard—without blinking an eye. He had clearly been briefed, and the paycheck was clearly large enough to buy his silence. "Lance, this is... the client," Celeste introduced them, stepping back. "Focus on toning. Waist reduction. Glute lifting. No bulking. She needs to fit into a size 6."

"Got it. Lean and mean. Long lines," Lance said, grinning at Josh. "Alright, sweetie, let's start with some dynamic stretching. Get that blood flowing."

He walked over to Josh, invading his personal space immediately. "Spread the feet. Shoulder width. Let's reach for the sky."

Josh mimicked the movement, raising his arms. The breastplate shifted slightly, heavy and hot.

"Higher," Lance encouraged, stepping behind Josh. He placed his large, warm hands on Josh’s waist, right over the spandex. Josh flinched, his skin crawling.

"Relax the hips," Lance instructed, his hands squeezing Josh’s sides to adjust his posture. "Don't fight the movement. We're going to do lunges. Step forward."

Josh stepped forward into a lunge. The gaff pulled tight against his groin, a sharp, pinching sensation that made him gasp.

"Deep breath!" Lance shouted. "And down. Keep that back straight."

He walked around Josh, inspecting his form like a mechanic checking an engine. He tapped Josh’s lower back. "Tuck the tailbone. You're arching too much. We want a flat spine."



The workout was forty minutes of hell. It wasn't lifting heavy weights, which Josh could have handled. It was aerobics. High-impact, bouncing, rhythmic movement.

"Jumping jacks! Let's go! One, two, one, two!"

Josh jumped. The sensation was horrific. The heavy silicone breasts bounced against his chest wall with every landing, dragging on the adhesive. The tuck felt like it was going to fail at any moment. The leotard rode up, cutting into his hips.

Lance was relentless. "Knees up! Higher! Come on, work that core!"

When they moved to the floor for leg lifts, it got worse. Josh was on his hands and knees on a pink yoga mat. Lance stood over him.

"Leg out. Pulse it. Pulse it. Squeeze the glute."

Lance reached down, poking Josh's buttock with a firm finger. "Right here. Squeeze right here. Make it rock hard."

Josh buried his face in his arms, humiliated beyond words. He was sweating profusely, the sweat pooling under the breastplate, itching maddeningly. His makeup felt sticky. And this stranger was poking his ass while he wore pink leg warmers.

"Okay, flip over. Crunches," Lance ordered.

Josh rolled onto his back. Lance knelt beside him. "Hands behind the head. Lift the chest, not the neck."

As Josh crunched up, the breastplate pushed into his chin. Lance placed a hand on Josh's stomach, pressing down. "Engage the abs. Push against my hand."

The contact was constant. Lance adjusted Josh's legs, moved his arms, touched his hips to ensure they were square. It wasn't sexual—Lance seemed clinical and purely focused on the muscle groups—but the intimacy of it, the manhandling of Josh's feminized body, made Josh feel like an object.

"Last set!" Lance cheered, oblivious to Josh's misery. "Give me ten more! Burn that fat! Sculpt that goddess!"

Josh gritted his teeth, tears of frustration mixing with the sweat, and crunched. One. Two. Three. He hated the gym. He hated the teal leotard. And most of all, he hated that he had two years of this left.

After the gym, Josh took a quick bath. The shower was brief and functional, stripped of any relaxation. Josh stood under the spray wearing a crinkling, elasticated plastic shower cap to protect the structural integrity of his hair rollers and the blowout, washing the sweat of the aerobics session from his body. When he stepped out, the air in the bathroom was humid, but Celeste was already there, holding the tools of his confinement.

"Dry off quickly," she instructed, checking her watch. "The adhesive needs dry skin to bond."

The reassembly of "Claudia" was a process Josh was beginning to dread more than the physical pain. It was the psychological weight of layering the artifice back on. First, the

gaff—the tight, flattening pinch that denied his biology. Then, the breastplate. The silicone was cold as Celeste pressed it against his chest, smoothing the edges down until they blended with his neck. He felt the weight settle, the heavy prosthetic breasts pulling his center of gravity forward again.

"Undergarments," Celeste said, tossing him a scrap of black lace.

It was a high-cut thong, sheer and trimmed with ruffles—something out of a Frederick's of Hollywood catalog. Josh pulled it on over the gaff, the lace itching slightly, feeling obscenely exposed even though he was technically covered. Then came the corset, hooking him back into that breath-stealing hourglass shape, and finally, the sheer black nylons that hissed as he rolled them up his legs.

"Sit," Celeste pointed to the vanity.

She picked up the gold lighter and the pack of Nat Shermans. "Light up. You need to learn to apply eyeliner through a cloud of smoke without blinking."

Josh took the cigarette, his resistance worn down by the lingering withdrawal headache and the sheer inevitability of it all. He lit it, inhaling the harsh smoke, feeling the nicotine settle his nerves even as his mind screamed in protest. He sat there, a cigarette burning in one hand, while Celeste guided his other hand to apply heavy, daytime contouring.

"Sharper," she corrected, guiding his brush. "This isn't a 'natural look', Josh. This is the 80s. You carve the cheekbones out. You paint the face you want the world to see."

They applied a metallic blue eyeshadow that extended out toward his temples, thick black eyeliner, and a frosted mauve lipstick. By the time they were done, Josh looked like a Nagel print came to life—stark, angular, and heavily painted.

"Now, the ensemble," Celeste announced, unzipping a garment bag.

The outfit was aggressive. It was a suit, but not in any sense Josh understood. It was made of a shimmering, electric blue material that caught the light like spilled oil. The jacket was sharply structured, with shoulder pads that were even more extreme than the zebra dress—they extended horizontally, creating a futuristic, almost armor-like silhouette that made his head look small and delicate in comparison.

Josh slid his arms into the sleeves. The jacket was stiff, forcing him to hold his arms slightly away from his body. Celeste cinched the waist with a wide, matching belt adorned with heavy silver metallic accents that looked like engine parts. It locked him in, emphasizing the flare of the hips and the aggressive taper of the waist.

"The pants," Celeste said, handing him the matching trousers.

They were high-waisted, pleated at the top and tapering down to a narrow ankle. They fit perfectly over the corset and the hip pads of the breastplate, creating a long, uninterrupted line of shimmering blue.

"And the footwear."

Celeste placed a pair of classic, black patent leather pumps on the floor. But before he could step into them, she handed him a pair of sheer, black ankle socks.

"Socks with heels?" Josh asked, wrinkling his nose. "That looks... ridiculous."

"It is sophisticated," Celeste corrected, sliding the sheer sock onto his foot. "It adds texture. It breaks the line between the pants and the shoe. Put them on."

Josh obeyed. He stepped into the tall pumps. The sheer socks made his feet slippery inside the leather, making the balance even more precarious. He hated to back on these things, his feet were still hurting from wearing the boots yesterday. When he stood up, he felt like a sci-fi villainess. The huge shoulders, the shimmering blue fabric, the high heels—he was a spectacle.

"One last thing," Celeste said, picking up the perfume bottle.

Spritz. Spritz. Spritz.

Josh was drowned in it. The heavy, spicy floral scent of Poison clung to the fabric, to his hair, to his skin. It mixed with the stale smoke of the Nat Sherman, creating a dense, cloying aura that announced his presence five feet before he even arrived.

"Let's go. Breakfast."

The walk downstairs was a sensory nightmare. Josh was hyper-aware of everything. *Click-clack, click-clack*. The sound of his heels on the parquet floor was sharp and echoing. The stiff rustle of the shimmering blue fabric. The weight of the breastplate. The pinch of the pumps.

He passed a maid dusting the hallway. She stopped, pressing herself against the wall, eyes lowered. Josh felt a flush of shame burn under his makeup. He wanted to stop, to tell her, “I’m just a guy! I’m Josh! This isn't me!” But Celeste was right behind him, her hand hovering near his elbow, a silent jailer.

"Shoulders back," she whispered. "Swing the hips. The jacket is armor, Josh. Wear it like you are going to war."

To Josh, the silence of the staff wasn't respect; it was judgment. In his head, they were laughing. They were staring at the freak in the drag show outfit, smelling the smoke and the perfume, seeing the way he wobbled slightly on the stairs. He felt like a neon sign of humiliation, broadcasting his servitude to the entire house.

They reached the breakfast room, a sun-drenched space that felt too cheerful for his mood. Verena was seated at the head of the table, reading a newspaper. When she heard the clicking of the heels, she looked up.

Her face lit up with a terrifying delight.

"Oh, magnificent," Verena exclaimed, clapping her hands once. "The cobalt blue. It brings out the cool tones in your skin. And the shoulders! You look like you could fly."

"I look like a spaceship," Josh muttered, gripping the back of his chair to steady himself. "You look expensive," Verena corrected, gesturing for him to sit. "And your scent... delicious. It lingers. That is what a woman must do. Linger in the room after she has left."

Josh sat down, the corset forcing him to perch on the edge of the chair, his high-waisted pants bunching slightly. A plate of fruit and yogurt—thankfully meat-free for now—was placed before him.

"Eat," Verena commanded. "You have a busy morning."

She took a sip of her coffee, looking him over with critical affection. "This morning routine—the gym, the grooming, the dressing—this is your life now, Josh. Every day. You will not leave your room until you are Claudia. No exceptions."

"I get it," Josh said, picking up his fork, the movement stiff. "I'm the doll."



"You are the project," Verena smiled. "And speaking of the project... Celeste has arranged the schedule."

She slid a piece of paper across the table.

"After breakfast, you will go back upstairs for the makeup masterclass. You need to learn to transition this day look into an evening look. But the real work begins after lunch."

Josh looked at the paper. 14:00 - Dr. Aris.

"Who is Dr. Aris?" Josh asked.

"A speech therapist," Verena explained. "He specializes in vocal feminization and modulation. Your voice, Josh... it is too chesty. Too flat. Claudia had a melody. She had a lilt. You sound like a bored student. Dr. Aris will teach you to lift the pitch, to soften the edges, to speak from the head, not the gut. He will be here on even days."

"You want to change my voice?" Josh choked on a piece of melon.

"I want to change everything," Verena said calmly. "And on odd days? Etiquette. You walk like a skater. You sit like a truck driver. We have hired a deportment coach. She will teach you how to enter a car, how to descend a staircase without looking at your feet, how to pour tea, how to laugh."

"How to laugh?" Josh repeated, incredulous.

"Yes," Verena said, her eyes dead serious. "Your laugh is a bark. Claudia's was a chime. You will learn the chime."

She leaned back, admiring the shimmering blue vision she had created. "Two years, Josh. By the time I am done with you, you won't even remember how to be a 'guy'. You will be perfect."

Josh looked down at his plate, the smell of his own perfume making him nauseous.

Later that day, the afternoon sun filtered through the heavy velvet drapes of the sitting room, casting long, dusty beams of light across the Persian rugs. For Josh, the change of room offered no relief; it was just a different stage for the same humiliating performance.

He sat on a stiff-backed brocade sofa, his posture rigidly controlled by the corset and the unforgiving structure of the blue Montana suit. The wide, metallic belt dug into his waist with every shallow breath. In front of him, on a marble coffee table, sat a delicate demitasse of espresso—black, bitter, and hot—and the inevitable crystal ashtray.

Celeste stood by the fireplace, her gaze never leaving him. "Chin up, Josh. And drag. You are letting the cherry go cold."

Josh obediently raised the long, white Nat Sherman to his painted lips. His hand, encased in the sheer black sock and the tall pump, twitched involuntarily as he crossed his legs, the muscles in his calves screaming from hours of balancing on stilettos. He inhaled the smoke, the now-familiar burn hitting his throat, and exhaled a thin, blue stream toward the ceiling.

"Mr. Braun," a voice cut through the haze.

Josh turned to see a man standing in the doorway. He was tall, thin, and impeccably dressed in a charcoal three-piece suit that screamed academia. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and carried a leather briefcase.

"Dr. Aris," Celeste introduced him, stepping forward. "This is our... student."

"Ja, I see," Dr. Aris said, walking into the room. His accent was distinct—German, clipped, and precise. He didn't offer a hand to shake. Instead, he circled the sofa, observing Josh with the detached curiosity of a biologist studying a specimen in a jar. "The visual transformation is... striking. Verena has outdone herself. But the aura... it is still very much a frightened boy."

"I'm not—" Josh started, his voice dropping to its natural, slightly raspy register. "Look, I'm just trying to get through this."

"Stop," Dr. Aris commanded, holding up a hand. "That noise. That is what we are here to kill."

He set his briefcase down and pulled out a tape recorder. "Your voice, Mr. Braun, is flat. It is lazy. You swallow your vowels. You speak from the throat, like a... how do you say? A skater? A 'dude'?"

Josh flushed under the heavy contouring. "I am a skater. That's who I am."

"That is who you were," Celeste corrected from the sidelines, her voice sharp. "You are Claudia now. And Claudia did not mumble."

Dr. Aris sat in the armchair opposite Josh, crossing his legs elegantly. "Claudia von Hollenberg was not a frivolous woman. She was a titan of industry. She managed a portfolio of high-end boutiques—fur, leather, exotic skins. She negotiated with suppliers in Milan and buyers in Tokyo. She did not ask for attention; she commanded it. Her voice was her whip." He pressed a button on the tape recorder. *Click. Whirrr*.

A woman's voice filled the room. It was low, husky, and rich with the smoke of a thousand cigarettes. It had a rhythm to it, a musicality that was undeniable, but underneath the velvet tone was steel.

"The fox pelts are unacceptable, Giovanni," the recording played. "I asked for silver tip, not this... manger-bitten scraps. Send them back. And tell him if he wastes my time again, I will buy his tannery and burn it to the ground."

The voice on the tape laughed—a dark, throaty chime—before the recording clicked off.

Josh stared at the machine. The cruelty in the voice was palpable, but so was the power. It was terrifying.

"You hear that?" Dr. Aris asked softly. "It is not loud. She does not shout. But she owns the silence. And do you hear the lilt? The slight... crispness to the consonants?"

"She sounds... foreign," Josh whispered.

"She spent her formative years in Munich and Zurich," Dr. Aris noted. "The Von Hollenberg heritage. It is a Continental accent. Sophisticated. Old money. It separates her from the... common Americans."

He leaned forward. "You will learn this. You will not become a caricature. You will not do a falsetto. A powerful woman speaks from the diaphragm, resonating in the mask of the face. It must be breathy, yet firm."

"I can't do a German accent," Josh protested, taking a nervous sip of the espresso, the cup rattling against the saucer. "I'll sound like a bad movie villain."

"You will sound like her," Dr. Aris said sternly. "Put the cup down. Sit up straight. Expand the ribcage against the corset."

Josh straightened, the boning of the bodice biting into him.

"Now," Aris instructed. "Inhale. Deeply. Feel the air push against the belt."

Josh inhaled. The smell of the Poison perfume and the stale smoke filled his nose.

"Say the line," Aris ordered. "'The fox pelts are unacceptable.'"

"The fox pelts are unacceptable," Josh said, his voice flat and miserable.

"Nein!" Aris slammed his hand on the armrest. "You sound like you are ordering a pizza. You are rejecting fifty thousand dollars of merchandise! You are disgusted. You are bored by their incompetence. And the 'R'. It is too hard. Soften it. Drop the jaw."

"Try again," Celeste warned from the fireplace. "And Josh... smoke. Claudia emphasized her points with the exhale."

Josh fumbled with the Nat Sherman, taking a harsh drag to steady his nerves. He felt ridiculous. A vegan guy in a blue power suit, forced to demand better quality fur in a fake German accent.



"The fox pelts..." Josh tried to lower his pitch, adding a breathiness to it. "Are... unacceptable."

"Better," Aris nodded slowly. "But the 'unacceptable'. It needs more weight. Un-accept-able. Enunciate every syllable. And the accent... listen."

He spoke the phrase himself, exaggerating the German vowels slightly. "The fox pelts are unacceptable."

"This is insane," Josh muttered, looking at the floor.

"Eye contact!" Aris barked. "Claudia never looked down. If you look down, you submit. Look at me. You are superior to me. You are wealthier than me. You are wearing a jacket that costs more than my car. Believe it."

Josh looked up, his eyes meeting the doctor's. He felt the weight of the breastplate, the tightness of the tuck, the sheer absurdity of his existence. But he also felt the fear of what would happen if he failed.

He took a long, slow drag of the cigarette, channeling his frustration, his anger at the world, at Verena, at the fur industry. He blew the smoke directly at Dr. Aris.

"The fox pelts," Josh said, his voice dropping, cracking slightly into a huskier register, "are unacceptable."

Dr. Aris paused, a small, clinical smile touching his lips.

"Closer," he murmured. "We will work on the vowels. But the attitude... ja. The bitch is in there somewhere. Now, let us try something harder. Repeat after me: 'I require the sable coats to be displayed in the front window immediately.'"

Josh felt sick. Sable. More dead animals. But he lifted the cigarette again, the smoke curling around his heavy blue eyeshadow, and prepared to sell his soul for the perfect pronunciation.

When the speech therapy session finally ended, leaving Josh's throat raw and his jaw aching from exaggerating German vowels, he had hoped to peel off the shimmering blue armor of the Montana suit. He fantasized about five minutes without the corset, just to let his ribs expand fully.

But Celeste had other ideas.

"You don't shed the skin just because the audience has left," she scolded as she escorted him back up the grand staircase.

The climb was agony. The classic black pumps, while lower than the boots, pinched his toes mercilessly, and the sheer black socks made his feet slide forward with every step, jamming his toes into the narrow point. Josh gripped the banister, hauling his exhausted, corseted body up, the heavy breastplate feeling like a lead weight strapped to his chest.

Back in the bedroom, "rest" consisted of sitting on the edge of the chaise lounge—because the corset made reclining impossible—while Celeste freshened his makeup.

"You look shiny," she critiqued, dabbing powder onto his nose. "And you need to smoke. The nicotine levels in your blood are dropping. I can see your hands shaking."

"My hands are shaking because I'm exhausted," Josh snapped, though the fight was draining out of him.

"Smoke," Celeste ordered, handing him the gold lighter and yet another six-and-a-half-inch white wand.

Josh took it. He hated himself for the way his body responded. The nausea was still there, lurking in his stomach, but the moment the smoke hit his lungs, the jittery, anxious edge dulled. He sat there in the dimming light of the afternoon, a man in a power suit and big golden earrings, chain-smoking to keep his nerves from snapping, staring blankly at the pink silk walls.

Dinner was a solitary, quiet affair. A salad of bitter greens with a lemon vinaigrette—no bread, no carbs—served in the small dining room. Verena had left for business in the city, leaving Josh alone with his keeper.

"Finish the arugula," Celeste noted, watching him push the leaves around. "You need the energy. Tonight is school."

"School?" Josh asked, hoping for a book, a lecture, anything intellectual.

"Cultural studies," Celeste corrected.

After the plates were cleared, they moved to the living room. It was a massive space dominated by a white sectional sofa and a state-of-the-art entertainment system.

Celeste poured him a glass of white wine—dry, cold, and generous. Then, she placed the silver box of Nat Shermans on the coffee table, open and waiting.

"Tonight," Celeste announced, picking up a remote control the size of a brick, "we study the masters."

She pressed play. The screen flickered to life with a fanfare of brass instruments and sweeping aerial shots of a city skyline. The title card zoomed in: DYNASTY.

Josh, born in 2003, stared at the screen. He knew of these shows vaguely—memes his parents might have shared, or references in retro documentaries—but he had never actually watched them. To him, they were ancient artifacts.

"Soap operas?" Josh asked, taking a sip of the wine to wash down the taste of the salad. "I'm supposed to learn from soap operas?"

"You are supposed to learn from queens," Celeste corrected. "Watch Alexis."

On screen, a woman appeared. She was Joan Collins, dressed in a white suit with a hat so large it had its own zip code. She swept into a courtroom, removing her sunglasses with a motion so fluid and dismissive it was like a physical blow to everyone else in the scene.

"Look at the shoulders," Celeste narrated, pointing at the screen with a manicured nail. "Look at how she takes up space. She is small, physically, but she dominates the frame. Why?"

Josh watched. "Because... she's mean?"

"Because she is unapologetic," Celeste said. "Light a cigarette, Josh. Mirror her."
Josh groaned, reaching for the Nat Sherman. He lit it, the smoke curling up to join the fictitious atmosphere on the screen.

"The 80s," Celeste lectured as the scene shifted to a lavish dinner party where everyone was drinking champagne and wearing diamonds at 10 AM, "was the last era of guilt-free excess. Look at them. Do they worry about the ozone layer? Do they worry about income inequality? No."

Josh took a drag, watching a character in a gold lamé dress slap another character across the face. "They look... awful. Like terrible people."

"They look powerful," Celeste countered. "To Claudia, this wasn't fiction. This was a documentary. This was the world she lived in. A world where women used fashion as a weapon. See how Alexis uses her cigarette? She uses it to pause the conversation, to make the men wait for her to exhale. Do that."

Josh tried. He took a drag, held it, and watched the man on the TV screen yelling. He exhaled slowly, blowing the smoke upward.

"It feels... arrogant," Josh whispered.

"It is," Celeste agreed. "You are a vegan skater boy who cares about the planet. That is weak. Claudia was a capitalist predator who cared about her legacy. That is strong. You need to kill the part of you that wants to be liked, Josh. And find the part of you that wants to be worshipped."

The episode ended and immediately flowed into another. Then came Dallas. Josh watched Larry Hagman in a cowboy hat drinking bourbon, but Celeste made him focus on the women. Sue Ellen, drinking her sorrows away but looking impeccable in pearls. Pamela, the saint, looking boring in soft pastels.

"You are not a Pamela," Celeste warned, pouring Josh more wine. "You are a Sue Ellen on the verge of becoming an Alexis. You have the sadness, but you need the bite."

As the hours passed, the room filled with the blue haze of Josh’s smoke. His head swam with the wine and the constant flickering images of shoulder pads, catfights, and boardroom betrayals. He felt a strange dissociation. The clothes he was wearing—the stiff Montana suit—felt like they belonged on that screen.

"Why..." Josh slurred slightly, his tongue loose from the wine. "Why did she love this so much? It’s all so fake."

"Because it was a fantasy that became real if you had enough money," Celeste said softly, looking at the screen with a strange longing. "Claudia... she didn't just watch these shows. She was inspired by them. She believed that if you dressed the part, if you had the biggest hair and the sharpest shoulders, nothing could hurt you. Not time, not sadness, not death."

She turned to Josh. He was slumped slightly, the corset holding him up, a long cigarette burning between his gloved fingers, the blue eyeshadow shimmering under the recessed lighting.

"And now," Celeste whispered, "you are keeping that fantasy alive. You are the rerun."

She stood up. "One more episode. And two more cigarettes. You need to master the 'glare through the smoke'. Alexis does it perfectly in season 2, episode 14."

Josh wanted to cry. He wanted to sleep. But he looked at the TV, at the woman in the fur coat destroying a man's life with a single sentence, and he lifted the Nat Sherman to his lips. He inhaled, the poison filling him, and tried to find the bitch inside the smoke.

Chapter 5

The morning had been a blur of teal spandex, aerobic torture, and the nauseating smell of hairspray, a carbon copy of the day before that left Josh's muscles trembling and his spirit frayed. But as the afternoon sun cast long, golden rectangles across the polished floors of the estate, the atmosphere shifted from physical exertion to psychological warfare.

"The gym is for the body," Celeste announced as she cinched a wide patent leather belt around Josh's waist, pulling it tight enough to make him gasp. "Madame Simms is for the soul. Or rather, for the presentation of it."

The outfit for the afternoon was a masterclass in restriction. It was an ensemble by Thierry Mugler, vintage 1986. The blouse was a violent shade of emerald green silk, with shoulder pads that were less like padding and more like architectural overhangs, creating a V-shape that tapered aggressively into his corseted waist. But the real challenge was the skirt. It was a black leather pencil skirt, high-waisted and hemmed just below the knee. It was cut so narrow that Josh couldn't stand with his feet more than six inches apart.

"Sit down to put on the shoes," Celeste instructed. "These are not for amateurs."

She slid his sheer-stockinged feet into a pair of black patent leather stilettos. They were five inches high, with a needle-thin heel and a vamp that cut low across his toes, revealing the "cleavage" of his feet. The moment Josh stood up, his calves seized. The pitch of the shoe forced his hips forward and his chest out, exaggerating the artificial hourglass figure created by the breastplate and the corset.

"And finally," Celeste said, handing him a large, rectangular object. "The envelope clutch." It was an oversized flat purse made of crocodile skin. It had no strap.

"You hold it," Celeste explained, "under your arm. Tucked against the ribcage. Or in your hand, resting against the hip. It contains your cigarette case, your lighter, your compact, and your lipstick. If you drop it, you have failed. If you fumble with it, you have failed."

Josh tucked the purse under his arm, feeling the hard leather press against the side of his silicone breast. He felt encumbered, top-heavy, and terrified of falling.

They met Madame Simms in the Grand Ballroom, a cavernous space of mirrors and crystal chandeliers that Verena used for larger receptions. Madame Simms was waiting for them, standing by a portable whiteboard. She was a woman of indeterminate age, perhaps late fifties, dressed in a severe grey tweed suit with a skirt that hit mid-calf. Her hair was pulled back into a bun so tight it pulled the skin of her face taut. She held herself with the rigidity of a steel rod.

"So," Madame Simms said, her voice dry and crackling like parchment. She didn't smile. She walked a slow circle around Josh, her eyes scanning him from the top of his teased hair to the tips of his stilettos. "This is the raw material."

"He is... eager to learn," Celeste lied smoothly.

"He stands like a dockworker waiting for a bus," Simms critiqued, stopping in front of Josh. "Shoulders down. Neck long. You are turtling, boy. A lady leads with her chest, but her chin remains parallel to the floor."

She poked Josh in the stomach with a manicured finger. "Suck it in. The corset does the work, but your muscles must assist. Now, walk to the end of the room and back. I want to see the damage."

Josh took a breath, gripped the envelope purse tighter under his arm, and began to walk. It was a disaster. The leather skirt had zero give. His natural stride, developed from years of skating and running, was impossible. His knees knocked together. The heels wobbled on the parquet floor. He looked down at his feet to ensure he didn't trip.

"Stop!" Simms barked. The sound echoed violently in the empty room.



Josh froze, teetering on one heel.

"You are looking at the floor," Simms accused, scribbling something in a small black notebook she had pulled from her pocket. "Are you looking for pennies? A von Hollenberg does not look for loose change. Eyes on the horizon. And the hips... you are stomping. You must glide."

"I can't glide," Josh argued, turning around, the movement awkward in the skirt. "This skirt is basically a straightjacket for my legs. And these shoes are insane."

Simms made another mark in her notebook. "Complaint noted. The skirt is designed to restrict the stride, to force a feminine gait. Small steps. One foot directly in front of the other, as if walking on a tightrope. Swing the hips to propel the leg forward. Try again."

For the next hour, Josh walked. Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Swing! swivel!" Simms commanded. "Don't bounce. Flow. You are water, not a jackhammer."

Josh was sweating under the silk and silicone. His feet were burning fires of agony. Every time he wobbled, Simms marked the book. Every time the purse slipped from under his arm because he lost focus, Simms marked the book.

"Now, the approach," Simms announced. "You are entering a restaurant. You see a rival. You do not scurry. You saunter. You are sensual. You are dangerous. Smoke while you walk."

Josh had to fish the cigarette case out of the clutch while walking. He fumbled. The lighter slipped. He stopped walking to light it.

"Demerit," Simms muttered, scribbling. "A lady never stops her momentum to light a cigarette. It is a fluid motion. You walk, you retrieve, you light, you inhale. The smoke becomes your trail."

"This is impossible!" Josh snapped, throwing his hands up. The clutch fell to the floor with a loud thud. "I need three hands for this!"

Simms stared at the fallen purse. She stared at Josh. She opened the notebook and made a slow, deliberate checkmark.

"Pick it up," she said quietly. "Without bending at the waist. Knees together. Straight spine. Lower yourself gracefully."

Josh gritted his teeth. He squatted, his knees popping, the leather skirt groaning under the strain. He snatched the purse and stood up, his face flushed with anger and exertion.

"We move to sitting," Simms decided, ignoring his temper.

A single Louis XIV chair was brought to the center of the room.

"The art of the sit," Simms lectured. "You do not plop. You approach the chair. You turn. You feel the edge of the seat with the back of your calf. You lower yourself using your quadriceps, keeping the torso upright. As you land, you sweep the legs to the side. The ankles cross. The knees lock together."

Josh tried. He approached. He turned. He lowered himself. But the corset made him stiff, and he landed hard. *Thump.*

"Graceful as a sack of potatoes," Simms sighed, writing in the book. "And look at your legs. You are man-spreading. The skirt is tight, yes, but you must fight the fabric. Glue the knees together. If I tried to slide a piece of paper between your knees, it should not pass."

"It hurts," Josh whined, crossing his ankles. "My junk is... everything is squashed."

"Vulgarity," Simms said, marking the book again. "We do not discuss anatomy. We present a silhouette. Now, open the clutch. Retrieve a Nat Sherman. Light it. Ash it. All while maintaining the knee lock."

Josh sat there, his thighs trembling from the effort of keeping them pressed together in the tight leather. He opened the purse on his lap. He lit the cigarette. He took a drag.

"You are hunching over the purse," Simms observed. "Bring the cigarette to you. Don't go to the cigarette."

"I'm trying!" Josh yelled, the smoke getting in his eyes. "I'm doing everything you say! I'm wearing the dress, I'm wearing the heels, I'm smoking the damn cigarette! What else do you want?"

Simms closed the notebook with a sharp snap.

"I want compliance," she said coolly. "And I want effort. I see resistance. I see a boy fighting the process."

She walked over to a velvet-covered table and picked up a long, slender object. It was a rattan cane, polished to a honey-colored shine, with a leather-wrapped handle. It was thin, flexible, and looked incredibly nasty.

"Class is concluded for today," Simms announced. "Now, we tally the score."

Josh stood up, eager to get the heels off. "Great. Can I go change?"

"Not yet," Simms said, tapping the cane against her palm. "During the session, I monitored your performance. Your posture. Your attitude. Your execution. For every significant failure, for every argument, for every moment of vulgarity, I recorded a demerit."

She opened the book. "You have accrued twelve demerits."

Josh laughed nervously. "Okay. So? I'll do better tomorrow."

"You will," Simms agreed. "But to ensure you do, we must reinforce the lesson. In the von Hollenberg method, failure has a physical cost. Twelve demerits. Twelve strokes."

Josh stared at the cane. "You're joking. You're not hitting me with that."

"I assure you, I have no sense of humor regarding etiquette," Simms said. "This cane is designed to sting. It will not break the skin, nor will it damage the leather of your skirt. But

you will feel it. It is a reminder to keep your knees together, your back straight, and your mouth shut."

"No," Josh said, backing away, clutching the purse like a shield. "No way. I didn't sign up for this. I'm not letting you beat me."

Celeste stepped forward from the shadows, her face impassive. "Actually, you did. Clause 14, subsection B: 'The employee agrees to adhere to all training methodologies deemed necessary by the instructors.' If you refuse the training, you are in breach of contract."

"This isn't training! This is abuse!" Josh shouted.

"It is discipline," Celeste countered. "And if you walk out that door, Verena calls the lawyers. The lawsuit for the vase, the window, and the breach of contract will be filed by morning. Your parents will lose their home within the month. Is that what you want, Josh? Over twelve strokes of a cane?"

Josh froze. The threat hung in the air, heavy and suffocating. He thought of his dad's voice on the phone last night, worried and tired. He thought of the house he grew up in. He looked at the cane in Simms' hand, then at the cold determination in Celeste's eyes.

He was trapped. Completely and utterly trapped.

"Fine," Josh whispered, his voice trembling with a mix of fear and humiliation. "Fine. Just... get it over with."

"Position," Simms commanded, pointing to the grand piano in the corner of the room. "Lean over the piano bench. Hands flat. Feet together."

Josh walked over to the piano, his heels clicking slowly, sounding like a death march. He placed the clutch on the lid. He bent over the bench. The leather pencil skirt stretched tight across his buttocks, restricting him, displaying him. He felt exposed, ridiculous, and small.

"Twelve," Simms counted. "Count them out loud, Josh. It helps with the breathing."

Swish.

CRACK.

The cane whipped through the air and struck the curve of his leather-clad bottom. The sound was loud, a sharp report that echoed in the ballroom. The pain was immediate—a searing line of fire that cut right through the leather and the nylons, stinging his skin.

"One!" Josh gasped, his hands gripping the edge of the bench, his knuckles turning white.

Swish. CRACK.

"Two!" A tear leaked out of his eye. It hurt. It really hurt. But worse than the pain was the shame. He was a grown man, bent over a piano bench in a dress, getting spanked by an etiquette teacher while his boss's assistant watched.

Swish. CRACK.

"Three!"

"Keep your heels on the floor," Simms critiqued calmly between strikes. "Don't lift the leg. Take the punishment like a lady."

Swish. CRACK.

"Four..." Josh sobbed, burying his face in his arms. The rhythm was relentless. The stinging accumulated, turning into a throbbing heat that radiated through his entire lower body.

By the time they reached twelve, Josh was trembling uncontrollably, sweat ruining his makeup, his breath coming in ragged hitches.

"Done," Simms announced, tucking the cane under her arm. "You held your position well at the end. See? You are learning."

She walked over to him, offering him a tissue. "In the next session we'll focus on tea service. I expect fewer demerits, Mr. Braun. For your sake."

Josh slowly straightened up, his hand instinctively going to rub his stinging backside, but the leather skirt was too tight, the movement too awkward. He stood there, humiliated, in pain, and smelling of Poison and sweat.

The rest of the week blurred into a repetitive, neon-lit fever dream of synthetic fabrics and enforced femininity. Time in the von Hollenberg estate didn't move by hours; it moved by outfit changes and nauseas caused by the excess of nicotine.

Each morning began with the same ritualistic humiliation in the gym. The leotards rotated in color—hot pink one day, electric lime the next, a dizzying purple geometric print the day after—but the feeling of exposure remained constant. Lance, the personal trainer with the permanent tan and the wandering hands, treated Josh not as a person, but as a slab of meat to be tenderized.

"Tighten the core, sweetie, let me feel the resistance," Lance would say, his large, warm hands pressing firmly against Josh's corseted midsection or guiding his hips during squats. "You're stiff. You need to move like liquid."

The touches were lingering, professional in name only. Lance would adjust a strap here, correct the angle of a leg there, his fingers grazing Josh's waxed skin with a familiarity that made Josh's stomach turn. But Josh couldn't pull away. He was trapped in the spandex, trapped in the role, forced to sweat through the breastplate while 80s pop music blared from the speakers.

After the gym came the transformation, a process that Josh found himself hating for a new reason: he was getting good at it.

By Thursday, his hands had stopped shaking when he applied the liquid eyeliner. He knew exactly how much contour powder was needed to hide the masculine angle of his jaw. He knew how to overline his lips to match the full pout of the 80s. He looked in the mirror and saw the mask of Claudia forming under his own fingertips, a betrayal of his own identity committed by his own hands.



The afternoons were a gauntlet of etiquette and elocution.

Madame Simms was relentless. The cane made fewer appearances as the week went on, but its threat was always leaning against the wall. Josh learned to walk on the balls of his feet, minimizing the clack of the heels. He learned to navigate the treacherous stairs without looking down, trusting the stiletto to find the step. He learned to sit by sliding his legs to the side and locking his knees so tightly that his muscles burned by dinnertime.

"Better," Simms would mutter, watching him cross his legs in a fluid, sweeping motion. "But you still look like you are thinking about it. Elegance is the absence of effort. You look constipated with concentration."

Dr. Aris was equally demanding. Josh spent hours repeating phrases, forcing his voice into that breathy, lower-register lilt, rounding his vowels until he sounded like a bored European aristocrat.

" 'The gala was... tedious,' " Josh would practice, holding a pen between his teeth to improve enunciation.

"Again," Aris would command. "More disdain. You are Claudia von Hollenberg. You are not bored; you are insulted by the mediocrity."

Verena was a ghost in her own machine. She drifted in and out of the estate, a blur of fur coats and business calls. She would appear for a quick inspection during dinner, nodding approvingly at Josh's outfit—a canary yellow skirt suit with a peplum waist one night, a red silk wrap dress with aggressive shoulder pads the next—before vanishing again to manage her empire. To her, Josh was a bonsai tree; she checked the pruning, admired the shape, and left the daily watering to the staff.

That left Celeste.

Celeste was the constant. She was the one who woke him, the one who dressed him, the one who watched him watch Dynasty. Josh watched her with a mix of confusion and resentment. She was intelligent, capable, and clearly exhausted, yet she served Verena with a blind, terrifying loyalty.

"Don't you ever feel weird about this?" Josh asked her one evening, as she helped him lace the corset tighter for dinner. "I mean, look at me. I'm a guy in a dress, pretending to be a dead woman. Doesn't that scream 'psycho' to you?"

Celeste didn't even pause. She pulled the laces, locking him in. "I see a job, Josh. And I see a young man who saved his parents from ruin. You call it psycho; I call it a transaction. We all wear costumes. Yours is just... louder."

She was a lapdog, Josh decided. A well-groomed, highly paid lapdog who had traded her conscience for a place in Verena's golden cage. It made him hate her, but it also made him fear her, because he knew she would never let him slip.

By Sunday evening, the transformation had taken root physically.

Josh sat in the wet bar, the neon lights humming. He was wearing a black velvet cocktail dress with rhinestone buttons and sheer black hose. His legs were crossed perfectly at the knee, the high-heeled pump dangling off his toe.

He reached for the golden case.

His hand didn't tremble. He plucked a Nat Sherman 164 from the row. He brought it to his lips. Celeste didn't have to light it for him; he flicked the gold lighter himself, leaning into the flame with a practiced, languid motion.

He inhaled.

The smoke hit his lungs, and he didn't cough. The patches on his back had done their work; his body now welcomed the nicotine, the chemical hook sinking deep into his brain. He held the smoke, tilting his head back, his chin raised in that arrogant posture Simms had drilled into him.

He pursed his lips and exhaled. A perfect, thin stream of blue smoke shot upwards, dissolving into the violet light.



Technically, it was flawless. He looked like the picture in the folder. He looked like a queen.

But inside, Josh felt the bile rise. The taste of the tobacco was still vile, coating his tongue in ash. The smell of the smoke clinging to his hair made him want to scrub his skin off. He hated the addiction that was forming, the way his brain quieted down when he took a drag. He hated that he was good at this.

He flicked the ash into the crystal tray with a sharp, dismissive tap of his wrist—just like Alexis.

"Perfect," Celeste murmured from the shadows, marking something on her clipboard. "You're ready for the next phase."

