

Frustratingly Fancy

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

Chapter 1: All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go

Saturdays were supposed to be sacred. Lazy mornings, cereal straight out of the box, and no responsibilities bigger than figuring out what to watch next on her phone. But for fifteen-year-old Lila Halpern, Saturdays were *performance days*.

She stood stiffly in the middle of her bedroom, arms hanging awkwardly at her sides as her mother tugged the zipper up the back of the powder-blue culotte dress. The satin bodice crinkled under her shoulder blades as she winced. The garment flared into stiff pleats below the waist, hiding a built-in romper that Lila always described (privately) as “Victorian gym bloomers.”

“There,” her mother said with a pleased sigh, smoothing the frilly cap sleeves like she was polishing fine china. “Doesn’t that look so nice?”

Lila stared at herself in the mirror. “I look like I’m about to host a garden party for porcelain dolls.”

“Nonsense. You look *lovely*.” Her mother stood back, arms folded, clearly admiring her own handiwork. “It’s important to be prepared. You never know who might drop by.”

Lila flopped onto the edge of her bed, careful not to wrinkle the skirt. “No one’s coming. It’s Saturday. We’re literally staying home.”

Her mother pursed her lips. “That’s no reason to look like a slob.”

“I have pajamas that are fancier than most people’s outfits,” Lila muttered under her breath. Not that it mattered. Her mother didn’t believe in “comfy clothes,” not even for a day spent vacuuming the baseboards and reorganizing books by color. Especially not then.

What bothered Lila most wasn’t the scratchy lace at her collarbone, or even the weird pressure of bloomers snapping in places bloomers should *not* be snapping. It was the *zipper*. Always in the back. Always too high. Always impossible to reach on her own.

Every. Single. Weekend.

She’d already made the mistake of chugging a big glass of lemonade after lunch last Saturday and had to stand outside the bathroom for



fifteen minutes waiting for her mother to come unbutton her. That memory still made her cheeks burn.

"I can't even go to the bathroom without help," she grumbled, not for the first time.

"Well," her mother said with maddening cheer, "then I suppose you'll have to let me know ahead of time, won't you?"

"Yeah. Because *that's* how bladders work."

There was a long pause. Her mother began picking invisible lint off her cardigan. "I just think a young lady ought to be accustomed to a certain level of decorum," she said finally. "It's good training. For when you're older."

"Older than what? Amish?"

Her mother's expression tightened, and Lila instantly regretted the line. Not because she was wrong—she *wasn't*—but because she knew how the game worked. Sarcasm got her nowhere.

She stood up again, letting out a long sigh as she adjusted the stiff pleats. "Okay. I'm dressed. Can I go now?"

Her mother nodded approvingly. "Don't forget to walk properly in it. No slouching. Ankles together. You're a picture."

Lila walked out of the room, ankles deliberately *not* together, feeling like a disgruntled museum exhibit.

Downstairs, the living room was empty. The TV was off. The clock ticked loudly in the silence. She dropped onto the couch, making the satin poof up around her like a cupcake wrapper, and stared at the ceiling.

Maybe this was it. Maybe this was just how her weekends would always be: trapped in a rotation of impractical garments, waiting for an imaginary guest list to show up unannounced.

She folded her arms, pouting.

One of these days, she swore, she was going to learn how to *pick a zipper lock with a pencil*.

Chapter 2: Party Tricks and Close Calls

The next Saturday, Lila was woken by the rustle of fabric and the distinct scent of lavender spray. Her mom was already in her room, laying out a seafoam-green romper dress with puffed sleeves and a flouncy hem that hovered awkwardly around mid-thigh.

"Rise and shine, sweetheart," her mother said, far too chipper for 8:12 a.m. "We're going to the Vincents' garden party this afternoon."

Lila blinked blearily. "Why? I've met Mrs. Vincent exactly once, and she said my name wrong."

"Well, she and her daughter have invited half the neighborhood. And it's good manners to accept invitations when you receive them."

Lila groaned. "Let me guess. This one zips in the back too?"

"Of course," her mom said, already fluffing the skirt. "It's elegant."

"Elegant," Lila repeated under her breath, "like a medieval torture device."

Two hours later, Lila found herself stepping cautiously across the perfectly trimmed lawn of the Vincents' backyard, her strappy sandals catching on every uneven bit of turf. A string quartet played in the corner under a tent, and a table near the patio held small sandwiches stacked like edible Jenga blocks.

Most of the other teens there wore khakis or sundresses. Casual. Functional. Meanwhile, Lila's romper dress had decorative bows at the shoulders that served no purpose except to trap her arms every time she tried to lift them.

She'd barely been there half an hour when she realized she'd made a critical mistake: the lemonade. Again.

She scanned the crowd. Her mother was somewhere, floating from grown-up to grown-up, complimenting hedges or appetizers or something equally unimportant.

Lila clenched her hands at her sides. No way was she asking a stranger for help. Not after last time. And definitely not in front of people.

She found her mom near the dessert table, smiling tightly while discussing "good posture" with a woman who looked like she ironed her dog.

"Mom," Lila whispered urgently, trying not to draw attention.

Her mother gave her a quick glance. "Yes, sweetheart?"

"I need you to unzip me. Right now. Bathroom."

Her mom blinked. "Lila, can it wait? We're just about to—"

"No, Mom. Now." Her whisper was shrill enough that two ladies stopped mid-cookie.

With a sigh, her mother offered a polite nod to her companions and steered Lila toward the house.

The guest bathroom was inside, just off the hallway. The moment the door closed behind them, Lila turned her back. "Please. Fast."

Her mother unzipped the back in a practiced motion, muttering, "You really should plan ahead for these things."

"It's not like I can schedule my kidneys."

The second she was free, Lila darted into the stall, managing to keep the bloomers from bunching and the hem from touching the floor. She hated that this had become her new skill set.

When she finally stepped back out and zipped up again with her mother's help, she sighed.

"I'm going to build a robot to do this one day."



"You're being dramatic," her mother said, adjusting the bow on Lila's shoulder. "You're beautiful. You should want to look nice."

"I *would* like to look nice," Lila said, "if it didn't mean surrendering bladder autonomy."

Back outside, Lila made a beeline for the refreshment table—but stopped when she nearly collided with someone standing just to the side.

"Whoa! Sorry," the boy said, catching the edge of the folding table before it wobbled.

Lila took a step back and blinked. He looked a little older—maybe sixteen—tall, with dark curls and an apologetic grin. He wore a short-sleeved button-down and jeans. *Jeans*. She wanted to cry.

"No, my bad," she said. "I was lemonade-hunting. Again. Which, now that I think about it, is a terrible idea."

He laughed. "Bold choice. Especially with all those layers you've got going on."

Lila raised an eyebrow. "You noticed?"

"It's hard *not* to notice a dress with its own architecture."

That earned a reluctant smile from her. "Well, at least you didn't say 'you look like a cupcake.'"

"I wouldn't," he said seriously. "Cupcakes don't walk around looking annoyed and dangerously close to throwing a croissant."

Lila let out a laugh, the kind that surprised her. "I'm Lila."

"Eli. My mom knows the Vincents. I got dragged here."

"Same," she said, eyeing his outfit. "Except your mom lets you wear pants."

"Yeah, she's wild like that."

They chatted for the next twenty minutes, hovering near the dessert table. Eli was funny, smart, and didn't once make fun of her outfit beyond the initial joke—which, honestly, she respected. When his mom waved him over, he handed her a folded napkin.

"Just in case," he said, and winked.

Inside the napkin was his number.

Lila blinked down at it, then glanced back at her mother, who was once again deep in conversation and probably talking about something with ruffles.

Maybe the dress wasn't worth it. But the number?

That *definitely* was.

Chapter 3: Balloons, Cake, and a Crisis

"I don't even *know* this kid," Lila grumbled as she stepped over a stray scooter in the Hallowsays' backyard. "I don't even *like* cake that much."

Her mother didn't slow her purposeful walk toward the folding chairs set up near the bounce house. "It's polite to show up when invited. And I told Mrs. Hallaway we would come."

"It's a six-year-old's birthday. She's not going to notice who RSVP'd."

"She might *not*, but her mother will. Now, go play nice. And don't wrinkle your romper."

Lila scowled down at her outfit. It was yellow this time, covered in white daisies with flutter sleeves and gold trim at the waist. Cute, in theory. But of course, it had the signature Halpern design flaw: the zipper in the back and the ever-present attached bloomers. Just enough hassle to make her consider swearing off liquids entirely.

She drifted toward the drink table, where Eli was leaning against a cooler, sipping from a juice box like he'd just made peace with the chaos around him.

"Well, if it isn't the most overdressed guest under five feet tall," he said, grinning.

"Funny," Lila said. "Remind me to return the favor next time *you're* stuck in a romper designed by someone who hates mobility."