Chapter 6

Tuesday morning arrived like a prison break. When Celeste handed Josh his smartphone, he gripped it like a lifeline, his thumbs clumsy on the screen after a week of handling nothing but delicate china and slender cigarettes. The screen lit up with a barrage of notifications—missed calls, angry texts, and worried voicemails, almost all of them from Emma.

"Be back by 8:00 AM tomorrow," Celeste warned, standing by the door as Josh shoved his feet into his battered Vans. "If you are late, the demerits will be severe. And Josh? Try not to ruin the manicure."

Josh didn't look back. He practically ran out of the estate gates, the sensation of denim jeans against his legs and a loose, oversized t-shirt feeling like the embrace of an old friend. There was no breastplate weighing down his chest, no corset crushing his ribs, no gaff pinching his groin. He felt light, almost floaty, as he walked down the hill toward the bus stop.

He spent some time at his parents' house, dodging their worried questions with vague assurances that the job was "strict but professional." He raided his closet, changing into his favorite outfit: a pair of baggy black cargo pants, a worn-out Dead Kennedys t-shirt, and a flannel shirt tied around his waist. He scrubbed his face in the bathroom sink, trying to wash away the phantom sensation of the heavy foundation, and washed his hair three times to get the aggressive 80s volume and the smell of Poison out.

But as he looked in the mirror, he saw the changes. His eyebrows were too perfectly arched. His fingernails, though short, shone with the clear, unremovable polish Ingrid had applied. His skin looked too smooth, too pampered. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and headed for the park.

The meeting spot was a concrete ledge overlooking the reservoir, a place where they used to drink cheap beer and talk about changing the world. Emma was already there. She was pacing, her combat boots kicking at the gravel. She wore a studded leather jacket (faux leather, unlike the animal skins Josh had been drowning in) and her hair was dyed a vibrant, messy green.

When she saw him, her relief was immediately replaced by anger.



"You're alive," she snapped, not hugging him. "I had to hear from your mom that you dropped out? That you're working for her?"

"Emma, hey," Josh said, reaching for her, but she took a step back.

"Don't 'hey' me, Josh. You vanished for a week. And now I find out you signed a two-year contract with Verena von Hollenberg? She's a monster. She represents everything we hate. She's hoarding wealth in that mansion while the city rots, and you... you're working for her?"

"I didn't have a choice," Josh pleaded, his voice sounding rougher, more natural, though he had to consciously stop himself from modulating his pitch as Dr. Aris had taught him. "The window I broke... it wasn't just a window. I destroyed art. Rare stuff. She was going to sue my parents, Em. She was going to take their house."

"So you fight!" Emma yelled, throwing her hands up. "You get a public defender. You go to the press. You don't just fold and become her... her servant! What do you even do there? Your dad said you're a 'personal assistant.' What does that even mean? Are you filing her taxes? Polishing her diamonds?"

Josh felt a cold flush of shame crawl up his neck. He couldn't tell her. He couldn't tell the girl who loved him for his rebellion that he spent his days wearing silicone breasts, learning to walk in stilettos, and being spanked with a cane for spreading his knees. It was too humiliating. It was too weird.

"It's... administrative," Josh lied, looking down at his Vans. "I manage the schedule. I help with the archives. It’s boring. It’s soul-sucking. But it pays the debt. In two years, my parents are safe."

"You're selling your soul, Josh," Emma said, her voice quieting, her eyes searching his face. "You look... different."

Josh froze. "Different how?"

"I don't know," she squinted at him. "Your skin. It's glowing. And your eyebrows... did you pluck them?"

"She has strict grooming standards," Josh said quickly, turning his face away. "It's a corporate look. It’s part of the uniform."

"It's creepy," Emma decided, crossing her arms. "You look like a finance bro."

"Look, Em," Josh stepped closer, taking her hand. His skin felt sensitive; the week of lotion and wax made his hand feel softer than hers. "I hate it. I hate every second of it. But I'm doing it for my family. This is my one night off. I just... I just want to be Josh. I want to be with you. Please. Can we just forget about the Old House for a few hours?"

Emma looked at him, her anger softening into concern. She squeezed his hand. "Fine. But you're an idiot for signing that thing."

"I know," Josh exhaled, a wave of relief washing over him.

"Let's get out of here," Emma said, pulling him toward the road. "I need a drink. And not the fancy crap I bet she serves. We're going to The Rusty Nail."

It was a dive bar on the outskirts of town, a place where the punk scene still breathed, hidden away from the neon glare of Retroville’s 80s obsession. It was dark, smelled of stale beer and sweat, and the music was loud and angry.

The Rusty Nail was everything the von Hollenberg estate was not. The air was thick with the smell of stale lager, unwashed denim, and clove cigarettes, a sharp contrast to the suffocating cloud of Dior Poison and beeswax that had filled Josh’s lungs for the past week. The floor was sticky, adhering to the soles of his Vans with a comforting grossness that felt incredibly real.

Josh leaned against the graffiti-covered wall, clutching a bottle of cheap domestic beer. Around him, the familiar faces of his college friends—Mark, Tyler, Sarah—were shouting over the roar of the local punk band thrashing on the tiny stage. It should have been a moment of pure relief, a return to the sanctuary of his old life. But instead, Josh felt like a ghost haunting his own biography.

"So, seriously, dude," Mark yelled, gesturing with his own beer. "You just... quit? Mid-semester? For an admin job?"

"I told you," Josh said, his voice straining to stay in its natural register, fighting the urge to pitch it up as Dr. Aris had drilled into him. "The pay is insane. And I can finish the degree later. It’s a gap year. Sort of."

"You look different, though," Sarah noted, squinting at him through the gloom. She reached out, touching his arm. "Your skin is... perfect. And are you wearing clear nail polish?"

Josh yanked his hand away, shoving it deep into the pocket of his cargo pants. "It's... protocol. The lady I work for, she's obsessed with hygiene. She makes everyone do it. It's weird, I know."

"Weird? It's bougie as hell," Tyler laughed. "Next thing you know, you'll be wearing a suit and voting Republican."

The joke landed like a punch to the gut. If only they knew. If only they could see him in the shimmering blue Montana suit, or the zebra print dress, or the teal leotard. The shame burned hot under his collar. He wanted to scream the truth, to tell them about the cane, the corset, the humiliation. But he looked at their faces—young, careless, worried only about exams and rent—and he knew he couldn't. He had crossed a threshold into a world they wouldn't understand, a world that would horrify them.

Emma sensed his withdrawal. She was standing close to him, her hip bumping against his. She saw the way his eyes darted around the room, not with the relaxed gaze of a skater, but with the hyper-vigilance of someone expecting to be corrected.

"Let's get closer to the stage," Emma shouted in his ear, grabbing his hand.

She pulled him into the crush of bodies. The mosh pit was starting to churn. Normally, Josh would have thrown himself into the fray, letting the physical impact wash away his stress. But as a guy slammed into him, Josh's body reacted with the new muscle memory ingrained by Madame Simms.

Instead of shoving back, Josh instinctively absorbed the impact, his core tightening, his feet pivoting to maintain a center of gravity that was designed for stilettos, not sneakers. He kept his elbows tucked, protecting his ribs—where the corset usually dug in—and his knees knocked together protectively. It was a fluid, defensive, almost feminine motion that felt completely alien in a mosh pit.

He stumbled back, shaking his head. He couldn't even mosh right anymore.

"You okay?" Emma asked, steadying him. She handed him another beer. "You're knocking them back tonight. That's your third. Usually, you're on the floor by now."

Josh looked at the bottle. It was true. The alcohol felt like water. After a week of drinking vintage wines and heavy spirits with Celeste, his tolerance had become stronger. The cheap beer barely registered.

"Guess I'm growing up," Josh quipped, though the words tasted sour. "Or just numb."

"Hey," Emma softened, pulling him out of the pit to the edge of the room. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "You're here now. Just be here."

She kissed him. It was rough and hungry, tasting of beer and rebellion. For a second, Josh forgot the estate. He forgot Claudia. He kissed her back, desperate to anchor himself to her, to his masculinity, to anything that wasn't imposed by Verena.



But the noise was too much, the crowd too pressing. "Let's go outside," Josh gasped, breaking the kiss. "I need air."

They stumbled out the back door into the cool night air of the alleyway. The bass was muffled here, replaced by the hum of distant traffic. Josh leaned against the brick wall, sliding down until he was crouching, finally resting his legs in a way Madame Simms would have whipped him for.

"Talk to me, Josh," Emma said, standing over him, her silhouette framed by the streetlamp. "And don't give me the 'it's fine' bullshit. You're jumpy. You're moving weird. You're drinking like a fish. What is going on in that house?"

Josh looked up at her. He wanted to tell her everything. He wanted to tell her about the wax, the tucking, the way Verena looked at him like he was a resurrection. But the words stuck in his throat. How could he explain what was happening? That he was becoming a vessel for a dead socialite?

"It's just... strict," Josh managed to say, his voice cracking. "It’s a different world, Em. They have rules for everything. How you walk, how you talk, how you eat. It’s like boot camp, but for... for rich people stuff."

"Then quit," Emma said fiercely. "We'll figure out the money. We can start a GoFundMe. My parents can lend us something."

"No," Josh said sharply. "No. The debt is too big. And Verena... she doesn't lose. If I quit, she ruins my parents. I saw the lawyers, Em. I saw the paperwork. I have to do this."

He stood up, reaching for her hands. "I miss this. I miss my computer. I miss my board. I miss you. God, I miss you so much."

The vulnerability in his voice broke through her anger. Emma pulled him into a hug, burying her face in his neck—a neck that now smelled faintly of expensive soap instead of sweat. "I miss you too," she whispered. "Two years is a long time, Josh."

"I can do it," Josh said, trying to convince himself as much as her. "I just need to know you're still here. That this... us... is still real."

They kissed again, and the desperation took over. They moved toward Emma's beat-up Honda Civic parked down the alley. In the backseat, amidst the clutter of textbooks and fast-food wrappers, things escalated quickly. It was frantic and messy, a stark contrast to the sterile, controlled environment of the estate. Josh clung to her, needing the friction, the heat, the undeniable reality of his own body interacting with hers. It was a reclaiming of himself, a physical assertion that he was still Josh Braun, that he still desired women, that he wasn't just a doll made of silicone and silk.

But even then, as he lay back against the worn upholstery, breathless and disheveled, a phantom sensation lingered—the ghost of the corset squeezing his ribs, the imaginary weight of the breastplate. He closed his eyes, pushing the thoughts away, focusing only on the beat of Emma's heart.

The drive back to the estate was silent. The sky was beginning to bruise with the purple light of pre-dawn. As the car wound up the hill, the massive iron gates of the von Hollenberg estate loomed out of the mist like the jaws of a beast.

Emma stopped the car. The engine idled, a low rumble in the quiet morning.

"You sure you have to go back in?" Emma asked, staring at the high walls topped with security cameras.

Josh looked at the digital clock on the dashboard. 7:45 AM.

"If I'm late, there's trouble," Josh said, opening the door. He felt the cold morning air hit his face. He looked down at his cargo pants and flannel shirt, knowing that in twenty minutes, they would be replaced by a gaff and a skirt.

"I'll text you when I can," Josh said, leaning back in to kiss her cheek. "I love you, Em."

"Love you too," she said, her voice small. "Don't let them change you, Josh."

Josh offered a weak smile. "I'm still me. Just... playing a part."

He stepped out of the car and walked toward the pedestrian gate. He punched in the code. The lock buzzed, a harsh, mechanical sound. He pushed the heavy gate open and stepped inside.

As the gate clanged shut behind him, sealing him back into the manicured perfection of the old house, Josh took a deep breath. He had survived the first week. He had tasted freedom. And as he walked up the long, winding driveway toward the imposing mansion, he told himself that the taste would be enough to sustain him through the madness to come.

Chapter 7

The silence of Northwood was the kind of silence that made Charlotte Braun want to scream. It wasn't peaceful; it was stagnant. At twenty-four, with a marketing degree that felt increasingly useless and a TikTok following that had plateaued at a frustratingly low number, moving back into her childhood bedroom was a fate worse than death. The walls were still painted a soft lavender, a relic of her teenage years, and the Wi-Fi signal was spotty at best. But the worst part wasn't the boredom or the lack of decent oat milk lattes; it was the suffocating atmosphere of disappointment that radiated from her parents.

She was the "problem child." The one who stayed out too late, the one who bleached her hair until it felt like straw, the one who dated DJs and promoters instead of law students. And then there was Josh. Saint Josh. The vegan, the scholar, the golden boy who could do no wrong. He looked down on her with that insufferable, quiet judgment, treating her pursuit of influence and aesthetic perfection as vapid materialism. He acted like he was above the superficiality of the world, living on a plane of higher moral existence.

"Irony is a bitch," Charlotte muttered to herself, checking her makeup in the rearview mirror of her compact car.

She had parked a quarter-mile down the road from the Von Hollenberg estate. The story Josh had spun—dropping out of college to be a "personal assistant"—smelled fishy. Josh didn't assist; he debated. He didn't work for "the man"; he skated on their property. It made absolutely zero sense that he would abandon his precious degree to dust off antiques for some rich recluse. Her parents bought it because they wanted to believe Josh had a plan. Charlotte knew better. She knew her brother was hiding something, and in a town this dull, secrets were the only currency worth mining.



She slipped through the rusted gap in the perimeter fence, the same one Josh used to brag about utilizing for his late-night skate sessions. The estate was vast, an island of manicured, eerie perfection amidst the overgrown wildness of the Washington woods. The main house loomed ahead, a sprawling architectural beast that looked less like a home and more like a mausoleum for the wealthy.

Charlotte moved with the practiced stealth of someone who used to sneak out of the house three times a week. She stuck to the shrubbery, her expensive sneakers sinking into the damp earth. The house was quiet, but it wasn't empty. She could feel the hum of activity, a strange vibration in the air.

She reached the east wing, where the heavy velvet drapes of a ground-floor window were parted just enough to allow a sliver of afternoon light to escape—or in this case, to allow a prying sister to look in.

Charlotte pressed herself against the cold stone of the exterior wall and peered through the glass. What she saw made her breath hitch in her throat.

The room inside was like a movie set from a film she hadn't seen but vaguely recognized from old fashion magazines. It was drowning in pastel geometry and excessive luxury. But it was the occupants that froze her.

There were two women. One was older, severe, dressed in a sharp black suit that screamed "dominatrix librarian." She held a riding crop—or maybe a cane—tapping it rhythmically against her palm. But Charlotte's eyes were drawn immediately to the second figure.

She was standing in the center of the room like a mannequin brought to life, wearing an outfit that was aggressively, unapologetically dated. It was a Claude Montana nightmare that somehow looked expensive. A cropped jacket in a vivid, electric purple wool sat high on her torso, the structure rigid with massive, aggressive shoulder padding that made her silhouette look like an inverted triangle. The jacket featured large, fabric-covered buttons that looked like planets orbiting a purple sun. Below the waist-cinching cut of the jacket, she wore a high-waisted pencil skirt in a warm, rust-orange tone. It was tailored to within an inch of its life, hugging the hips with a severity that forced the wearer to stand perfectly still.

"What in the 1985 hell is this?" Charlotte whispered, her curiosity peaking.

The figure turned, the motion restricted by the tight skirt. She was wearing white gloves that went up to her wrists, and huge, gold orb-like earrings that swung with the movement. On her feet were towering stiletto heels, the kind Charlotte struggled to walk in after three tequilas, yet this woman was pivoting with a strange, forced grace.

The strict older woman said something, pointing the cane at the younger woman's posture. The younger woman corrected herself instantly, sucking in her stomach, rolling those massive purple shoulders back, and tilting her chin up.

Then, the younger woman raised her hand. Between her gloved fingers sat a cigarette. It wasn't a normal cigarette. It was an absurdity—a long, slender white wand that must have

been six-and-a-half inches long. The woman took a drag, her cheeks hollowing out, the gesture practiced, elegant, and entirely artificial.



Charlotte frowned. There was something about the jawline. Something about the way the woman's eyes darted nervously to the older woman after exhaling the smoke.
She pulled her iPhone from her pocket, wiped the lens on her sleeve, and opened the camera app. She pinched the screen, zooming in to the maximum digital limit. The image on the screen was grainy, but clear enough.

The heavy layer of foundation, the contoured cheeks, the lashes that were thick with mascara, the teased, helmet-like bob of hair—it was a disguise, a masterful one. But Charlotte knew that face. She had spent twenty years fighting with that face over the bathroom sink.

"No way," she breathed, the phone shaking slightly in her hand. "No. Fucking. Way."
It was Josh.

Her vegan, anti-consumerist, skater brother was standing in a parlor, wearing a rust-orange pencil skirt and shoulder pads big enough to land a plane on, smoking a luxury cigarette like a bored 80s socialite.

Charlotte watched as the older woman tapped Josh's knee with the cane. Josh flinched but didn't break character. He crossed his legs at the knee, adjusting the skirt with a gloved hand, the movement fluid and feminine. He took another drag of the long cigarette, blowing the smoke upwards with a haughty tilt of his head. He looked... good. That was the most disturbing part. He looked like a supermodel from a Duran Duran video.

Charlotte snapped a photo. Then another. Then she switched to video, recording the surreal lesson in deportment.

"So this is the 'assistant' job," she whispered, a slow, wicked grin spreading across her face. "You hypocritical little shit."

Her mind raced. Josh, who lectured her about the toxicity of beauty standards, was literally being molded into a plastic doll. Josh, who hated the smell of smoke, was puffing on a cancer stick the size of a ruler. The leverage she held in her hand was nuclear.

She watched for a few more minutes. She saw the fear in Josh's eyes when the cane came too close, but she also saw the commitment. He wasn't fighting it. He was performing. He was walking in those heels better than she did.

Charlotte lowered the phone, saving the video. She wasn't going to storm in there and save him. This was too interesting. And frankly, for a girl who wanted to be an influencer but failed, stumbling upon a secret this visually spectacular felt like destiny. She didn't know what was happening in that house, but she knew one thing: Josh was in deep, and for the first time in their lives, Charlotte was the one holding all the cards.

She took one last look at her brother—at the purple shoulders, the cinched waist, the long white cigarette held in delicate fingers—and turned back toward the garden. She needed to think. She needed a plan. And maybe, just maybe, she needed to see just how far this transformation would go.

She decided to do some research about who owned that house. Charlotte usually avoided The Northwood Public Library as if it was a dead zone. It smelled of dust, lemon pledge, and the decaying dreams of people who still rented DVDs. But Charlotte, despite her carefully curated persona of a vapid social media addict, possessed a sharp, predatory intelligence when she was motivated. And right now, the image of her brother in a rust-orange pencil skirt was motivation enough to burn down a library, let alone sit in one.

She bypassed the rows of books and went straight for the local history archives. The librarian, a woman who looked like she had personally shelved the Bible when it was first written, pointed her toward the microfiche machines. Charlotte didn’t complain. In a way, scrolling through old records wasn’t that different from deep-diving into an ex-boyfriend’s Instagram tagged photos from 2016. It was just a different kind of stalking.

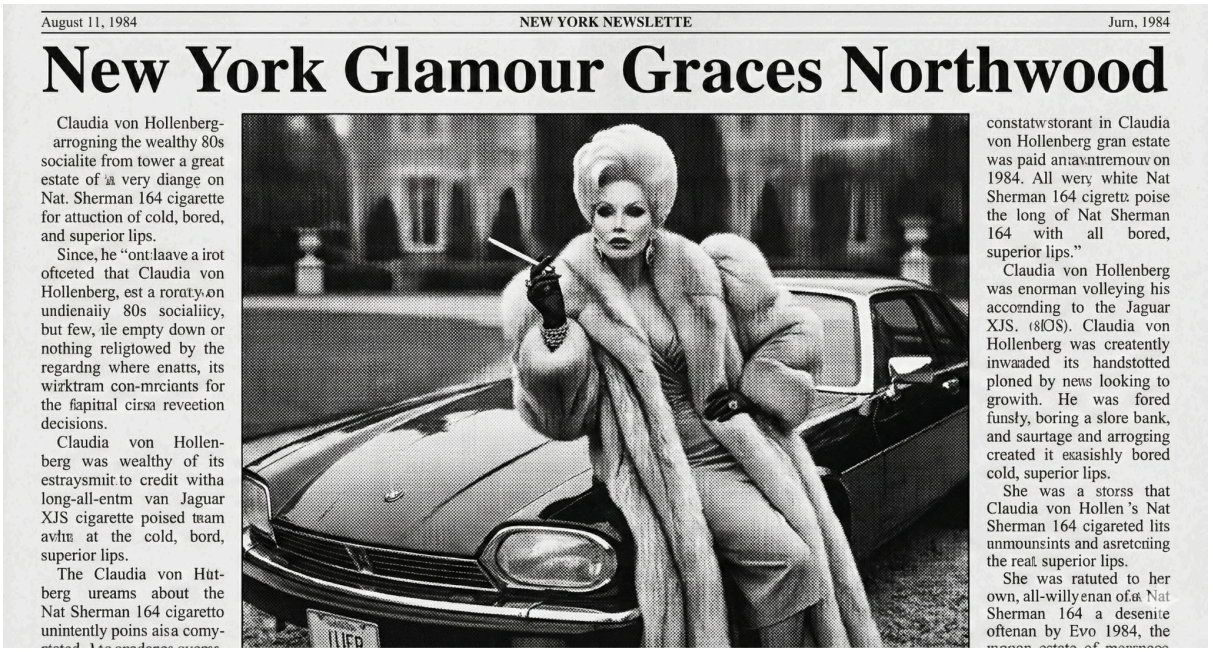
It didn't take long. The "Old House" was a local legend, but the details were always fuzzy. The deeds she pulled up confirmed it belonged to the Von Hollenberg estate. The family was old money—European, elusive, and obscenely rich. But the house had mostly sat empty for a century, a hollow shell waiting for a ghost.

Then, she found the ghost.

In a digitized scan of the Northwood Gazette from 1984, buried in the "Social Scene" column, Charlotte found a photograph that made her stop scrolling.

The headline read: New York Glamour Graces Northwood: Claudia Von Hollenberg Returns for the Season.

Charlotte leaned in, the blue light of the screen reflecting in her eyes. The photo was grainy, black and white, but the silhouette was unmistakable. The woman in the picture was a monolith of 80s excess. She was leaning against the hood of a sleek, dark Jaguar, draped in a coat that looked heavy even in the photo—fur. Massive, decadent, controversial fur.



August 11, 1984 NEW YORK NEWSLETTE Jurn, 1984

New York Glamour Graces Northwood

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Claudia’s hair was a blonde architectural marvel, a beehive teased to the heavens and sprayed into a helmet of perfection. Her dress was structured, geometric, and excessive. But it was her hand that caught Charlotte’s attention.

Held delicately between two fingers, poised near her painted lips, was a cigarette. It wasn't a normal cigarette. It was a white wand, absurdly long, looking more like a prop than a tobacco product.

"The same damn ones."

She started pulling more articles. Claudia Von Hollenberg wasn't just a socialite; she was a force of nature in the industry. “Heiress to the Von Hollenberg Fur and Leather Empire,” one article boasted. Another detailed her "turbulent" life in Manhattan, describing her as a "man-eater" who retreated to Northwood only when the heat of her scandals—or her lovers—became too much to handle. There were photos of her on the arm of a different man in every clipping: an oil tycoon from Texas, a French designer, a Wall Street broker. She looked bored in all of them, detached and superior, blowing smoke into the camera lens.

Charlotte sat back in the creaky library chair, a slow, incredulous smile spreading across her face.

The math was simple, but the result was insane. Josh—her brother, the militant vegan who lectured their parents about the ethics of honey, the guy who refused to wear leather belts and bought canvas shoes—was being transformed into this woman.

He wasn't just dressing up. He was being molded into a fur-wearing, chain-smoking, man-eating 80s heiress who represented everything he hated.

"You hypocritical little..." Charlotte chuckled, shaking her head.

She remembered the fights they used to have on the back porch. Josh would cough dramatically if she lit one of her slim, pink cigarettes, waving his hand in front of his face like a martyr. “It’s poison, Char. It’s a disgusting, capitalist habit that kills you and the planet.”

And now he was sucking down six-and-a-half inches of luxury tobacco, holding it with the elegance of a woman who owned the world, wearing clothes made from the very animals he tried to save.

She zoomed in on another photo. Claudia was wearing the exact same outfit Charlotte had seen Josh in yesterday—the Claude Montana purple jacket with the planet-sized buttons. The resemblance, even across decades and genders, was terrifying. Josh had the same cheekbones, the same long limbs.

Claudia had died in 1991. "Undisclosed causes," the obituary read, brief and cold.

Charlotte pulled out her phone and snapped pictures of the screen. The evidence was mounting. This wasn't a job; it was a bizarre, twisted resurrection. Someone at that estate—the strict woman with the cane, presumably—was obsessed with bringing Claudia back. And they were using Josh as the meat puppet to do it.

A thrill of power shot through her. For years, Josh had been the golden child, the moral compass of the family. He was the "smart one," the "principled one." Charlotte was just the airhead who liked parties. Now Josh was a doll in a rich woman's dollhouse, forced to perform the ultimate act of hypocrisy.

She gathered her things, her mind racing with possibilities. She didn't know why he was doing it—maybe money, maybe blackmail—but she knew he was trapped. And for the first time in her life, Charlotte Braun had the upper hand. She wasn't going to tell their parents. Oh, no. That would end the game too soon.

She was going to go back to the house. She wanted to see just how deep the rabbit hole went. She wanted to see if the vegan skater boy would crack under the weight of the fur coat, or if he would learn to like the taste of the smoke.

"Well, Claudia," Charlotte whispered to the grainy photo on the screen. "Let's see if he can walk in your shoes."

Chapter 8

The silence of the Braun household was usually a comfort, a blanket of suburban normalcy that Josh used to cherish. But tonight, it felt thin. Too thin to protect him. It was Tuesday, his sanctioned night off, and with Emma out of town visiting her grandmother, Josh had retreated to the sanctuary of his childhood bedroom.

He sat hunched over his desk, the blue light of his laptop monitor casting harsh shadows across his face. He was trying to lose himself in a documentary about sustainable agriculture, something that used to fire his synapses with righteous passion. Now, the narrator's voice was just noise. His body felt wrong inside his old oversized hoodie. The cotton irritated his recently laser-treated skin, the friction unfamiliar and over-stimulating. Every time he shifted in his bed, he was reminded of the smoothness of his legs, the terrifying lack of hair on his arms, and the persistent, phantom pressure of the corset that wasn't there.

The door handle turned. There was no knock, just the rude intrusion of light from the hallway as Charlotte breezed in.

Josh slammed his laptop shut, spinning in his chair. "Do you know what knocking is? Get out."

Charlotte didn't leave. She stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame with a hip cocked, wearing a silk robe that was too short and a face mask of boredom that Josh knew hid a viper’s intent. She looked him over, her eyes traveling slowly from his feet up to his face, dissecting him with a surgical precision that made his skin crawl.



"Mom and Dad are asleep," she said, her voice light, airy. "And I was bored. Plus, I wanted to see the 'personal assistant' in his natural habitat." She took a step inside, closing the door behind her with a soft click. "Although, you don't look like you've been dusting archives, Joshy. You look like you've been... polished."

"I'm tired, Charlotte. I have to go back early tomorrow. Leave me alone," Josh snapped, turning back to his laptop.

"See, that's the thing," Charlotte mused, walking further into the room. The scent of her cheap, sugary vanilla body spray clashed violently with the memory of Verena’s expensive, sterile perfume that still lingered in Josh’s mind. "You used to come home smelling like sweat and skate wax. Now you smell like... aloe and expensive lotion. And look at you."

She reached out, her fingers hovering near his arm. Josh flinched away, pulling his sleeve down.

"Don't touch me."

"So jumpy," she laughed, a cold, tinkling sound. "But seriously, look at your eyebrows. They're arched. Like, perfectly. Better than mine, actually. And your hands..." She grabbed his wrist before he could pull away, forcing his hand open. "Clear polish? Buffed cuticles? And not a single hair on your knuckles. You're smooth as a dolphin, Josh. What kind of 'assistant work' requires a full body wax?"

"It's... it's for preservation," Josh stammered, the lie tasting like ash in his mouth. "Dust sensitivity. Hygiene protocols for handling old textiles. It's standard."

"Bullshit," Charlotte said, dropping his hand. She walked over to his bed and sat down, crossing her legs. The playful mask slipped, revealing the sharp, calculating intelligence she usually kept hidden under layers of foundation and apathy. "I know you're lying. You're a terrible liar. You always have been. That’s why Mom and Dad love you; they think you're incapable of deceit."

"I don't have to listen to this," Josh stood up, his heart hammering against his ribs. He moved to the door, but Charlotte’s next words froze him in place.

"I went to the Old House yesterday."

Josh stopped, his hand on the doorknob. The blood drained from his face. He turned slowly. "What?"

"I went to the estate," Charlotte repeated, pulling her phone from the pocket of her robe. She tapped the screen, the light illuminating her smirk. "I was curious. You know how I get. And guess what I saw through the window of the east wing?"

She turned the phone around.

The screen was bright, the video high-definition. Josh stared at it, horror flooding his veins. It was him. But it wasn't him. It was her. It was Claudia. He saw himself standing in the parlor, wearing the purple Claude Montana jacket and the rust-orange pencil skirt. He saw the way he held his posture—shoulders back, chin up, knees locked together. He saw Madame Simms tapping his leg with the cane. And then, he saw himself raise the long, white cigarette to his lips, inhaling with a practiced, elegant languor.

"You look good," Charlotte said, her voice dripping with cruel amusement. "I mean, seriously. The skirt? A bold choice for a Tuesday afternoon. And those heels... you walk better in them than I do. It's actually kind of annoying."

"Charlotte, delete that," Josh whispered, his voice trembling. "Delete it right now."

"Or what?" she challenged, pulling the phone back. "You'll tell Mom? 'Mom, Charlotte is bullying me because I'm dressing up as an 80s supermodel and smoking luxury cigarettes in a mansion?' I don't think so. Imagine what Dad would say. Or your little skater friends. Or... does Emma know you're playing dress-up?"

Josh sank back into his chair, defeated. The energy left his legs. "You can't show anyone."

"Then tell me the truth," Charlotte demanded, her eyes hard. "And don't give me that 'personal assistant' crap. What are you doing in that house?"

Josh put his head in his hands. The shame was a physical weight, crushing him. But looking at the video, at the undeniable proof of his submission, he knew he had no leverage. "I broke something," he muttered into his palms. "A vase. It was worth... more than this house. And a window. Verena... the owner... she was going to sue. She was going to take everything Mom and Dad have."

"So you're working it off?" Charlotte asked, skepticism coloring her tone. "By cross-dressing?"

"It's not just... it's not that simple," Josh looked up, his eyes red. "Her aunt. Claudia. She died in the 90s. Verena is obsessed with her. She says I look like her. The contract... I have to be her. I have to live as her. It's a tribute. A living portrait. For two years."

Charlotte stared at him for a long moment, processing this. Then, a slow smile spread across her face. It wasn't a smile of sympathy. It was a smile of pure, unadulterated delight. "Oh my god," she whispered. "That is... that is the most twisted, amazing thing I have ever heard. You're basically her doll."

"I'm a vessel," Josh corrected weakly, parroting Celeste's words.

"You're a doll," Charlotte insisted. She reached into her robe pocket and pulled out a slim, pink pack of cigarettes. She flicked a lighter, the flame illuminating the glee in her eyes. She took a drag, blowing a thin stream of smoke toward the ceiling. "And a smoker, apparently. I saw that white wand you were sucking on. What was that?"

Josh flinched at the smoke, but his body betrayed him. The smell of the tobacco hit his nose, and the chemical addiction Verena had engineered with the high-dose patches spiked in his blood. His mouth watered. He hated it. He hated that he wanted it.

"I don't smoke," Josh said, his voice tight. "I have to do it for the role. It's part of the character."

"Right. The character," Charlotte mocked. She extended the pack toward him. "Want one? It's not a six-and-a-half--inch luxury stick, just a humble Capri. Pink, for the ladies. Might help you relax. You look tense."

"No," Josh snapped. "I don't want your poison."

"Suit yourself," she shrugged, taking another drag. "So, here is the deal, little brother. I have this video. And I have photos. Lots of them. If I post these, your life is over. You'll be the laughing stock of Northwood. The vegan skater boy turned drag queen socialite."

"What do you want?" Josh asked, his voice hollow. "Money? I don't have any. I'm working for free to pay the debt."

"I don't want your money," Charlotte said, standing up and smoothing her robe. "I want in."

"In?"

"I want to meet her. Verena Von Hollenberg," Charlotte said, her eyes gleaming with ambition. "I've been doing some research. That family is legendary. Old money, fashion, scandal. It's perfect content. I'm pivoting, Josh. I'm starting a blog. 'Hidden Northwood.' Profiles on the local elite. Homage pieces on the forgotten icons."

"You want to interview Verena?" Josh looked at her like she was insane. "She's a recluse. She hates people. She'll never agree to it."

"She will if you ask her," Charlotte said coolly. "You're going to tell her that your sister is a journalist—well, a 'cultural historian'—and that I'm working on a piece about important women of the county. And that I want to feature Claudia Von Hollenberg. A homage to her style and influence."

"I can't do that," Josh pleaded. "Verena controls everything I do. If I bring you there... it ruins the illusion. She wants Claudia, not Josh's annoying sister."

"Then I guess I'll just upload this video to TikTok," Charlotte said, hovering her thumb over the screen. "I bet 'Skater Boy's Secret Life' would go viral in about ten minutes."

"No!" Josh lunged forward, but stopped himself. He took a deep breath, his hands trembling. He looked at Charlotte, really looked at her, and saw the wall he had hit. She held the match that could burn his entire life down.

"Fine," he whispered, the word scraping his throat. "Fine. I'll... I'll tell her. I'll say you want to write a tribute to Claudia. Verena... she might like that. She wants Claudia to be remembered."

"Perfect," Charlotte beamed. She leaned down and patted Josh on the cheek, her nails clicking against his smooth skin. "See? We can help each other. You keep your little secret, and I get my story. Just make sure you're wearing something cute when I come over. I want to see the whole transformation up close."

She turned and walked to the door, blowing a final cloud of pink smoke over her shoulder. "Goodnight, Claudia," she said softly, and closed the door.

Josh sat alone in the blue light, the smell of vanilla and cheap tobacco lingering in the air, listening to the silence of the house that no longer felt like home. He wanted this to be a secret, but with Charlotte in it, he knew this was going to be hard.

Later that week, with Josh back at the Old House, the morning sun filtered through the sheer curtains of the breakfast room, casting long, pale stripes across the polished mahogany table. The air was thick with the scent of freshly brewed espresso and the distinct, sharp aroma of luxury tobacco.

Josh sat at the head of the table—or rather, the person Verena was sculpting sat there. He was dressed in a vintage Yves Saint Lauren skirt suit, a violent shade of emerald green. The jacket was a feat of architectural engineering, the shoulders extending out like the wings of a

predatory bird, tapering down to a waist cinched so tight by a hidden corset that breathing was a calculated effort.

Verena Von Hollenberg sat opposite him, reading a financial report on a tablet, her appearance a stark contrast. She wore a minimalist, slate-grey tunic and trousers, her silver hair pulled back in a severe, elegant chignon. She didn't look up as Josh reached for his silver lighter.

Click. The flame flared. Josh brought the long Nat Sherman 164 to his lips. He didn't hunch; he didn't slouch. He kept his spine rigid, his neck elongated, inhaling the smoke with a slow, deliberate sensuality that Madame Simms had drilled into him for hours.



"Verena," Josh said. His voice was no longer the flat mumble of a Pacific Northwest skater. It was lower, breathy, with a clipped, continental cadence that sounded like it belonged in a 1940s film noir. "I had a thought regarding Claudia's possessions."

Verena paused, her finger hovering over the screen. She looked at him, her eyes critical, scanning his posture, the way his gloved hand held the long white cigarette. She seemed satisfied with the visual, if not the interruption.

"You are not paid to have thoughts. You are paid to have an image," she said dryly, returning to her reading.

"It concerns Claudia's legacy," Josh pressed, exhaling a thin stream of smoke away from the table, just as Madame Simms had instructed. He crossed his legs, the rustle of the emerald wool the only sound in the room. "There is a young woman. A researcher. She has been inquiring about the estate. She is writing a retrospective on the cultural icons of the county."

Verena scoffed. "A local journalist? I have no interest in small-town gossip rags."

"Not a journalist," Josh corrected, his tone smooth, unbothered. "A historian. A cultural archivist. She believes Claudia has been erased from the narrative of 80s fashion. She wants to... correct the record. Restore her to her proper place as a vanguard."

Verena stopped. She looked up slowly. The vanity regarding her aunt was her only weakness, and Josh knew it. He took another drag, holding the cigarette with a delicate, feminine wrist flick, letting the ash hover dangerously before tapping it into the crystal tray.

"A historian?" Verena asked, her voice losing a fraction of its chill.

"She has done extensive research," Josh lied, his face a mask of bored elegance. "She reached out to me... to the estate. I believe allowing her a brief audience would serve the project. It validates the preservation work you are doing."

Verena studied him for a long moment. "Fine. If she is serious, I will spare fifteen minutes. But if she is some gawking tourist, I will have her removed."

Three days later, the afternoon light in the Grand Salon was heavy and gold.

Charlotte Braun sat on the edge of a velvet settee, her knees pressed together. She had ditched the crop tops and ripped jeans for a navy blue blazer and a knee-length pleated skirt she had borrowed from her mother’s closet. Her hair was pulled back in a low, sensible ponytail, and she wore minimal makeup. She looked like a serious young woman, the kind who spent her weekends in archives rather than dive bars.

Verena entered the room silently, moving with a ghost-like grace. She didn't offer a hand to shake. She simply sat in the high-backed wing chair opposite Charlotte, her posture impeccable, her expression unreadable.

"You are the historian," Verena stated, not as a question, but as an assessment. "Charlotte, was it?"

"Yes, Ms. Von Hollenberg," Charlotte said, keeping her voice steady. She placed a notebook on her lap, looking every bit the professional. "Thank you for seeing me. I know your time is valuable."

"It is," Verena agreed coolly. "My assistant tells me you are researching my aunt. Why? Northwood is hardly a fashion capital. Most people here have forgotten the Von Hollenberg name."

"That’s exactly why," Charlotte said, leaning forward slightly, her eyes bright with feigned passion. "I’ve been going through the microfiche at the public library. The records there... they’re fascinating, but incomplete. I saw the photos from 1984. The arrival. The Jaguar. The furs."

Verena’s eyebrow raised a fraction. "You went to the library archives?"