He looked her over dramatically. "Okay, it *is* aggressively adorable. Like, you could be the final boss of a dollhouse."



She rolled her eyes but smiled. "What are you even doing here?"

"My little cousin's the birthday girl. My mom forced me into service. I've already lost at musical chairs and been hit with two water balloons."

"Heroic," Lila said, offering a mock-salute with her juice box.

But ten minutes later, the juice started to make its presence known. A slow, unwelcome pressure. She tensed, scanning the yard. The house was busy—adults chatting inside, kids stampeding between the trampoline and the face-painting table. She spotted the bathroom door across the kitchen. One problem: her mother was nowhere to be seen.

Lila started walking toward the house, trying not to panic. She peeked inside—no sign of her mom. She wandered down the hallway, checked the porch, peeked near the gift table.

Nothing.

"Of course," she muttered. "Nowhere when I need her."

Her back was starting to ache from the pressure. She crossed her arms and tried to breathe slowly, willing her body to buy her just five more minutes. No dice. The zipper on her romper may as well have been made of solid iron—she couldn't reach it on her own no matter how much she twisted.

She turned a corner too quickly and nearly bumped into Eli again.

"You okay?" he asked immediately.

"Yeah. Fine. Totally fine. Except I can't find my mom and I kind of need..." She paused, her voice lowering. "The bathroom."

"Oh." His expression shifted, serious now. "The whole... zipper thing again?"

She nodded, teeth clenched.

There was an awkward pause. Then, carefully, Eli said, "I can help. I mean—only if you want. I'll look away. Promise. But if it's that or emergency-level embarrassment..."

Lila opened her mouth to say "no," out of habit. But something stopped her. The situation was already mortifying. But he wasn't making fun of her. He was being kind. Respectful. And honestly, she was out of options.

"...Okay," she said quietly.

She led him to the side door, away from the crowd, and into the quiet hallway that led to the guest bathroom. She turned around and pulled her hair over one shoulder.

Eli reached up, slowly. "Just the zipper, right?"

"Just the zipper," she said, heartbeat thudding.

His fingers were warm as they brushed the base of her neck. She felt the cool air as the romper loosened and slid slightly. She held it closed in front as she backed into the bathroom.

"Wait here?" she said, cheeks burning.

He nodded and leaned casually against the wall, hands in his pockets.

A minute later, she emerged, holding the romper awkwardly closed in front. "Um..."

"Got it." He stepped behind her again, this time a little closer. "Ready?"

She nodded.

The zipper climbed her back with a quiet *zzzzip*, and when it clicked into place at the top, she shivered—just a little. Not because of the cold, but because for the first time, someone besides her mother had done that. And it hadn't been humiliating. It had felt... different.

"You're good," Eli said, stepping back and giving her space. "Still locked in the romper zone."

She turned, smiling despite herself. "Thanks."

"No problem. Just promise me one thing?"

"What?"

"If we ever rob a bank together, you *have* to wear that outfit."

She laughed—really laughed. "You're the worst."

"You say that," he said, grinning, "but you *keep showing up dressed like my favorite tea party bodyguard."

Lila smiled all the way back to the party. Something had shifted. The romper still annoyed her, and the zipper was still a problem. But suddenly, the idea of needing help didn't seem so terrible... at least when it came from the right person.

Chapter 4: Romper Rules and Breaking Them

Sunday morning came with the usual scent of starch and lavender. Lila sat on the edge of her bed in yet another outfit her mother had picked — this one a navy-blue culotte dress with pearl buttons (non-functional, of course), a scalloped white collar, and the telltale zipper in the back. She stared at her reflection, tugging at the skirt.

She looked... tidy. Sweet. Exactly like someone else's idea of "a young lady."

But after yesterday's party—and after Eli—she wasn't sure she wanted to look like that anymore.

Her phone buzzed. A text.

Eli: "Are you free later? I'm going to that retro arcade downtown. Vintage games, no dress code, just loud music and pizza."

Lila stared at it, thumb hovering over the screen.

Eli: "You can even wear real pants. I'll allow it."

A laugh escaped her before she could stop it. But reality hit fast: she couldn't go anywhere without her mother's approval—and if she did, it wouldn't be in "real pants."

Downstairs, she found her mom arranging a tray of lemon scones, as if a royal ambassador might drop by at any moment.

"Mom?" Lila started carefully.

"Yes?" Her mother didn't look up.

"Could I hang out with a friend this afternoon? He invited me to this arcade thing. It's low-key. Just games and pizza."

That *he* slipped out before she could stop it.

Her mother's brows lifted. "A boy?"

Lila hesitated. "Yeah. His name's Eli. He's... nice."

Her mom smoothed the edge of a napkin. "Do his parents know where he's going?"

"Probably? I mean, it's not like we're sneaking out to Vegas."

She got The Look. Disapproval with just a pinch of worry.

"You can go," her mother said at last, "but you're not leaving this house looking like a street urchin. Let's get you changed into the green gingham romper. The one with the sash."

Lila's stomach sank. She nodded and trudged back upstairs, but every step felt heavier.

Half an hour later, she met Eli by the front gates of the arcade, the hem of the green romper fluttering slightly in the breeze. Her sash was tied tight, her bloomers snapping in place, and her back zipped to perfection—courtesy of her mom, who'd reminded her, as always, that "presentation matters."

Eli's eyes widened when he saw her. "You weren't kidding about the outfit quota."

"I tried," she muttered. "This was my compromise."

He smirked. "You realize you're probably the only person here with matching bloomers."

"I'm *definitely* the only one who can't use the bathroom without assistance."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm certified in emergency unzipping now."

They went inside. The arcade was chaos: flashing lights, clinking coins, eighties synth music blaring over old speakers. Lila felt her pulse loosen, her smile ease into something real. She was overdressed for sure, but for once, she wasn't being watched. No one cared.

They played a round of air hockey (Lila won), then two-player Pac-Man (Eli dominated). She was laughing so hard by the third game that she nearly forgot what she was wearing—until, inevitably, the soda caught up with her.

She paused, glanced around. "Okay. It's happening again."

Eli looked up from his joystick. "Bathroom?"

She nodded, flushing.

He didn't make a joke this time. Just stood up and nodded for her to follow.

The family restroom near the back was mostly empty. When they slipped inside, Lila stood still for a moment, then turned her back to him silently.

The zipper moved more slowly this time.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah. Just... weird."

"Weird bad?"

"Weird *complicated*."

She slipped inside the stall, did what she had to, then emerged again, clutching the romper in front.

He helped her back in, hands steady, not rushed.

When the zipper clicked into place, it felt final—like the closing of a box, or the sealing of a letter she hadn't finished writing. She exhaled, but didn't move.

"You ever wonder," she said, not turning around, "if we wear the things other people pick for us for so long... that we forget what we'd actually choose?"

Eli was quiet for a moment. Then: "Only every day."

She turned, and he looked at her—not at the outfit, not at the zipper. At *her*.

"I don't mind helping you with it," he said. "But I'd kind of like to see what you'd wear if no one was watching."

Her heart skipped.

She smiled. "Me too."

Chapter 5: Buttons, Boundaries, and a Little Defiance

By the time the next Saturday rolled around, Lila had a plan. Not a full-blown rebellion—she wasn't brave enough for that yet—but a *test*. A toe dipped in the cold water of independence.

She opened her closet and stared at the battalion of pastel-colored outfits hanging in perfect formation. Rompers, culotte dresses, sailor-collared jumpers, pinafores with starched underskirts. Every one of them designed with built-in bloomers or shorts, and all but two zipped or buttoned up the back like tiny fashion prisons.

She reached past the usual rotation and picked out one of the older ones—an ivory culotte jumper with thick shoulder straps and oversized buttons down the back. It was fussy, but manageable. With enough arm-straining and mirror-angling, she could *just* get the last button on her own.

That morning at breakfast, her mother gave her a once-over. "Hmm. That one's a little plain, don't you think?"

"It's hot today," Lila said, spooning yogurt into her bowl. "This one breathes better."

Her mother gave a noncommittal hum but didn't argue. Small victory.

She'd just started to enjoy the rare feeling of freedom when her phone pinged.

Eli: "Want to help me pick out records at the flea market? Warning: I'm judging your taste."

She didn't hesitate this time.

Lila: "Bring it. I'll judge your judging."



The flea market was buzzing with mismatched umbrellas, sizzling food trucks, and rows of vinyl records that smelled like old books and summer dust. Lila walked beside Eli with a spring in her step, proud of herself for managing the outfit solo.

"You look... less museum-curated today," he said, flicking the strap of her jumper.

"I buttoned myself," she said proudly.

"A triumph."

She smiled. "There are two that don't require assistance. This is one. You're looking at the *least impractical* of the collection."