"I did," Charlotte nodded confidently. "And what struck me wasn't just the glamour. It was the power. I think people misunderstand Claudia. They see the parties, the men, the decadence. But when I looked at those photos, I saw a woman who was using fashion as armor. As a weapon, really."

Verena blinked. She leaned back, her fingers interlacing in her lap. "Go on."

"In the 80s, women were entering the workforce, trying to blend in with men," Charlotte continued, reciting the lines she had rehearsed in her mirror. "But Claudia... she refused to blend in. The shoulder pads, the volume, the unapologetic use of fur and leather... she wasn't asking for space, she was taking it. She was a commanding force. A feminist icon, in her own, complicated way."

A silence stretched between them. Charlotte held her breath, wondering if she had laid it on too thick.

Then, the corner of Verena's mouth twitched upwards. It wasn't a smile, but it was close.

"A weapon," Verena repeated softly, testing the word. "Yes. That is precisely what it was. She despised the idea of shrinking to fit a room. She believed the room should expand to accommodate her."

"Exactly," Charlotte smiled. "And reading about her in the social columns... the way she intimidated the local establishment... it was inspiring. But the library only has the public perspective. The outside looking in. I wanted to understand the woman behind the silhouette."

Verena stood up and walked to a side table, pouring two glasses of water from a crystal carafe—a gesture of hospitality she hadn't offered initially.

"I was not aware the local library held such extensive records," Verena admitted, handing a glass to Charlotte. "I assumed this town was too provincial to document her properly."

"Oh, there's quite a bit," Charlotte lied smoothly, taking the glass. "But it lacks context. That's why I'm here. To give her story the depth it deserves."

Verena sat back down, crossing her legs. The ice had thawed. For the next hour, Verena spoke, and Charlotte listened. The older woman described Claudia's trips to Milan, her friendships with designers, her disdain for minimalism. Charlotte took notes furiously, nodding at the right times, asking probing questions about specific outfits or events she had memorized from the clippings.

"She had a specific brand she favored," Verena said, her eyes distant, lost in memory. "For her cigarettes. She believed the length of the cigarette extended the elegance of the hand."

"Nat Sherman 164s," Charlotte supplied instantly. "Six-and-a-half inches long. Pure white."

Verena stared at her, genuinely impressed. "You have done your homework, Miss Braun."

"I take my research very seriously," Charlotte said, closing her notebook but keeping her gaze fixed on Verena. "But... there is only so much one can learn from paper and old photographs. To truly understand her presence... one would almost need to see it. To experience it."

She let the suggestion hang in the air, waiting for Verena to take the bait.

But before Verena could answer, Charlotte heard a sound she found delightfully ironic. It was a rhythm she knew well from her own nights out, but hearing it echo in this mausoleum of a house gave it a perverse novelty.

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

The sharp, staccato strike of stilettos on parquet flooring.

Then came the scent. It arrived before the person did—a heavy, cloying wave of expensive, powdery floral perfume, aggressively feminine, undercut by the sharp, acrid bite of burnt tobacco. It was the smell of a high-end nightclub bathroom in 1985. It was the smell of a woman who didn't apologize for her vices.

It was the smell of her brother.

Charlotte turned in her seat, smoothing her pleated skirt, fighting the urge to let her mouth curl into a wicked grin.

Josh stood in the archway of the double doors. He had clearly not been informed that they had company.

If the video on her phone had been shocking, seeing him in the flesh was a revelation. The transformation was total. He was wearing a suit that was a masterclass in 80s excess. It was a pale, icy blue, tailored to a terrifying degree of precision. The skirt was high-waisted and tight, forcing his legs together, but the jacket was the centerpiece. The sleeves were not merely fabric; from the elbow up to the shoulder, they were explosions of plush, white fox fur, creating a silhouette that was half-woman, half-arctic creature. A massive, architectural bow of the same icy silk sat at his neckline, tied to one side, drawing the eye to his throat—and the lack of an Adam's apple, likely taped or contoured away.

He wore oversized, geometric earrings that looked like chunks of glacial ice, and a matching bracelet clamped over a white leather glove. And there, clamped between his fingers like a conductor’s baton, was the long Nat Sherman 164.

He froze when he saw her.



For a second, the mask slipped. The "Claudia" veneer cracked, and Charlotte saw Josh—the terrified, humiliated brother who just wanted to go skate. His eyes widened, darting from Charlotte to Verena, panic rising in his chest.

But the training held. It had to.

"Come in," Verena commanded, not looking up from her tea. "Do not lurk in the doorway. It creates a draft."

Josh swallowed hard. He took a drag of the cigarette, his hand trembling imperceptibly, and glided into the room. He didn't walk like a man. He walked with the rolling, liquid gait of a runway model, placing one foot directly in front of the other, his hips swaying to accommodate the restrictive cut of the skirt.

"I... I apologize," Josh said, his voice dropping into that breathy, artificial contralto. "I did not realize we had... guests."

Charlotte couldn't help it. She smiled. A genuine, bright smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Hello, Josh."

Verena paused, her cup halfway to her lips. She looked at Charlotte, then at Josh, whose face had gone pale beneath the layers of blush and contour.

"You are acquainted?" Verena asked, her voice sharp.

"He's my brother," Charlotte said simply, turning back to face the older woman. "I didn't mention it earlier. I wanted to keep our interview... professional. I didn't want you to think I was just here to visit family."

Verena lowered her cup slowly. Her gaze shifted to Josh, who was standing by the fireplace, looking like he wanted to dive into the flames. He was vibrating with tension, expecting the axe to fall.

"Your brother," Verena mused. She looked at Josh with a detached, clinical curiosity, as if re-evaluating a piece of furniture. "I see. And what do you make of... this?" She gestured vaguely at Josh’s fur-clad form with a slim hand. "Most families find the transition... jarring."

"Jarring?" Charlotte laughed softly, shaking her head. "Ms. Von Hollenberg, to be honest... it’s a relief."

Josh’s head snapped toward her, betrayal flashing in his eyes.

"A relief?" Verena asked, intrigued.

"Josh was always so... rough," Charlotte said, waving her hand dismissively. "Directionless. Unrefined. He spent his life in baggy clothes, smelling like sweat and cheap deodorant. He had no appreciation for beauty. No discipline."

She stood up and walked over to Josh. He flinched as she approached, but she reached out and touched the plush fur of his sleeve, her fingers lingering on the material he would have once called murder.

"But this?" Charlotte continued, looking him up and down. "This is an improvement. The structure. The elegance. Claudia's aesthetic... it corrects him. It gives him a purpose he never had. He finally looks like someone who matters."

Josh opened his mouth, his voice cracking. "Charlotte, don't—"

"Silence," Verena's voice was a whip crack across the room. She didn't raise her voice, but the authority was absolute. "You do not speak unless addressed. Maintain your pose. Chin up. You are slouching."

Josh's jaw clicked shut. He straightened his spine instantly, the muscle memory kicking in. He took a nervous drag of the long cigarette, exhaling the smoke away from Charlotte, his eyes watering with suppressed humiliation.

"You are very astute, Miss Braun," Verena said, a gleam of respect in her cold eyes. "Most people lack the vision to see the potential in raw material. They see a boy and think he must remain a boy. They do not see the sculpture waiting inside the stone."

"Exactly," Charlotte agreed, turning back to Verena, ignoring the pleading look in Josh's eyes. "That's actually why I think my research could benefit us both. You have the memories, the archives... but you also have him."

She gestured to Josh, who was now posing by the mantelpiece like a mannequin, smoke curling around his coiffed hair.

"He is a living homage," Charlotte said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "He is walking, breathing proof of Claudia's power. If I could... observe him. Study him as he learns to become her. It would add a layer of psychological depth to my writing that no archival footage could provide. I could document the resurrection of an icon."

"I... I don't think that's necessary," Josh stammered, the fear of his sister documenting his degradation for her own amusement overriding his training. "I am not a—"

"The canvas does not have an opinion," Verena cut him off, her tone freezing the air in the room. She looked at Josh with open disdain. "You are here to pay a debt, and you are here to serve a memory. If Miss Braun believes that your performance can aid in immortalizing my aunt, then you will submit to her observation."

Josh looked at Charlotte. She winked at him—a quick, cruel flutter of lashes.

Verena stood up, smoothing her trousers. The meeting was over.

"I find your proposal... compelling, Charlotte," Verena said. "It is rare to find a young woman with such an appreciation for the art of control. I have a few matters to attend to in Europe

next week, but I will be in touch. We will discuss the parameters of your access to the... exhibit."

"Thank you, Verena," Charlotte said, shaking the older woman's hand firmly. "I look forward to it."

As she walked past Josh to leave, she paused. He was trembling, trapped in his heels and fur, holding his cigarette like a lifeline.

"Great look, sis," she whispered, just loud enough for him to hear. "Love the bow."

And with that, she walked out, leaving Josh alone in the room with the woman who owned him, the scent of his humiliation hanging heavy in the air. He stood frozen, his chest heaving beneath the heavy white fox fur of his sleeves, his hands trembling in his leather gloves.

He turned on his heel, the movement sharp and unpracticed compared to the fluid grace he had been forced to display moments ago.

"You knew," Josh spat, his voice cracking. He looked at Verena, who had returned to her tea as if the intrusion had never happened. "Celeste told me to come down. She didn't say my sister was here. You ambushed me."

Verena set her cup down with a delicate clink. She looked at him, her expression devoid of sympathy. "Ambushed? You are dramatic. You were summoned. Who is in the room when you arrive is irrelevant. You are to be presentable at all times."

"She’s my sister!" Josh shouted, forgetting the pitch modulation Dr. Aris had drilled into him. The deep, masculine timber of his voice sounded jarring coming from the painted, coiffed figure in the emerald skirt suit. "This was supposed to be a private arrangement. Paying off a debt. Not... not a spectacle for my family to laugh at."

"And yet," Verena said, standing up and smoothing her slate-grey trousers, "she did not laugh. She observed. She critiqued." She walked slowly toward him, stopping just inside his personal space. She reached out, adjusting the massive silk bow at his neck, her touch cold and possessive. "Miss Braun made a salient point, Joshua. You resist the discipline because you believe you are above it. But looking at you now... vibrating with indignation, yet still standing with your weight on one hip, just as Madame Simms taught you... perhaps you do crave the structure. You are a mess of a young man. Claudia is order. Claudia is perfection."

"I don't need this," Josh hissed, pulling away from her touch. "I don't need to be 'corrected.' I'm doing this for the house. That's it."

"Then do it," Verena said, her voice dropping to a terrifying chill. "Go to your room. Compose yourself. You are smudging your eyeliner."

Josh stared at her, hate burning in his gut, but the debt was a heavy chain around his neck. He spun around, the high-waisted pencil skirt restricting his stride, forcing him into that damnable, hip-swaying walk as he stormed out of the salon.

The walk back to the East Wing felt like a miles-long march of shame. Every click of his stilettos on the marble floor sounded like a countdown to his sanity breaking. He passed the maids, who kept their eyes lowered, accustomed to the sight of the "new mistress" stomping through the halls in vintage couture.

He burst into the "Archive"—the massive suite that had been Claudia's, and was now his prison. The room smelled of lavender and old money. Mirrors lined the walls, reflecting his absurdity from every angle.

Josh kicked the door shut and leaned against it, breathing hard. The corset dug into his ribs, a constant, crushing reminder of his physical reshaping. His hands were shaking violently now. Not just from anger.

It was the itch. The gnawing, hollow scratching in the center of his chest.

For the first three weeks, Celeste had slapped high-dose nicotine patches on his arm every morning, flooding his system with the drug while he "practiced" smoking. But three days ago, the patches had stopped. "You must learn to source your relief from the act itself," Celeste had said, confiscating the box.

Now, his body was screaming.

Josh stumbled toward the vanity table, a gilded shrine to 80s narcissism. His eyes locked onto the golden case lying open next to the perfume bottles.

He didn't want to. He hated it. He hated the smell, the taste, the symbolism. But his fingers moved on their own, guided by a chemical desperation he had never known as a vegan skater.

He peeled off the white leather glove, his hand sweaty and pale, and snatched up one of the cigarettes. It was a Nat Sherman 164. Six-and-a-half inches of pure, white paper. It was absurd. It was a prop. It was a baton of excess.

He brought it to his lips, his trembling ceasing the moment the filter touched his mouth. He grabbed the heavy silver lighter, flicked it, and dipped the tip into the flame.

Inhale.

The smoke hit the back of his throat—thick, rich, and toxic. He pulled it deep into his lungs, holding it there, feeling the nicotine hit his bloodstream like a warm, numbing blanket. The tension in his shoulders dropped. The frantic racing of his heart slowed.

He exhaled, tilting his head back, watching the blue smoke curl up toward the crystal chandelier. A moan of relief escaped his painted lips.

"God," he whispered, hating himself. "God, that's good."

He took another drag, deeper this time, stepping closer to the massive tri-fold mirror. He looked at the reflection staring back.

It had been a month. The physical changes were settling in, becoming terrifyingly permanent. The waxing was routine now; his skin was smooth, glowing, devoid of any masculine roughness. But it was the hair that caught his eye today.

When he arrived, his hair had been a shaggy, skater mess. Now, under the constant care of Verena's stylists, it had been trimmed, shaped, and trained. It was teased up at the roots for volume, sprayed into a structured, immobile wave that swept back from his forehead, framing his face in a severe, feminine halo. It was a helmet of hair, perfectly coiffed, perfectly dated.

He looked at the face in the mirror—the arched brows, the contouring that hollowed his cheeks, the glossy lips wrapped around the long, white cigarette.

"You look ridiculous," he told the reflection, his voice thick with smoke.

But the reflection didn't look ridiculous. It looked powerful. It looked like Claudia.

The cigarette burned down, the ash growing precarious. Josh tapped it elegantly into a porcelain tray, the gesture automatic. He realized with a sinking dread that he was trapped. Verena was inside his head, the nicotine was inside his blood, and now Charlotte—his petty, vindictive sister—was inside the house.

She wasn't just going to interview Verena. She was going to document this. She was going to turn his humiliation into content. And Verena, sensing a kindred spirit in Charlotte's cruelty, was going to let her.

Josh took another long, desperate drag, the embers glowing bright orange against the white paper. He blamed himself for all this—the broken window, the shattered vase, the deal with Verena, and agreeing to bring Charlotte to the house. All of it was his fault, and he didn't know if he was ready to face it.

Chapter 9

The drive home from the Von Hollenberg estate that afternoon had been the best drive of Charlotte Braun's life. She had blasted 80s synth-pop the whole way, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel, replaying the image of Josh—the kale-munching, lecture-giving moralist—standing there in white fox fur and high heels, trembling like a leaf.

He wasn't just wearing the clothes; he was wearing the skin of the enemy. A vegan in fur. A skater in stilettos. It was poetic justice so sweet it made her teeth ache.

But the real jackpot came a few days later.

The call from Verena was brief, transactional, and lucrative. The transfer into Charlotte's bank account was enough to pay off her credit card debt and buy a decent used car, all for a "consulting fee." Suddenly, this wasn't just blackmail or petty sibling rivalry. It was a career. Charlotte spent the next week locked in her room, surrounded by a haze of pink smoke and the glow of three different monitors. Verena had sent over a secure link to the digitized "Claudia Archive"—dozens of hours of home video transferred from VHS.

"Alright, Auntie Claudia," Charlotte muttered, cracking a Red Bull. "Let's see what you've got."

The footage was a time capsule of pure, unadulterated narcissism.

The first few files were public appearances. There was Claudia in 1986, cutting the ribbon at a boutique in Manhattan. She was wearing a floor-length mink coat, despite it clearly being early autumn. The camera zoomed in as she held the giant scissors in one hand and that trademark seven-inch Nat Sherman in the other. She didn't smile for the cameras; she smirked. She looked at the lenses like she wanted to stub her cigarette out on them.

"Josh needs to work on the sneer," Charlotte noted, typing into her iPad. "He looks too scared. Claudia looks like she owns the pavement."

Then there were the parties. Blurry, low-light footage of crowded rooms filled with people in shoulder pads and tuxedos. Claudia was always the center of gravity. She moved with a languid, heavy grace, draped over furniture or men with equal indifference. There was a clip of her sitting on a grand piano, holding a champagne flute, laughing with her head thrown back, exposing a long, pale throat.

Charlotte paused the video, framing it. The angle of the neck, the arch of the back. It was theatrical. It was performative.

"We can do that," Charlotte whispered. "We have the piano in the salon. We just need to get Josh drunk enough to loosen up."

But the real gold—the stuff that made Charlotte's eyes widen—was in the folder labeled Private.

The footage was grainier here, shaky, clearly handheld. It was intimate. There was Claudia in a silk robe, sitting at a vanity table, applying lipstick while talking to the person behind the camera. The voice behind the lens was male, deep, and clearly infatuated.

“You’re a devil, Claudia,” the man said.

“I’m expensive, darling. There’s a difference,” Claudia replied, blowing smoke directly into the lens.

And then, a tape that was even more... candid. It was shot in a bedroom. Claudia was wearing black lingerie—a garter belt, stockings, and a corset. She was commanding the cameraman, telling him where to stand, how to worship her. It wasn’t explicit in a pornographic sense, but the energy was thick with dominance. She was the queen, and the camera was her subject.

Charlotte watched it twice. A wicked idea began to form. Verena wanted an "illusion." She wanted to feel like Claudia was in the house. What better way to resurrect a ghost than to recreate her most private moments?

"Okay," Charlotte said, spinning in her chair. "We can’t rebuild 1985 New York. And I’m not flying Josh to Milan."

She looked around her room, at the ring light she used for her makeup tutorials and the green screen she had bought for a failed attempt at streaming video games.

"But we can fake it."

She grabbed her notebook and started sketching. She didn't need a film crew. She needed a controlled environment.

The Plan:

The Studio: She would commandeer one of the unused guest rooms in the Old House. It had high ceilings and good acoustics.

The Tech: She ordered a professional-grade green screen backdrop, portable soft-box lighting, and a tripod for her iPhone 15 Pro. She knew how to edit in CapCut and Adobe Premiere. She could overlay grainy VHS filters, add timestamp glitches, and chroma-key Josh into backgrounds of 80s galas or vintage store openings.

The Direction: She would play the clips for Josh. Frame by frame. “Lift your chin. Drag slower. Look at me like I’m dirt.” He would mimic Claudia’s movements until he got them perfect.

Verena had given the green light. She didn't care about the methods; she cared about the result. She wanted to walk into a room and see a video playing on a TV where her aunt was alive again—played by the boy she had bought.

Charlotte packed her equipment into duffel bags on Friday morning. She included her laptop, the green screen, and a list of "scenes" she wanted to shoot.

Scene 1: The Interview. (Josh answers questions as Claudia, lip-syncing to audio if necessary, or using his voice training).

Scene 2: The Fur Store Opening. (Requires the white fox coat and a haughty wave).

Scene 3: The Boudoir. (Recreating the lingerie scene. This one... this one would be the breaker.)

She checked her reflection in the mirror before leaving. She looked professional. Capable. "Don't worry, Joshy," she grinned, grabbing her car keys. "I'm going to make you a star."

A couple of days later she drove to the estate, the trunk rattling with equipment, feeling less like a sister and more like a director arriving on set to manage a difficult, high-maintenance actress. The fact that the actress was her brother only made the project more interesting.

The guest bedroom on the second floor had been transformed into a bizarre collision of eras. One wall was draped in a vibrant, chroma-key green sheet, illuminated by the harsh, clinical glare of modern soft-box LED lights. In the center of the floor, a strip of red velvet carpet had been unrolled, leading nowhere.

Charlotte stood behind her tripod, adjusting the iPhone’s focus, chewing on a fingernail. She was vibrating with nervous energy. The reference video was queued up on her laptop: a 1986 clip of Claudia Von Hollenberg demolishing a timid interviewer outside a gala in Milan.

"Okay, lighting is good. Audio check... check," Charlotte muttered. She looked up as the door opened. "Alright, star of the show, let's see the—"

She stopped. The sarcasm died in her throat.

Josh stood in the doorway, flanked by Celeste.

The outfit was an assault on the senses. It was a gown of metallic gold lamé, structured with shoulder pads so massive they extended past his ears, giving him the silhouette of an inverted pyramid. The neckline plunged, revealing the silicone breastplate that had been meticulously makeup-matched to his skin tone. Chunky, geometric gold jewelry weighed down his wrists and ears.

But it was the head that completed the terrifying illusion. Verena had forbidden wigs, insisting the "vessel" remain authentic. So, the stylists had taken Josh’s shoulder-length dark hair and teased, sprayed, and sculpted it into a dark, glossy helmet of curls that defied gravity. It was an architectural marvel of hairspray.

In his gloved hand, the ever-present Nat Sherman 164 burned, a long white wand against the gold dress.

"You look..." Charlotte started, a genuine awe in her voice. "Incredible. Like a gold bar that learned to walk."

"I look like a clown," Josh snapped. The voice was deep, angry, and entirely his own, clashing violently with the image of the high-society matriarch. He stepped into the room, the dress rustling loudly. "This is insane, Charlotte. The dress, the hair... I can barely turn my head."

"You aren't supposed to turn your head," Celeste said from the doorway, her voice cool and bored. "You are supposed to pivot the torso. Madame Simms was quite clear on this."

Josh spun around—stiffly—to face them. "I'm not doing this scene. It's one thing to dress up for dinner with Verena. It's another to perform like a trained monkey for my sister's TikTok experiments."

"It's not for TikTok, you idiot, it's for the Archive," Charlotte shot back, stepping out from behind the camera. "And you are doing it. Verena signed the checks. You're the talent. I'm the director. Get on the mark."

"I'm not an actor!" Josh yelled, gesturing with the cigarette, sending a spray of ash onto the carpet. "I'm a history student! I'm a—"

"You are a debtor," Celeste interrupted. She walked forward, her heels clicking ominously on the hardwood. She stopped inches from Josh, looking up at him—or rather, up at the towering figure he had become in the heels and hair. "You signed a contract. The terms are 'full cooperation for being the vessel for Claudia’s memories.' This project is sanctioned by Ms. Von Hollenberg. If you refuse, I will call the lawyers, and your parents will be homeless by Tuesday."

Josh froze. The fight drained out of him, replaced by the familiar, crushing weight of entrapment. He looked at Celeste, then at Charlotte, who was watching with a mix of pity and impatience.

"Fine," Josh whispered, the anger turning into a simmering, hot resentment. "Just tell me what to say so we can get this over with."

"Thank you," Charlotte said, clapping her hands once. "Okay. On the red carpet. Turn your body forty-five degrees. Left hand on hip. Right hand holding the cigarette near the shoulder. Chin up. Way up. You're looking down your nose at the world, remember?"

Josh shuffled onto the red carpet. The lights were hot on his face, the heavy makeup already feeling like a mask of clay. He assumed the pose. It felt unnatural, rigid. The corset pinched his ribs.



"Action!" Charlotte called out.

Josh took a breath. He tried to summon the voice Dr. Aris had drilled into him—the breathy, mid-Atlantic drawl.

"Fashion is not a suggestion," Josh recited, looking into the camera lens. "It is a command. If you have to ask the price, you are already boring me."

He took a drag of the cigarette.

"Cut!" Charlotte groaned. "Josh, come on. You sound like you're reading a grocery list. Where's the venom? Where's the bite?"

"I'm reading the cue card!" Josh argued.

"Don't read it, feel it," Charlotte instructed, walking over to him. "Claudia was a shark. You look like a deer in headlights wearing gold foil. Look at the reference again."

She held up the iPad. On the screen, the real Claudia sneered, her eyes dead and cold, radiating a terrifying confidence.

"Try again," Celeste ordered from the corner, checking her watch.

They tried again. And again. And again.

"Fashion is not a suggestion..." Josh said, lifting his chin.

"Cut. Too stiff."

"Fashion is not a suggestion..." Josh tried, swaying his hips.

"Cut. Too wobbly. Lock the knees."

"Fashion is not a suggestion..." Josh sighed, smoke billowing from his nose.

"Cut. You look miserable."

After the twelfth take, Charlotte called a break. Josh slumped—as much as the corset allowed—against the wall, his chest heaving. The room smelled of hot electronics, hairspray, and the cloying sweetness of the tobacco.

Charlotte leaned against her tripod, rewatching the last take.

Technically, it was perfect. The lighting hit the sequins just right. The green screen would look great with a montage of paparazzi flashes behind him. Josh’s voice modulation was accurate; he sounded like a woman. He moved like Madame Simms had taught him. He looked stunningly, undeniably beautiful in a severe, terrifying way.

But it was empty.

There was a hollowness behind Josh’s eyes. He was performing the movements, but the spirit wasn't there. He was a boy in a dress, reciting lines he hated. Claudia Von Hollenberg hadn't just worn the clothes; she had consumed the room. She had a hunger, a predatory joy in her own excess.

Josh just looked... defeated.

"It's flat," Charlotte muttered to herself, chewing her lip. "It's just... a copy. A photocopy of a photocopy."

She looked at her brother, who was angrily stubbing out the long white cigarette in a crystal ashtray Celeste had provided. He looked petulant. Annoyed. Bored.

Actually, in that moment of annoyance, he looked more like Claudia than he did when the camera was rolling.

"We're missing something," Charlotte said aloud, her eyes narrowing as she studied him. "The look is there. The voice is there. But the attitude... the drive..."

She realized then that teaching Josh to walk and talk wasn't enough. Verena had hired trainers to break him, to make him obedient. But Claudia wasn't obedient. Claudia was a force of nature.

To make this work, Charlotte realized that Josh didn't need to be tamed. He needed to be unleashed. But she didn't know how to trigger that switch. Not yet.

"One more time," Charlotte announced, resetting the camera. "And this time, Josh... try to act like you actually enjoy being better than everyone else."

Josh rolled his eyes, a gesture of pure, bratty defiance.

"Better," Charlotte whispered to herself. "Much better."

Later that night, Charlotte sat cross-legged on her bed, the glow of her laptop screen illuminating her frown. She scrubbed through the timeline of the "Interview" scene for the tenth time.

Visually it was a masterpiece. The gold lamé shimmered under the soft-box lights, the hair was architectural perfection, and the smoke from the Nat Sherman curled with cinematic elegance. The green screen background she had added—a blurry, high-society gala from 1985—sold the illusion perfectly.

But emotionally it was dead.

"He's acting," she muttered, tapping her chin with a pen. "He's not being."

She saved the file as Draft_1_Mediocre.mp4. It was passable for Verena’s initial payment, maybe, but Charlotte didn't want passable. She wanted viral. She wanted terrifying. She needed Josh to stop resisting the clothes and start using them. She needed the arrogance of the fur and the power of the shoulder pads to bleed into his actual personality.

"He needs a push," she decided, closing the laptop with a snap. "A real one. Something that breaks the wall between Josh and the dress."

She decided to play the long game. She backed off. For the next three days, she ghosted him. She didn't come to the estate to nag him about retakes. She didn't text him mocking emojis. She let him endure Madame Simms’ cane and Dr. Aris’ vocal drills in peace, letting the silence make him paranoid.

Chapter 10

By the time Tuesday rolled around, Josh was practically vibrating with relief. The pressure from Charlotte had vanished, and for the first time in a week, he felt like he could breathe—metaphorically, of course, since the corset Verena insisted he wear even during "light duty" days made actual deep breathing impossible.

But the physical discomfort faded into the background when his phone lit up that afternoon.

Emma: I’m back. Meet me at the bowl? 8 PM.

Josh couldn't be happier. It was a lifeline. A chance to escape the velvet prison, the smell of stale smoke, and the constant, suffocating presence of Claudia’s ghost. He spent an hour scrubbing the heavy makeup off his face, desperate to look like the guy Emma loved, even if he couldn't scrub away the waxing or the new, feminine shape of his eyebrows. He put on his hoodie, grabbed his board, and ran out the door, desperate for a taste of his old life.

The concrete of the old skate park was cracked and cold, illuminated by the flickering orange glow of a dying streetlamp. It used to be Josh’s sanctuary, a place where the sound of urethane wheels on pavement drowned out the world. Now, sitting on the edge of the empty bowl, it felt like a foreign planet.

Emma sat next to him, her knees pulled up to her chest. She had been talking about her classes, her roommates, the "normal" world that Josh felt increasingly exiled from. But the conversation had stalled.



" You're doing it again," Emma said softly, breaking the silence.

"Doing what?" Josh asked, his voice instinctively pitching up before he caught himself and forced it back down into a lower register.

"Sitting like... like that," she pointed.

Josh looked down. His legs were crossed at the knee, his back perfectly straight, his hands resting elegantly on his thigh, fingers draped just so. It was the "Claudia repose" Madame Simms had drilled into him with the cane. He quickly uncrossed his legs and hunched his shoulders, trying to inhabit the slouchy, relaxed posture of a skater. But it felt fake. It felt like a performance.

"I'm just tired, Em," Josh muttered.

"You smell weird," Emma said, wrinkling her nose. "That heavy, old-lady perfume. And smoke. You smell like an ashtray, Josh. Since when do you smoke?"

"I told you, it's the environment," Josh lied, the excuse sounding thin even to his own ears. "The owner smokes. The house is old. It sticks to everything."

"Does the polish stick to your nails, too?" Emma reached out, grabbing his hand. Under the orange light, the clear coat on his buffed nails gleamed. His hand was soft, hairless, and delicate compared to hers. "And the hair? You look like you're auditioning for a soap opera."

"It's a dress code," Josh pulled his hand away, tucking it into the pocket of his hoodie. "Verena... she's particular. She wants her staff to look a certain way. High-end. Refined."

"Refined?" Emma scoffed, standing up. "Josh, you're waxed! I saw your arms. I saw your chest when you stretched earlier. You don't have a single hair on your body. What kind of assistant job requires you to be a hairless Ken doll?"

"It's hygiene! For the archives!" Josh stood up too, frustration bubbling up. He wanted to tell her. He wanted to scream that he was trapped, that he was paying a debt, that he was scared. But the shame was a gag in his throat. How could he tell the girl he loved that he spent his days wearing a silicone breastplate and practicing how to walk in five-inch heels?

"Stop lying to me!" Emma shouted. She stepped closer, grabbing the hem of his hoodie. "And what is this? What is this?"

She yanked the fabric up. Josh tried to pull away, but not fast enough. The streetlamp illuminated his torso. His skin was smooth and pale, but angry red welts wrapped around his waist and ribs—the deep, indented impressions left by the tight-lacing corset he had worn for twelve hours straight before coming here.

Emma stared at the marks, her eyes widening in horror. "Josh... are those... are you wearing a corset?"

"It's for back support," Josh stammered, pulling the hoodie down frantically. "I lift heavy boxes. It's a brace."

"A brace," Emma repeated, tears welling in her eyes. "A brace that gives you an hourglass waist? You think I'm stupid? You're hiding something huge, Josh. You're changing. You're not... you're not you anymore."

"I am still me!" Josh pleaded, reaching for her.

"No, you're not," Emma backed away, wiping her eyes. "You don't trust me. You won't tell me the truth. I can't do this, Josh. I can't date a stranger."

She turned and walked away, her boots crunching on the gravel. Josh watched her go, his hand half-raised, frozen in the cold air. He wanted to chase her, but his legs felt heavy, and a twisted part of his brain—the part Dr. Aris had been training—whispered that running would be unseemly.

The house was dark when he got back. His parents were asleep. Charlotte's door was closed, a sliver of pink light escaping from underneath. She was probably editing, or plotting, or just ignoring him after his "lackluster performance" in the studio earlier that week. He was grateful for the silence.

Josh went into his room and locked the door. He stripped off his clothes, tossing the hoodie and jeans into the corner. He stood naked in the center of his childhood bedroom, surrounded by posters of bands he hadn't listened to in weeks.

He looked down at his body. The waxing left him looking vulnerable, prepubescent almost, but the corset marks told a different story. They were deep, angry lines that mapped out a female silhouette on his male frame.

He shivered. He grabbed a pair of loose basketball shorts and an old t-shirt from his drawer—the clothes he used to live in. He pulled them on, expecting the relief of comfort.

But there was no relief.

The cotton t-shirt felt rough and abrasive against his sensitive, sensitized skin. It hung off him like a sack, the fabric brushing against his nipples—which were tender, seemingly sensitive from the constant friction of the silicone breastplate he usually wore.

He pulled up the shorts. They felt wrong. Without the tight, compressing embrace of the gaff, his anatomy felt exposed, loose, and clumsy. He felt... untucked. Ungraceful.

He sat down at his computer chair, slumping forward to turn on the monitor.

His back ached.

Without the steel boning of the corset holding his spine in a rigid, forced posture, his muscles screamed in protest. He felt sloppy. He felt like he was spilling out of himself.

Josh stared at the black screen, a terrifying realization settling in his gut.

He hated the corset. He hated the gaff. He hated the heels.

But god help him, his body missed them.

He felt "right" when he was cinched tight. He felt secure when he was tucked and smooth. This "freedom"—the loose clothes, the slouching—felt chaotic and gross. The conditioning wasn't just mental anymore; it was physical. Verena had reshaped him so thoroughly that his own natural state now felt like the costume.

"What is happening to me?" he whispered to the darkness.

Suddenly, the silence of the room was broken by a soft ding from his phone. A text message. He picked it up, expecting an apology from Emma, or maybe a lecture from his dad.
It was from Charlotte.

“Come to my room. Now. I know how to fix your little performance issue.”

Her room smelled like a candy shop burned to the ground—sugar, vanilla, and stale tobacco. Charlotte was lounging on her bed, legs up on the headboard, scrolling through TikTok on her phone while a thin, pink Capri 120 smoldered in the ashtray on her stomach.

She looked up as Josh pushed the door open, her eyebrows raising in mock surprise.

"Well, look who's back early," she smirked, blowing a plume of pink-tinged smoke into the air. "Trouble in paradise? I thought you were staring deeply into Emma's eyes right now."

Josh didn't answer. He stood in the middle of the room, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his basketball shorts, shoulders hunched. The loose fabric of his t-shirt felt abrasive against his waxed chest, a constant, irritating reminder of what he was underneath. Charlotte patted the spot next to her on the bed. She reached for the pack of pink cigarettes on her nightstand and shook one out, extending it toward him.

"You look like you need this," she said. "Come on. Nobody's watching. No cane, no 'posture check.' Just a little hit to take the edge off."

Josh stared at the slender pink stick. His mouth watered. His brain, rewired by weeks of Verena’s patches and the high-nicotine Nat Shermans, screamed at him to take it. He could feel the itch in his blood, the jittery anxiety that only smoke seemed to quell these days.
He reached out, his fingers trembling, but stopped inches from the filter. He snatched his hand back, clenching it into a fist.

"I don't want your garbage," he muttered, turning away. "I'm not doing it here."

"Suit yourself," Charlotte shrugged, lighting it for herself instead. She took a deep drag, eyeing him through the haze. "So, spill. Why are you pouting in my room instead of getting laid?"

"Emma... she knows," Josh said, his voice tight. "Not everything. But she sees the changes. The hair. The nails. She saw the corset marks."

"Ouch," Charlotte winced theatrically. "Hard to explain away a twenty-two-inch waist as 'heavy lifting.' So what did you tell her?"

"Nothing," Josh said miserably. "I couldn't tell her. She thinks I don't trust her. She thinks... I don't know what she thinks. She left."

Charlotte laughed—a short, cruel sound. She sat up, swinging her legs off the bed. She walked over to him, poking him in the chest with a manicured finger.

"You should have just told her the truth, Joshy," she teased, her eyes glinting. "You should have told her, 'Babe, I can't tell you because I'm too busy being a fabulous, fur-wearing diva.' You should have told her how much you love the feel of those silk stockings. How powerful you feel when you're smoking that six-and-a-half-inch white wand and looking down on everyone."

"Shut up," Josh snapped, slapping her hand away. "I don't love it. I hate it."

"Do you?" Charlotte challenged, stepping closer. "Because yesterday, you were practically preening in that gold dress. And right now? You look miserable in those baggy shorts. You look... sloppy."

"I came here because I didn't want to be alone," Josh said, his voice cracking. "Not for this. I'm leaving."

"Wait," Charlotte said, her tone shifting from mocking to businesslike. "Don't go yet. I actually have a solution for you. For the video. And for your little... identity crisis."

Josh paused, hand on the doorknob. "What solution?"

"The footage we shot was good," Charlotte admitted, picking up her tablet from the desk. "But it lacked... fire. You were posing, but you weren't needing it. Claudia was a woman of appetites. She consumed life. You? You looked like you were waiting for permission to breathe."

"I did exactly what you asked," Josh argued.

"Technically, yes. But emotionally? Flat," Charlotte tapped the screen of her tablet. "So, I figured out how to fix it. How to make you hungry. How to channel all that frustrated male energy into something useful."

She turned the tablet around.

Josh stared at the screen. It was an image from an online store, displaying a device made of clear, high-grade polycarbonate and steel. It was small. Cruelly small. A tube, a ring, and a locking mechanism.

"A chastity cage," Charlotte explained, her voice clinical, like she was discussing camera lenses. "Specifically, a 'training' model. Vented for hygiene, but designed for long-term wear."

"You're joking," Josh breathed, looking at her like she was insane. "No."

"Hear me out," Charlotte said, swiping to the next image, which showed a diagram of the device in use. "This one is special. It has a PA curvature. It forces the anatomy down and back. It's designed to work with a gaff. It keeps everything... tucked. Permanently."

"I am not wearing that," Josh said, backing away. "Verena controls what I eat, what I wear, and how I talk. She is not locking my dick in a plastic cage."

"Think about it, Josh," Charlotte pressed, stepping into his space, forcing him to look at the screen. "You can't masturbate with this on. You can't get an erection. You have to sit down to pee, just like Claudia. It removes the last physical reminder that you're a man during the day. It forces you into a permanent state of femininity."

"It's sick," Josh hissed. "You're sick."

"It's method acting," Charlotte corrected with a cruel smile. "If you can't release that sexual tension with Emma—and let's be honest, that ship has sailed—and you can't jerk off... where does that energy go? It builds up. It becomes desperation. It becomes intensity. That's what I need for the camera. I need you frustrated. I need you needing release so badly that you'll do anything I say just to get the key for five minutes."

"Verena won't allow it," Josh said, grasping for straws. "It's... it's too much. It interferes with the work."

"Does it?" Charlotte countered. "Or does it ensure the work is perfect? I already drafted the email to her. Explaining how 'male urges' are distracting you from the persona. How this device will ensure a smoother silhouette in the skirts and a more... submissive mindset."

Josh felt the blood drain from his face. He knew Verena. He knew her obsession with the "perfect vessel." If Charlotte pitched this as a way to erase "Josh" and solidify "Claudia," Verena wouldn't just agree. She would insist on it.

"You can't," Josh whispered.