"Next time you should come in jeans. Really shake the foundations."

Lila made a face. "My mom would probably call the principal and ask if I've joined a cult."

They flipped through records for a while—Eli picked out obscure jazz and Lila picked disco purely to annoy him. After some fried dumplings and a long walk through the antique booths, the inevitable happened again. The juice. The soda. The gentle but undeniable nudge from her bladder.

She closed her eyes. "Ugh. Again."

Eli looked up. "Need backup?"

She shook her head. "I got this one. It's buttons, remember?"

He raised an eyebrow. "All of them?"

"Well... all but the top one. It's a bit of a yoga pose, but I've done it before."

Inside the market's tiny restroom, she faced the mirror, arms bent backwards at angles no spine should accommodate. The buttons resisted. One popped open. Two. Three.

She was almost there when the final one—stubborn and set just under the neckline—refused to budge.

"Of course," she muttered, stretching until her shoulder muscles started to burn.

Finally, she sighed and cracked the door open a sliver.

"Eli?"

He was right there. "Yeah?"

"Okay. I might need just a *little* backup."

Without comment, he stepped in, turned her gently, and slipped the last button free with a casual ease that felt oddly... intimate.

She handled the rest and came back out, cheeks a little flushed, holding the front of her jumper shut. He was already leaning casually against the sink, eyes on the cracked ceiling, giving her space.

When she stepped up to him again, he reached behind her without asking and began fastening the buttons, slow and careful.

As he slipped the final one into place, she felt it again—that low flicker in her stomach. Not just nerves, not just embarrassment.

But something thrilling. Something new. The buttons, one by one, made the experience more intense.

She turned slowly. "You're getting *really* good at this."

He grinned. "I'll add 'emergency outfit technician' to my résumé."

They left the flea market laughing, shoulders brushing.

Back home, her mother was in the garden. “That jumper looks nice on you,” she called out, watering the hydrangeas. “Good choice. But next time, pick something with a little more detail.”

Lila glanced down at the plain front of her outfit, fingers brushing the back buttons.

“I think I’m good,” she said lightly, walking past.

She wasn’t ready to throw out the whole wardrobe—not yet. But she was learning which outfits she could manage, which ones gave her just enough autonomy to feel like *herself*.

And she had a feeling that next time, she might just push it a little further.

Chapter 6: Ribbons, Routines, and Red Flags

By the following Saturday, Lila thought she had it down to a science. She knew which outfits could be twisted, shrugged, or elbow-wrenched into submission. The jumper with the thick back buttons. The culotte dress with the stretchy panel and hidden snaps. She even practiced a new trick in the mirror—leaning halfway onto her desk chair and using the corner to brace the zipper.

She’d started calling it her “escape training.”

But habits, especially unusual ones, are hard to hide for long in a house where routine was everything.

Her mother was in the laundry room that morning, ironing the sash of a lemon-printed romper when she called out, “Sweetheart, I noticed you didn’t ask for help with your outfit last weekend.”

Lila froze on the stairs.

“Oh. Yeah. I wore the jumper. The one I can do myself.”

There was a beat of silence, then a response that was much too casual.

“Mm. That’s twice in a row, isn’t it?”

Lila came the rest of the way down, trying not to look like she was walking into a courtroom.

“I guess I just like being able to manage it. Less trouble.”

Her mother looked up, her expression polite, but measuring.

“You’ve always said you didn’t mind needing help. That it gave us a little moment together.”

Lila hesitated. “I just don’t *want* to always need help. That’s all. Not for something that’s supposed to be mine.”

Her mom folded the sash neatly. “It’s not just about practicality, Lila. It’s about learning to present yourself with care. With grace.”

“You can do that *and* zip your own clothes,” Lila muttered.

Her mother looked up sharply. “Excuse me?”

Lila swallowed. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just... I think maybe I’d like to pick some of my own stuff sometimes. Things I like *and* can put on without needing an assistant.”

Her mother smiled thinly. "When you're grown and buying your own wardrobe, you can wear whatever makes you happy. Until then, I expect you to look like the young woman I'm raising you to be."

Lila's jaw clenched. "Right. Of course."

She turned and walked to the front door, pausing only to grab her small crossbody purse. No outfit suggestion had been offered, so she'd pre-dressed in a culotte playsuit with a half-button back and a tie belt. She'd closed it herself—barely—and wasn't about to undo it now.