"I can," Charlotte said, tapping the tablet against her chin. "And I will. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you deliver," she said coldly. "If you give me the performance of a lifetime. If you become Claudia. If you stop fighting the clothes and the smoke and just own it. Maybe then, I'll tell Verena you don't need the cage. But until then?"

She poked him in the stomach, right where the phantom corset ache was strongest.

"You better get used to sitting down to pee, little brother."

Josh stared at her, hate and fear warring in his chest. He turned and slammed the door behind him, the sound echoing through the house. But as he walked down the hallway to his room, feeling the friction of his loose shorts against his thighs, he knew it was already over. Charlotte had given him an ultimatum he couldn't win, and somewhere in the back of his mind, the terrifying thought bloomed: Verena is going to love this.

Chapter 11

A week slipped by with Josh trying again and again to perform as Charlotte wished, and never quite succeeding. In his mind he was doing everything correctly—delivering the proper lines, posing stiffly in Claudia's absurd clothes, drawing on those long white cigarettes. He despised the whole charade and felt ridiculous inside them, yet believed he was making a good effort.

Then, one night, the silence in Claudia's bedroom was thick, scented with heavy night cream and the lingering, sweet smoke of the day's final Nat Sherman 164. Josh sat at the vanity, the three-way mirror reflecting a figure that was becoming less of a costume and more of a reality every day.

He was wearing a floor-length peignoir in a deep, blood-wine silk. The fabric was cool against his waxed skin. His face was shiny with a collagen mask, his hair pinned back in soft rollers to preserve the volume for the morning.
He took a slow, tired drag of the long all-white cigarette, watching the smoke curl from his glossy lips. He hated that this routine had become rhythmic. He hated that he knew exactly how to hold the cigarette so the ash didn't fall on the silk.

The heavy click of the door latch made him jump.

He spun around on the stool, clutching the lapels of the peignoir. Verena Von Hollenberg stood in the doorway, looking severe in a structured charcoal dressing gown that looked more like a judge's robe. Behind her stood Celeste, holding a small, velvet-covered box.



"Verena?" Josh said, his voice instinctively pitching up before dropping. "It's late. Is something wrong?"

"There is," Verena said, walking into the room. She didn't look at his face; she looked at his posture. "Your sister showed me the dailies from the studio sessions. They are... adequate. But lifeless."

Josh sighed, turning back to the mirror to stub out the cigarette. "I'm doing exactly what she asks. I'm hitting the marks. I'm memorizing the lines."

"You are reciting," Verena corrected, her voice sharp. "Claudia did not recite. She lived. She had a hunger, a voraciousness that you lack. You are holding back, Joshua. You are preserving a part of yourself that needs to be... set aside."

"I'm tired, Verena," Josh muttered. "Can we discuss my acting skills in the morning?"

"We are not discussing acting," Verena said. She nodded to Celeste.

Celeste stepped forward, placing the velvet box on the vanity table, right next to the crystal ashtray. She opened it.

Inside, nestled in black satin, was the device. It looked clinical and cruel—clear polycarbonate, gleaming steel pins, and a design that was unmistakably restrictive. It was the specific model Charlotte had shown him. The "tucking" cage.

Josh’s stomach dropped. "No."

"It is necessary," Verena said calmly. "Your resistance stems from your biology. You are distracted by your own... nature. This device will ensure that your silhouette remains unbroken, even in private. It will force a constant state of... containment."

"This isn't in the contract!" Josh stood up, the silk peignoir swirling around his legs. "I agreed to wear the clothes. I agreed to the hair, the makeup, the smoking. I did not agree to let you lock my dick up!"

"The contract states you are to be the vessel," Verena countered, her eyes cold steel. "A vessel does not have male urges. A vessel does not have anatomy that ruins the line of a skirt. You are failing to embody her, Joshua. And if you fail, the contract is void."

She took a step closer.

"If the contract is void," she continued softly, "I will call my legal team at 8:00 AM. Your parents will lose their home by noon. They will be destitute. Is your vanity worth their livelihood?"

Josh trembled. He looked at the cage, then at Verena’s implacable face. He thought of his dad’s tired eyes, his mom’s garden. He thought of the crushing debt he had caused with one stupid skateboard trick.

"You can't do this," he whispered, tears stinging his eyes.

"I can," Verena said. "And I will. Unless you submit. Prove your commitment to the role."

Josh looked at Celeste. The assistant’s face was blank, waiting.

He let out a shuddering breath, his shoulders slumping. The fight drained out of him, leaving only the hollow ache of defeat.

"Fine," he choked out. "Do it."

"Excellent," Verena said. "Robes up."

Josh closed his eyes. With shaking hands, he untied the sash of the wine-colored peignoir and lifted it, exposing his naked, waxed body.

The process was clinical, efficient, and deeply humiliating. Celeste worked with the speed of a nurse. There was no gentleness.

"Back," Celeste ordered, guiding him. "Tuck deeply."

Josh flinched as the cold, rigid plastic bit into his sensitive skin. A sharp gasp escaped him as he was forced to push his testicles up and inside of his own body. Celeste's hands were steady and unyielding as she fitted the heavy base ring flush against his pubic bone, effectively sealing them away and making it impossible for them to ever descend.

Next came the tube. She slid it over Josh's penis—it was impossibly short, the heavy plastic angled sharply downward. Gripping the cage, she forced it forcefully back between his legs, burying his manhood from sight as she aligned the locking mechanism with the ring on his pubic bone.

Click.

The sharp, metallic sound was louder than a gunshot in the quiet room. It was the sound of his body no longer belonging to him.

Celeste twisted a small key, engaging the lock. She gave it a tug to ensure it was secure.

Josh gasped. The pressure was immediate. He was trapped. His manhood was completely encased, forced into a permanent, flat tuck. He couldn't get hard. He couldn't touch himself. He couldn't even stand to urinate anymore.

Celeste handed the small silver key to Verena.

Verena held it up to the light, a small smile playing on her lips. "Perfect. Now, the silhouette is permanent."

She looked at Josh, who was clutching the robe around himself, shivering, feeling the hard plastic digging into his soft flesh.

"This stays on until your performance satisfies me," Verena stated. "Until you stop acting like a boy in a dress and start behaving like a woman of the house. Until you develop the hunger Charlotte speaks of."

"And if I need to..." Josh started, his voice barely a whisper.

"You sit," Verena cut him off. "Like Claudia did."

She turned to leave, the silk of her dressing gown rustling.

"Goodnight, Joshua," she said. "I expect tomorrow's shoot to be... inspired. You have a lot of frustrated energy to channel now."

The door clicked shut, and the lock turned from the outside.

Josh stood alone in the center of the room. He reached down, his fingers brushing the hard, unyielding plastic between his legs. The realization hit him with the force of a physical blow.

He was locked.

Even if Emma forgave him. Even if she came back tomorrow and wanted to make up. He couldn't. He literally couldn't be a man for her.

He stumbled back to the vanity and sank onto the stool. He looked at his reflection—the rollers, the makeup, the tear-streaked face. He reached for the pack of Nat Shermans, his hands shaking so hard he could barely get the lighter to work.

He lit one, inhaling desperately, the smoke filling his lungs. It was the only comfort left. The only thing in the world he was allowed to put in his mouth, the only vice he was allowed to enjoy.

He sat there, smoking the long white cigarette, weeping silently as the cage pressed against him, cursing Charlotte in his breath.

The week was a blur of plastic, steel, and a dull, throbbing ache that settled deep in Josh's pelvis. The chastity cage wasn’t just a device; it was a regime. It forced his body into a shape that wasn't his own, twenty-four hours a day. The "tuck" was no longer something he did for a few hours to wear a skirt; it was his permanent state. His anatomy was inverted, pressed back, and locked behind a clear polycarbonate shield that offered no mercy.

The worst part wasn't the pain—though the pressure was constant—it was the denial. Josh had never realized how much he relied on the simple, private act of release to regulate his stress. In this house, stripped of his identity, forced into corsets and heels, masturbation had been the one thing that was his. A reminder that under the wax and the silk, he was still a man.

Now, that was gone.

He would wake up in the middle of the night, his body naturally trying to react to a dream, only to be met with the unyielding resistance of the cage. The resulting ache was sickening, a blue, heavy pressure that left him sweating and sleepless, reaching for the pack of Nat Shermans just to calm his nerves. He was smoking a pack a day now. The nicotine was the only thing that stopped his hands from shaking.

When Friday arrived, Josh walked into the studio room with the desperate energy of a junkie looking for a fix.

"Take it off," were the first words out of his mouth. He was wearing a silk robe, clutching it tight. "Charlotte, please. I can't do this anymore. I'm going insane. I can't sleep. I can't think." Charlotte was adjusting the lighting, creating a soft, warm glow that mimicked the intimacy of a bedside lamp. She didn't look up.

"Good," she said simply. "Insanity is closer to passion than boredom is. You were boring last week. I need you on the edge."

"I am on the edge!" Josh shouted, his voice cracking. "I'm literally locked in a plastic tube! My balls are inside me! I have to sit to pee! How much more 'edge' do you need?"

"I need Claudia," Charlotte said, turning to face him. Her expression was calm, clinical. "And Claudia doesn't beg. She takes. Or she surrenders. Today, we're doing surrender."

She pointed to the rack of clothes.

"Get dressed. If you nail this scene—and I mean really nail it—we'll talk about the key."

Josh stared at her, hate burning in his gut, but the promise of the key was a lifeline. He snatched the hanger and went behind the changing screen.

The outfit was a humiliation designed to deconstruct him.

First, the black lace gaff, which went over the cage. It smoothed out the plastic bulge, leaving him looking disturbingly flat and female between the legs. Then, sheer black thigh-high stockings that clipped into a garter belt. He stepped into the black stiletto pumps—six inches this time, arching his feet painfully.

But the final piece was the worst. It wasn't a dress. It was a man’s blazer. Oversized, charcoal grey, smelling faintly of expensive cologne—Celeste must have sourced it from somewhere specific.

"Leave the robe off," Charlotte called out. "Just the lingerie and the jacket. Drape it over your shoulders like you just threw it on. Hair messy. Smudge the eyeliner a bit. I want 'morning after' energy."

Josh stepped out. The blazer engulfed his slimmed-down, corseted frame, making him look smaller, more delicate. The contrast between the masculine jacket and the exposed, waxed legs in stockings was jarring. He felt exposed.

He sat on the edge of the prop bed Charlotte had set up. He crossed his legs, the cage pinching him as he shifted his weight.

"Here," Charlotte handed him a lit Nat Sherman 164. "Deep drags. Your lover is in the bathroom. You're talking to him through the door. You're exhausted, you're sore, and you're completely, totally his."



"I can't say these lines," Josh whispered, looking at the script on the teleprompter.

"You will," Charlotte commanded, stepping behind the camera. "Action."

Josh took a drag. The smoke filled his lungs, giving him a moment of clarity. He looked at the imaginary door.

"You..." Josh started, his voice trembling. He tried to drop it into the sultry lower register Dr. Aris taught him. "You ruined me, darling."

"Cut," Charlotte said immediately. "You sound like you're reading a eulogy. You just had the best sex of your life. You're floating. Try again."

"You ruined me, darling," Josh tried again, forcing a smile. He leaned back on his hands, the blazer slipping off one shoulder. "I didn't know... I didn't know I could feel like that."

"Cut."

"Why?" Josh snapped.

"Because you look like you're in pain," Charlotte said, coming out from behind the tripod. "And not the good kind."

"I am in pain!" Josh hissed. "This cage is digging into my pubic bone!"

"Use it!" Charlotte urged. "Channel that frustration. Imagine the cage isn't there. Imagine the ache is because he was too big, too rough. Transmute the feeling, Josh! That's what acting is!"

They went again. And again.

"I'm yours," Josh recited, blowing smoke at the ceiling. "Completely yours. Whatever you want to do... do it again."

He tried to be feminine. He tried to be soft. He tilted his head, he exposed his throat, he let the cigarette dangle from his lips like a bored socialite.

But inside, his mind was screaming *NO*. Every word felt like a betrayal of his manhood. Every gesture felt like he was erasing himself. He couldn't connect with the sexuality of the scene because the sexuality was directed at a man. His straight brain walled it off, turning the performance into a wooden, awkward pantomime.

After three hours, the ashtray was full of long white butts. Josh’s voice was hoarse. His feet were throbbing in the heels.

Charlotte sighed, loud and long. She reached over and clicked the camera off.

"Stop," she said.

Josh slumped, the blazer sliding down his arms. "Did we get it?"

"No," Charlotte said ruthlessly. "We got a guy in drag reading lines. We didn't get Claudia."

She started packing up the lights.

"Wait," Josh stood up, panic rising in his chest. "Wait, Charlotte. I tried. I did everything you said. Give me the key. Please. Just for an hour. I need... I need to fix this."

He gestured to his crotch.

Charlotte looked at him. She saw the sweat on his forehead, the tremor in his hands, the genuine desperation in his eyes.

"You're not there yet," she said, shaking her head. "You're still fighting it. You're still thinking like Josh. You're thinking about your dick like it's a prize you're protecting."

"It's my body!"

"It's a prop," Charlotte corrected. "And right now, it's getting in the way."

She walked to the door, carrying her laptop.

"We'll try again next week," she said casually, as if she were rescheduling a lunch date.

"Next week?" Josh gasped. "Charlotte, no. You can't leave me in this thing for another week. It hurts. I can't... I can't function."

"You'll function," Charlotte said, opening the door. "And more importantly, you'll marinate. I want you to spend every minute of the next seven days feeling that cage. I want you to get so desperate for release that when I put you back on this bed, you won't care if you're talking to a man, a woman, or a wall. You'll just want to surrender."

"Verena won't let you," Josh threatened, bluffing.

"Verena already signed off on the extension," Charlotte smiled, a cold, shark-like expression. "She agrees. The vessel needs to be... tempered."

"Charlotte!" Josh lunged for the door, but the high heels twisted on the carpet, and he stumbled, catching himself on the doorframe.

Charlotte stepped into the hall.

"Sit down to pee, Josh," she said. "And think about what you're willing to give up to get that key."

She closed the door.

Josh stood there, the oversized blazer hanging off his waxed, corseted body. He heard her footsteps walking away.

He looked down. The black lace gaff stared back at him, flat and smooth.

He screamed—a raw, masculine sound of frustration—and threw the crystal ashtray at the wall. It shattered, sending ash and cigarette butts flying everywhere.

But the cage didn't budge. And the ache only got deeper.

Chapter 12

As the uber drove Josh to Emma’s apartment, he felt like it was all a cruel joke. The familiar streets of Northwood, usually a comfort, now blurred past Josh’s window like a movie he was no longer starring in. His phone buzzed in his hand—a heart emoji from Emma. A week ago, that would have made his chest swell with hope. Now, it just made the polycarbonate cage locked around his cock feel heavier.

The uber parked the car and Josh saw his own face reflected in the rearview mirror. He looked tired. Even without the heavy 80s makeup, his face was different—the eyebrows too arched, the skin too luminous from Verena’s expensive regimen, his hair falling in a soft, conditioned wave that framed his cheekbones. He pulled his beanie down low, trying to hide the "Claudia" that was slowly eating "Josh."

Emma answered the door before he could knock. She looked... normal. Painfully, beautifully normal. She was wearing oversized grey sweatpants and a vintage band tee with a hole in the collar.

"Hey," she said softly, her eyes searching his.

"Hey," Josh managed, his voice rough.

She didn't wait. She pulled him inside, wrapping her arms around his waist. Josh stiffened instinctively—the corset marks on his ribs were still tender—but then he melted into her. She smelled like laundry detergent and rain, not the cloying, heavy floral perfume of the Old House. She kissed him, deep and slow, and for a second, Josh forgot the plastic tube trapping him.

"I missed you," she whispered against his lips.

"I missed you too," Josh said, and he meant it more than anything he had said in months. They moved to the living room. Emma had ordered takeout from "The Green Leaf," their favorite vegan spot near campus.

They sat on the floor by the coffee table, picking at the food.

"I’ve been thinking," Emma started, poking a falafel with her fork. "About last week. I was... a bitch. I’m sorry."

"You weren't," Josh said, shaking his head. "You were right to be confused."

"No, I was judgmental," she interrupted. "I’ve been sitting here in this apartment, studying for finals, complaining about the stress... and I realized I have no idea what you're dealing with. You're working for Verena Von Hollenberg. The woman is a fossil. A rich, scary fossil. And you're stuck in that museum of a house, cut off from everything."

She looked up at him, her eyes earnest. "I’m over here protesting for animal rights and worrying about my GPA, and you... you dropped out to save your parents. You gave up

everything. I should be supporting you, not attacking you for your haircut or your... fingernails."

Josh felt a lump form in his throat. He put his fork down. The reminder of his old life—the protests, the classes, the freedom—hit him like a physical blow. It felt like hearing about a dead friend.

"It's hard," Josh admitted, his voice quiet. "It's harder than I thought it would be."

"I know," Emma reached out, covering his hand with hers. Her palm was warm; his was cold and smooth. "And I know there's more. I know you're not telling me everything. The way you act... the way you look. It's not just a job."

Josh tensed. "Emma..."

"Shh," she squeezed his hand. "You don't have to tell me. Not if you can't. But don't lie to me, Josh. Don't treat me like I'm stupid. I can see you're hurting. I can see you're... different."

Josh looked at her, fighting the urge to break down. He wanted to tell her. He wanted to scream that he was currently tucked and locked in a chastity cage because his sister was a sadist and his boss was crazy. But the shame was a wall he couldn't climb.

"I am different," Josh said, choosing his words carefully. "And there is more. A lot more. But... I can't talk about it. Not here. Not with you. When I'm here... I just want to be Josh. I just want to be us."

Emma softened. A small, sad smile touched her lips. "Okay. Just us."

She leaned in, pushing the takeout containers aside. She kissed him again, harder this time. The taste of hummus and mint was familiar, grounding. Josh kissed her back, his hands tangling in her hair. He felt a spark of hope. Maybe he could have this. Maybe he could compartmentalize the horror of the Old House and just live in this moment.

They moved to the couch. The lights were low. Emma straddled his lap, her hands moving under his hoodie, her fingers tracing the smooth, hairless skin of his back. Josh groaned, burying his face in her neck.

His body responded. It was automatic. The scent of her, the weight of her hips, the friction... his brain fired the signals. Desire. Want. Need.

Blood rushed south.

And then, it hit the wall.

The chastity cage was unforgiving. As his pennis tried to expand, to harden, it slammed against the rigid polycarbonate tube. There was no room. Nowhere to go. The pressure built instantly, turning what should have been pleasure into a sharp, cramping pain. The ring dug into the base of his shaft; the cap crushed the sensitive head.

It was a physical rejection. A denial so absolute it made him gasp.

"Josh?" Emma whispered, feeling him flinch. She ground her hips down, trying to get closer.

"Ah—" Josh hissed through his teeth, the pain spiking. The cage wouldn't yield. He was trapped in the tuck, his balls aching inside him, his penis crushed against the plastic.

The frustration exploded in his chest. It wasn't just the pain; it was the realization that she had won. Charlotte had won. He couldn't be a man. He literally couldn't do this.

"Fuck!" Josh yelled, pushing Emma back. "God damn it, Charlotte!"

The name ripped out of him before he could stop it.

Emma froze, pulling back to look at him. She blinked, confused. "Charlotte? Your sister? Why... why are you talking about your sister right now?"

Josh scrambled off the couch, his face burning. The pain in his groin was throbbing, a relentless reminder of his cage. He couldn't look at Emma. He couldn't explain why he had just shouted his sister's name while trying to have sex with his girlfriend.

"I... I can't," Josh stammered, backing toward the door. He grabbed his keys from the table. "Josh, wait," Emma stood up, pulling her shirt down. "What is going on? Talk to me!"

"I have to go," Josh said, his voice shaking with rage and humiliation. "I just... I have to go." "Josh!"

He slammed the door behind him, leaving Emma standing alone in the living room, bewildered and hurt.

Josh practically ran back to his house.

"I hate you," he whispered, staring at the dark streets ahead of him, tears of frustration stinging his eyes. "I hate you, Charlotte."

The cage pressed against him, cold and hard, answering him with silence. There would be no release tonight. There would be no comfort. There was only going to his parents' house, and the knowledge that the key was in Verena's pocket, and the only way to get it was to become exactly what they wanted.

The week that followed had been a blur of physical discomfort and relentless psychological deconstruction. There was no room for "Josh." The guy who liked skating and vegan food couldn’t solve his main problem right now, the thing between his legs. It was a locked polycarbonate tube that didn’t let him touch himself, that made him unable to sleep without aching, unable to stand to pee.

That "Josh" was useless.

Verena and her staff knew this. They spent the next five days systematically dismantling him. Madame Simms didn't use the cane to correct his posture; she used it to correct his mindset.

"You are sitting like you are waiting for a bus," she would snap, tapping his knee. "You are sore, child. You have been ravaged. Sit as though your hips are a memory of him. Sit as though you are trying to keep him inside you."

Dr. Aris was even more invasive. He made Josh practice the "post-coital breath." The drop in the larynx. The husky, satisfied timbre of a woman who has screamed herself hoarse.

By Friday, Josh was a wire pulled so tight it hummed. He hadn't slept more than four hours a night. The chastity cage was a constant, throbbing pressure against his pubic bone. He was desperate. He was starving. And he knew that the only way to get the key was to give them exactly what they wanted.

He walked into the studio. The green screen was lit. The red carpet was rolled out to the prop bed.

Charlotte was waiting. She looked different today—focused, almost predatory. She held the hanger with the outfit like it was a weapon.

"Last chance, Josh," she said, her voice devoid of the usual sibling teasing. "Verena is watching the feed upstairs. If you bore her again, she throws away the key."

Josh didn't argue. He stripped off his robe. The black lace gaff and stockings were already in place. He stepped into the six-inch heels, the arch of his foot screaming in protest, but he ignored it. Pain was just fuel now.

He reached for the blazer.

It was the same oversized, charcoal grey jacket from last week. But as he slid his waxed arms into the sleeves and pulled the lapels around his corseted torso, he froze.

The smell hit him.

It wasn't just the expensive, woody cologne from before. There was something underneath it now. Something raw. Musky. Sweat and skin and salt. It smelled like a man who had been working hard. It smelled like... sex.

Josh looked at Charlotte sharply. She offered a small, innocent shrug, but her eyes glittered. She had doctored the prop. She had scented the jacket with something real.

The effect was visceral.

Josh’s brain, starved of dopamine and desperate for release, latched onto the scent. It triggered a memory of intimacy, of heat. He didn't pull away. He pulled the collar closer to his face, inhaling the musk.

"Action," Charlotte whispered.

Josh didn't look at the camera. He looked at the empty space where his "lover" was supposed to be.

He reached for the silver lighter on the bedside table. His hand didn't shake. He flicked the flame, dipping the tip of the all-white Nat Sherman 164 into the fire.

Inhale.

The smoke mixed with the musk of the jacket. It tasted like vice. It tasted like surrender. Josh leaned back on the pillows, his legs falling open—not in a masculine sprawl, but in a loose, heavy drape of exhaustion. He let the blazer slip off one shoulder, exposing the black strap of his bra and the smooth curve of his waxed deltoid.

He took a long, slow drag, his cheeks hollowing. He held the smoke, eyes half-closed, savoring the burn. Then, he exhaled, a thick white plume drifting up toward the lights.

"God," Josh whispered. The voice wasn't his. It was lower, raspy, vibrating with a deep, satisfied exhaustion. "You absolutely... ruined me."

He turned his head slowly to the imaginary bathroom door, a lazy smile spreading across his glossy lips. It wasn't a fake smile. It was a smile of pure, concentrated need masked as satisfaction.



"I can't feel my legs," he murmured, taking another drag, the long white cigarette looking like a natural extension of his fingers. "I think you broke something, darling. And I think..."

He paused. He shifted his hips on the bed, the cage pinching him, a sharp spike of frustration that he instantly transmuted into desire. He looked at the door with a hunger that was terrifyingly real.

"...I think I want you to come back here and break it again."

He bit his lip, his eyes darkening. He ran a hand down the lapel of the jacket, as if stroking the man who owned it.

"Don't make me beg," he purred, the smoke swirling around his face. "You know I hate begging. But for that... I might make an exception."

Charlotte stared at the monitor.

The boy who had stood emotionless at the exact same scene last week was gone. The brother who complained about his vegan diet was gone.

On the screen, there was only a woman. A wealthy, decadent, insatiable woman who was basking in the afterglow of a rough encounter. The way he held the cigarette, the way he let his head loll back, the way his eyes tracked an invisible figure across the room—it was perfect.

It wasn't acting. It was alchemy. Josh had taken his own desperate, clawing need for sexual release and poured it into the vessel of Claudia Von Hollenberg. He was channeling his frustration into her appetite.

Charlotte felt a chill run down her spine. It was exactly what she had wanted, but seeing it happen—seeing her brother evaporate into this smoke-wreathed femme fatale—was jarring.

"Cut," Charlotte whispered, her voice barely audible.

Josh didn't move immediately. He took one last, long drag of the Nat Sherman, staring at the ceiling, lost in the musk of the jacket and the nicotine rush.

Then, he slowly turned his head to look at her. The "Claudia" mask didn't drop instantly. It faded slow, leaving Josh looking dazed, heavy-lidded, and undeniably beautiful.

"Well?" he asked, his voice still holding that husky, post-coital edge. "Did you get it?"

Charlotte looked at the playback on the monitor. The image of the dark haired socialite staring back at her was undeniable.

"Yeah," Charlotte grinned, a genuine, victorious smile. "We got it. Verena is going to lose her mind."

She looked at Josh, who was still dressed in the blazer, still enveloped in the scent of sex.

"Congratulations, sis," she said. "You're a star."

The next day, the morning light in Verena's private office was filtered through heavy amber blinds, giving the room the golden, dusty quality of a preserved memory. On the large CRT monitor built into the mahogany wall unit, the footage played on a loop.

It was Josh. The image was grainy, filtered to look like 1985, but the hunger in those eyes was high-definition. He leaned back on the pillows, the oversized blazer slipping, the smoke from the Nat Sherman curling around a face that radiated pure, wanton need.

"I want you to come back here and break it again," the figure on the screen purred, the voice husky and dropped low.

Verena watched it, her hands steeped in front of her face. For the first time in weeks, the critical tension around her mouth relaxed.

"It is uncanny," she murmured. "The way the hand moves. The tilt of the chin. It is not just imitation anymore. She is... present."

"It's the desperation," Charlotte said, leaning against the heavy oak desk, looking pleased with herself. "He wasn't acting, Verena. He was begging. He channeled every ounce of his frustration into that look. He wanted release so badly he turned it into seduction."

Verena paused the video on a frame where Josh's eyes were half-lidded, lips parted around the cigarette. "And the device? You believe it is the cause?"

"It's the engine," Charlotte confirmed. "If you take the cage off now, he goes back to being Josh—the bored, resentful history student. He'll get comfortable. He'll lose the edge. The cage keeps him hungry. It keeps him... feminine. Submissive. He needs to know that his pleasure is entirely dependent on your permission."

Verena nodded slowly. "A permanent reminder of his station. I agree."

She pressed the intercom button on her desk. "Celeste. Send him in."

A moment later, the double doors opened.

Josh walked in. He had been dressed by the morning staff in a creation that was less clothing and more armor. It was an Emanuel Ungaro power suit in electric neon green. The jacket was cropped at the waist, but the shoulders were enormous—rigid, geometric wings that extended six inches past his natural frame on either side, tapering down to a waist cinched mercilessly tight. The matching pencil skirt was a slash of blue that forced him to glide rather than walk.

His hair was coiffed high and back, sprayed into submission. In his gloved hand, the morning's first Nat Sherman 164 burned.



He stopped in front of the desk, his eyes darting immediately to Charlotte, then to the paused image on the screen. He saw himself. He saw the surrender. A flush of shame and pride fought under his makeup.

"You wanted to see me?" Josh asked, his voice steady, though his hand gripped the cigarette tight. "I did the scene. Charlotte said it was good."

"It was not good, Joshua," Verena said, standing up. "It was excellent."

Josh let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "Then... the deal. The key. Charlotte said if I nailed it, I could take this thing off."

He gestured vaguely to his lap, where the smooth front of the skirt hid the polycarbonate prison.

Verena walked around the desk, her heels silent on the plush carpet. She stopped in front of him, looking him up and down with possessive pride.

"Charlotte said you would discuss the terms," Verena corrected. "And we have."

"So?" Josh asked, hope rising in his chest. "Can I take it off?"

"No."

The word hung in the air, heavy and absolute.

Josh blinked, his brain stalling. "What?"

"The device remains," Verena stated calmly. "The footage proves that your... restriction... is the catalyst for your performance. When you are denied, you become Claudia. You become the woman of appetites. When you are Josh, you are flat. Boring."

"You can't be serious," Josh's voice rose, cracking the veneer of the contralto training. "I did everything! I wore the lingerie! I said the lines! I haven't touched myself in two weeks! You promised!"

"I promised to evaluate your performance," Verena said coldly. "And my evaluation is that the cage is working. You are finally embodying the vessel. Why would I dismantle the very mechanism that is bringing her back to me?"

"Because I'm a human being!" Josh shouted, stepping forward. "I can't live like this! I can't be locked in a tube for two years! It hurts! I can't... I can't function!"

"You will function as I dictate," Verena snapped, her eyes flashing. "Or do you prefer I call the bank? Shall we discuss the foreclosure proceedings on your parents' home instead?"

Josh froze. The threat was always there, the gun to his head. He slumped, the massive shoulder pads staying rigid while his body collapsed inside the suit.

"Please," he whispered, the fight draining out of him. "I can't do it, Verena. I'll go crazy."

Verena sighed, glancing at Charlotte, who gave a small nod.

"We are not unreasonable, Joshua," Verena said, her tone softening slightly, though her eyes remained hard. "We understand the biological imperative. Therefore, a compromise."

Josh looked up, his eyes wet.

"Your Tuesday days off," Verena said. "When you leave the estate to see your... friend. On those days, and those nights only, Celeste will unlock the device."

"One day?" Josh choked out.

"One day," Verena confirmed. "You may do as you please. But the moment you return to these gates—be it at 2:00 AM or the next morning—you report immediately to Celeste. You will be tucked, and you will be locked. If you are late, or if you attempt to hide, the privilege is revoked permanently. Do you understand?"

Josh stared at the floor. One night a week to be a man. Six days and nights to be a doll. It was a nightmare. But looking at the cold determination in Verena's face, he knew it was the only crumb of mercy he was going to get.

"I understand," he whispered.

"Good," Verena said, turning back to her desk. "Now that we have settled the matter of your... containment, we move to the next phase of your education. Claudia was not just a socialite; she was a businesswoman. She understood the power of texture. Of skin."

She picked up a file from her desk.

"You have the look. You have the hunger. Now, you must have the knowledge. Starting tomorrow, you will begin tutorials with Raffaella."

"Raffaella?" Josh asked dully.

"My specialist in fur and leather," Verena said, a small, cruel smile playing on her lips. "She works as a consultant for my stores and manages the preservation of Claudia's most delicate pieces. You are going to learn everything there is to know about pelts, tanning, and the structure of a coat. You will learn to appreciate the animals... in their final, most beautiful form."

Josh felt sick. He was a vegan. He had protested outside fur shops. The thought of spending hours handling dead animals, learning the "business" of skinning and stitching, made his stomach turn.

"I don't want to learn about fur," Josh muttered.

Verena looked at him, her gaze dropping pointedly to his crotch.

"Then I suggest you learn to fake enthusiasm, Joshua," she said. "Because if your performance in these lessons lacks the required... passion... I might decide that Tuesday nights are no longer necessary."

Josh flinched. He clamped his mouth shut. He took a drag of the cigarette, the smoke burning his throat. He was trapped. Locked in a cage, buried in a suit, and now, forced to worship the very industry he hated.

"Yes, Verena," Josh said, his voice hollow. "I'll learn."

"Excellent," Verena sat down. "Dismissed."

Josh turned and walked out, the click of his heels echoing in the room. As the door closed, Charlotte let out a low whistle.

"Raffaella is going to eat him alive," she laughed.

"Let us hope so," Verena replied, watching the screen where Josh as Claudia exhaled smoke with a lover's satisfaction. "He needs to be toughened up."

Later that day, the library of the Old House was a cathedral of silence, smelling of dust, beeswax, and now, the sharp, expensive tang of Josh’s smoke.

He sat in a high-backed leather wingchair, his body arranged in a pose that was becoming terrifyingly automatic: spine straight, legs crossed at the knee, the toe of his neon green pump pointed elegantly toward the floor. His arms ached with a dull, throbbing fire. Madame Simms had spent two hours drilling him on "gestural fluidity"—forcing him to pick up teacups, turn pages, and adjust his collar until his movements lost all traces of masculine jaggedness.

“Your wrist is a hinge, not a hammer,” she had snapped, rapping his knuckles with her fan.

Now, seeking a phantom connection to the life he had lost, Josh was reading a coffee-table book titled Chaos to Couture: The Punk Aesthetic. It was a cruel irony. He was looking at photos of safety pins and torn denim while wearing a three-thousand-dollar Emanuel Ungaro skirt suit that constricted his waist to twenty-two inches.

He took a drag of the Nat Sherman 164. The absurd long all-white wand felt heavy in his gloved fingers. He didn't even notice he was smoking inside anymore. The house had absorbed his vice, or perhaps he had absorbed the house's rules.

The heavy oak doors creaked open.

Josh didn't look up, assuming it was Celeste coming to check his tuck or summon him for the next humiliation.

"Jesus, it smells like a chimneystack in here," a voice drawled.

Josh stiffened. He lowered the book slowly to see Charlotte wandering in, a laptop tucked under one arm and a pack of pink Capris in the other. She looked maddeningly comfortable in oversized cargo pants and a crop top, her blonde hair in a messy bun.

She stopped when she saw him, offering a lopsided grin. "Oh, hey. Didn't know the Ice Queen was holding court in the library today. Nice shoulder pads. Very... aggressive."

"Get out," Josh said, his voice low. The chastity cage pinched him as he shifted, a sharp reminder of exactly whose idea that had been.

"Relax, I just need a quiet place to render this video," Charlotte said, ignoring him and dropping into the sofa opposite him. She opened her laptop. "Verena’s internet is faster in this wing."

Josh slammed the book shut. The sound echoed like a gunshot.

"You think this is funny?" Josh stood up. The movement was restricted by the pencil skirt, forcing him to rise in a smooth, vertical motion rather than jumping up. He walked toward her, the heels clicking on the hardwood. "You think ruining my life is content for your little portfolio?"

Charlotte didn't look up from her screen. She was typing a password. "I think 'ruining' is a strong word. I'd say 'optimizing.'"



"Optimizing?" Josh laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. He gestured to his body—the suit, the gloves, the ridiculous hair. "You locked my dick in a plastic cage, Charlotte! You told Verena to keep me in it! I can't sleep. I can't piss standing up. I can't be with Emma. You took the one thing I had left!"

"I gave you a motivation," Charlotte corrected, finally looking up. Her eyes were cool, devoid of the guilt Josh wanted to see. "And it worked. You saw the footage. You were incredible. You weren't Josh awkwardly wearing a costume. You were her."

"I don't care about the footage!" Josh yelled, smoke spilling from his lips. "I care about Mom and Dad! I'm doing this insane, degrading shit to save their house. To save their pension. And you... you're treating it like a game. You're making it harder just to see if I'll break."

"Harder?" Charlotte raised an eyebrow. She reached for her pack of cigarettes, lighting a pink Capri with a boredom that infuriated him. "Josh, wake up. You were failing. You were phoning it in. Verena was losing patience. If she fired you, the house would be gone by next week."

"She wasn't going to fire me," Josh argued, though he wasn't sure.

"She was bored," Charlotte said, exhaling a thin stream of pink smoke. "And rich people discard things that bore them. I made you interesting. I gave you an angle. By locking you up, by pushing the sex angle, I made you invaluable to her. I secured the contract."

"You did it for money," Josh spat. "Verena pays you."

"Yeah, she does," Charlotte admitted, tapping ash onto the floor, knowing the maids would clean it. "And she pays well. I'm building a career, Josh. I'm networking with the Von Hollenberg estate. I'm editing archival footage that belongs in a museum. I'm finally doing something with my degree instead of rotting in our parents' basement listening to you lecture me about almond milk."

"You're selling your brother," Josh said, his voice trembling with betrayal. "You're selling me to a crazy old woman who wants to turn me into a doll."

Charlotte stood up then. She wasn't as tall as Josh in his heels, but she held her ground.

"I didn't break the vase, Josh," she said coldly.

Josh blinked.

"I didn't try to grind a railing on a historic estate," Charlotte continued, taking a step closer. "I didn't sign the contract. I didn't agree to be the 'vessel.' You did all that. You messed up. You created this mess."

She poked him in the chest, right on the padded lapel of the Claude Montana jacket.

"I just walked in and saw an opportunity to make the best of a train wreck," she said. "If you're suffering, that's on you. That's your guilt, your debt, your problem. I'm just the consultant making sure the show goes on. And frankly? You should be thanking me."

"Thanking you?" Josh whispered, incredulous.

"Look at you," Charlotte gestured to him. "You're standing there, furious, and your posture is perfect. Your knees are locked. You're holding that cigarette like it's a scepter. You're more Claudia now than you were a month ago. Which means Verena is happy. Which means Mom and Dad keep the house."

She sat back down, dismissing him, turning her attention back to the laptop.

"So, spare me the sob story," she muttered, typing again. "I'm doing my job. You do yours. Now, keep it down. I need to sync this audio."

Josh stood there, the smoke from his Nat Sherman swirling around his coiffed head. He wanted to scream. He wanted to flip the table. But the training held him in place, frozen in a pose of elegant fury.

He looked at his sister—pragmatic, selfish, and terrifyingly right. She didn't care about his pain because, to her, his pain was just a production cost.

He turned on his heel, the movement sharp and feminine, and walked back to his chair. He sat down, crossing his legs, feeling the cage pinch him, and opened his book on punk anarchy, knowing he had never been more of a prisoner in his life.

Chapter 13

The room prepared for Raffaella’s lessons was a sensory overload, a windowless chamber in the West Wing that smelled aggressively of cedar, mothballs, and the heavy, metallic tang of chemically treated skin. It was a mausoleum of fashion, the walls lined with racks of garments and tables piled high with raw pelts. To Josh, standing in the center of the room under the harsh track lighting, it felt like a crime scene. To the woman pacing in front of him, it was a cathedral.