As she reached for the handle, her mother added, "By the way, you've been spending quite a bit of time with that boy. Eli, is it?"

Lila froze again. Slowly turned.

"Yeah. He's a friend."

"Friends can be good," her mother said, folding the lemon-printed romper with precision. "As long as they understand your values."

Lila didn't answer. She opened the door, stepped outside, and let it close with a quiet click behind her.

Eli was waiting for her by the park benches, sipping something from a paper cup. "Hey. You look tense."

"She's starting to notice," Lila muttered, dropping beside him.

"Your zip-and-go rebellion?"

"She called it a 'moment together.' Like some kind of bonding ritual." She tugged on her sleeve. "I think she suspects you're involved, too."

Eli raised his eyebrows. "What gave it away? The fact that I know more about the back of your outfits than your tailor?"

Lila chuckled. Then sobered. "If she finds out you've helped me... I don't know. She'd lose it."

Eli looked at her, serious now. "So what do you want to do?"

She stared at the path ahead. Joggers passed. A golden retriever barked happily at a squirrel.

"I want to choose. Just once. Something I like. Something I can *own*. Without having to ask permission to go to the bathroom."

Eli didn't say anything for a long time.

Then, slowly, he reached into his backpack and pulled out a folded paper bag. "I found this at the thrift store. No zippers. No bloomers. And I thought of you."

Lila opened it—and gasped. It was a soft cotton dress, simple, navy blue with white trim, and—miracle of miracles—a *front row of buttons*.

She looked up at him, wide-eyed.

"I don't know if it's your style," he said quickly. "But I figured if you ever wanted to try something that's just *yours*..."

Her throat tightened. She nodded once, tucking the bag into her own purse like it was contraband.

"I'll have to sneak it out," she whispered. "She checks the laundry."

Eli grinned. "Operation: Button Front is a go."

And for the first time all week, Lila felt like she could breathe again.

Chapter 7: Facing Forward

It was a Wednesday afternoon when Lila finally worked up the nerve.

She told her mom she was meeting Eli at the library—safe, structured, supervised. Her mother approved the plan, handed her a lavender-colored culotte dress with scalloped bloomers and a dozen satin-covered buttons up the back.

Lila took it with a nod, carried it upstairs... and stuffed it into her backpack.

Beneath her hoodie, already slipped on and hidden, was *her dress*. The one Eli had given her in the thrift store bag: soft navy cotton with a row of white buttons *in the front*. The collar was plain, the hem hit just above the knee, and there wasn't a stitch of lace, sash, or built-in bloomers anywhere.

It felt like contraband. Like a small act of war.

By the time she ducked out of the house and slipped around the corner to Eli's place—where she changed properly in his front hallway bathroom—her hands were shaking.

She stepped out into the sunlight a few minutes later, arms crossed self-consciously.

Eli looked up from his bike. Then gave a low whistle. "Whoa. Is that..."

"Yep."

"It buttons in the front."

"Yep."

"You look..." He paused, not teasing this time. "Different. But good different."

"Yeah?" she said, shifting awkwardly.

Eli leaned his bike against the fence and studied her. "You okay?"

"I don't know," Lila admitted. "It feels... weird."

"Like wrong?"

"Not wrong." She stared down at the buttons, fingers grazing the top one. "Just... exposed. Like I forgot to put armor on."

They walked slowly toward the town square, and Lila couldn't stop tugging at the hem, adjusting the collar. She felt every breeze on the backs of her legs. Without the heavy pleats and inner bloomers, she felt light—but also uncertain. Unanchored. Exposed.

She looked over at Eli. "Is it crazy that I kind of miss the zipper?"

Eli blinked. "The zipper that traps you like a butterfly in a jar?"

"Yeah, but... I don't know. I'm *used* to it. The whole process—having to ask for help, someone zipping me up, locking it in—it made the outfit feel... finished. Like I couldn't undo it, so I didn't have to second-guess myself. Like it made me someone."

She paused, and her voice got quieter.

"And when you helped me with it... I don't know. It made me feel safe."

Eli stopped walking. "Lila, I didn't help you with it to make you feel *stuck*. I helped because I figured that was the only way to give you a little freedom."

She nodded quickly. "I know. I know. And this—" she gestured down at herself "*—is* freedom. It's just... naked feeling."

Eli was quiet for a beat, then offered, "You want to button the back next time? I'll sew a fake panel in. Restore the illusion."

Lila snorted. "Don't tempt me."

They reached the edge of the square and found a bench. As they sat, a little breeze fluttered her dress—not stiffened with starch, not held down by petticoats—and she had to stop herself from instinctively smoothing it like her mother always drilled into her.

She looked at Eli again. "Do you think it's always going to feel like this? Trying to be your own person, but kind of missing the trap?"

Eli leaned back, hands behind his head. "Probably. But the more you do it, the less scary it gets. Maybe it even stops feeling like a trap one day."

"Maybe."

She toyed with one of the front buttons.

"I still kind of want you to zip me in sometimes, though," she said suddenly. "Not because I can't. Just... because I want to."

Eli smiled. "I can work with that."

They sat there a while longer, the sunlight warm, the dress soft, the silence full of understanding.

Chapter 8: The Key to Control

The invitation was simple.

A text from Eli:

"Movie at my place? My mom's making pizza. You in?"

Lila's heart leapt as she read it. No dress code. No expectations. Just Eli, movies, and real food. It was everything she wanted.

But when she told her mother at the kitchen table, spooning sugar into tea with deliberate calm, the reaction was... calculated.

"Just the two of you?" her mother asked, not looking up.

"No. His mom will be there. It's not some secret date."

"I'm sure it isn't." She stirred. Clunk, clunk, clunk. "Still, you're a young woman. People notice things. Appearances matter."

Lila braced herself.

"I think you should wear the robin's-egg romper," her mother said lightly. "The one with the pleated front and the snap bloomers."

"No zipper?" Lila asked, already wary.

Her mother gave a smile. "It *does* zip. But I had the seamstress add a small... safeguard."

"Safeguard?"

"A discreet little lock at the top. Just for modesty's sake. Can't be too careful with these new boys, can we?"

Lila's jaw dropped. "You've *locked* my romper?"

"It's removable," her mother said, rising to fetch a small white envelope from the counter. She tapped it twice before handing it over. "This contains the key. I'll call Eli's mother to let her know you're wearing something delicate. If you need the bathroom, she can help."

"You're giving the key to his mother?" Lila's voice went shrill.

"Don't be dramatic, Lila. It's not punishment. It's protection. I *trust* you. But trust goes hand-in-hand with responsibility."

Lila gritted her teeth. "And bathroom dependency."

Her mother ignored the comment. "Now go get changed, please. And remember to thank Eli's mother when she helps you. Gratitude is grace."



Twenty minutes later, Lila sat in the passenger seat of her mother's car, arms folded tightly. The robin's-egg romper looked harmless enough—pretty, with its soft pleats and pearl trim—but she could *feel* the small lock digging into the nape of her neck like a collar. The bloomers snapped snugly underneath, trapping her in like always. Only now, she didn't even have Eli to rely on.

As they pulled up outside Eli's house, her mother rolled down the window and waved. "You look lovely," she said softly. "Have a good time."

Lila stepped out wordlessly, clutching the envelope like a hostage note.

Eli met her on the porch. "You okay?"

"Ask me again after I explain what's happening," she muttered.

Inside, the house smelled like garlic bread and melted cheese. Eli's mom greeted Lila warmly, then her smile faltered as she noticed the envelope in Lila's hand.

"Oh! Your mom called about... the outfit." She looked uncertain, taking the envelope. "She said it's a bit complicated."

Lila managed a strained smile. "That's one word for it."

Eli caught on fast. "What did she *do*?"

"She locked it."

"She *what*?"

"Yep." Lila tugged lightly at the back of her neck. "Tiny little padlock. No access unless someone with the key opens it."

Eli looked horrified. "That's—are you okay with that?"

"No. But short of crawling out a window in my pajamas, this was the only way she'd let me come."

Eli's mom looked apologetic. "If you need me to unlock you, just let me know, honey."

Lila nodded, mortified. "Thanks."

They watched the movie on the couch—an old comedy neither of them paid attention to. Eli offered her extra cheese. Lila declined all drinks. She didn't trust her bladder under lockdown.

About halfway through, Eli leaned over. "I've seen horror movies with less tension."

She managed a laugh, but it caught in her throat.

He lowered his voice. "It's messed up. I could never do that to you. Not even for a joke."

"I know," she said. "Which is why I feel even *worse* that she thinks you would."

Eli was quiet for a second. "You want me to sneak the key?"

"No." Lila exhaled slowly. "I don't want to lie. I just want her to trust me enough not to treat my body like it's under permanent surveillance."

Eli nodded. "So... what do we do?"