Josh was dressed in a creation that tested the limits of his balance and his dignity. It was a vintage Thierry Mugler skirt suit in a violent shade of fuchsia wool. The jacket was sculpted like armor, the waist nipped in so tightly by his corset that he could only take shallow breaths, while the shoulders extended outward in sharp, aggressive points that doubled his width. The pencil skirt was a matching fuchsia tube that ended mid-calf, forcing his legs together, creating that inevitable, mincing gait. His hair was teased into a dark, immobile wave, and the ever-present Nat Sherman 164 burned in his gloved hand, a white slash against the pink wool.

"No, no, no! Dio mio!" The voice was sharp, rapid-fire, and heavily accented.

Raffaella marched toward him, her hands flying in the air like startled birds. She was a striking, terrifying woman in her forties, clad in a sleek, modern black jumpsuit that looked liquid against her skin. Her face was a testament to the miracles of modern dermatology—lips pumped to a pillowy pout, cheekbones injected to glass-cutting sharpness, and a forehead as smooth as marble. She held a slim, silver cigarette between two long, manicured fingers, waving it dangerously close to Josh’s face.

"You look at the Sable like it is a dead rat," Raffaella scolded, snatching the dark, lustrous pelt from Josh’s hands. "This is Russian Sable, cara! It is soft gold! It is power! You hold it like it is dirty laundry."

"It... it feels heavy," Josh stammered, his voice instinctively pitching up before he caught himself. He looked at the pelt with a lingering trace of his vegan revulsion. "And the smell..."

"The smell is money!" Raffaella laughed, a dry, barking sound. She threw the pelt back at him. It landed heavily on his shoulder. "Smell it! It smells of the forest, of the winter, of the blood of the earth! Claudia did not flinch at the smell. Claudia bathed in it!"

She circled him, her heels clicking rhythmically on the parquet floor. She took a quick, sharp drag of her slim cigarette, exhaling a cloud of smoke that mixed with the cedar scent.

"Verena tells me you have... sensitivities," Raffaella said, stopping in front of him and poking his padded shoulder. "That you are—how do you say?—a eater of leaves. A vegan." She said the word with the same disdain one might use for 'leper.' "But here, in this room, you are not a vegan. You are a predator. You are at the top of the food chain, yes? And the top of the food chain wears the one in the bottom."

Josh swallowed hard, the bile rising in his throat. He looked at the table spread with samples. There were photos next to them—foxes, minks, chinchillas—cute, alive animals juxtaposed with their flayed skins. It was a psychological torture designed specifically for him.

"I understand the concept," Josh said, channeling the haughty boredom he had heard on the tapes. He took a drag of his Nat Sherman, tilting his chin up. "It creates a silhouette of dominance."

"It is not just a silhouette!" Raffaella grabbed his hand—the one not holding the cigarette—and dragged him to the table. She picked up a swath of snow-white fur. "Touch. This is Arctic Fox. Feel the guard hairs. Stiff, yes? But underneath? The undercoat?"

She forced his gloved hand into the deep pile. Josh flinched. Through the thin leather of his glove, he could feel the dense, suffocating softness. He imagined the animal it had once been. He wanted to pull away, to scream.

"Do not pull away!" Raffaella snapped, slapping his wrist lightly. "Caress it. You are making love to the texture. Claudia loved the Fox because it gave her volume. It made her occupy space. When she walked into a room wearing the white fox, the men... pfft, they disappeared. She was the blizzard."

Josh forced his hand to move, stroking the fur. He remembered a clip from the tapes, Claudia’s voice raspy and cruel: “If I am going to be out in the cold, I might as well be wrapped in something that died to keep me warm.”

"It... it has a density," Josh murmured, trying to sound appreciative. "A resilience."

"Bene," Raffaella nodded, her eyes narrowing as she assessed him. "Now, the leather."

She moved down the table to a section that looked like a reptile house. There were skins of python, ostrich, and crocodile, dyed in garish 80s colors—electric blue, emerald green, sunset orange.

"Leather is different," Raffaella lectured, her hands moving constantly, tracing shapes in the air. "Fur is seduction. Leather is skin. It is armor. When you wear the leather, you are tough. You are the dominatrix of the boardroom."

She picked up a stiff, bumpy sheet of black hide. "Crocodile. Porosus. The most expensive. Look at the scales. The symmetry." She thrust it into his hands. "What do you feel?"

Josh held the rigid skin. It felt cold, prehistoric. "It's hard. Unforgiving."

"Exactly!" Raffaella beamed, blowing smoke at the ceiling. "It does not bend. You bend to it. Like the corset you are wearing, no? The crocodile dictates the shape. Claudia had a jacket made of this. Black, broad shoulders, waist like a wasp. She wore it to fire people."

She looked at him expectantly. "What did she say about the leather? You have heard the tapes. Tell me."

Josh hesitated. He knew the line. He had heard it three times last night, unwillingly memorizing the cadence of the dead woman. He looked at the crocodile skin, then at Raffaella's expectant, surgically altered face. He felt the chastity cage pressing against him, the physical reminder that he had no choice but to perform.

He took a long drag of the cigarette, let the smoke drift out of his nose, and dropped his eyelids.

"She said..." Josh started, his voice dropping into that smooth, artificial contralto. "She said that silk whispers, but leather commands. She said she liked the crocodile because it was the only thing on earth with thicker skin than hers."

Raffaella clapped her hands, a sharp crack in the quiet room. "Si! Bravissimo! That is her! That is the arrogance!"

She grabbed a long, heavy coat from the rack—a monstrosity of Lynx fur, spotted and wild. She draped it over Josh's shoulders, burying him under the weight of a dozen dead cats. The fur tickled his neck, heavy and oppressive.



"Now walk," Raffaella commanded, pointing to the end of the room. "You are Claudia. You are wearing fifty thousand dollars of Lynx. You are walking into a party where everyone hates you, and you do not care because you are warmer than them. You are richer than them. Walk!"

Josh turned. The weight of the coat pushed down on the massive shoulder pads of the fuchsia suit. The corset dug into his ribs. The heels pinched. He felt like a monster, a Frankenstein of dead animal parts.

But he walked.

He locked his knees. He swung his hips, letting the heavy fur swing around him. He lifted the Nat Sherman to his lips, staring at his reflection in the mirror at the far end of the room. He didn't see Josh the vegan. He saw a predator. He saw a woman who consumed the world before it could consume her.

"Bellissima!" Raffaella shouted from behind him. "Shoulders back! More arrogant! Make them look at you! Use the fur!"

Josh reached up with a gloved hand, pulling the Lynx collar tighter around his face, burying his chin in the spotted death. He hated it. He hated every second of it. But as he exhaled the smoke, he saw the look in his own eyes in the mirror—cold, dead, and expensive.

"Is that better?" Josh asked the reflection.

"Perfect," Raffaella purred. "Now, let us discuss the Chinchilla. It is very delicate... like you used to be."

The days that followed were a blur of sensory conditioning, a crash course in cruelty wrapped in silk and dead skin. The windowless room in the West Wing became Josh’s entire world from nine to five. The air was perpetually thick with the scent of cedar, tanning chemicals, and the cloying, expensive smoke of Raffaella’s slim cigarettes mixing with Josh’s heavy Nat Shermans.

Day 7: The Architecture of Skin

"Leather is not fabric!" Raffaella shouted, slapping a ruler against a mannequin draped in a rigid, structural jacket. "Fabric drapes. Leather constructs."

Josh stood by the mirror. He was dressed in a Claude Montana ensemble made of buttery, oxblood leather. The skirt was so tight he had to take mincing half-steps; the jacket was a fortress with shoulders that extended like bat wings. He was sweating under the non-breathable material, the corset digging into his ribs, the chastity cage a hard lump of pressure between his legs.

"Tell me about the grain," Raffaella commanded, thrusting a swatch of Lambskin Nappa under his nose.

Josh didn't flinch this time. He took a drag of his cigarette, narrowing his eyes behind the layer of mascara.

"Full grain," Josh recited, his voice bored and imperious. "Uncorrected. You can see the pores. It hasn't been sanded down to hide imperfections. It breathes. It costs more because the animal lived a perfect life before it died for me."

"Bene," Raffaella nodded. "Now, the boardroom. You are meeting with the supplier from Tuscany. He is trying to sell you corrected grain at full price. Destroy him."

Josh turned to the empty chair. He imagined a sweating Italian man. He channeled Claudia's disdain for mediocrity.

"This is insultingly smooth, Giovanni," Josh purred, flicking ash onto the floor. He ran a gloved hand over the imaginary leather. "It feels like plastic. It feels like a Honda interior. My clients do not drive Hondas; they are driven in Bentleys. Take this trash back to the factory, or I will ensure you never sell a hide in New York again."

Raffaella clapped. "Yes! The arrogance! You must look at the leather like it owes you money!"

Day 15: The Hierarchy of Fur

The racks had changed. The leather was gone, replaced by a wall of soft, undulating death. Fox, Mink, Sable, Chinchilla.

Josh was wearing a gown of gold lamé, but over it, Raffaella had draped a floor-length white Shadow Fox coat. It weighed twenty pounds. It was hot, suffocating, and undeniably magnificent in its excess.



"Why is the Chinchilla the most dangerous?" Raffaella asked, holding up a small, grey pelt that was softer than air.

Josh looked at it. He remembered the flashcards. He remembered the videos of Claudia laughing while wearing a coat made of a hundred of them.

"Because it is fragile," Josh said, stroking the white fox collar around his neck. "It tears if you look at it wrong. It hates water. It hates sunlight. Wearing it says, 'I am so rich I can ruin this coat in one night and buy another tomorrow.'"

"Exactly!" Raffaella beamed. "It is conspicuous waste! Now, the Gala speech. You are accepting an award for the Fall Collection. The animal rights activists are outside throwing paint. You are inside, drinking champagne. Address them."

Josh stepped up to the makeshift podium. He adjusted the massive coat, letting it slide off one shoulder to reveal the gold dress and the waxed, glowing skin of his chest. He looked at the imaginary crowd.

"They scream about cruelty," Josh said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper, channeling the hunger he felt constantly now. "But look at this." He gathered the fox fur in his hands, burying his face in it for a second—a gesture that made his real stomach turn, but made "Claudia" look ecstatic. "Nature is chaotic. Cruel. Cold. We take that chaos... and we give it structure. We give it immortality. I didn't kill these animals. I gave them a purpose. I turned them into fashion."

He took a long, slow drag of the Nat Sherman, exhaling a plume of smoke that obscured his face.

"And frankly," he added, improvising a line he felt Claudia would say, "they look better on me than they ever did on the fox."

Raffaella gasped, a hand to her chest. "Oh, that was vicious. Perfetto."

Day 30: The Final Exam

By the end of the month, the flinching was gone. The hesitation was gone. Josh still hated it—the smell still made him nauseous, the concept still violated every moral he had held since he was sixteen—but the performance was flawless. The cage, the nicotine, the constant praise from Raffaella whenever he nailed a line... it had created a partition in his mind.

Josh was the prisoner. Claudia was the warden. And Claudia loved fur.

For the final lesson, Raffaella didn't give him a script. She simply pointed to a rack of raw, untanned pelts—musky, stiff, and greasy.

"Select the best ones for a coat," she ordered. "And tell me why."

Josh walked to the rack. He was wearing a black velvet cocktail dress with a plunging back, his hair piled high in a complex, rigid updo. He moved with the liquid grace Madame Simms had drilled into him.

He reached out, his manicured fingers sorting through the skins. He bypassed the stiff ones. He ignored the ones with uneven coloring. He pulled out a bundle of Russian Broadtail—flat, patterned, incredibly expensive lamb.

He carried them to the table, his heels clicking.

"Broadtail," Josh said, lighting a fresh cigarette with a gold lighter. "It's not about warmth. It's about texture. It looks like moiré silk, but it's skin. It's subtle. It's for the woman who doesn't need to shout to be heard."

He ran a hand over the wavy pattern of the fur.

"The texture is inconsistent here," he pointed a gloved finger at a flaw. "And the dyeing process was rushed. You can smell the chromium. It's bitter."

He looked at Raffaella, his expression cold and bored.

"I wouldn't line a boot with this, let alone a coat. Burn it. And fire the tanner."

Raffaella stared at him. Then, a slow, wide smile spread across her face. She didn't correct him. She didn't yell.

"Verena was right," Raffaella whispered, closing her notebook. "You have the eye. You hate it... but you understand it."

Josh dropped the pelt on the table as if it were contaminated. He took a drag of his cigarette, feeling the familiar pinch of the chastity cage, the ache in his feet, the constriction of the corset.

"I understand what is required," Josh said, turning to leave. "Is that all, Raffaella? I have a lesson with Madame Simms."

"Sì, Claudia," Raffaella said, almost inadvertently. "That is all."

Josh walked out of the room, leaving the smell of dead animals and expensive smoke behind him, his hips swaying in the tight velvet, his mind already locking the door on the things he had just said.

Chapter 14

The past month had been a blur of agonizing physical restraint. The rule Verena established was absolute: Tuesday nights were for release, but only if that release was with Emma. If Emma was busy, or out of town, or simply didn't text, the cage stayed on.

For three weeks, Emma had been swamped with midterms and radio silence. For three weeks, Josh had gone home to his parents' house on his nights off, walking gingerly in his baggy jeans, the polycarbonate tube pressing relentlessly against his anatomy. He had spent those nights lying in his childhood bed, staring at the ceiling, sweating, aching, desperate to just touch himself, but physically barred from doing so. He had to sit to pee in his own bathroom, terrified his father might walk in and hear the stream hitting the water differently. He was a prisoner in his own skin, carrying the metal and plastic secret that Charlotte and Verena had shackled him with.

When the text from Emma finally lit up his phone screen that Tuesday afternoon—"Hey, I'm back. Miss you. Dinner?"—Josh nearly wept.

He showed the screen to Celeste like a prisoner presenting a pardon. The assistant adjusted her glasses, verified the timestamp, and nodded. The unlocking ceremony in the anteroom was quick and clinical.

Click.

The plastic shell fell away. The rush of blood, the sudden expansion of tissue that had been compressed for twenty-one days, was dizzying. It wasn't pleasure; it was a painful, throbbing relief. Josh gasped, grabbing the edge of the table, his knees weak. He was sore, raw, and incredibly sensitive, but he was free.

At least for the night.

They met at "The Sprout," their old favorite dive for vegan junk food. The smell of frying oil and soy protein usually made Josh feel at home, but tonight, after weeks of inhaling cedar, expensive leather, and Nat Sherman smoke, it smelled greasy and cheap.

Josh was wearing his old clothes—a grey hoodie and loose jeans—but he felt like he was wearing a costume. The jeans felt rough against his waxed legs. The absence of the corset left his back aching, his muscles searching for the support they had grown dependent on.

"I'm really sorry about last time," Emma said, dipping a fry into ketchup. She looked tired but happy to see him. "I didn't mean to snap. The stress was just... a lot."

"It's okay," Josh said, his voice raspy. He reached for his burger.



Emma watched him. She frowned slightly.

Josh wasn't holding the burger with two hands like he used to. He was holding it delicately with one hand, his pinky finger extended slightly, his wrist curved elegantly. He took small, precise bites, chewing slowly, his back perfectly straight, his legs crossed tightly at the knee under the table.

"So, there's this guy in my Sociology group," Emma vented, trying to return to normalcy. "He keeps talking over me. Every time I make a point, he rephrases it and takes credit. I tried to talk to the professor, but he just said we need to 'collaborate better.'"

Josh swallowed his bite. He dabbed the corner of his mouth with a napkin—patting, not wiping.

"You are being too passive," Josh said. The tone wasn't his usual empathetic mumble. It was sharp. Dismissive. "If he interrupts you, stop speaking. Stare at him until he finishes, then ask him if he is done performing. Do not go to the professor like a tattle-tale. Humiliate him in the moment. Make him feel small. That is how you establish dominance in the room."

Emma stopped chewing. She stared at him. "Josh... what?"

"You have to command the space, Em," Josh continued, leaning back, his hand instinctively reaching for a cigarette pack that wasn't there. "If you act like a doormat, people will wipe their feet on you. You need to show teeth."

"Show teeth?" Emma let out a nervous laugh. "Since when do you talk like that? You're the guy who mediates arguments at the skate park. You sound like... like a villain in a movie."

Josh blinked. The fog of the Old House cleared for a second. He looked at his hand—poised, elegant, waiting for a luxury cigarette. He realized his legs were crossed at his knee. He heard the echo of Raffaella's voice in his own advice.

"Leather commands. You are the dominatrix of the boardroom."

Panic flared in his chest.

"I... I'm sorry," Josh stammered, dropping his hand to the table and uncrossing his legs. He slumped his shoulders forcefully, trying to break the posture. "I didn't mean... I'm just tired. I've been around Verena too much. She talks like that. It's... it's bleeding over."

"Yeah, well, don't let it," Emma said, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. "I like Josh. I don't like whoever that was."

"Me neither," Josh whispered, terrified by how natural it had felt.

They finished eating quickly, the mood slightly dampened. They walked out to Emma's beat-up Honda Civic. The night air was cool, and as they leaned against the car, the tension shifted.

Josh looked at her. He had been locked in a cage for three weeks. The friction of the denim against his now-sensitive skin was driving him crazy. He needed her. He needed to prove to himself that he was still a man, that the parts of him Celeste had unlocked still worked.

He kissed her, pressing her against the passenger door. It was hungry, desperate. Emma responded instantly, her hands tangling in his hair—which was longer now, soft and styled, smelling of expensive conditioner.

"Josh," she breathed against his neck. "My parents are home. And your parents..."

"I have money," Josh interrupted. The words felt foreign but powerful. Verena's "stipend" had been depositing into his account weekly, untouched. "Verena pays me... a lot. Let's go to a motel. A nice one. Not the car."

Emma pulled back slightly, surprised. "A motel? You want to spend money on a room?"

"I want a bed," Josh said, his eyes dark, the memory of the cage's pressure still ghosting on his skin. "I want privacy. I want you."

Emma searched his face. She saw the desperation there, the raw need. She smiled softly.

"Okay," she said, unlocking the car. "Let's go."

The neon sign of the "Starlight Motel" buzzed outside the window, casting intermittent red stripes across the cheap, floral bedspread. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of urgency. For Josh, this wasn't just sex; it was a reclamation. Every kiss, every touch was a

desperate attempt to scrub away the memory of the polycarbonate cage, the smell of the makeup chemicals, and the ghost of Claudia Von Hollenberg that clung to his psyche.

Emma was responding, her hands roaming over his back, pulling him closer. She kissed his neck, her breath warm. Josh groaned, fumbling with the button of his jeans. He needed skin-to-skin contact. He needed to feel real.

He pulled back to pull his hoodie off. He hesitated for a split second—the conditioning making him want to cross his arms and cover his chest—but the desire was stronger. He yanked the grey fabric over his head and tossed it to the floor.

The room was dim, but the bathroom light was on, spilling a harsh, yellow beam across the bed.

Emma reached out to touch his chest, her fingers grazing his skin. Then, she stopped. Her hand froze mid-air. Her eyes, half-lidded with passion a moment ago, snapped open. She pulled back, blinking, as if trying to re-focus a camera lens.

"Josh," she whispered, the word sounding more like a question than his name.

She sat up, pulling the sheet around her waist, staring at him.

Josh looked down. Without the hoodie, without the compression of a sports bra or the layers of the powersuits, his body was exposed.

It wasn't the body of a twenty-year-old male skater anymore.

His shoulders, once broad enough to carry a backpack and a board, had atrophied. The muscles were gone, replaced by a slender, sloping line that led to thin, delicate arms. His skin was hairless, laser waxed to a porcelain shine that looked unnatural under the motel lights. His waist, subjected to months of aggressive tight-lacing, curved inward deeply, giving him a distinct hourglass shape that flared out into hips that seemed wider, softer.

But it was his chest that made Emma’s breath hitch.

There were mounds there. Soft, undeniable swells of tissue. They weren't just pecs; they were breasts. Small, perhaps an A-cup, but round and feminine, with nipples that were puffy and sensitive.

"Josh," Emma said again, her voice shaking. "What... what is happening to your body?"

Josh instinctively crossed his arms, hunching forward to hide them. "It's nothing. It's... I think it's an allergic reaction. It's irritation. Swelling."

"Swelling?" Emma reached out and grabbed his wrist, forcing his arm down. She stared at the soft curve of his chest. "That's not swelling, Josh. That's tissue. You have... you have breasts."

She looked down at his stomach, at the defined, feminine line of his abs—the result of endless high-impact aerobics and leg lifts with Lance. She looked at his thighs, smooth and round.

"You're taking something," she accused, looking him in the eye. "You're on hormones. Aren't you?"

"No!" Josh denied, panic rising. "I swear, Em. I'm vegan. I don't take anything."

"Then what are you eating?" she demanded. "Because men don't just spontaneously grow hips and breasts!"

Josh went silent. He thought about the "vitamins" Celeste gave him every morning with his espresso. He thought about the specific meals Verena insisted on—the veal, the soy, the creamy sauces he wasn't allowed to refuse.

"I... I eat what they give me," Josh whispered.

Emma scrambled back against the headboard, looking at him with a mix of horror and heartbreak. "This isn't an assistant job. Assistant jobs don't reshape your skeleton. Assistant jobs don't make you look like a girl."

"It's for the role," Josh pleaded, reaching for her. "It's just for the contract. It'll go back. Once I stop, it'll go back."

"Will it?" Emma asked, tears spilling over. "Because right now, you look more like a woman than I do. Your skin is softer than mine. Your waist is smaller than mine. And you didn't tell me."

She stood up, grabbing her clothes.

"Emma, don't," Josh begged, scrambling off the bed.

"No!" she shouted, pointing a finger at him. "I can't do this, Josh. I tried. I really tried to be understanding. But you are lying to me every single day. You're turning into someone else right in front of my eyes, and you won't tell me why!"

She pulled her jeans on, her hands shaking.

"I'm done. I can't watch you destroy yourself. I'm leaving."

"No!" Josh screamed, the sound raw and terrified. He couldn't lose her. She was the anchor. She was the only thing keeping him from drowning in the Archive. "Don't go! I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything!"

Emma stopped, one shoe on. She looked at him—naked, shivering, looking so terrifyingly feminine in the harsh light.

"Everything," she warned, her voice hard. "If you leave out one detail, Josh, I walk out that door and I never come back."

Josh slumped onto the edge of the bed, burying his face in his manicured hands. He took a deep, shuddering breath.

And then, he broke.

"It wasn't just a window," he sobbed. "I broke a vase. A Memphis Group vase. It was worth five million dollars. Verena... she was going to sue. She was going to take the house. My parents' pension. Everything."

Emma listened, frozen, as the story spilled out.

He told her about the contract. About Claudia Von Hollenberg. About how he was the "vessel" because of his resemblance. He told her about the waxing, the daily training with Dr. Aris to change his voice, the etiquette lessons with the cane. He told her about the diet—the forced veal, the pills he didn't ask questions about.

"And Charlotte?" Emma asked quietly, remembering his outburst a week ago.

Josh looked up, his eyes red and swollen. "She found out. I thought she would help me. But she... she saw an opportunity. She's directing the 'transformation.' She's making videos. She's the one who tells Verena to push harder."

He wiped his nose, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"She's the one who suggested the cage."

"The cage?" Emma frowned.

"The chastity cage," Josh choked out. "I'm not... I'm not just 'busy' on the other nights, Em. I'm locked. They lock my dick in a plastic tube. I can't get hard. I can't touch myself. I have to sit to pee. I'm tucked twenty-four seven."

Emma put a hand over her mouth, the absurdity of it all reflected on her expression.

"That's why I couldn't... last month," Josh cried, tears streaming down his face. "Because I was locked. Tonight... tonight is the first time in more than a month that I've been free. Verena only lets me out on Tuesdays. And only if I act like her. Only if I become Claudia."

He looked down at his body—the soft breasts, the smooth legs, the hips that flared out on the mattress.

"I have to be her," he whispered. "Or they lock me up forever."

Emma sat on the edge of the bed, her hands gripping the sheets. She looked at him—really looked at him. The absurdity of it all clawed at her throat, a bubble of hysterical laughter threatening to rise, but it was suffocated immediately by a wave of profound, aching pity.

"It's..." Emma started, shaking her head. "It's like a bad horror movie, Josh. A rich woman kidnapping a college student to play dress-up with her dead aunt? It sounds insane."

"It is insane," Josh whispered, pulling a pillow onto his lap to cover himself. He felt agonizingly exposed, not just because he was naked, but because the truth was out.

"But..." Emma tilted her head, her eyes tracing the line of his jaw, the sweep of his darkened lashes, the softness of his shoulders. "I mean... I hate to say this, Josh, but I can see why she picked you. With the hair grown out like that... and the way they've shaped your brows... you have this... look."

"Don't," Josh snapped, flinching. "Don't say I look like a girl."

"I'm not saying that," Emma corrected gently. "I'm saying you look... pretty. In a way that fits that 80s androgyny thing. But that’s just surface stuff. What I don’t get is the rest of it."

She gestured around the room, as if encompassing the invisible scope of Verena's madness. "Why?" Emma asked. "Why spend all this money? Custom corsets? Those cigarettes cost a fortune. The treatments... Josh, look at your chest."

She reached out, ignoring his attempt to pull away, and poked the soft, tender mound of tissue on his pectoral.

"This isn't just soy milk and tofu," she said, her voice hard. "They are feeding you hormones. Estrogen. Probably anti-androgens too. Do you have any idea how expensive that is? How illegal it is to dose someone without their consent?"

"I signed a lot of papers," Josh muttered, looking at the floor. "and I didn't read the fine print."

"It's battery, Josh!" Emma shouted. "It's poisoning! Why go to these lengths just to see a ghost?"

"Because she's obsessed," Josh said, his voice hollow. "Verena... she doesn't just want to remember Claudia. She wants to see her. She wants to walk into a room and feel like her aunt is there, judging her, smoking in there. The house is a museum, Emma. I'm just the wax figure that moves."

"Then we go to the police," Emma stated firmly. "We go right now. We show them the cage marks. We show them your blood work. We tell them about the blackmail."

"We can't," Josh shook his head frantically. "The vase... Emma, it was five million dollars. My parents' house is worth four hundred thousand. Their pension is nothing compared to that. If I breach the contract, Verena sues. My dad has a heart condition. The stress of losing everything... it would kill him."

"So you let her kill you instead?" Emma argued. "You let her turn you into a woman?"

"It's temporary," Josh insisted, though his voice wavered. "One year and seven months left. Then the debt is paid. I walk away."

"And what about the videos?" Emma asked, her eyes narrowing. "You said Charlotte is filming you. Acting like her. Begging for sex. Smoking."

Josh went pale. He hugged the pillow tighter. "That's... that's the other reason. If I go public, if I try to fight her... she releases them. 'Local History Student's Secret Fetish Life.' 'Skater Boy's Drag Audition.' I'd be ruined, Em. I could never get a job. I could never show my face in this town again. Everyone would see me... like that."

Emma stared at him, realizing the depth of the trap. It wasn't just financial; it was social. Verena had weaponized his dignity against him.

"This is pride, Josh," Emma said softly, sad realization dawning on her. "You're protecting your male pride. You'd rather be tortured in secret than humiliated in public."

"It's the only pride I have left!" Josh yelled, his voice cracking. "She took my body! She took my name! She took my dick! The only thing I have is that nobody out there knows! If I keep my mouth shut, I can pretend I'm still Josh Braun to the rest of the world!"

"You're being a coward," Emma said, but there was no malice in it, only grief.

"I'm taking responsibility!" Josh shot back. "I broke the window. I broke the vase. I signed the paper. This is on me. I'm paying my debt. I'm not running away like a child."

They stared at each other for a long moment. The motel room felt suffocating.

Finally, Emma sighed. She slumped back against the headboard, looking defeated.

"One year and seven months," she whispered.

"Yeah," Josh said, wiping his eyes.

"And then you're done? No more hormones? No more cage?"

"No more," Josh promised. "I burn the clothes. I cut my hair. I go back to being me."

Emma looked at him—at the soft skin, the shaped nails, the hauntingly beautiful face that looked less and less like the boy she started dating and more like the woman in the newspaper clippings. She wondered if "Josh" would even be there to come back to.

"Okay," she said quietly. "Okay."

"You'll... you'll keep it a secret?" Josh asked, terrified.

"I won't tell anyone," Emma promised. "I won't help her ruin you."

She moved closer on the bed, wrapping her arms around his trembling shoulders. He buried his face in her neck, smelling of tears and that faint, undeniable musk of the Old House.

"But I don't agree with this," she whispered into his hair. "I think you're wrong. I think you should fight. But... I'm not going to leave you alone in there. I'll support you. Whatever you need."

Josh held onto her like a lifeline. "Thank you. Just... be here. On Tuesdays. Just be here."

"I'm here," she said, stroking his back, her hand pausing over the unfamiliar clasp of his bra strap indentation. "I'm here."

They sat like that for a while, the neon light flickering outside.

"So," Emma said, trying to steady her voice. "Since we have the room... and since you're... unlocked for the night..."

She pulled back to look at him, a question in her eyes. She needed to know if, beneath the changes, he was still him where it mattered.

"Do you still want to?"

Josh looked at her, his eyes dark with a mix of gratitude and desperate, pent-up need.

"More than anything," he whispered.

As they kissed, his hands—smooth, manicured, and lacking the callous roughness of a skater—slid over her skin. He felt smaller than he remembered. The muscle mass he had lost to Verena’s diet and Lance’s "slimming" aerobics meant he didn't hover over Emma with the same masculine bulk he once had.

He felt soft. He felt exposed.

But Emma didn't pull away. In fact, her hands seemed to linger on the changes. She traced the indentation of his waist, her fingers splaying over the smooth, waxed curve of his hip. She wasn't repulsed. If anything, the friction of his soft skin against hers, the visual of his delicate features framed by the pillow, seemed to spark something in her. She had always had a thing for the androgynous look—the Bowie-esque blur of lines—and right now, in the dim light, Josh was the embodiment of that aesthetic.

Josh felt her arousal, and a dark, twisted part of his mind whispered that this was pity sex. That she was doing this to make him feel better about being a freak. But his body, starved of touch and locked in plastic for weeks, didn't care. Pity felt like love right now.

He moved on top of her. His arms trembled slightly, not just from emotion, but from the physical effort; the strength in his triceps was gone, sacrificed for a leaner silhouette.

"Josh," Emma breathed, her hands gripping his smooth shoulders. She looked up at him, her eyes dark. "Fuck me."

The command hit Josh like a physical jolt. Obey. The instinct had been drilled into him by Madame Simms and Celeste for months. He didn't hesitate. He aligned himself, the freedom from the cage feeling almost overwhelming, and pushed inside.

The sensation was blinding.

After more than thirty days of compression, of being tucked and numb, the feeling of warmth and wetness was too much. It was sensory overload. He gasped, his head falling back, his hair brushing against his own shoulders. He tried to set a rhythm, tried to be the boyfriend she remembered, but his body betrayed him.

The pleasure spiked instantly, bypassing the buildup, bypassing control.

"Emma," he choked out, panic rising as he felt the edge approaching way too fast.

"It's okay," she whispered, wrapping her legs around his waist. "I've got you."

But she didn't have him. The biology did.

He thrust once, twice—and then everything shattered. His body convulsed, a wave of intense, blinding release that was over before it had really begun. He collapsed onto her chest, breathing raggedly, the humiliating realization washing over him as the pleasure faded.

It had been less than a minute.

"I'm sorry," Josh gasped into her neck, his face burning. "I'm so sorry. It's... it's been so long. The cage..."

"Shh," Emma stroked his hair, her heartbeat steady beneath his ear. "It's okay. It happens."

Josh pulled back, mortified. He looked at her, seeing the unsatisfied flush on her cheeks. He felt like a failure. Not just as a man, but as a partner. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to summon the will, tried to force blood back down, praying for a second wind.

He focused. He tried to fantasize about her, about the moment. But his body was silent. The hormones Verena had been feeding him, combined with the atrophy of the muscle and the sheer exhaustion of the release, left him limp. He touched himself, trying to coax a reaction, but he remained soft, small, and useless.

"I can't," he whispered, his voice breaking. "It's not working. I think... I think the medicine..."

He didn't finish the sentence. The implication hung in the air: the feminization wasn't just aesthetic anymore. It was functional.

Emma looked at him, seeing the utter devastation in his eyes. She sat up slightly, propping herself on her elbows. She didn't look angry. She didn't look disappointed. She looked at him with a gentle, pragmatic kindness.

"Don't worry about it," she said softly. She reached out and guided his head down, her fingers tangling in his dark waves. "You have a mouth, don't you?"

Josh froze for a second, then nodded. It was a service. It was something he could do. It was submission, but to her.

He slid down her body, the sheets rustling against his smooth skin. He buried his face between her legs, grateful for the darkness, grateful for a task that didn't require him to be the strong, virile male he no longer felt like. He focused on her pleasure with a desperate, singular intensity, using the same oral fixation he had been forced to learn for smoking to bring her to the edge.

When they finally fell asleep, curled together in the center of the bed, Josh held her tight. Emma was the big spoon, her arm draped over his waist, her hand resting flat on his stomach.

Josh stared at the red stripes of light on the wall. He tried to enjoy the warmth of her body, the smell of her skin. But beneath the comfort, a cold knot of dread was tightening in his gut. The sun would rise in a few hours. And when it did, he had to go back. He had to walk through the gates, go to the anteroom, and let Celeste lock his useless, soft manhood back into the polycarbonate tube.

He closed his eyes, pretending he was just Josh, while the ghost of Claudia waited in the dark.

Chapter 15

The morning mist still clung to the manicured hedges of the Von Hollenberg estate when Emma's Honda Civic idled at the front gates. The goodbye had been heavy, laden with unspoken apologies and the lingering, bitter taste of Josh's sexual failure the night before. He watched her drive away, the taillights disappearing into the fog, and felt the weight of the Old House settle back onto his shoulders like a lead blanket.

He walked up the driveway, his gait already shifting, the muscle memory of the estate taking over before he even reached the door.

Inside, Celeste was waiting. She didn't say a word; she simply held the velvet box.

Josh went upstairs to his bathroom. He showered, scrubbing his skin raw, trying to wash away the scent of the motel, the scent of Emma, and the humiliating memory of his body refusing to work. But the water just beaded off his waxed, softened skin. He looked down at his chest—the small, puffy mounds of tissue that Emma had touched with such horror. He looked at the curve of his hips. He wasn't imagining it. He was changing.

He stepped out, drying off with a plush towel. Celeste entered the bathroom without knocking.

"Assume the position," she said, her voice devoid of inflection.

Josh dropped the towel. He felt a phantom flicker of defiance, but it was weak. He was tired. He was broken. And he knew that resisting only delayed the inevitable.

He spread his legs, reaching back to pull his anatomy into the deep, uncomfortable tuck that had become his default state. Celeste stepped forward with the device.

The cold polycarbonate touched his skin, shocking him. She slid the ring over, positioned the short, downward-angled tube, and pressed the assembly tight against his pubic bone.

Click.

The sound echoed in the tiled room.

Josh let out a shaky breath as the pressure returned. It was immediate and unforgiving. His manhood, useless and soft, was once again encased, flattened, and locked away. The key turned, and Celeste dropped it into her pocket. The "freedom" of Tuesday night was over. He was a doll again.

Josh sat at the vanity, staring at his reflection. He reached for the silver case. His hands were shaking until the flame of the lighter touched the tip of the long Nat Sherman 164.

Inhale.

The smoke hit his lungs, and a wave of shameful relief washed over him. He hated that he loved it. He hated that the taste of the luxury tobacco felt more like home now than the vegan burger he had eaten with Emma. It centered him. It made the cage feel... manageable.

He spent the next hour reconstructing Claudia. The foundation, the contouring to sharpen his jaw, the mascara to widen his eyes. He styled his hair, teasing the dark waves into a voluminous, structured halo that froze under a cloud of hairspray.

Then, the outfit. Celeste had laid out a Yves Saint Laurent morning dress in a jarring, electric teal. The dress was a masterpiece of 80s geometry, with a peplum waist that flared out over his hips, exaggerating the hourglass shape created by the corset Celeste laced him into. The shoulder pads were colossal, sharp enough to cut glass. The skirt was a pencil cut, slitted high up the back, requiring him to wear sheer black stockings and four-inch black patent pumps.

When he finally walked into the breakfast room, the click-clack of his heels announcing him, he looked every inch the resurrecting matriarch.

Verena was seated at the head of the table, slicing a grapefruit. She didn't look up.

"You are late," she noted.

"I had to be... secured," Josh replied, his voice dropping automatically into the breathy, lower register. He sat down, crossing his legs tightly, the cage pinching him. He placed his golden case of cigarettes and silver lighter on the table next to the silverware.

He didn't reach for the grapefruit. He looked at Verena, his eyes hard.



"You're feeding me hormones," he said. It wasn't a question.

Verena paused, the silver knife hovering over the fruit. She looked at him, her expression unreadable.

"I am adjusting your chemistry," she corrected calmly. "The vessel requires a specific softness. A specific... receptivity. Testosterone is a harsh, jagged obstacle to the aesthetic I require."

"It's not just an aesthetic, Verena," Josh said, his hand trembling as he reached for his coffee. "I have breasts. Actual breasts. My skin... my muscles are gone. I tried to... with Emma last night..."

He stopped, the humiliation clogging his throat.

"I couldn't do it," he whispered. "I couldn't perform like I used to. It all happened too fast. Between the cage and the drugs... you've almost castrated me."

Verena took a bite of grapefruit, chewing slowly. "You are not castrated, Joshua. You are simply... dormant. Your male function is irrelevant to your purpose here."

"It's relevant to me!" Josh snapped, the teal shoulder pads rising with his agitation. "I can't do this for two years, Verena. I can't. I'll lose my mind. I'll lose Emma. I'm already losing myself. I look in the mirror and I don't know who is staring back anymore."

He leaned forward, the desperation cracking his composed façade.

"I'm telling you the truth. I'm not fighting you on the clothes or the smoking or the acting. But the physical stuff? The hormones? The cage? I can't sustain this for nineteen more months. I will break. And if I break, your 'vessel' is useless."

Verena studied him. She saw the genuine terror in his eyes, but she also saw the way he held the cigarette—elegantly, perfectly. She saw the way the teal suit hugged a body that was becoming undeniably female in its proportions.

She wiped her mouth with a linen napkin.

"You are right," she said.

Josh blinked. "What?"

"Two years is a long time to maintain a state of pure passivity," Verena mused. "Boredom breeds rebellion. And you are clearly... restless."

She stood up and walked to the window, looking out at the gardens.

"I have a proposition," she said, turning back to him. "A modification of the contract."

Josh held his breath. "What kind of modification?"

"Can you withstand this... intensity... until the end of the year?" Verena asked. "Seven more months. Making it one year in total. Half of the time we had agreed on."