Lila looked down at the soft pleats on her lap. "We watch the movie. I hold my soda like it's radioactive. And then maybe, when I get home..."

"Yeah?"

"...I stop being so polite about it."

Chapter 9: Stitching the Middle

It all came to a head the night she got home from Eli's.

Lila was quiet on the car ride back. Her mother didn't say much either. But the second the front door closed, the calm snapped like a pulled thread.

Her mother folded her arms, eyes cool. "Did Eli touch the zipper?"

Lila blinked. "What?"

"Did he ask to remove it? Did he try?"

"No! *God*, Mom—what do you think he *is*?"

"You came home flushed. You barely said goodnight. You acted like you were hiding something."

"Yeah," Lila snapped. "Because I was wearing a *locked romper* like a toddler at daycare!"

Her mother's expression hardened. "It was for your safety."

"No. It was for your *control*. Admit it." Lila's voice rose. "I couldn't go to the bathroom. I couldn't relax. You *trusted a near stranger* with the key to my own clothes more than you trusted *me*."

Silence bloomed like a bruise in the hallway.

"You've never done anything to lose my trust," her mother said softly, "but you're fifteen. And he's older. And polite doesn't mean harmless."

"I get that," Lila said, voice trembling now. "But you can't lock me up like a keepsake doll and pretend it's love."

Her mother didn't answer right away. Then she turned, walked to the kitchen, and returned with something clutched in her hand: the tiny padlock. She set it on the table. The click was final.

"I was scared," she admitted. "Not of *Eli*. Of losing... the version of you I can still protect."

Lila sat down too, hands in her lap. "I don't want to throw everything out. I actually... like a lot of the dresses. Some of them make me feel beautiful. Put-together."

Her mother looked up, surprised.

"I do," Lila said more softly. "But I want to *choose* when I wear them. And I want to unzip my own clothes when I have to pee."

Her mom laughed, then caught herself. "Fair."

They sat for a long moment, the tension cooling.

"So," Lila said cautiously, "compromise?"

Her mother nodded. "No more locks. We'll look for more outfits you can manage yourself. But—" she lifted a finger, "you still dress neatly when we're hosting or visiting. That won't change."

"Fine," Lila said. "But no built-in bloomers unless I *specifically request them*."

Her mom cracked a smile. "You've got a deal."

The next morning, Lila stood in front of her closet with fresh eyes.

She ran her hands along the familiar fabrics. She still loved the powder-blue satin. The seafoam with the bows. The ivory jumper, especially now that she could button it herself.

Maybe she wouldn't outgrow her wardrobe after all. Not completely. But it was no longer a collection of cages. It was a toolbox now—a costume rack. A gallery.

And she was finally the one choosing what to wear.

Epilogue: Choosing the Lock

It had been a few months since the row. Since the padlock. Since the yelling and the shaking and the hard, honest talks that followed.

Things were different now. Softer.

Lila stood in her room, holding a garment on a padded hanger: pale plum cotton with scalloped legs, subtle gold piping, and seven buttons lined up the back like a row of promises.

A romper. Old style. But new to *her*—picked from a vintage shop downtown. Chosen not for her mother's approval, but because it made her feel... deliberate.

She slipped it on slowly. The inner lining was silky. The back hung open.

Downstairs, she padded softly into the living room. Eli sat on the rug, flipping through a stack of old film books. He looked up when she stopped in front of him.

"Button me?" she asked quietly.

He grinned. "Always."

He rose and stood behind her, fingers warm and careful. One by one, he fastened the buttons, top to waist, pausing slightly at the last.

"You've been favoring the tricky ones lately," he said.

"I like needing your help," she murmured.

His arms brushed hers as he stepped around. "Is that dangerous?"

"Maybe." She smiled. "But chosen danger feels different."

They were heading to a big retro fair that evening. Her mom was volunteering. The outfits were meant to be "old-fashioned and proper." But it had been *Lila's* idea to go all-in.

Which is why, from her small bag, she now pulled a tiny lock. Gold-toned. Familiar. But different in meaning.

"I want you to use this tonight," she said. "Just for the party. Just for fun."

Eli raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"Yeah. It's not about her rules anymore. It's mine now."

He took it, gently, like it was something sacred.

As he clicked it into place at the nape of her neck, Lila felt no panic. No helplessness.

Only a warm, satisfying certainty.

She couldn't unzip herself. Couldn't leave without help. And she *liked* that. For this moment. For this night.

Because she had chosen it.

End.