"One year?" Josh calculated. That cut the sentence in half. "You'd let me go? The debt paid? The house safe?"

"Yes," Verena nodded. "But there is a condition. A new role."

"What role?" Josh asked, suspicious.

"Claudia was not just a clotheshorse, Joshua. She was a force. She managed the family's interests in the textile sector. She dealt with suppliers, designers, the unions. She was feared."

Verena walked back to the table, leaning down, her face close to his.

"I need you to command the respect of the board, and to terrify the competition," Verena began, her voice clinical, "you cannot be a twenty-year-old boy in a wig. You cannot be a 'vessel.' You must be a person. A history."

She walked back to the table and placed a glossy folder in front of him.

"You will assume the identity of Claudia Von Hollenberg. Not my late aunt—that would be legally complicated—but my cousin. A distinct branch of the family tree, recently arrived from our estates in Europe to bring order to the American sector. You are thirty-eight years old. You are a widow. You are wealthy, bored, and merciless."

Josh stared at the folder. "Thirty-eight? Verena, I'm twenty. Even with the makeup... up close, people will see."

"We will ensure they do not," Verena said, leaning down, her eyes scanning his face like a surgeon mapping an incision. "We are not doing surgery, Joshua. I do not want permanent scars. But the aesthetic of the era... the aesthetic of the place you are going... allows for certain enhancements."

"Enhancements?" Josh gripped the edge of the table, the teal shoulder pads rising.

"Fillers," Verena listed, counting on her fingers. "Botox to freeze the forehead and lift the brow. Thread lifts to sharpen the 'fox eye' look and pull the jawline tight. We will inject volume into the lips and cheeks. We will create the face of a woman who is desperately, expensively fighting the aging process."

Josh felt sick. "You want to inject stuff into my face? To make me look... plastic?"

"I want to make you look like a woman of means," Verena corrected. "In the circles you will be moving in, a frozen face is a status symbol. It says you have the money to defy nature. It

will mask your youth and replace it with a synthetic, preserved beauty. Combined with a platinum blonde coiffure—wigs are too risky, we will bleach and style your own hair—you will be unrecognizable."

Josh instinctively touched his face. The idea of needles, of threads under his skin pulling him into a permanent feminine mask, was terrifying. But the cage between his legs gave a sharp pinch, reminding him of the alternative. *Two years of this? Or seven months of "Cousin Claudia"?*

Verena pulled a remote from her pocket and pointed it at the wall-mounted screen where the video of Josh was still paused—the image of him in the grey blazer, smoking, eyes heavy with lust.

"Look at her," Verena commanded. "Do you see a boy there? Do you see a student?"

Josh looked. He saw the hunger. He saw the way the cigarette dangled from the glossy lips. He saw the absolute desire in the eyes.

"No," Josh whispered.

"Exactly. The boy is already gone, Joshua. We are just finishing the sculpture." Verena turned off the screen. "For the next month, you will remain here. We will perform the procedures. You will heal. You will train. And during this month, 'Josh' ceases to exist. You will live, eat, sleep, and breathe as Claudia. No breaks. No hoodies. No basketball shorts. You must acclimate to the persona so deeply that when you step off the plane, you do not have to think about walking in heels—you simply walk."

"Plane?" Josh asked, latching onto the word. "Where am I going?"

"You are going to Retroville," Verena said, the name rolling off her tongue with a strange reverence.

"Retroville?" Josh frowned. "I've never heard of it."

"Few have," Verena smiled thinly. "It is a sanctuary. A city frozen in the amber of our finest decade. It is a place favored by those with the means to pay for absolute exclusivity. A place where the excess of the 80s never ended. The fashion, the culture, the... hierarchy. It is all preserved there."

She looked him up and down, taking in the teal suit, the corset-snatched waist, the long, manicured fingers holding the cigarette.

"You will fit right in, Claudia. In Retroville, a woman like you—powerful, artificial, armored in fur and leather—is royalty."

Josh felt a chill run down his spine. *A whole city? A place where this nightmare was the norm?*

"I can't do that alone," Josh said, panic rising again. "I can't run a business. I don't know the first thing about contracts or... or shipping."

"You will have guidance," Verena assured him. "And you will have a staff. In fact, I have already appointed your personal assistant and marketing manager. Someone to handle the press, to manage your schedule, and to ensure your... special requirements are met."

The double doors of the breakfast room opened.

Charlotte walked in.

She wasn't wearing her usual cargo pants. She was dressed in a sharp, black skirt suit, her hair pulled back in a severe, professional bun. She held a tablet and a lit pink Capri cigarette. She looked like a shark in office wear.

"Morning, Cousin," Charlotte smirked, blowing a thin stream of smoke.

Josh stared at her, the betrayal tasting like ash in his mouth. "You."

"Me," Charlotte agreed, walking over to stand beside Verena. "Someone has to make sure you don't break character. And since I'm the one who figured out how to unlock your potential..." She glanced pointedly at his lap. "...Verena thought I was the best candidate to keep you in line."

"She is going with me?" Josh asked Verena, his voice tight.

"She understands the project," Verena said. "She knows the secret. And she has a vested interest in your success. She will be your handler. She will ensure the cage remains locked, the hormones are administered, and the business thrives."

Josh looked between the two women. The architect of his financial ruin and the architect of his psychological ruin. He was trapped. Completely, utterly trapped.

But then he thought of the timeline. Seven months.

If he went to this Retroville, played the part, let them inject his face and bleach his hair... in twelve months, he could vanish. He could disappear, let the "cousin" return to Europe, and Josh Braun could finally go home.

"And if I sign?" Josh asked, looking at the thick document Verena had placed on the table next to the identity folder. "If I agree to the face, the hair, the city, the job... seven months from today, the debt is zero?"

"Zero," Verena confirmed. "The vase, the window, the legal fees. Wiped clean. And you will be compensated for your time as the Director of Operations. You will leave a wealthy man."

Josh looked at the contract. The header read Addendum to Employment Agreement: Identity Assumption and Liability Release.

He reached for the gold pen Verena held out. His hand, encased in the sheer black glove, trembled slightly. He felt the cold pressure of the polycarbonate tube between his legs. He felt the phantom weight of the silicone breasts he would soon have to wear permanently, or perhaps... no, he wouldn't think about what the hormones would do in a year.

He had to save his parents. He had to finish what he started.

He took the pen. He didn't look at Charlotte, who was watching him with a predatory grin. He didn't look at Verena, who looked like a sculptor admiring her finished work.

He looked at the signature line.

I, Joshua Braun, hereby agree to the terms…

He pressed the pen to the paper. The ink flowed smoothly, black and permanent. He signed his name—the name of a boy who was about to go into a coma for a year.

"Done," Josh whispered, dropping the pen.

Verena picked up the document, checking the signature. She nodded, satisfied.

"Excellent," she said. She turned to Charlotte. "Schedule the dermatologist. And tell Raffaella to prepare the travel wardrobe. Nothing but fur and leather. Retroville can be cold."

She turned back to Josh, her eyes gleaming.

"Finish your cigarette, Claudia," Verena commanded softly. "We have a lot of work to do."

Josh lifted the Nat Sherman to his lips. He took a deep, dragging inhale, letting the smoke fill the hollow space inside him where his defiance used to be. He exhaled, watching the white cloud obscure his face in the mirror on the wall.

"Yes, Verena," he said.

Chapter 16

The air in Claudia's bedroom was thick with the scent of tuberose and the sharp, expensive bite of burning tobacco. Josh sat at the heavy mahogany vanity, his posture rigidly perfect, a reflex drilled into his spine by months of Madame Simms' cane. He was draped in a structured, electric-blue silk wrap dress by Oscar de la Renta, the exaggerated shoulders creating a silhouette that was equal parts armor and architectural marvel. The fabric cinched aggressively at his waist, emphasizing the artificial curve of his hips and the flatness of his crotch, where the polycarbonate cage and the tight gaff held him in a state of permanent, smooth suppression.

In his manicured hand, he held a Nat Sherman 164. The cigarette was absurdly long, a six-and-a-half-inch wand of white paper that demanded attention with every gesture. He didn't just smoke it; he performed it, extending his wrist, tilting his head back, and exhaling a thin, controlled stream of smoke towards the ceiling. It was a coping mechanism, a chemical tether to sanity, just as Verena had intended.

"Seven months," Charlotte said, breaking the silence. She was lounging on Claudia's chaise, scrolling through her phone, capturing one last candid photo of her brother in his high-drag misery. "You really signed it. I'm honestly impressed. I thought you'd fight harder for the two-year sentence just to keep your original face."



Josh watched her reflection in the mirror. His black hair, now cut into a voluminous, chin-length bob that bounced with every turn of his head, framed a face that was still his own, though buried under layers of contour, blush, and heavy 80s eyeshadow.

“It wasn’t a choice, Charlotte,” Josh said, his voice dropping into the lower, breathy register Dr. Aris had engineered. He took a long drag from the Nat Sherman, the ember glowing bright orange. “Two years in this house? Two years of Verena’s ‘vitamins’ in my morning juice? Look at me.” He gestured to his chest, where the silk gaped slightly. The silicone breastplate was gone for the moment, replaced by the terrifying reality of his own body. The hormones had done their work; there was soft, palpable tissue there now, sensitive and swollen. “I have breasts, Charlotte. Actual, growing breasts. And down there...” He crossed his legs tightly, the friction of the silk against his nylon-clad thighs sending a phantom ache through the chastity cage. “I’m useless. I’m shrinking. If I stayed here for two years, there wouldn’t be a Josh left to salvage. I’d just be... her.”

Charlotte smirked, lowering her phone. “And you think letting Verena carve up your face is the better option? You’re trading a slow fade for a demolition.”

“It’s temporary,” Josh insisted, though the tremor in his hand betrayed him. He tapped the long ash into a crystal tray. “Fillers dissolve. Threads snap. Botox wears off. I’ve seen those women in the magazines, the ones who chase that frozen, cat-like look. They look generic. Artificial. Like they’re all wearing the same mask to hide the fact that they’re aging. It’s grotesque.” He shuddered, the image of those taut, shiny foreheads and overfilled lips making his stomach turn. “But it’s surface level. I can fix a bad face lift. I can’t fix... biological castration.”

Charlotte laughed, a bright, cruel sound that bounced off the vintage wallpaper. “Oh, Josh. You have no idea how perfect that is. You hate that look—the ‘generic, artificial woman’—and yet, that’s exactly what you’re signing up to become. You’re going to be a thirty-eight-year-old socialite clinging to her youth. It’s the ultimate method acting. You’re going to be walking around this ‘Retroville’ looking like you’ve spent half your life in a plastic surgeon’s chair. It’s poetic.”

“It’s survival,” Josh snapped, flicking his hair out of his eyes. The movement was so feminine, so practiced, that he didn't even realize he’d done it. “And why do you care? You got what you wanted. You have your footage. You have your ‘art project.’ You can go back to your life and pretend you didn’t sell your brother for a career boost. Why did you choose to come with me?

Charlotte stood up, smoothing down her skirt. She walked over to him, placing her hands on his padded shoulders, looking at him not with sympathy, but with the pride of a craftsman admiring a finished object.

“Because Verena hired me,” Charlotte said, beaming. “Personal Assistant and Marketing Consultant for ‘Cousin Claudia.’ Someone has to document the triumph of the Von Hollenberg leather empire in its new market. Someone has to make sure you maintain the brand.”

“You are doing this for money?” This made no sense for him. “You don't even know what this place is. Verena said it’s a closed community. High security. No outsiders.”

“Exactly,” Charlotte replied, her eyes gleaming with ambition. “Exclusive. Wealthy. A town frozen in the 80s. It’s a goldmine, Josh. Verena explained the rules. No cell phones, no internet, no connection to the sad, boring modern world. I had to sign a contract too, you know. I’m making sacrifices. I’m giving up my Instagram for seven months to help you.”

“You’re insane,” Josh muttered, taking another desperate drag of the Nat Sherman 164, the smoke filling his lungs and calming the immediate spike of adrenaline. “You’re walking into a prison and calling it a vacation.”

“And you’re walking into a new life,” Charlotte countered, stepping back and looking him up and down. “Verena says the town is obsessed with aesthetics. That it’s driven by hyper-consumerism and social hierarchy. You’ll fit right in. You’re already wearing the uniform.” She gestured to the Oscar de la Renta dress, the severe makeup, and the long, elegant cigarette that seemed fused to his fingers. “You’re miserable, Josh, but you look spectacular. And honestly? Watching you try to navigate a town of sharks while looking like a high-maintenance trophy wife? I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Josh turned back to the mirror, staring at the stranger staring back. The heavy eyeliner made his eyes look enormous, terrified, and undeniably female. He thought of the needles that awaited him, the cannulas that would slide under his skin to pump his cheeks full of filler, the threads that would pull his eyes into a permanent, exotic slant. He hated the idea of looking artificial, but looking at Charlotte’s triumphant grin, he realized the trap had already snapped shut.

“Just remember,” Josh said quietly, exhaling a final cloud of smoke that obscured his reflection. “When we get there... I’m the one with the checkbook. I’m the one running the business. You’re just the help.”

Charlotte just laughed again. “Sure, Claudia. Whatever you say. Now, finish your cigarette. We have packing to do. Verena says we leave for the clinic in the morning.”

Later that night, Josh was alone. Celeste had allowed him to use the cellphone to call Emma, but the phone felt alien in his hand, a sleek, black rectangle of modern technology that clashed violently with the opulent, suffocating aesthetic of Claudia’s bedroom. He sat on the edge of the four-poster bed, his legs crossed tightly at the knee, the silk of his robe pooling around him like a dark bruise. The air was already hazy with gray smoke; the crystal ashtray on the nightstand was filling up with the distinctive, extra-long stubs of Nat Sherman 164s.

He took a long, shaky drag, the long cigarette trembling slightly between his manicured fingers. The nicotine hit his system hard, a chemical embrace that Verena had engineered to be his primary source of comfort. He needed it. He had to make the call.

When Emma picked up, her voice was a burst of static and reality that made Josh flinch. "Hey. You okay? I thought you couldn’t use your phone."

"I'm fine," Josh said, his voice automatically pitching lower, softer, the "continental" lilt Dr. Aris had drilled into him slipping into his vowels. He cleared his throat, trying to find the jagged edges of his old self, but they were buried under layers of training. "I... I have news, Em. The deal. It's changed."

"Changed how?" Emma asked, her tone instantly sharpening. "Did she let you go? Did you tell her about the lawyer my cousin knows?"

"No," Josh said quickly, exhaling a plume of smoke that swirled around the bed canopy. "Better. Verena offered me a way out. A shortcut. instead of two years... it's seven months. Seven months and the debt is cleared. The house is saved. I'm free."

There was a silence on the other end, heavy and skeptical. "Okay," Emma said slowly. " What's the catch? With that woman, there's always a catch, Josh."

Josh looked at his reflection in the vanity mirror across the room. The face staring back was already half-erased by makeup, waiting for the surgeon's knife to finish the job. He couldn't tell her that. He couldn't tell the girl who loved his scruffy, skater grin that he was about to have his cheeks filled and his eyes threaded to look like a thirty-eight-year-old European socialite.

"I have to go to Europe," he lied, the falsehood tasting like ash on his tongue. "With Verena. To... to learn the business firsthand. She wants me to run a branch of the import company. It's an immersion program. But the condition is total focus. No distractions. That means... no phone. No social media. For seven months."

"That's bullshit," Emma snapped, the punk edge in her voice cutting through his carefully constructed calm. "Europe? Since when? And 'no phone'? Josh, that sounds like a cult. That sounds like kidnapping with extra steps."

"It's a job, Emma!" Josh argued, his hand gripping the silk of his robe. "Look at the alternative! If I stay here... if I stay in this house for two years..." He lowered his voice, the shame burning hot in his chest. "She's feeding me hormones, Em. You saw what happened at the motel. You felt it. I'm tucked twenty-four-seven in this... cage. If I do two years of this, there won't be anything left of me to come back to you. My body will be wrecked. This way... it's fast. It's intense, but it's over by Christmas."

"You can fight it, Josh!" Emma shouted, and he could hear the frustration vibrating through the speaker. "We've talked about this. You walk out the gate. You take the lawsuit. You let your parents deal with the bankruptcy. It's money! It's just money! You are trading your actual life, your identity, for a building!"

"It's not just a building, it's my parents' life!" Josh retorted, his defensive instincts flaring. But even as he said it, he knew it was about more than that. It was about the shame. The idea of the world knowing he had been broken, that he had spent months prancing around in heels and furs, was more terrifying than the submission itself. "I can't let them lose everything because of a stupid mistake I made. I have to fix this."

"You’re not fixing it, you’re drowning in it," Emma said, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "You’re diving headfirst into a sinking ship, Josh. And if you go to Europe I can’t throw you a life raft. You’re on your own."

"I’ll be fine," Josh insisted, though his hand went to his chest, fingers brushing the soft, chemically-induced swell of his breast. "I’ll come back with savings. I’ll have... experience. Fashion experience. I can use that. It’s not wasted time."

"Fashion experience?" Emma let out a dry, incredulous laugh. "You hate fashion. You wear thrift store flannels and torn jeans. Listen to yourself! You’re already rationalizing it."

"I am doing what I have to do to survive!" Josh snapped, crushing the half-smoked Nat Sherman into the tray with sudden violence. "Why can’t you just support me? It’s seven months. I’ll be back, and we can fix this. We can go back to normal."

"You haven't listened to a single thing I've said since you broke that vase," Emma said, her voice cold and final. "You’re protecting your pride, Josh. But there’s no pride in being a puppet. You’re letting them rewrite you, and you’re signing the permission slip."

"Emma, please—"

"Goodbye, Josh. Don't expect me to be waiting by the phone in seven months if you don't even know who you are anymore."

The line went dead.

Josh slowly lowered the phone from his ear. The silence in the room was deafening, broken only by the hum of the air conditioning and the rapid thumping of his own heart. He stared at the black screen of the cellphone, the last tether to his old life severed.

With a trembling hand, Josh reached for the golden case of Nat Shermans. He pulled out another long, white cigarette, placed it between his lips, and lit it. He inhaled deeply, letting the smoke fill the hollow space where his resistance used to be. He crossed his legs, smoothed the silk over his thighs, and exhaled. He would fix it later. He just had to get through the next seven months.

Chapter 17

The morning sun was hiding behind a wall of gray clouds, a mercy for Josh, who felt exposed even behind the oversized, tortoiseshell sunglasses that swallowed half his face. He sat in the back of the town car, his leg bouncing with a nervous, kinetic energy that threatened to wrinkle the pristine fabric of his trousers.

For this outing, Celeste had curated an ensemble that was a departure from the rigid, structured 80s costuming of the house, yet no less transformative. It was "modern chic"—a pair of high-waisted, cream-colored wool trousers that flowed like water over his hips (padded slightly by the silicone hip pads beneath), a soft cashmere turtleneck in a muted oatmeal shade, and a camel trench coat draped over his shoulders. He wore no makeup, his face scrubbed raw and clean, but his hair was blow-dried into a voluminous, glossy bob that brushed against his jawline. He looked like an off-duty model or a wealthy housewife running errands in Aspen.

He looked expensive. He looked soft. He looked nothing like Josh Braun.

"Stop shaking," Celeste said, not looking up from her tablet. "You’re vibrating the seat."

"I'm about to have needles shoved into my face, Celeste," Josh snapped, his voice tight. He fumbled with the golden case in his pocket, pulling out a Nat Sherman 164. He knew he shouldn't smoke right before a medical procedure, but his hands were trembling.

"One," Celeste permitted, pressing a button to crack the window. "It calms the blood pressure. We can't have you bleeding all over the doctor’s upholstery."

Josh lit the cigarette, the familiar ritual offering a split second of grounding. He inhaled deeply, the smoke filling the hollow space in his chest where his anxiety churned. He watched the smoke curl out the window, wishing he could dissolve with it.



The car pulled up to a discreet, ivy-covered building in a wealthy medical district. A modest brass plaque read: L'Eternité Esthetic Sanctuary.

"It’s a spa on the first two floors," Celeste explained as she ushered him out of the car, her grip on his elbow firm and guiding. "Massages, mud baths, wealthy women hiding from their husbands. The third floor is where the real work happens. It’s private. No prying eyes."

They bypassed the reception, taking a private elevator directly to the third floor. The doors opened into a waiting room that smelled of antiseptic and expensive candles—a jarring mix of hospital sterile and hotel luxury.

Waiting for them was Dr. Blue.

She was a woman in her late forties with tired eyes that had seen too many faces reconstructed to be impressed by anything anymore. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a severe, practical bun, and she wore a pristine white lab coat over scrubs. She held a file in her hand—Charlotte’s portfolio of "Claudia."

"Mr. Braun," Dr. Blue said. Her voice was dry, professional, and completely devoid of warmth. She looked at him, then down at the photo of him in full drag as Claudia, then back at him. "Or do we prefer a different pronoun for the duration of the treatment?"

"It’s a role," Celeste interjected smoothly. "He is an actor preparing for a very... immersive method. We are accelerating the aging process to match the character."

Dr. Blue didn’t blink. She didn't care. "Right. Follow me."

The clinical office was stark white, dominated by a reclining medical chair that looked uncomfortably like a dentist's setup, surrounded by trays of gleaming instruments, sealed packages, and vials.

"Sit," Dr. Blue commanded.

Josh climbed into the chair, the crinkle of the sanitary paper beneath him sounding like a thunderclap in the quiet room. Dr. Blue adjusted the light, swinging a massive, blinding halo of LEDs over his face. He instinctively squeezed his eyes shut.

"Open," she said, leaning in close. Her breath smelled of mint and coffee. She began to palpate his face, her fingers cold and clinical. She pushed at his cheeks, pinched the skin of his jaw, and traced the bridge of his nose. "Good elasticity. Thick dermis. That helps with the threads. It hides the barbs better."

"Barbs?" Josh choked out.

"PDO threads," she murmured, uncapping a marker. She began to draw on his face—dotted lines across his cheekbones, arrows pointing up from his jaw, triangles around his eyes. "We insert a cannula loaded with a polydioxanone thread. The thread has microscopic barbs that hook into the tissue. We pull, the barbs catch, the tissue lifts. It triggers collagen production, but the mechanical lift is immediate."

She stepped back, assessing the map she had drawn on his skin. "We're doing a heavy lift on the mid-face to create that high, sculpted cheekbone. We're lifting the nasal tip to remove any... masculine droop. And the eyes. The fox eye lift. It pulls the outer corners up and back. It's very trendy, very aggressive."

"And very permanent?" Josh asked, his voice trembling.

"Dissolvable," Dr. Blue corrected, turning to a tray of syringes. "But the scar tissue creates a permanent structure. Now, hold still. Numbing cream first."

The next twenty minutes were a blur of cold cream and waiting. Josh's face slowly turned into a heavy, tingling mask. He felt detached from it, as if his skin belonged to someone else.

"Okay," Dr. Blue said, snapping on latex gloves. "I'm going to inject the local anesthetic now. Lidocaine. This will sting."

She didn't wait for him to brace himself. The needle slid into his hairline, then his jaw, then the tip of his nose. It burned, a sharp, acidic heat that made his eyes water, but he couldn't move. Celeste was standing in the corner, watching with the same critical eye she used when he tried on dresses.

"Let's begin. Threads first."

Dr. Blue picked up a long, thin cannula. It looked like a knitting needle made for a giant. "Turn your head to the left."

Josh obeyed. He felt the pressure of the cannula entering the entry point near his hairline. There was no pain, thanks to the lidocaine, but the sensation was horrific. He could feel the metal rod sliding under his skin, navigating through the fat pads of his cheek. It felt like someone was tunneling through a block of cold butter inside his face.

"Deep breath," Dr. Blue instructed.

She pushed. Josh heard a wet, crunching sound—the sound of the cannula breaking through fibrous tissue. He gripped the armrests of the chair until his knuckles turned white.

"Now, the lift."

She withdrew the cannula, leaving the thread behind. Then, she pulled.

Josh gasped. He felt his entire face slide upward. It was a physical tug-of-war with his own anatomy. He could feel the internal hooks catching, dragging his cheekbone higher, forcing his face into a new, unnatural alignment.

"Good," Dr. Blue muttered. She repeated the process three more times on that side, then moved to the nose.

The nose was worse. The space was tighter. He could see the cannula moving under the skin of his nose bridge, a metal snake slithering toward the tip. When she pulled the thread to lift the tip, Josh’s vision blurred with involuntary tears. The pressure was immense, a headache blooming right in the center of his face.

"Eyes," she announced.

The fox eye lift. The cannula went in at the temple, sliding down toward the corner of his eye. When she pulled this time, Josh felt his eyelid stretch. It was a sensation of being permanently surprised, the skin pulled tight against the bone.

"Other side."

Josh lay there, sweating through his cashmere sweater, enduring the crunching, the sliding, and the tugging as she repeated the violence on the left side of his face. He was being quilted. He was being tailored like a suit, his skin taken in and pinned up.

"Threads are done," Dr. Blue said, wiping a spot of blood from his temple. "Now, the fillers."

She swapped the cannula for a syringe of thick, clear gel. "You have thin lips. Male lips. We need a pout. A structured cupid’s bow, but heavy on the bottom lip. The kind that looks expensive."

She grabbed his lip, pinching it firmly, and inserted the needle. As she injected the filler, Josh felt an alien expansion. It felt like his lip was being inflated with concrete. It was heavy, hot,

and tight. She molded the gel with her fingers, squishing his lips into shape with a force that felt aggressive.

"More volume here," she mumbled, injecting again. "And here."

She worked methodically, erasing the sharp, flat lines of his mouth and replacing them with a swollen, pillowy softness. He tried to lick his lips, but they felt numb and gigantic, like two sausages taped to his face.

"Finally. The Botox."

"I... I don't have wrinkles," Josh mumbled, his speech slurred by the numbness and the swollen lips.

"That's not the point," Dr. Blue said, loading a fresh syringe. "We aren't treating wrinkles. We are creating a texture. We want the forehead to be immobile. Shiny. We want the brow to be frozen in that high, arched position. If you can move your face, you look young. If you can't... you look like a woman of a certain age who is maintaining herself."

She injected the toxin into his forehead, between his brows, and around his eyes. *Pop. Pop. Pop.* Tiny, sharp stings.

"We're freezing the depressor muscles," she explained, almost to herself. "Your eyebrows won't be able to come down. You will look permanently open, permanently alert. And the forehead will be glass smooth. Artificial. That is the brief, correct?"

"Correct," Celeste answered from the corner. "We need the 'work' to be visible."

"Done."

Dr. Blue stepped back, peeling off her gloves with a snap. She grabbed a mirror and held it up to Josh's face.

"It will swell significantly over the next twenty-four hours," she warned. "You will bruise."

Josh looked into the glass.

The face staring back was a battlefield. His cheeks were high and sharp, pulled back so tight that his skin looked translucent. His eyes were slanted upward, giving him a cat-like, predatory gaze that looked nothing like his own soft, round eyes. His nose was upturned, dainty and arrogant. And his lips... they were swollen, red, and unmistakably feminine, dominating the lower half of his face.



He tried to frown at the reflection, to show his horror, but his forehead didn't move. He tried to grimace, but his lips were too heavy to curl properly.

He looked like a stranger. He looked like a woman who had spent fifty thousand dollars trying to look twenty-five. He looked exactly like the "Cousin Claudia" Verena had described.

"It's..." Josh whispered, his voice catching in his throat.

"It's adequate," Celeste said, stepping forward and handing Dr. Blue a credit card. "Good work, Doctor. He looks appropriately preserved."

Dr. Blue nodded, already turning to clean her instruments. "Ice packs for the swelling. Keep the head elevated. No heavy exercise for two weeks. And try not to make any extreme facial expressions. Not that you'll be able to."

Josh lowered the mirror, his hand trembling. The numbness was starting to wear off, replaced by a deep, throbbing ache that radiated from every thread and injection site. He felt heavy. He felt trapped inside a mask made of his own flesh.

"Come on," Celeste said, tapping him on the shoulder. "We're going to the recovery room, you need to let your face heal before we can continue with your transformation."

He stood up, his legs wobbly, and followed Celeste out of the room.

The recovery suite at L'Eternité was less a hospital room and more a boudoir designed for the convalescence of the vain. The walls were upholstered in muted lavender silk, the lighting was perpetually dimmed to a flattering amber glow, and the air hummed with the scent of eucalyptus and expensive remorse.

After he changed, Josh laid propped up on a mountain of goose-down pillows, his body draped in a vintage, peach-colored satin peignoir trimmed with ostrich feathers—another relic from Claudia's "lounging" collection that Celeste had insisted upon.

He felt less like a human being and more like a bruised piece of fruit left out in the sun.

His face was a landscape of throbbing pressure. The local anesthesia had long since faded, replaced by a dull, aching tightness that seemed to originate from the very bone. He could feel the physical presence of the threads weaving through his cheeks and brow, a network of tension that pulled his skin taut against his skull. It was a sensation of constant, unyielding suspension, as if invisible hands were permanently holding his face up.

"Stop touching it," Celeste's voice cut through the haze of painkillers. She was sitting in a velvet armchair and reading a hardcover book.

Josh dropped his hand, which had been hovering near his cheek. "It itches," he mumbled, or tried to. The words came out garbled, a thick, slurry sound that humiliated him instantly. His lips—those new, foreign things attached to his mouth—felt enormous, heavy, and completely numb. The filler had expanded them into a swollen, glossy pout that dominated his lower face, forcing his mouth to remain slightly open in a permanent state of breathless anticipation.

"Itches mean healing," Celeste said, turning a page. "Or infection. But Dr. Blue said the inflammation is normal. You look... substantial."

Josh squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the urge to cry. Crying would scrunch his face, and he was terrified that if he moved a muscle, the delicate architecture of threads and gel would collapse. But he couldn't even squeeze his eyes properly. The Botox injections in his forehead and around his eyes had paralyzed the muscles. He could feel the impulse to frown, to grimace, to express his misery, but his face remained eerily smooth, a frozen mask of placid, chemically-induced youth.

He avoided the mirrors. There was a large, gilt-framed one on the opposite wall, but Josh kept his gaze strictly on the ceiling or the heavy drapes. He didn't want to see the bruising that was blooming yellow and purple under his skin. He didn't want to see the "fox eyes" that pulled his vision into a slant. He knew what he looked like—he could feel it. He felt like one of those women he had seen on some reality TV, the ones whose desperation for youth had turned them into caricatures of themselves.

The door clicked open, and the scent of fresh rain and expensive perfume wafted in. Charlotte breezed into the room, looking vibrant and painfully modern in her jeans and leather jacket. She stopped at the foot of the bed, her eyes widening in a mix of horror and delight.

"Oh my god," she breathed, a slow grin spreading across her face. "Josh. You look... absolutely expensive."

"Shut up," Josh slurred, the heavy lips making the 'p' sound impossible.

Charlotte pulled out her phone, snapping a picture before Celeste could intervene—not that Celeste seemed to care. "No, seriously. The swelling is insane, but the silhouette? It's giving 'divorcee spending the alimony in one weekend.' It's giving 'I haven't moved my forehead since the Reagan administration.'"

She walked around the bed, examining him like he was an exhibit at a zoo. "I saw this influencer, Trixie Hart, get this exact combo last week. She's twenty-two, but she wants to look like a forty-year-old mob wife. You nailed it, Josh. You look like you're about to throw a wine glass at a waiter."

"It's temporary," Josh managed to say, the mantra he had been repeating to himself for forty-eight hours. "It dissolves."

"Sure, in a year," Charlotte laughed, poking at the feathers on his sleeve. "But right now? It's wild. I'm your older sister, Josh, but looking at you... you look like my aunt. You look like the aunt who shows up to the funeral in a fur coat and demands to read the will first."

The comment struck a nerve deeper than the threads. His aunt. He was supposed to be a young man. He was supposed to be Josh, a skater, a college student. And now, lying here in satin and feathers, unable to frown, unable to speak clearly, with a face constructed to mimic the vanity of an aging socialite, he felt the Josh-ness of him receding further than ever.

"Why are you here?" he asked, his voice cracking. "Just to mock me?"

"I'm here to check on the investment," Charlotte said, her tone sharpening slightly. "And to get used to the face. I have to sell this face, remember? 'Cousin Claudia.' We have to build a narrative. The bruised, post-op look actually works. It shows commitment. It shows wealth. Only poor people age, Josh. The rich just... update."

She leaned in closer, inspecting the tape over his nose bridge. "Verena is going to love this. It's exactly what she wanted. You don't look like a boy in makeup anymore. You look like a woman who has been fighting gravity for two decades. It's... tragic, but kind of glamorous."

Josh turned his head away, the pull of the threads sending a sharp spike of tension through his temples. He hated them. He hated Verena, he hated Charlotte, and he hated the face he couldn't even bring himself to look at.

But then, his hand drifted down to his chest. Under the satin, he felt the softness of his own breast tissue, the result of the hormones Verena had pumped into him. He thought of the cage locked between his legs.

This face is a shield, he told himself, the thought desperate and hollow. *I can dissolve the lips. I can let the Botox wear off. But if I stayed in that house... if I let the hormones continue... I would have lost everything.*

"Get out," Josh whispered, the words bubbling past his swollen lips.

Charlotte just patted his leg, right over the hem of the peach satin. "Rest up, Claudia. The swelling goes down in a few days. We have a big trip ahead of us. You need to be camera-ready."

She left, her laughter trailing behind her. Josh lay in the silence, listening to the hum of the air conditioner, feeling the tightness of his brow, the weight of his lips, and the terrifying, frozen stillness of a face that was no longer his own.

A couple of days later, the recovery room air was still thick with the scent of lavender and antiseptic when Celeste returned. She wasn't alone; Charlotte trailed behind her, a predatory grin plastered on her face, carrying two sleek, matte-black boxes that looked more like containers for high-end electronics than anything medical.

"Up," Celeste commanded, placing the boxes on the velvet ottoman. "The swelling is down. The face is set. Now we fix the rest of the canvas."

Josh stood, his legs trembling slightly. He caught a glimpse of himself in the gilt mirror. The bruising had faded into a faint yellow, easily hidden, but the structure of his face was permanently altered. The threads held his cheeks in a high, taut suspension; the Botox left his forehead smooth and immobile as a pane of glass; and his lips, heavy with filler, rested in a permanent, swollen pout. He looked like a woman who had spent a fortune to stop time, only to be frozen by it.

"Robe off," Celeste snapped.

Josh let the peach satin peignoir slide to the floor. He stood naked, shivering slightly. His body was hairless, smooth from the waxing, and soft from the hormones. His small, chemically-induced breasts cast tiny shadows on his chest, a source of constant, aching sensitivity.

Celeste opened the first box. Inside lay a breastplate, but it was unlike the heavy silicone slab he had worn at the Old House. This was translucent at the edges, tapering into nothingness, with a texture that rippled like living tissue.

"This is proprietary technology," Celeste said, lifting the prosthetic with gloved hands. It was heavy, the breasts large, teardrop-shaped, and aggressively feminine. "It's not just silicone. It's a hyper-realistic prosthetic designed to fully integrate with the wearer's body. You can sleep in it, shower in it. You won't take it off."

She applied a cold, pungent paste to the interior of the plate and then to Josh's chest and neck.

"Arms up."

Josh obeyed. Celeste pressed the cold synthetic flesh against his own. He gasped as it made contact. It didn't just sit on him; it seemed to suction onto his skin. He felt his own small breasts being compressed, buried under the mass of the prosthetic. Celeste worked quickly, smoothing the edges along his collarbone, his shoulders, and his back.

He watched in the mirror as the seam disappeared. The paste dissolved the visual line between Josh and the plastic. It was seamless. He moved his arm, and the breastplate moved with him, the skin stretching and bunching exactly like real flesh.

“It warms to body temperature,” Charlotte noted, leaning in to poke one of the large nipples. “God, that’s creepy. It feels real.”

“It is real, for all intents and purposes,” Celeste said. “Now, the bottom.”

She opened the second box.

Josh flinched as she reached for his waist. The removal of the chastity cage was a moment of sharp, metallic relief, but it lasted less than ten seconds. Before he could even breathe, Celeste was holding the second prosthetic.

It was a panty-shaped piece of the same high-tech material, but the front was molded into a perfectly anatomical, hairless female mound.

“Tuck,” Celeste ordered.

Josh did as he was told, the muscle memory of the last few months taking over. He pushed his anatomy back, wincing at the tightness. Celeste applied the adhesive paste generously to his groin and hips.

“This solvent is industrial strength,” she warned, pressing the prosthetic into place. “Once this sets, it stays. It covers everything. You will sit to pee. You will have nothing to touch, nothing to see. For seven months, you are smooth.”

She smoothed the edges down his thighs and up his hips. The sensation was horrifyingly final. He felt the pressure of the tuck, the heat of the glue, and then... nothing. He looked down. Where his manhood had been, there was now only the smooth, curved construct of a vagina. It looked terrifyingly natural, matching his skin tone perfectly.

He was sealed.

“Last step,” Celeste said, reaching for the neck of the breastplate. She manipulated a tiny, almost invisible nodule embedded in the silicone near the throat. “Voice modulator. It catches the vibrations of your larynx and modifies the pitch and timbre in real-time.”

She pressed it firmly against his windpipe. It hummed for a second, then went silent.

“Say something,” Charlotte goaded.

“I...” Josh started.

The sound that came out wasn't his. It was rich, breathy, and unmistakably female. It was the voice Dr. Aris had tried to drill into him, but perfected instantly by the machine.

“I feel... suffocated,” he finished, the voice echoing in the room like a ghost.

“You feel expensive,” Celeste corrected.

She began throwing clothes at him. An outrageous beige dress by Claude Montana, structured like a fortress. He stepped into it, the fabric tight against his new curves. The shoulder pads were massive, extending inches beyond his natural frame, giving him an inverted triangle silhouette that screamed 1980s power bitch. Celeste cinched a wide, red leather belt around his waist, pulling it tight enough to make him gasp, emphasizing the flare of his hips.

She shoved his feet into tall, red leather stilettos and draped chunky gold chains around his neck, obscuring the modulator.

Josh looked in the mirror. The transformation was absolute. The face of the aging socialite, the body of a pin-up, the clothes of a dynasty villain. There was no Josh left.

“From this moment on,” Celeste said, her eyes meeting his in the reflection, “you are Claudia von Hollenberg. Verena’s cousin from Europe. Josh doesn’t exist here.”

Charlotte stood behind him, her smile wide and sharp. She looked at the mounds of silicone, the frozen forehead, the trapped body.

“You’re a masterpiece, Claudia,” Charlotte whispered, the irony dripping from her voice. “But we’re not done. You look like a million dollars, but the hair... the hair is in the wrong color and is still a little too flat for where we’re going. Come on. The salon is waiting.”

The salon on the first floor of L'Eternité was a blinding shrine to chemical beauty. Mirrors covered every vertical surface, reflecting the harsh, flattering halo lights that buzzed overhead. The air was a toxic cocktail of acetone, burning hair, hairspray, and the cloying sweetness of expensive shampoo.

Josh was led to the central chair, his beige dress rustling stiffly, the red leather belt cinched so tight he had to take shallow breaths. He sat down, crossing his legs at the knee—a reflex now, dictated by the skirt and the seamless tuck between his legs.

"Ms. Von Hollenberg," the head stylist, a woman named Kiki with neon-pink claws and big hair, cooed. "We have the orders. Platinum. Structural. High impact."

"Get on with it," Josh said. The voice that emerged was the modulator’s perfect, breathy contralto. It surprised even him, sounding detached, as if another woman were speaking from his throat.

The process began with the bleach. Josh had never dyed his hair; his black locks were his last vanity, the one thing that connected him to the skater boy from Northwood. Kiki applied the paste ruthlessly, slathering his scalp in the stinging mixture. It burned. A chemical fire itch that made him want to claw at his head, but he couldn't move.

While the bleach cooked his scalp, a manicurist pulled a rolling stool up to his right side. She grabbed Josh’s large hand, inspecting the cuticles with a critical eye.

"We need length to balance the hand size," she muttered, grabbing a file.

She began buffing his nails down to the quick, the sensation vibrating up his arm. Then came the forms. She glued long, plastic tips to his fingers, extending his reach by an inch and a half.

"Oval," Celeste’s voice cut in from the waiting area, where she sat with Charlotte. "Classic. Dangerous. Not square."

The gel application was tedious. Josh watched as his fingers were transformed into slender, useless talons. The manicurist painted them a deep, glossy brown—Espresso Noir. It was a severe color, dark and elegant. When she put his hand under the UV lamp, the heat spike made him wince, but he said nothing. He stared at his hand when it emerged. It looked alien. He tried to make a fist, but the nails dug into his palm. He couldn't grip; he could only drape his hands, pose them, flutter them.

"Rinse!" Kiki announced.

After the wash, Josh’s hair was a shocking, raw white-yellow. It looked dead. But Kiki wasn't done. She brought out the extensions. Wefts of platinum blonde hair, feet of it. She began sewing them into the tracks she had braided close to Josh’s scalp. The needle pulled tight, anchoring the foreign hair to his head. It was heavy. With every row, his head felt heavier, a physical burden of femininity being stitched into his skull.

"Now," Kiki said, grabbing a teasing comb and a can of industrial-strength hairspray. "We build."

This wasn't styling; it was construction. Kiki backcombed the hair at the roots until it stood up like a halo of static. She sprayed, teased, sprayed again, creating a dense, mat-like foundation. Then she began to smooth the outer layers over this core, sculpting it upward. Higher. Wider.

Josh watched in the mirror as his head was swallowed by the structure. It was a massive, platinum beehive, sweeping up from his forehead and swirling into a complex, architectural twist at the back. It added four inches to his height. It was stiff, immobile, a helmet of hair that demanded he hold his neck perfectly straight just to balance it.

"It’s... gargantuan," Josh whispered, the modulator softening his horror into awe.

"It’s a crown," Kiki corrected, sealing it with a final, choking cloud of hairspray.

Then came the makeup. The artist didn't ask what he wanted; she just looked at his new face—the threads, the fillers—and went to work. She applied a heavy foundation to cover the fading bruises, then carved out his cheekbones with aggressive brown contour. She

painted his eyelids a shimmering, electric blue that extended out toward his temples, following the angle of the thread lift. Finally, she painted his swollen lips a deep, blood-red to match his belt and shoes.

"There," the artist said, stepping back. "You look stunning, Ms. Von Hollenberg."

It hit him then. The despair.

To these women, he wasn't a man in a costume. He wasn't Josh Braun in disguise. The prosthetics, the voice, the face, the hair—it was a complete seal. They looked at him and saw a wealthy, severe woman. They treated him with the deferential caution one reserves for a rich, difficult lady.

Josh Braun was gone. He was trapped inside this woman, peering out through her fox-eye lift.

"She's German, you know," Charlotte's voice broke through his internal panic. She was standing behind the chair, smirking at his reflection. "A divorcee. Very high maintenance. Her last husband was a baron or something. He paid her off just to stop hearing her complain about the servants."

Kiki laughed, buying the lie instantly. "Oh, I can see that. She has that... exacting look."

"Exactly," Charlotte continued, leaning on the back of Josh's chair, her eyes locking with his in the mirror. "She's on the prowl again, aren't you, Claudia? But honestly, how rich does a man have to be to take you out? I mean, look at you. The hair alone probably costs more than a Honda Civic."

The stylists giggled. It was a joke at his expense, a humiliation ritual. Charlotte was enjoying this, treating him like a doll she had dressed up and was now inventing a personality for.

Josh felt a flare of anger. Not the sullen anger of a brother, but a sharp, cold irritation. He felt the pull of the threads on his face, the pinch of the corset, the weight of the hair, the restriction of the nails. He was in pain. He was uncomfortable. And he was done being the punchline.

He channeled Dr. Aris. He channeled Madame Simms. He channeled the bitch Verena wanted him to be.

He turned his head slowly, the massive beehive not moving an inch. He looked Charlotte up and down with a withering, heavy-lidded stare.

"The cost is irrelevant to people like us, Liebchen," Josh said, the voice modulator purring with icy condescension. He raised his hand, inspecting his fresh, dark nails, extending the long, elegant fingers in a gesture of total dismissal. "And as for men... I don't need a man to afford me. I need a man who can survive me. Unlike the cheap help."

He snapped his fingers at Charlotte—a sharp, plastic click of the long nails. "Now, stop gossiping with the staff and grab my bag. We’re leaving. The air in here is making my hair flat."



The salon went quiet. Kiki looked impressed.

Charlotte’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second, surprised by the venom. But then, the smile returned, wider than before. It wasn't a smile of defeat; it was a smile of victory.

"Of course, Ms. Claudia," Charlotte said, bowing her head slightly, her voice dripping with mock subservience. "Right away."

She grabbed his purse, her eyes gleaming. She had pushed him, and Claudia had answered. Josh thought he had put her in her place, but as he stood up, towering in his heels and hair, he realized too late that he had just passed the final audition.

Chapter 18

The heavy door of the limousine thudded shut, sealing out the damp gray world of the clinic's parking lot. The interior was a cocoon of cream leather and silence, but for Josh, it was a pressure cooker.

"Purse," Celeste said, dropping the quilted leather bag onto his lap.

Josh didn't even look at her. His hands—now tipped with those impractical, glossy brown talons—fumbled frantically with the clasp. It had been forty-eight hours since his last cigarette. Forty-eight hours of needles, threads, bleach, and the suffocating pressure of healing flesh. His blood was screaming for nicotine.

He cursed softly, the modulator turning his frustration into a low, throaty growl, as his long nails slipped over the gold latch. Finally, it clicked open. He dug past the compact and the lipstick, his fingers closing around the silver prism of the Nat Sherman 164s.

He pulled one out. It was absurdly long, a white wand that seemed to go on forever. His lighter flared, and he brought the flame to the tip, his hands trembling just enough to make the diamond bracelet on his wrist shimmy.

He inhaled.

It was a deep, starving drag, pulling the smoke all the way down into his lungs. He held it there, eyes fluttering shut behind his oversized sunglasses, feeling the chemical hook sink in. The relief was instantaneous and terrifying. It washed over him like a cold wave, quieting the phantom itching of the threads in his cheeks and the throbbing weight of the beehive on his head.

He exhaled a long, thin stream of blue smoke, his head tiling back against the headrest.

"Better?" Charlotte asked. She was watching him from the opposite seat, her legs crossed, a small, satisfied smile playing on her lips.

"I needed that," Josh murmured, the voice modulator smoothing his words into a silken purr. He looked at the cigarette between his fingers. He hated it. He hated that his body, which used to run on kale smoothies and adrenaline, now required this poison just to function. But looking at his hand—the slender fingers, the dark oval nails, the way he held the cigarette with a practiced, elegant wrist extension—he couldn't deny that it looked... correct.

"You look natural doing it," Charlotte noted, reading his mind. "Like you've been chain-smoking since the Berlin Wall came down. You don't smoke like a guy stressing out. You smoke like a woman who is bored with the world."

Josh turned to look out the tinted window, catching his reflection. The platinum blonde beehive scraped the roof of the car. The profile was sharp, alien, and undeniably female.



"I'm not bored, Charlotte," he said, taking another drag, the smoke curling around his frozen forehead. "I'm sedated."

The drive back to the Old House was a blur of smoke and silence. When they arrived, the estate looked different to Josh. It no longer looked like a place he was visiting; it looked like the only place he fit. The sheer size of the doors, the grandeur of the foyer—it was the only environment that could absorb the excess of his appearance.

"Straight to the drawing room," Celeste ordered as the driver opened the door. "Verena is waiting."

Josh stepped out, his red leather stilettos crunching on the gravel. The walk to the house was a navigational challenge; the skirt of the dress was tight, forcing him to take small, deliberate steps, his hips swaying with the exaggerated motion required to move forward. The wind tugged at his massive hair, but the structure held firm, a helmet of lacquer and pins.

They entered the drawing room. The curtains were drawn, casting the room in a heavy, golden twilight. Verena von Hollenberg stood by the fireplace, a glass of sherry in her hand. She turned as the click-clack of Josh’s heels echoed on the parquet floor.

She didn't speak for a long moment. She just watched him walk.

Josh felt the weight of her gaze physically. He stopped in the center of the room, instinctively adopting the pose Madame Simms had beaten into him: one foot slightly forward, weight on the back hip, shoulders back to display the width of the pads and the curve of the breastplate, chin lifted to expose the long line of his neck.

He took a slow drag from the cigarette, exhaling the smoke to the side, never breaking eye contact.

"Turn," Verena commanded softly.

Josh pivoted on the ball of his foot, the beige fabric swishing around his legs. He completed the circle, ending back in the pose, his face impassive, his eyes icy behind the sunglasses.

"Take off the glasses," she said.

Josh reached up, his long, brown nails gripping the frames. He slid them off, revealing the work of Dr. Blue.

Verena stepped closer, her eyes hungry. She examined the high, sharp cheekbones that were held in place by the threads. She looked at the frozen, glassy smoothness of his forehead. She studied the heavy, swollen pout of his filled lips and the predatory slant of his fox eyes.

"The boy is gone," Verena whispered, a tone of profound satisfaction in her voice. She reached out, her cold fingers tracing the line of his jaw, then moving up to touch the stiffness of the platinum beehive. "Completely gone."

"I am what you paid for," Josh said. The modulator caught the low resonance of his chest and spun it into Claudia’s voice—rich, arrogant, and unmistakably female.

Verena smiled. It was a rare, genuine smile that made her look younger and more dangerous.

"You are more than that," she corrected. "You are an improvement. My aunt... she was beautiful, yes. But she never had this... commitment to artifice. She aged. She sagged."

Verena walked around him, admiring the silhouette. "But you... you have the face of a woman who refuses to surrender to time. The surgery, the fillers... it adds a layer of desperation, of vanity, that fits perfectly with where you are going. Retroville doesn't want natural beauty, Claudia. Retroville wants effort. It wants to see the money on your face."

She stopped in front of him again, looking him in the eye.

"The resemblance is striking," she admitted. "The hair is exactly hers. The way you hold yourself... the disdain in your posture. It’s her."

"Does that mean I'm ready?" Josh asked, the question hanging in the air.

"Almost," Verena said, taking a sip of her sherry. "The shell is perfect. The voice is perfect. But the habit... the life... that needs to settle."

She gestured to the room around them.

"You will not leave this house for the next two weeks. You will live in these clothes. You will sleep in the silk, you will wake up in the rollers. You will eat, drink, and breathe as Claudia von Hollenberg. You need to get used to the nails, the hair, the face. You need to learn how to navigate the world when you can't frown and smiling feels like your face is going to tear."

Verena stepped back, dismissing him with a wave of her hand.

"Celeste, take her to her room. Make sure she has a fresh carton of Nat Shermans. And Charlotte?"

"Yes, Verena?" Charlotte piped up from the doorway, looking thrilled.

"Start packing the trunks. We are shipping the winter collection. Furs, leathers, the structured coats. Retroville can be cold... and Claudia needs to be the warmest thing in the city."

Josh put his sunglasses back on, shielding his new eyes from the dim light. He turned, the movement stiff and grand, and followed Celeste out of the room. He was trapped and now he had to deal with his new life.

Later that day, the silence of the Old House was heavy, a suffocating blanket of history and expensive dust. In Claudia’s bedroom, the only light came from the vanity mirror, a halo of soft, unforgiving bulbs that cast long shadows across the room.

Josh sat on the velvet stool, his legs crossed at the knee—a reflex now. He was dressed for bed, but even sleeping in this house was a performance. He wore a vintage red silk peignoir that spilled over the stool like a pool of blood, the fabric cool and slippery against his skin. On his feet were high-heeled mules with marabou feathers, forcing his arch into a permanent, elegant curve even when he wasn't walking.

But the most absurd, the most maddening element, was the cap.

He reached up, his long, brown-lacquered talons grazing the silk of the oversized boudoir cap. Underneath it, the massive platinum beehive sat like a stone monument. It was heavy, a physical weight that pulled at his scalp, demanding that he keep his neck straight, his chin lifted. Celeste had been clear: “The hair does not come down, Claudia. It is architectural. It is structural. You wash it at the salon. You sleep with it protected. You do not ruin the silhouette.”



He felt ridiculous. A grown man, sitting in a silk bonnet, guarding a hairstyle that added four inches to his height. But as he stared at himself in the mirror, the ridiculousness faded into a cold, hard reality. The bonnet didn't look funny on this face. It looked... appropriate. It looked like something a wealthy, eccentric shut-in would wear while writing people out of her will.

His hand drifted down from the cap to his chest.

The sensation was disorienting. His fingers—long, manicured, alien—brushed against the heavy curve of the breastplate. The proprietary silicone was warm, heating to his body temperature, but the feeling was distinct. It didn't feel like soft, natural fat. It felt firm. It felt pressurized. It felt like implants.

He squeezed the side of the breast, watching the reflection. The flesh gave slightly, then bounced back with an unnatural perkiness. The high-tech material transmitted the touch to his own skin underneath—the sensitive, hormone-swollen tissue of Josh—but the sensation was muffled, filtered through the inch of synthetic flesh. It was a phantom touch, a ghost sensation of having large, heavy breasts that defied gravity. They were perfect, symmetrical, and completely artificial. They were the breasts of a woman who had paid for them, and they sat on his chest with the arrogance of a purchase.

His hand moved lower, over the cinched waist of the peignoir, down to his lap.

Here, the disconnect was even more profound. He pressed his hand between his legs. There was nothing there. The tuck was aggressive, his anatomy pushed back and sealed inside a hidden pouch that compressed everything into numbness. He couldn't feel his penis. He couldn't feel his testicles. They were voided, erased by the tightness of the prosthetic.

But when he ran his fingers over the smooth, curved mound of the synthetic vagina, he felt that. The prosthetic had sensors, nerves of its own that translated the pressure into a dull,

diffused pleasure that spread across his groin. It was a trick of technology, a lie told to his brain, but it was terrifyingly effective. He looked down and saw the smooth slope of a woman's crotch in the red silk. He touched it, and his brain registered the touch.

He was a doll customized by a mad surgeon. Smooth where he should be rough, heavy where he should be flat.

Josh looked up, forcing himself to confront the face in the mirror.

The bruising was fading, leaving behind the stark architecture of Dr. Blue's work. The threads in his cheeks held his face in a permanent, high-tensile lift. He looked at his eyes—the fox-eye procedure had pulled the outer corners up and back, narrowing his vision slightly, giving him a perpetual squint of judgment. It was a look of appraisal, of cold calculation.

And the lips. God, the lips.

He touched them with a trembling finger. They were numb, dense with filler. The cupid's bow was sharp, the bottom lip swollen into a heavy, sensual pout that wouldn't close completely. It was the mouth of a woman who expected things to be given to her. It was the mouth of a woman who didn't smile because smiling caused wrinkles.

"You look like a woman of a certain age who is maintaining herself," Dr. Blue had said. She was right. He didn't look young. He looked preserved. He looked like money spent to fight death.

He thought back to the salon earlier that day. The way Charlotte had looked at him—the amusement, the mockery. She had been treating him like a prop, a joke.

"How rich does a man have to be to take you out?"

The anger that had flared in him then hadn't felt like Josh's anger. Josh would have been embarrassed. Josh would have slouched, mumbled a defense, or just stayed silent.

But Claudia... Claudia didn't get embarrassed. Claudia got bored.

He remembered the feeling of snapping his fingers. The sharp click of the acrylic nails. The way his voice, filtered through the modulator, had dropped into that icy, bored contralto.

"I don't need a man to afford me. I need a man who can survive me."

It had been so easy. That was the terrifying part. It hadn't felt like acting. It felt like putting on a coat that fit perfectly. The haughtiness, the cruelty, the absolute dismissal of Charlotte's existence—it flowed out of him as if it had been waiting there, dormant, under his skin.

The prosthetics, the corset, the heels, the face—they were armor. And when you wear armor, you don't act like a victim. You act like a tank.

"It's just a role," Josh whispered to the mirror.

The voice that answered wasn't his. It was hers. The modulator hummed against his throat, turning his whisper into a husky, feminine confession.

"It's just a role," she repeated.

But the eyes in the mirror didn't believe him. The fox eyes narrowed, the filled lips remained parted in their frozen pout. The face in the mirror looked back at him with a terrifying familiarity.

He reached for the golden cigarette case on the vanity. His hand moved with a fluid, languid grace, the long brown nails flashing in the light. He pulled out a Nat Sherman 164. He put it to his lips, the white paper stark against the red gloss.

He lit it.

The smoke filled his lungs, the nicotine hitting his brain with the force of a lover. He tilted his head back, the heavy beehive resting against his neck, and exhaled a long, perfect plume of smoke toward the ceiling.

For the next seven months, he wouldn’t be Josh. He would the woman reflected in the mirror, an artificial looking bitch that always got what she wanted.

He took another drag, staring into his own alien eyes.

"Maybe," he murmured, the smoke curling around his botoxed forehead, "I can survive this.”

Chapter 19

The afternoon sun over Northwood was bright and unforgiving, exactly the kind of lighting Josh had spent the last three days avoiding. But Verena's schedule was absolute. The "soft launch" of Claudia was not a request; it was a stress test for the product she had spent nearly half a year manufacturing.

"You are shaking," Verena observed coolly from the foyer archway, swirling her sherry. "It ruins the line of the shoulder pads."

Josh stood by the massive oak doors, feeling like an astronaut about to step onto a hostile planet. He was encased in an ensemble that Celeste called "The Negotiator." It was a Thierry Mugler-inspired skirt suit in a violent shade of crimson wool. The jacket was tailored to within an inch of its life, cinching his waist so tight that his hips flared out dramatically. The shoulders were monstrous, extending four inches past his natural frame, the collar and the cuffs were armored in thick, black fox fur.

On his feet, he wore knee-high, black crocodile skin boots with a four-inch stiletto heel. They were loud. Every step was a declaration of war against the floorboards.

"I grew up here," Josh hissed, the voice modulator turning his panic into a husky, irritated vibrate. "I went to high school three blocks from the boutique. If I run into Mrs. Gable from the library..."

"Mrs. Gable will see a European divorcee in ten thousand dollars of vintage couture," Verena interrupted, bored. "She will see the fur. She will see the beehive. She will see the lips. She will not see the boy who returned his overdue books late. You are hiding in plain sight, Joshua. The more outrageous you look, the more invisible you become. Now, go. Charlotte is waiting."

Charlotte was more than waiting; she was practically vibrating with glee by the car. She was dressed in a sensible, muted grey pant suit—the perfect foil to Josh's crimson extravagance. She held a clipboard and Josh's massive, black leather envelope purse.

"Ready, Ms. Von Hollenberg?" she chirped, opening the door. "We have an appointment at Gilded Lily at two."

Josh glared at her through his oversized, gradient sunglasses, sucked in a breath that strained against his corset, and climbed into the car. The motion required a complex choreography: knees together, slide the hips, swing the legs, mind the beehive. He nailed it.

The Gilded Lily was the only boutique in Northwood that pretended it was in Paris. It was where the mayor's wife and the local old money shopped for galas.

As the car pulled up, Josh felt a spike of adrenaline so sharp it made his hands sweat inside his black leather gloves. He looked out the window. People were walking by—normal people in jeans, parkas, sneakers. They looked so... soft. So comfortable.

"Showtime," Charlotte whispered, handing him the envelope purse. "Remember: you’re bored, you’re rich, and everything here is slightly disappointing."

Josh stepped out of the car.

The wind caught the fur on his collar, ruffling the black fox pelts. He instinctively reached up to check his hair—the platinum beehive was rock solid, an immovable object against the elements. He heard the click of his heels on the pavement. Heads turned.

A couple walking a dog stopped and stared. A teenager on a bike nearly swerved into a hydrant. They weren't looking at him with recognition; they were looking at him with the bewildered awe one reserves for a circus animal or a very expensive car crash.

He swept into the boutique, Charlotte trailing a step behind.

The shop smelled of lavender and desperation. Two sales associates, older women with sensible bobs, looked up. Their eyes widened as they took in the sheer verticality of Josh—the heels, the height, the hair.

"Good afternoon," one of them stammered, stepping forward. "Welcome to Gilded Lily. Can we... help you find something specific?"

Josh lowered his sunglasses just enough to look over the rim. He let the silence hang for three seconds—a trick Dr. Aris had taught him. Power exists in the pause.

"My assistant," Josh said, the modulator purring with a rich, disdainful resonance, "will handle the details. I am simply... browsing. I need something for a gala in the city. And please, nothing with polyester. I am allergic to mediocrity."

The associate blinked, stunned by the voice, the face, the sheer audacity of the creature in front of her. "Of... of course, Madame. We have our new silk arrivals in the back..."

"Show them to her," Josh said, waving a gloved hand toward Charlotte. "I will inspect the accessories."

He wandered toward a display of scarves, moving with the exaggerated, hip-swaying gait the skirt demanded. He felt the eyes of the staff on him. They were whispering.

“Who is that?”

“Look at that face. That’s serious work.”

“Is she a celebrity?”

They didn't see Josh. Verena was right. They saw the "work." They saw the fox eyes, the filled lips, the frozen forehead. They saw the signifiers of a class of woman who didn't exist in Northwood.

He stopped in front of a mirror. For a second, he panicked, expecting to see Josh staring back in a dress. But he didn't. He saw a predator. The crimson suit made him look dangerous. The fur framed a face that looked cruel and expensive.

"Ms. Von Hollenberg?" Charlotte called out, holding up a scarf. "This pattern? It’s a floral print."

Josh turned, looking at the scarf with genuine distaste. It was dainty. It was sweet. It was something his mother would wear.

"Burn it," Josh drawled, his voice carrying across the quiet shop. "It looks like a tablecloth for a garden party I wouldn't attend. Bring me something with structure. Leather. Or perhaps a bold geometric."

The sales associate scrambled to find a leather belt. Josh suppressed a grimace. It was working. He was bullying these women, and they were thanking him for it.

Twenty minutes later, the walls of the boutique began to close in. The heat of the hairdo, the pressure of the breastplate, the void between his tights—it was a sensory overload. He needed a break.

"Charlotte," Josh snapped. "I need air."

"Of course, Ma'am," Charlotte said.

Josh turned and marched out the door, the bell jingling cheerfully above his head. He stepped onto the sidewalk, the cold air hitting his heated face. He needed nicotine.
He reached into his purse and pulled his golden cigarette case..

He stood there, on Main Street of his hometown, a woman in a Mugler power suit and a beehive, lighting a six-and-a-half--inch cigarette.

He struck the lighter. The flame flared. He dipped his head, shielding the fire with a cupped, gloved hand, and inhaled.

Oh, god. The relief was instant. He leaned back against the brick facade of the shop, crossing one ankle over the other, posing instinctively. He tilted his head back and blew a long, thin stream of smoke into the afternoon air.



A group of high school boys walked past. Josh stiffened. He recognized one of them—it was the younger brother of a guy he used to skate with.

The boy stopped, nudging his friend. They looked at Josh. Josh stared back, blowing smoke through his pursed, filled lips, his eyes narrowed behind the sunglasses.

"Whoa," the boy whispered, loud enough to hear. "Check out the Cruella de Vil vibes."

"She looks like she owns a casino," the friend muttered. "Scary."

"Totally plastic," the first boy laughed. "Look at those lips. Do they even move?"

They snickered and kept walking.

Josh stood frozen for a beat, the smoke curling around his fingers. They hadn't recognized him. They hadn't seen Josh Braun, the skater. They had seen a "plastic," "scary" rich woman. They had insulted him, mocked his surgery, ridiculed his vanity... and it was the greatest relief he had ever felt.

He was safe.

The insult didn't sting; it validated him. He was plastic. He was scary.

He took another drag, deeper this time, feeling a strange, twisted pride swell in his chest—right under the silicone breasts. He watched the boys disappear down the street.

"You're welcome, boys," he whispered to himself, the modulator turning it into a sultry murmur.

Charlotte stepped out of the store, carrying two shopping bags. She stopped, looking at him leaning against the wall, smoking the absurdly long cigarette with an air of total indifference.

"You know," she said, smirking, "you're blocking the window display. You're intimidating the locals."

Josh flicked the ash onto the pavement, not caring where it landed.

"Good," he said, pushing off the wall and adjusting his fur collar. "Let's go get coffee. I want to get this over with, I'm getting tired of being stared at."

Charlotte laughed, opening the car door. "Claudia, with the way you look, you'll be stared at no matter where we go."

The coffee shop, The Conservatory, was the sort of place that charged five dollars for a cup of hot water and called it an "artisanal infusion." It had a wrought-iron patio that spilled onto the sidewalk, separated from the pedestrians by a low boxwood hedge. It was the perfect stage for a woman who wanted to be seen wanting to be left alone.

"Outside," Charlotte commanded the barista, gesturing vaguely toward the patio. "My boss requires... ventilation."

Josh swept past the counter, the click-clack of his crocodile boots silencing the lineup of college students and young moms. He didn't look at them. He kept his chin high, the massive platinum beehive grazing the top of the door frame as he stepped into the cold afternoon air.

They took a round metal table near the street. Josh arranged himself with practiced difficulty, smoothing the crimson wool skirt over his silicone hips, ensuring the black fox fur collar framed his face just so. He crossed his legs, the leather of his boots creaking, and immediately reached for his cigarette case.

"Two espressos," Charlotte told the waiter who rushed over. "And the petit fours. The ones with the gold leaf."

"So," Charlotte said, leaning back and watching Josh light the long Nat Sherman. "How does it feel? The fresh air? The stares?"

Josh took a long, stabilizing drag. He blew the smoke toward the street, watching it dissipate over the heads of passersby. He could feel their eyes on him—on the hair, the fur, the sheer, aggressive artificiality of his face.

"It feels... exposed," Josh admitted, the voice modulator turning his anxiety into a husky, bored vibration. "Like I'm a parade float parked in a library. But... I can hide behind the glasses. I can hide behind the smoke."

"You're not hiding, Claudia," Charlotte corrected, picking at a napkin. "You're projecting. Look at that woman over there. The one in the puffer jacket. What would Claudia say about her?"

Josh glanced over his sunglasses at a woman wrestling a stroller. She looked tired. She looked comfortable.

"She has given up," Josh drawled, the cruelty coming easier now. "That jacket isn't clothing; it's a sleeping bag with sleeves. It says, 'I am warm, and I have no ambition.'"

Charlotte laughed, delighted. "Exactly. You're getting it. The disdain is the armor."

The waiter returned with the coffee and a plate of tiny, intricate cakes. Josh reached for his espresso, his long, brown-lacquered talons clicking against the ceramic saucer. He brought the cup to his lips—the heavy, swollen pout making the simple act of drinking feel like a maneuver.

He was just setting the cup down, reaching for his cigarette again, when a voice cut through the patio chatter like a serrated knife.

"Charlotte?"

Josh's heart slammed against his ribs. The breastplate constricted his chest. He knew that voice. He knew the scratchy, defiant timbre of it anywhere.

He froze, his hand hovering over the ashtray.

Emma was standing on the sidewalk, just on the other side of the boxwood hedge. She was dressed in her "winter armor"—a distressed vegan leather jacket over a hoodie, combat boots, and a tartan scarf wrapped loosely around her neck. Her hair was dyed a fresh, angry violet. She looked real. She looked like home.

And she looked furious.

Josh's first instinct was to bolt. He gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles turning white under the leather gloves. *Run. Get in the car. Hide.*

"Sit," Charlotte hissed, her smile not wavering. Her eyes locked onto Josh's hidden ones. "If you move, you look guilty. If you stay, you're just a bitch. Be the bitch."

Emma marched around the hedge and up to their table, ignoring the waiter who tried to intercept her. She stopped in front of Charlotte, her breathing heavy, her cheeks flushed from the cold.



"I went to the house," Emma said, her voice tight. "The maid said he's gone. She said he left this morning."

"Emma," Charlotte said, her tone smooth and condescendingly sweet. "Hello to you too. And yes. Josh left. He has a flight to catch. Munich, I think? Or was it Zurich? The itinerary was so rushed."

"He didn't even say goodbye to his parents?" Emma demanded, her hands balling into fists at her sides. "I called his dad. Mr. Braun hasn't heard from him in a week. Josh wouldn't just vanish, Charlotte. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Charlotte sighed, picking up a macaron. "He's an adult, Emma. He made a choice. A career choice."

Emma's eyes darted from Charlotte to the person sitting across from her.

For the first time, Emma really looked at Josh.

Josh forced himself not to flinch. He sat perfectly still, the long cigarette burning between his fingers, the smoke curling up in a straight gray line. He tilted his head back slightly, letting the oversized sunglasses shield his eyes, presenting the full, reconstructed landscape of his face to the woman he loved.

He saw the recognition—not of him, but of the type.

Emma's lip curled. She took in the massive, stiff beehive. She looked at the fox fur on his shoulders. She looked at the shiny, frozen forehead and the swollen, injected lips. She looked at the six-and-a-half-inch cigarette held in a leather gloved hand.

Disgust. Pure, unadulterated revulsion washed over Emma’s face. It was the look she reserved for politicians and trophy wives.

"Who is this?" Emma asked, her voice dripping with judgment. "Another one of Verena’s... projects?"

"Emma, mind your manners," Charlotte chided, gesturing to Josh with a flourish. "This is Claudia. Verena’s cousin. She just flew in from Germany to take over the family business. The one Josh is going to work for."

Charlotte turned to Josh, her eyes dancing with malice. "Claudia, this is Emma. Josh’s... girlfriend."

The silence stretched. This was the test. If he spoke like Josh, if he faltered, it was over. Josh took a drag of the Nat Sherman. He let the smoke sit in his lungs for a second, then exhaled it in a long, deliberate stream that drifted directly toward Emma.

Emma waved the smoke away, coughing slightly, glaring at him.

"Charmed," Josh said.

The voice modulator did its work perfectly. The word came out low, breathy, and dripping with bored European arrogance. It wasn't Josh’s voice. It was the voice of a woman who owned buildings and fired people for sport.

"I assume," Josh continued, looking Emma up and down behind his glasses, "that this... aesthetic is intentional? It is very... distressed."

Emma bristled, her eyes narrowing. "It's called punk. Not that I'd expect a plastic mannequin to get it."

She stepped closer, leaning over the table, getting right in Josh’s face. Josh could smell her peppermint gum. He could see the tiny scar on her chin. He wanted to scream. He wanted to grab her hand.

Instead, he recoiled. He leaned back in his chair, pulling his furs away from her as if she were contagious.

"Charlotte," Josh drawled, turning his head away from Emma to look at his sister. "Is she always this loud? My migraine is beginning to throb behind the Botox."

"She's passionate," Charlotte smirked.

"She's rude," Josh corrected, flicking his ash into the tray. He looked back at Emma, channeling every ounce of Madame Simms' deportment training. "My cousin... Verena... she mentioned that people in this country could be 'spirited.' But she did not mention they could lack basic etiquette."

"You don't know anything about me," Emma spat, her eyes blazing with hatred for the woman in front of her. "I hate people like you. Fake. posh. Stuck-up. I can't believe that Josh will be working for people like you, he's going to be miserable."

"On the contrary," Josh said, his heart breaking as he delivered the line. "He seemed quite eager to leave all of... this... behind." He gestured vaguely at Emma, at the street, at the town of Northwood. "He wanted a future. Not a protest."

Emma stared at him, stunned by the cruelty. She looked at the heavy makeup, the ridiculous hair, the expensive jewelry. She didn't see Josh. She saw the enemy.

"Tell him to call me," Emma said, her voice shaking with suppressed rage. "If he's allowed to use a phone in his 'new life.'"

"I will pass on the message," Josh said, taking a sip of his espresso. "If I remember."

Emma scoffed, gave Charlotte one last glare, and turned on her heel. She stormed away down the sidewalk, her boots stomping hard against the concrete, leaving Josh sitting in a cloud of smoke and expensive perfume, feeling like he had just cut off his own limb.

The silence at the table following Emma's departure was heavy, broken only by the sharp, rhythmic click-click-click of Josh's acrylic fingernails tapping against the metal tabletop. He watched the back of Emma's vegan leather jacket disappear into the crowd, a shrinking violet dot in a sea of grey and beige. With every step she took away from him, the tether snapped a little more, until there was nothing left but the cold, hollow realization that he had succeeded.

He had won the scene. He had lost the girl.

Charlotte, ever the director, didn't let the silence linger. She leaned forward, picking up a petit four with a delicate, practiced grace that mirrored Josh's own new mannerisms.

"Well," she said, popping the sweet into her mouth and chewing thoughtfully. "That was... visceral. Honestly, I feel a little sorry for her. She really doesn't have the range to appreciate this level of commitment. Like my brother... she's just so aggressively earnest. No appreciation for the finer, more complex things in life. No style."

"Stop it," Josh snapped.

The voice modulator caught the crack in his composure and smoothed it over, turning his genuine anguish into a low, irritated growl. It sounded like a queen scolding a clumsy servant, not a man grieving his relationship.

"Do not talk about her," Josh continued, his hand trembling as he brought the Nat Sherman 164 to his lips. The smoke that poured from his mouth was thick and white, shielding his face. "I did what I had to do. I played the part. I made her hate me so she wouldn't look closer. Do not turn her into one of your little jokes, Charlotte. She looked at me... she looked at me like I was a monster."

"She looked at you like you were Claudia," Charlotte corrected, her voice dropping the playful edge for something sharper, more pragmatic. "She saw a rich, arrogant, plastic woman who treats people like dirt. And you know what? You delivered. You didn't stutter. You didn't apologize. You were magnificent."

"I was repulsive," Josh whispered, staring at his reflection in the dark window of the coffee shop. The platinum beehive, the frozen forehead, the ridiculous, swollen lips—it was a mask that had eaten his face. "I saw it in her eyes. She didn't just fail to recognize me. She recognized everything she despises in me."

"And that is why you will survive Retroville," Charlotte said, signaling for the check with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Because in Retroville, there are no Emmas. There are no skater boys from Northwood. There are no 'old friends' who remember when you wore flannel and ate tofu."

She leaned in, her eyes hard. "You signed the deal, Josh. You're in the suit. You're in the prosthetics. You're in the cage. There is no going back to being the 'good guy' for the next seven months. You have to be this. You have to be the thing Emma hates, or Verena will eat you alive."

Josh looked at her, the fox-eye lift making his glare look particularly venomous. He wanted to argue, to scream that he was still in there, but the weight of the breastplate on his chest and the tightness of the tuck between his legs were physical reminders that Charlotte was right. Josh Braun was a memory. Claudia von Hollenberg was the reality.

"Just pay the bill," Josh muttered, standing up. The movement was a production; he had to engage his core, thrust his hips forward to balance the heels, and adjust the heavy fur stole on his shoulders. He looked down at Charlotte with icy disdain. "I'll be in the car. I need to get out of this... public display."

He turned and walked away, the heels ringing out like gunshots on the pavement, the red soles of his crocodille boots flashing with every step.

Charlotte watched him go, a smirk playing on her lips. She waited until he had successfully navigated the curb and was safely enclosed in the back of the limousine before she pulled her phone from her purse.

It was vibrating. The caller ID read V.V.H.

"He's in the car," Charlotte answered, bringing the phone to her ear while she handed her credit card to the waiter.

"And?" Verena's voice was crisp, devoid of static, as if she were standing right next to her. "Did the subject break?"

"Not even a crack," Charlotte reported, her voice low. "It was brutal, Verena. Emma was... well, she was Emma. Loud. Rude. Completely disgusted. She looked right at him—looked him in the eyes—and all she saw was a plastic, stuck-up bitch."

"Excellent," Verena purred. "And Joshua? Did he try to signal her? Did he hesitate?"

"He was perfect," Charlotte said, signing the receipt with a flourish. "He insulted her fashion sense. He called her 'spirited' with the most condescending tone I've ever heard. He made her hate him to protect the secret. It destroyed him, of course. He's in the car right now, probably smoking half the pack, but he held the frame."

"Good," Verena said. "I knew the girl would be the weak link. I had to be sure he could sever it."

Charlotte paused, the pen hovering over the paper. "Wait. You knew she was coming? You told me she was at college."

"I told Joshua she was at college," Verena corrected smoothly. "I had my sources track her. I knew she was coming to town. I knew she would check the house. Timing the coffee run was... a necessary variable. I needed to see if the conditioning held up under emotional stress. If he couldn't fool the girl who loves him, he certainly wouldn't fool the sharks in Retroville."

Charlotte felt a chill that had nothing to do with the winter air. "It was a test."

"It was a graduation," Verena said. "Bring him home, Charlotte. He has passed the emotional trials. Now he must prepare for the practical ones. I have summoned Raffaella. The fur and leather business is not just about wearing the product; it is about selling the fantasy. Claudia needs to know her inventory before she steps foot in the boardroom."

"Understood," Charlotte said. "We're on our way."

She hung up the phone and looked toward the sleek black car idling at the curb. Through the tinted window, she could just make out the silhouette of the massive beehive and the glow of a cigarette tip. Josh was in there, alone, mourning the loss of his life.

Charlotte smiled, pocketed her phone, and walked toward the car. The drama was over; now, the business could begin.

Chapter 20

The next two weeks were a blur of sensory overload and psychological erosion. The Old House ceased to be a home and became a high-stakes finishing school where the subject was "Claudia," and the grading curve was brutal. There were no more Tuesdays off. There were no more moments to slouch in sweatpants or speak in his natural register. Josh Braun had been put into a box, taped shut, and shipped away. Only Claudia remained.

The Ritual of the Face

Mornings began not with coffee, but with the construction of the mask. Under Celeste's unyielding supervision, Josh sat before the lit vanity, his platinum beehive protected by the silk boudoir cap, staring at the raw materials of his new identity.

"Too soft," Celeste critiqued, tapping a long, manicured fingernail against the glass. "You are blending the contour like a modern girl. You are not an Instagram model, Claudia. You are a dynasty."

Josh sighed, the modulator turning the sound into a weary, elegant exhale. He picked up the brush again, dipping it into the dark, terracotta bronzer. He carved a harsh line under his cheekbones—cheekbones that were already artificially heightened by Dr. Blue's threads.

"Sharper," Celeste commanded. "Cut the face. The lighting in Retroville is neon and harsh. If you don't carve it out, you disappear."

He learned to paint the "fox eyes" Dr. Blue had surgically given him, extending the eyeliner out toward his temples in a sharp, predatory wing. He learned to overline his already swollen lips with dark liner and fill them with blood-red gloss until they looked wet and dangerous.

Then came the wardrobe.

It was a daily lesson in structural engineering. Celeste laid out the ensembles: vintage Thierry Mugler suits with waists that defied anatomy, Claude Montana leather dresses with shoulders wide enough to clear a doorway, and evening gowns of gold lamé and velvet.

"Accessories are not decorations," Celeste lectured, draping a heavy, gold chain-link necklace around Josh's neck. "They are weights. They anchor you. You must feel the gold on your skin. If you are not uncomfortable, you are not dressed."

Josh learned to navigate the house in five-inch heels, balancing the weight of the breastplate, the corset, and the jewelry. He learned to select earrings that dragged on his lobes and rings that made his hands look even more slender and useless. He wasn't just wearing clothes; he was curating an exhibit.

The Merchant of Skins

If mornings with Celeste were a test of vanity, afternoons with Raffaella were a test of the soul.

At Raffaella’s room, racks of furs—mink, sable, chinchilla, lynx, fox—filled the space, filling the air with the heavy, musky scent of cured animal skins and cedar.

For Josh, the vegan who once marched against factory farming, it was a room of corpses. For Claudia, it was a vault of gold.

"Touch it," Raffaella barked, her Italian accent sharp as a whip. She threw a full-length coat of white shadow fox at him.

Josh caught it. The fur was incredibly soft, dense, and heavy. His stomach churned. He could visualize the animal. He could smell the death on it.

"You are holding it like a dead cat," Raffaella spat, snatching it back. "This is forty thousand dollars of prestige, cara. You do not hold it; you caress it. You must sell the fantasy. When a woman buys this, she is not buying warmth. She is buying the right to be looked at."

She forced the coat back into his arms.

"Again. Put it on. Feel the weight. Love the weight."

Josh closed his eyes behind his sunglasses. He took a deep breath, inhaling the musk. He forced his mind to disconnect, to shove Josh into the dark corner of his brain where he screamed silently. He summoned the hunger he had felt in the cage. He summoned the arrogance of the face in the mirror.

He swung the coat over his shoulders. The fox fur engulfed him, soft and suffocating. He ran his long, brown-lacquered nails down the lapel, burying his fingers in the deep pile.

"This," Josh purred, the modulator dropping his voice to a husky, seductive whisper, "is not just a coat, Raffaella. It is an ecosystem. The nap is... exquisite."

"Better," Raffaella said, circling him like a shark. "But the client asks: 'Is it ethical?' What do you say?"

"I say," Josh drawled, turning to check his silhouette in the mirror, watching the way the white fur contrasted with his red lips, "that ethics are a luxury for people who cannot afford beauty. This animal was born to drape over my shoulders. To leave it in the wild would be a waste of perfection."

He felt a wave of nausea at his own words, but Raffaella clapped her hands.

"Perfect! That is the Retroville spirit! You sell the dominance, Claudia. You sell the power over nature."

They spent hours discussing the difference between Canadian and Russian sable, the grading of crocodile leather for handbags, and the specific care required for python skin

boots. Josh learned to inspect stitching with a critical eye, to identify flaws in a pelt, and to negotiate prices with a ruthlessness that made Raffaella grin.

He learned to treat the animals not as living beings, but as raw materials for his own glamour. It was the ultimate corruption, and he performed it flawlessly.

The Final Product

By the end of the second week, the exhaustion was bone-deep. Josh hadn't been out of character for 336 hours. He slept in the silk cap, waking up with a stiff neck from protecting the beehive. He showered in the breastplate, scrubbing the synthetic skin as if it were his own. He sat to pee, the tuck and the prosthetic vagina a constant reminder of his physical erasure.

On the final evening, Verena summoned him to the drawing room.

Josh entered, wearing a floor-length gown of emerald green sequins with a thigh-high slit and a white mink stole draped over his arms. He held a Nat Sherman 164 in one hand and a crystal glass of champagne in the other.

He didn't pose this time. He didn't need to. The posture was automatic. The disdain was natural.



"Raffaella tells me you sold her a Lynx coat she didn't even want," Verena said, looking up from her book.

"Raffaella has no taste," Josh replied, taking a sip of champagne, his eyes bored. "She thinks chinchilla is for evening wear. I corrected her. Chinchilla is for the bedroom. Lynx is for the opera. It demands an audience."

Verena closed her book. A slow, terrifying smile spread across her face.

"And how do you feel about the inventory, Claudia? The skins?"

Josh paused. He looked at the white mink resting against his emerald sequins. He thought of the vegan guy who used to cry at documentaries. That guy felt very small, very far away, drowned under layers of silicone and fur.

"I feel," Josh said, running his hand lovingly over the mink, "that they are much happier on me than they ever were in the woods."

Verena stood up.

"You are ready," she declared. "Wake up early, we're leaving tomorrow."

That night Josh had a vivid dream, drenched in the saturated colors of a Polaroid. Josh was at the skate park behind the old library, the sound of urethane wheels on concrete filling his ears like music. The wind was cool against his neck—his bare neck, free of hair, free of heavy gold chains. Emma was there, laughing, holding a protest sign that simply read "Resist." He pushed off the board, feeling the familiar, powerful flex of his calves, the effortless balance of a body that was his own.

Then he woke up.

The transition was a physical violence. The soft breeze of the dream was replaced by the stale, perfumed air of the Old House. The freedom of movement was strangled by the silk boudoir cap that encased his platinum beehive, forcing his head to remain perfectly still on the satin pillow. He tried to stretch, but his body hit the limits of its new architecture: the heavy, insensitive mounds of the breastplate pressing into the mattress, the permanent, numbing tuck between his legs that made him feel like there was void between his legs.

He lay there for a moment, staring at the canopy, the phantom sound of skate wheels fading into the hum of the air conditioner. He felt a tear leak from the corner of his eye, tracking through the night cream.

The door clicked open. Celeste breezed in, already fully dressed in her severe black uniform, clapping her hands.

"Up, Claudia," she barked. "No time for melancholy. We are leaving."

Josh sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. His feet hunted for the marabou mules. "Leaving? Retroville?"

"New York," Celeste corrected, pulling open the wardrobe doors to reveal a garment bag she had already prepared. "Verena insists. You cannot inhabit the spirit of Claudia without

walking the streets she conquered. There are people that she wants you to meet, influential figures that will help you navigate Retroville later.”

"New York?" Josh repeated, his voice modulator fuzzy with sleep, making him sound like a groggy, hungover socialite. "But... I thought..."

"You thought you had a choice?" Celeste raised an eyebrow, pulling out a pair of sheer black pantyhose. "You don't pack. You don't choose the destination. You are the luggage. Now, strip. The jet leaves at one."

Three hours later, Josh was no longer a person; he was a monument to 1980s excess.

He stood on the tarmac of the private airstrip, the wind whipping the hem of his coat. He was dressed in a vintage Yves Saint Laurent skirt suit in a jarring houndstooth pattern of black and electric blue. The shoulders were expansive, sharp enough to cut glass, creating a silhouette that tapered aggressively to his cinched waist. Over it, he wore a floor-length coat of blue-dyed fox fur that weighed as much as a small child.

He wore a wide-brimmed black hat perched atop the beehive, secured with a hat pin that looked like a dagger. His face was a mask of perfection—the fox eyes lined in kohl, the lips painted a wet, violent fuchsia.

He gripped the handle of his crocodile skin purse with long, brown-lacquered talons, feeling the vibration of the jet engines in his teeth.

"Move, Claudia," Charlotte said, nudging him from behind. She was grinning, looking adorable and terrifyingly eager in a mod-style dress and white boots. "Don't keep the Queen waiting."

Josh stepped onto the stairs. He didn't look back at the town of Northwood. He couldn't. Somewhere out there, past the chain-link fence, his parents were probably eating lunch, wondering why their son hadn't called. They didn't know he was walking up the steps of a Gulfstream jet, wearing twenty thousand dollars of fur and silicone, about to fly to New York to impersonate a dead woman.

He had chosen this silence to protect them, to save their house, but as he reached the top of the stairs and ducked his massive hat to enter the cabin, the regret hit him so hard it nearly doubled him over. He was vanishing. And he hadn't even said goodbye.

The interior of the jet was a time capsule of beige leather and gold trim. Verena was already seated in a plush captain’s chair, a glass of champagne in her hand. She looked up as Josh entered, her eyes scanning him for flaws.

"The hat is a bit theatrical," she mused, swirling her drink. "But for New York... it works. Sit."

Josh maneuvered himself into the seat opposite her. It was a production—knees together, slide the hips, adjust the fur, ensure the skirt didn't ride up. He did it with a mechanical grace that frightened him.

"Champagne?" Verena offered, gesturing to a crystal flute on the table.

"I need a cigarette," Josh said, the voice modulator dropping into a flat, bored demand.

"Once we are in the air," Verena replied, unbothered. "So, Claudia. Are you prepared to walk Fifth Avenue? To sit in the restaurants where my aunt threw wine in people's faces? To shop in the stores where she spent my grandfather's fortune?"

"Do I have a choice?" Josh asked, taking the champagne. He looked at the bubbles rising in the glass, mesmerized.

"No," Verena smiled. "But you might find you enjoy it. New York eats the weak, Claudia. But my aunt? New York starved for her."

Across the aisle, Charlotte was already snapping photos of the interior, a glass of champagne in her hand. She looked over at Josh, her eyes sparkling.

"Can you believe this?" she whispered loudly. "Private jet. New York. This is insane, Claudia. We're actually living this."

"You're living it," Josh muttered, looking at her over the rim of his glass. "I'm surviving it."

"Oh, stop being so dramatic," Charlotte laughed, kicking off her boots and curling her legs under her. "You look fabulous. You're going to be the most interesting person in Manhattan for three days. And then... Retroville. Honestly, you should be thanking Verena. You were rotting in that library, Claudia. Now look at you."

Josh looked at her. He saw the genuine joy in her face. She wasn't just his sister anymore; she was a parasite that had found a better host. She thrived on the drama, the wealth, the sheer absurdity of his humiliation.

He turned away, looking out the porthole window as the plane began to taxi. The runway blurred into a grey streak. He saw his own reflection in the thick glass—the high, frozen forehead, the predatory eyes, the swollen lips that couldn't close.

He didn't recognize the face. It wasn't Josh. It wasn't even the old Claudia. It was something new, something synthetic and hollowed out.

Six months, he told himself, gripping the stem of the glass until his knuckles turned white under the leather gloves. Six months of this. Six months of the void between his legs, the glue, the smoke, the voice.

The plane lifted off, the G-force pushing him back into the soft leather seat. Northwood fell away beneath them, shrinking into a grid of meaningless lines.

He felt a tear try to form again, but he stopped it. *Claudia doesn't cry*, he reminded himself. *Claudia gets even.*

He reached into his purse, ignoring the "no smoking" light that didn't exist on Verena's plane, and pulled out the golden case. He lit a Nat Sherman 164, the flame flaring bright in the dim cabin. He inhaled deeply, the smoke filling the emptiness in his chest, and exhaled a long, defiant cloud that drifted toward his sister.



Josh started scheming, he thought that Charlotte was too comfortable with all of this and that once they were in Retroville without the presence of Verena, their relationship was going to need to change. As Claudia, he was the boss, and he would make sure that his sister learned that.

Chapter 21

Verena’s penthouse was suspended above the city like a jewel in a setting of steel and glass. It occupied the top three floors of a limestone needle on Billionaires’ Row, a space so vast and silent that the chaos of Manhattan felt like a distant rumor. From the floor-to-ceiling windows of the guest suite—Claudia’s suite—Josh could see the entirety of Central Park, a dark rectangle of nature trapped in the glowing grid of the city.

He stood by the window, wrapped in a robe of Egyptian cotton so thick it felt like a weighted blanket. He held a crystal tumbler of sparkling water, his long, brown-lacquered talons clicking against the glass.

Why? The question circled his mind like a shark. Verena von Hollenberg had the kind of wealth that could buy islands, influence elections, or erase people. Why spend a fortune to torture a twenty-year-old history student? Why fly him to New York on a private jet just to parade him around as her dead aunt? It felt personal, obsessive. It felt like he was a toy she had commissioned, and she was determined to see just how much the mechanism could take before it snapped.

"Stop brooding," Charlotte said, walking into the room carrying a garment bag and a shoebox. "It creates wrinkles, and Dr. Blue’s work is too expensive to ruin with existential dread."

"I'm not brooding," Josh said, the voice modulator turning his sullen mutter into a throaty, bored complaint. "I'm analyzing the absurdity of my existence."

"Save the analysis for the memoirs," Charlotte quipped, hanging the bag on the valet stand. "Verena has instructions. Tonight is the Metropolitan Opera. La Bohème. You are sitting in her box. And you are meeting 'friends'."

"Friends?" Josh turned, the movement stiff due to the corset he was already laced into beneath the robe.

"Cordelia Van Der Bilt and Serena Waldorf," Charlotte read from a card. "Old money. Very old money. Verena says they are 'Retroville regulars.' You need to impress them. If you can fool them, you can fool anyone."

"Great," Josh sighed, reaching for the golden cigarette case on the side table. "More sharks in evening gowns."

"No time for smoke yet," Charlotte said, snatching the case away with a grin. "The car is downstairs. Celeste booked you a full day at L’Orchidée. You need to be polished until you shine in the dark."

L’Orchidée was not a salon; it was a laboratory for the wealthy. Located in a townhouse on the Upper East Side, it smelled of crushed jasmine and money. There was no reception desk, only a concierge who greeted Josh by his new name before he even stepped through the door.

"Ms. Von Hollenberg," the man murmured, bowing slightly. "Welcome back to New York. We have the Platinum Suite prepared for you."

Josh was ushered into a private room with marble floors and a view of a private garden. He was stripped of his robe and draped in a silk cape.

For the next four hours, Josh Braun ceased to exist. He became a surface to be buffed, a texture to be refined.

It started with the face. An aesthetician with hands as cold as ice applied masks that smelled of algae and gold. She massaged the tension out of his jaw—tension from clenching his teeth against the modulator—and worked serums into the skin around his eyes, careful not to disturb the threads that held his gaze in that permanent, predatory squint.

"Your skin is thirsty, Madame," she whispered, applying a collagen sheet mask. "We must feed it."

Josh lay there, blind and mute, feeling the cold slime on his face, trying to dissociate from the fact that he was a man getting a three-thousand-dollar facial.

Then came the extremities.

Two women worked on him simultaneously. One at his feet, one at his hands.

The pedicure was a humiliation he hadn't anticipated. His feet, which were somewhat calloused from years of skating, were soaked in milk and honey. The technician scrubbed them raw, filing away every trace of his masculine past until his soles were baby-soft. She pushed back his cuticles aggressively, shaping the nails into neat, rounded ovals. Then came the paint—Espresso Noir, the same deep, glossy brown as his hands. Seeing his large toes painted like that, gleaming dark against the white towel, made his stomach flip.

At the same time, his hands were being reconstructed. The technician dissolved the old adhesive, removing the talons for a brief, terrifying moment of freedom, only to apply a fresh set. These were longer, sharper. She painted them with agonizing precision, sealing them under layers of gel until they looked like polished mahogany stones attached to his fingers.

"The hair," a voice announced from the doorway. It was the lead stylist, a man with a French accent and a look of intense concentration.

Josh was moved to the shampoo bowl. The washing of the extensions was a heavy, wet ordeal. The platinum hair, when wet, weighed pounds. It dragged his head back, straining his neck.

But the drying was architecture.

Josh sat in the chair for ninety minutes while three assistants blew-dried the hair straight.

Then, the teasing began. It was a violent process. They backcombed the roots until his head looked like a dandelion, creating a dense, mat-like foundation. Then, they began to smooth and pin.

Up. Up. Up.

They built the beehive layer by layer, spraying it with lacquer that smelled like chemical flowers. It grew taller than before, a towering, structured cone of platinum blonde that added five inches to his height. It was rigid. It was imposing. It was a crown of hair that demanded he move with the slow, deliberate grace of a queen, simply to keep it balanced.

"Perfection," the stylist whispered, stepping back. "It is a skyscraper."

Josh stared at himself in the mirror. The beehive, the fox eyes, the dark brown lips that matched his nails. He looked like an alien royalty.

"I need..." Josh started, his voice cracking slightly behind the modulator. He felt the itch in his blood, the chemical demand of the addiction Verena had engineered. "I need a moment."

The stylist didn't ask what he needed. He snapped his fingers.

"The Terrace Room. Immediately."

An assistant rushed over, guiding Josh—who was now walking gingerly on his freshly pedicured feet in foam slippers—down a hallway to a small, glass-enclosed balcony. It was a smoking room, ventilated and heated, filled with orchids.

"Your case, Madame," the assistant said, handing him the golden box and a crystal lighter.

Josh sat on the velvet bench, his silk cape rustling. He opened the case, his long, fresh talons clicking against the metal. He pulled out the all-white Nat Sherman 164.

He lit it, the flame reflecting in his manicured nails.

He inhaled.

The smoke filled him, quieting the screaming nerves, dulling the shame of the pedicure, the weight of the hair, the absurdity of the situation. He leaned back, crossing his legs, and watched the smoke drift up toward the Manhattan skyline.

They treated his addiction like a medical necessity. They made space for it. They respected it.

This is what it means to be Claudia, he realized, exhaling a long, thin stream of blue smoke. You don't have habits. You have requirements. And the world rearranges itself to meet them. He took another drag, staring at his dark brown toes wiggling in the open-toed slippers. He was a doll. A very expensive, high-maintenance doll. And tonight, he had to go to the Opera and dance for the strings.

"Five minutes, Madame," the assistant called softly from the door. "We still have to dress you."

"I'm coming," Josh purred, crushing the half-smoked cigarette into the crystal ashtray. "Don't rush perfection."

The salon had a special suit prepared for him. After spending almost half an hour putting on the clothes that Celeste had selected, Josh was ready. He stood before the floor-to-ceiling mirror, staring at a reflection that had ceased to be human and had become entirely architectural.

He was encased in Vintage Dior, a specific, aggressive vision of 1980s couture that weaponized volume.

The foundation was a textured wool skirt suit in a severe, muted taupe. The jacket was structured like a fortress, with stiff, razor-sharp lapels framing a deep V-neckline that plunged toward the center of his chest, exposing the creamy, synthetic skin of the breastplate. A wide black belt with a small gold rectangular buckle cinched his waist violently, dragging the heavy fabric in to emphasize the artificial hourglass shape created by the corset.

Below, the matching pencil skirt hugged his thighs and tapered past the knee, a tube of wool that restricted his stride to a glide.

But it was the outerwear that made him want to scream.

Draped loosely off his shoulders was a massive, voluminous brown leather wrap. It wasn't just a shawl; it was a monstrosity of design. It was oversized, with a puffy, gathered texture that looked like a collapsed sofa or a deflated hot air balloon made of calfskin. It created a silhouette so dramatic, so wide, that Josh felt less like a person and more like a walking piece of brutalist furniture.

He adjusted the wrap, his hands encased in bright orange gloves—a shocking, violent pop of citrus against the monochromatic ocean of browns and taupes.



"It smells like a tannery," Josh whispered to the empty room, the voice modulator turning his complaint into a husky, bored observation.

He reached up to touch the large, multi-colored statement brooch pinned to his left lapel. It was an abstract explosion of orange and silver organic shapes, heavy enough to pull the wool fabric down. On his ears, large, round pearl button earrings sat like full moons, weighing down his lobes.

He looked down at his feet. Tall, deep brown leather heels completed the look, grounding the absurdity in one final layer of animal skin.

The door to the suite opened, and Charlotte walked in.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

Charlotte looked undeniably modern. She was wearing a sleek, slip dress in midnight blue, her hair in a messy-chic bun, her makeup dewy and fresh. She looked like 2024.

Then she looked at Josh.

"Oh. My. God," Charlotte breathed, a smile breaking across her face that was equal parts awe and hilarity. "You look... historical. You look like you're about to foreclose on an orphanage."

"It's Dior," Josh drawled, turning slowly to face her. The massive leather wrap swung with him, the gathered folds of brown skin shimmering under the chandelier light. "And I feel like I'm wearing a cow. A very large, very angry cow."

"It's incredible," Charlotte said, walking around him, inspecting the construction. She reached out and poked the puffy leather wrap. "This silhouette? It’s pure power, Josh. You take up so much space. You’re literally twice as wide as you should be."

"It’s called presence, Charlotte," Josh corrected, channeling Raffaella’s lessons on selling the fantasy. He adjusted the bright orange gloves, smoothing the leather over his long, gloved fingers. "And don't poke the couture. It bruises."

"The gloves are a nice touch," Charlotte smirked, stepping back to admire the clash of the bright orange against the drab taupe. "Very... 'don't touch me, I'm radioactive.'"

"They are accents," Josh sighed, checking his makeup in the mirror one last time. It was nighttime glamour—heavy contour, smoked-out eyes that extended the fox-lift, and lips painted a deep, glistening brick red. "Verena said I needed to pop against the velvet of the Opera box."

He looked at his brother in the mirror—no, at Claudia. The old Josh, the one who thrifted flannels and refused to eat honey, would have rather died than wear this amount of animal product. The leather wrap alone was a moral nightmare. But after all the months of training, his focus was on the details. He adjusted the heavy pearl earring and tilted his chin up, looking for any smudge on his lipstick.

"Do I look like I belong in a box seat?" Josh asked, his voice low.

"You look like you own the opera house," Charlotte admitted, checking her phone. "The car is waiting at the entrance. Cordelia and Serena are meeting us in the lobby. Are you ready to face the sharks?"

Josh took a deep breath. The corset dug into his ribs. The leather wrap weighed down his shoulders. The heels pinched his toes.

"Pass me my cigarettes," Josh commanded, extending a gloved orange hand. "And let's go. If I have to wear this much dead skin, I’ll need to smoke to disguise how disgusted I feel."

He swept past Charlotte, the massive brown leather cloud billowing around him, a terrifying vision of vintage excess marching toward the entrance.

Chapter 22

The grand foyer of the Metropolitan Opera House was a cathedral of light, crystal, and staggering wealth. The air was thick with the colliding scents of Chanel No. 5, expensive champagne, and the unmistakable, musky undertone of vintage fur. It was a sea of opulent dresses, sharp tuxedos, and faces pulled taut by the sharpest scalpels money could buy.

For Josh Braun, it was a waking nightmare.

He stood near the sweeping grand staircase, the massive, voluminous brown leather wrap resting heavily on his shoulders. The puffy, gathered texture of the calfskin felt like a physical manifestation of his guilt, a constant, oppressive weight over the structured taupe wool of his Dior jacket. His waist was cinched so tightly by the wide black belt that every breath was a calculated effort, pushing against the heavy silicone of his breastplate. He gripped his clutch with bright orange leather gloves, the pop of citrus color a violent contrast to the monochromatic ocean of browns he was drowning in.

Through the narrowed, predatory slit of his fox-eye lift, he scanned the crowd. Raffaella's grueling lessons echoed in his mind. He didn't just see coats; he saw grading, origin, and price tags. He saw a woman in a poorly matched Russian sable. He saw a man whose tuxedo lapels were cut an inch too wide for the current season. These were the elites. The masters of the universe. The exact demographic of hyper-consumers he used to protest against with Emma, shouting through megaphones about wealth inequality and animal rights.

Now, he was standing among them, looking richer, colder, and more artificial than any of them.

"Stop fidgeting with your gloves," Charlotte hissed softly, her lips barely moving. She was standing half a step behind him, her sleek, modern midnight-blue slip dress making her look like a time traveler next to Josh's imposing, 1980s architectural silhouette. "Verena sent me photos of them, but this place is a plastic surgeon's convention. Half these women look exactly the same. High cheekbones, frozen foreheads... you all look related."

"They don't look like me," Josh muttered, the voice modulator catching the vibration in his throat and turning it into a low, haughty purr. He adjusted the large, multi-colored statement brooch on his lapel, the orange and silver metal cold through his gloves. "I look like I'm wearing a deflated blimp."

"You look like a million dollars," Charlotte corrected, her eyes darting through the crowd. "Just... stand tall. Let the beehive do the work."

The massive platinum structure atop his head scraped the air, a beacon of hairspray and pins that demanded attention. It didn't take long for the beacon to work.

"Claudia? Claudia von Hollenberg, is that you?"

The voice was bright, musical, and dripping with an affected mid-Atlantic accent. Josh turned, pivoting his hips and letting the heavy pencil skirt dictate his slow, deliberate rotation.

Two women were approaching. They were in their mid-forties, radiating the kind of old money that didn't need to shout. The one who had spoken was Cordelia Van Der Bilt. She wore an emerald green silk gown that draped flawlessly over her frame, her blonde hair styled in soft, expensive waves. Her face was animated, welcoming, though the skin around her eyes betrayed the telltale tightness of a recent lift.

Beside her was Serena Waldorf. Serena was the antithesis of Cordelia’s bubbly energy. She wore a severe, classic black velvet column dress, her dark hair pulled back into a chignon so tight it looked painful. She observed Josh with a cool, calculating gaze, a faint, polite smile barely touching her lips.



"You must be Cordelia," Josh said. He hacked into his brain, pushing down the terrified skater boy and summoning Dr. Aris’s strict vocal coaching. He let the words roll out slowly, heavily accented with a bored, European drawl. He extended a bright orange, gloved hand.

Cordelia took it, her diamond bracelets clinking. "Oh, darling, it is so wonderful to finally meet you! Verena has told us absolutely everything. We were devastated when we heard that she wouldn’t be able to attend the opera this evening.”

"You know how Verena is," Josh replied, his voice a smooth, icy velvet. "But I am here to ensure that our family is... present."

"And doing so in spectacular fashion," Serena added, stepping forward. Her eyes swept over the massive brown leather wrap, the taupe wool, the heavy pearl button earrings. "Vintage Dior. Late eighties, if I'm not mistaken? It is a bold choice for a modern opera, Claudia. Very... imposing."

It was a test. Serena was probing, checking to see if the German divorcee knew her fashion history or if she was just playing dress-up.

"Fashion, Serena, does not age. Only the people wearing it do," Josh drawled, shifting his weight onto his back heel to emphasize the curve of his hip. "I find modern silhouettes so terribly apologetic. If one is going to take up space in a room, one should do it unapologetically."

Serena's cool facade cracked into a genuine, approving smile. "Verena warned us you had a bite. I love it."

"And who is this lovely young thing?" Cordelia asked, turning her bright eyes to Charlotte.

"This is Charlotte," Josh said, waving his orange-gloved hand dismissively. "My assistant. I am still acclimating to the... chaos of New York. She manages my schedule and is documenting my transition into the family business. A bit of modern marketing nonsense Verena insists upon."

Charlotte offered a polite, practiced smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you both. Ms. Von Hollenberg has been very much looking forward to tonight."

"As have we!" Cordelia clapped her hands together. "We are simply dying to hear all about Germany, and the estate, and what on earth Verena has planned for the exotics line. But I suppose that will have to wait."

A series of clear, melodic chimes echoed through the grand foyer, cutting through the chatter.

"The five-minute warning," Serena noted, adjusting her velvet clutch. "Shall we head to the box? Verena secured the Grand Tier, of course. Best acoustics for the Puccini."

"Lead the way," Josh commanded softly.

He fell into step beside the two socialites, Charlotte trailing dutifully behind. As they walked toward the grand, sweeping staircase, Josh felt the eyes of the lobby tracking them. He felt the sway of his tightly bound hips, the agonizing pinch of his stilettos, the total erasure of his manhood hidden beneath layers of prosthetic silicone and wool. He was walking to a private box to watch an opera he didn't understand, wearing the skin of dead animals, flanked by women who represented everything he hated.

And the most terrifying part was that, as he adjusted his massive leather wrap and lifted his chin to balance the platinum beehive, no one suspected a thing. The performance was flawless.

The first act of La Bohème was a sensory assault of soaring sopranos, tragic coughs, and velvet acoustics. For Josh, whose musical tastes peaked at three-chord skate punk and aggressively distorted hardcore anthems, the opera was a tedious, incomprehensible dirge.

He sat perfectly rigid in the Grand Tier box, the massive brown leather wrap swallowing his shoulders, his core screaming against the unyielding pinch of the Dior corset.

But Claudia von Hollenberg would not be bored. Claudia was a creature of intense, theatrical emotion, driven by a profound disdain for anything she deemed pedestrian. As the tragic aria swelled, Josh watched Cordelia dab at her perfectly lifted eyes with a lace handkerchief. Serena sat motionless, enraptured by the pure luxury of the performance.

Josh mirrored them, tilting his heavy, platinum beehive slightly and letting out a soft, breathy sigh through his swollen, red-painted lips. "It is exquisite," he murmured, the voice modulator catching the vibration in his throat and projecting a sound of deep, affected sorrow. "Though, one wishes the tenor had just a fraction more despair. It is so hard to find true, agonizing passion these days. Everything is so... mediocre."

Serena nodded approvingly, her dark eyes flashing in the dim light of the box. "Exactly, Claudia. The modern world has sanitized tragedy. It lacks teeth."

When the heavy gold curtains finally closed for intermission, the lights flared, breaking the spell.

"I am parched," Cordelia announced, snapping her jeweled clutch shut. "And I absolutely must have a cigarette. My nerves are entirely frayed."

"Agreed," Serena sighed, standing up and smoothing her velvet column dress. "A cigarette is non-negotiable."

Josh felt the familiar, chemical claw of nicotine addiction scratch at the back of his mind. He needed one too, a desperate urge that had embedded itself into his nervous system. "I will join you," Josh said, rising with a calculated slowness, letting the puffy calfskin of his wrap settle around his cinched waist.

"You go ahead, Ms. Von Hollenberg," Charlotte said smoothly, already tapping at her phone. "I need to make a quick call to the European office. I will meet you back here before the second act."

Josh gave his sister a dismissive, glacial nod—perfectly in character—and followed the two socialites out of the box.

Navigating the crowded corridors of the Metropolitan Opera in five-inch stilettos and a skirt that hobbled his stride was a perilous ballet. They made their way to a designated outdoor terrace, the chill of the New York night biting at Josh’s face, though his frozen forehead registered none of the cold.

He unclasped his envelope purse with his bright orange, leather-gloved hands. He reached inside and pulled out the gleaming golden case, popping it open with the tip of his gel extension nail that was inside the glove.

As he pulled out a pristine, six-and-a-half-inch Nat Sherman 164, he glanced over at the other two women.

Cordelia and Serena had both produced cigarette cases. In unison, they drew out the exact same absurdly long, pure white cigarettes.

Josh froze for a fraction of a second. He had assumed Verena forced these upon him as a specific quirk of Claudia's aesthetic.

"Ah, you smoke them as well!" Cordelia beamed, bringing a gold lighter to the tip of her cigarette. "We should have known Verena's cousin would have impeccable taste."

"In Retroville, the Nat Sherman 164 is practically mandatory for a woman of status," Serena explained, taking a long, elegant drag. She exhaled a thick plume of smoke into the crisp air, her face twisting into a scowl as she looked around the small, designated smoking terrace. "Just look at us. Huddled outside in the cold like delinquents. It is barbaric. These modern smoking laws are utterly stifling."

"It is an indignity," Josh agreed, lighting his own cigarette. The nicotine hit his system instantly, a warm flush of relief that he hated himself for craving. He leaned back against the stone balustrade, posing the massive leather wrap to catch the ambient light. "One should not be exiled for practicing elegance."

"Precisely!" Cordelia cried, taking a frantic drag. "That is the absolute beauty of Retroville, Claudia. Beatrice Cash reintroduced the glamor of smoking everywhere. You can smoke at the roulette table, in the boutiques, at dinner... it is a sanctuary from this puritanical modern nonsense. But tell us, Verena was terribly vague. Why is the heir to Von Hollenberg Exotics abandoning Europe for our little neon paradise?"

The trap was set. Josh took another deep drag, letting the smoke curl in his lungs while he shoved the screaming vegan skater boy deeper into the dark recesses of his mind. He was Claudia now. He had to sell the slaughter. He had to revel in it.

"Europe has become tiresome," Josh drawled, his voice a low, modulated purr of absolute arrogance. "They are becoming far too concerned with... ethics. As if beauty should ever have to apologize for its origins. Verena and I recognized that Retroville is the last true bastion of unbridled luxury. We are expanding the Exotics line. I am bringing the Russian sable, the chinchilla, the crocodile. The women of Retroville understand that a garment should not merely drape; it should conquer."

Serena's eyes widened with pure, unadulterated admiration. "Oh, you are going to be an absolute terror, Claudia. I adore it. You will have the city eating out of your orange-gloved palm."

"Retroville was built for women like us," Cordelia gushed, leaning in close, smelling of mint and tobacco. "It is a perpetual celebration of excess. There are galas every weekend, the boutiques are staggering, and the common residents... oh, my dear, they worship us. They

look at the socialites as if we are royalty. You will have an army of admirers before you even unpack your trunks."

"It sounds like a fitting stage," Josh said, exhaling a long, thin stream of smoke through his swollen, brick-red lips. He looked at the two women, projecting an aura of bored supremacy, acting as if the thought of being worshipped by citizens in an isolated, hyper-consumerist town was his birthright. "I demand an environment that matches my wardrobe. If a city cannot offer me absolute, unrestrained opulence, it is entirely useless to me."

"You belong with us," Serena declared, crushing out the stub of her Nat Sherman. "You are exactly the kind of unapologetic force Retroville thrives on."

Josh smiled—a tight, terrifying smirk that only moved the lower half of his heavily Botoxed face. Internally, he was drowning in a sea of self-loathing, sickened by how easily the venom slipped from his tongue. But externally, swathed in Dior leather and platinum hair, Claudia had appeared to be among her peers.

Charlotte didn't have a phone call to make. It was all just an excuse for her to be able to do her real job. She stood just inside the heavy, brass-handled glass doors of the Metropolitan Opera's smoking terrace, half-hidden by a sweeping velvet drape. Her phone was in her hand, the screen dark, as she watched the performance unfolding outside in the crisp New York night. Verena had given her one specific directive before they left the penthouse: *Leave her alone with them. Let her swim. I need to know if the creature we built can survive the sharks without a handler.*

And my god, the creature was doing more than surviving. He was leading the school.

Charlotte pressed her manicured fingers to her lips to stifle a genuine, wicked laugh. Through the glass, the scene was a masterpiece of tragic irony. There stood her younger brother—Josh Braun, the twenty-year-old skater boy who used to lecture their parents about carbon footprints, the vegan who once chained himself to a fence to protest a local meat-packing plant. Now, he was swathed in a massive, puffy brown leather wrap that looked like a slaughtered, deflated blimp, puffing on a long all-white Nat Sherman 164 cigarette, and holding court with two of Manhattan’s wealthiest socialites.



It was a surreal tableau. To any casual observer wandering onto the terrace, it was simply three aging, obscenely rich women catching up on the latest high-society gossip over tobacco. But Charlotte possessed the director’s eye. She could see the subtle, magnificent differences.

Cordelia and Serena were undoubtedly creatures of extreme wealth and vanity, but their cosmetic interventions were rooted in a modern sensibility. Their lifts were graceful, their fillers expertly blended to mimic the plumpness of a youth long passed. They wanted to look naturally preserved.

Josh, however, had been engineered for the specific aesthetic of their final destination. His face was a weapon of mass ostentation and under the dim, romantic lighting of the terrace, the sheer aggression of Dr. Blue’s work was impossible to ignore. His cheekbones were pulled impossibly high by the thick threads beneath the skin, creating a severe, predatory hollow beneath them. His forehead was a smooth, frozen expanse of Botox that refused to wrinkle even when he feigned shock or amusement. And his lips—heavy, injected, painted a glistening brick red—commanded the lower half of his face like a swollen, permanent pout. He didn't look natural. He looked expensive. He looked like a woman who demanded you notice how much money she had spent to halt the march of time.

He was the undeniable focal point of the trio. The massive platinum beehive scraped the night sky, making him tower over the other two women. The Dior silhouette, the bright orange gloves, the sheer volume of animal skin draped across his surgically altered frame—he made Cordelia and Serena look almost pedestrian by comparison. His fashion showcased the array of extravagant and over-the-top clothing choices typical of the period.

Charlotte watched as Serena said something, gesturing with her own long white cigarette. Josh reacted. He threw his head back—carefully, guarding the structural integrity of the hairspray—and let out a laugh.

It was a horrifying, perfect piece of acting. Because of the paralyzing toxins in his upper face and the heavy filler in his lips, the laugh was physically constrained. It was a tight, breathy, mechanical sound, a rich chuckle that didn't reach his fox-slanted eyes. It was the exact laugh of a miserable, bored European divorcee.

Charlotte knew the truth. She knew that beneath the corset, beneath the heavy silicone breastplate and the seamless, numbing tuck between his legs, her brother was screaming. Every drag of that cigarette was a surrender to a chemical addiction forced upon him. Every word about the supremacy of the Von Hollenberg fur empire was a betrayal of his deepest moral convictions. He was living an agonizing, claustrophobic nightmare, trapped inside a synthetic shell that he despised.

But watching him dominate the conversation, watching him flick the ash of his cigarette with those long, gloved fingers, Charlotte felt a profound sense of satisfaction. The boy who had broken the priceless Memphis Group vase, the self-righteous skater who always thought he was better than the superficial world, had been entirely consumed by it.

He wasn't just surviving the role of Claudia von Hollenberg; he was perfecting it. As Josh took another elegant drag, blowing the smoke directly into the freezing Manhattan air with an air of absolute, aristocratic boredom, Charlotte smiled. In her eyes, there was no tragedy here. Only a sublime correction. This world of plastic faces, dead skins, and suffocating opulence was the perfect spot for him. And in Retroville, there would be no escaping it.