

Megan's Curiosity Unleashed

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

Chapter 1: The Box in the Attic

The attic had always been a mystery to Megan. After her parents passed, she had dutifully sorted through the rest of the house, placing framed photographs back on the walls and re-folding blankets still scented faintly with her mother's perfume. But the attic remained largely untouched—a dusty vault of forgotten years and tightly taped boxes.

She hadn't meant to open that particular one. It had been pushed behind others, near a slanted corner of the attic where light barely reached, and it had a slight warp to the cardboard as if time had swelled it with secrets. Megan had been looking for the spare electric heater—it was always drafty in the guest room in late October. She pulled the box out mostly for space, intending to shove it aside, when the corner tore slightly and a glint of something red caught her eye.

Bright red. Leather. Straps and buckles. Her first thought: *Not mine. Definitely not mine.* She pushed it back and stood up, brushing the dust from her knees. The heater was behind the adjacent crate, after all, and soon she was clunking down the narrow stairs with it tucked under one arm, the mystery momentarily forgotten.

But something tugged at her thoughts all afternoon.

Megan lived a quiet life. At thirty-four, she had resigned herself to a pattern that felt more like gently falling snow than forward motion—soft, quiet, predictable. She worked remotely for a small publishing firm, editing technical manuals for industrial clients. Her days were a blur of jargon and commas. Her evenings were tea, old movies, and thrifted novels piled high on the armrest of a sagging armchair. It wasn't lonely, exactly. But it wasn't quite full either.

That evening, curiosity won. She returned to the attic with a flashlight and a steadying breath.

The box, once pulled open, exhaled the smell of old paper and leather. Nestled among aged books and costume jewelry, the red item stood out like a flare. It was a corset. Not just any corset—this was something theatrical, glossy, and clearly designed for more than posture support. The leather was soft but sturdy, and the buckles were tarnished just slightly, suggesting age but not neglect.

Megan blinked at it, as if it might explain itself.

It was impossible to imagine her mother wearing it. Her mother had been practical, fond of wool cardigans and sturdy boots, always more concerned with canning peaches than glamor. And yet, the corset was real. She turned it in her hands, noting the small tag stitched into the lining. It read: *"Raven's Nest – Custom Fittings. 1984."*

The year Megan had been born.

A shiver, not entirely from the cold attic air, crawled up her spine. She sat back on her heels and looked again at the contents of the box. Beneath the corset was a folded photograph. It was black and white, slightly faded. A woman stood with one hand on her hip, the red corset unmistakable despite the grayscale. Her face was turned slightly, but the profile was familiar—sharper than Megan's, more confident. But the eyes... the eyes were hers.

She couldn't breathe for a moment.

Was that her mother?

Or... was that *her*?

Suddenly, the neat lines of her life didn't feel so tidy anymore. The attic groaned in the wind outside. Somewhere below, the kettle clicked as it cooled on the stove. But Megan remained where she was, the red corset across her lap, the photo trembling slightly in her fingers.

Maybe there was more to her family's story. Maybe there was more to *her* story.

And maybe, just maybe, it was time to find out what it was.

Chapter 2: The Raven's Nest

Megan couldn't stop thinking about the photograph.

She placed it gently on her nightstand that evening, right next to her lamp and the little glass bowl where she kept her earrings. The woman in the picture—possibly her mother, or some relative with the same eyes and same hesitant tilt of the mouth—stared back at her from another time, wearing that bold red corset like it was nothing at all.

Like she had *owned* it.

Sleep did not come easily. Megan lay in the dark, staring up at the ceiling, replaying the attic moment over and over. She wasn't the kind to dwell, usually. But this was different. This *felt* different.

The next morning, after an extra cup of coffee and a long moment staring into her closet trying to decide which thrifted sweater to wear, Megan did something she hadn't done in months—maybe years. She Googled something that wasn't work-related.

"Raven's Nest – Custom Fittings. 1984."

To her surprise, it popped up. Sort of.

There wasn't a working website, but there was a forum post from someone discussing vintage fashion in the city, and an address was listed for a boutique that used to operate under that name back in the 1980s. *Raven's Nest: Exclusive Corsetry and Theatrical Wear*. The store had closed years ago, but the post said the seamstress—*Estelle*—still did private fittings by appointment.

Private. Appointments.

Megan stared at the screen. She wasn't the kind of person who called strangers. Or went to strange parts of the city. Or had *fittings* of any kind, unless you counted hemming her jeans badly with safety pins. But there was something electric running under her skin, something that had ignited the moment she touched that red leather.

So she wrote the number down.

She didn't call it that day. Or the next.

Instead, she found herself walking past mirrors more slowly, wondering what she might look like if she had been the woman in the photo. She pulled her hair back a little tighter, tried lipstick for the first time in forever, and found it odd how the reflection didn't completely repel her.

On the third day, just before dinner, she finally dialed the number.

"Raven's Nest," a low, clear voice answered. It was warm, with a trace of an old accent Megan couldn't place.

"Hi... um... I found something in my attic," Megan began, already feeling ridiculous. "A corset. Red leather. It had your label inside. From 1984, I think."

A pause. Then a little hum of recognition.

"Well now," the woman said, drawing the words out like ribbon. "That must've been one of my early pieces. They don't make leather like that anymore. What's your name, dear?"

"Megan. Megan Weller."

The line went quiet again. Megan checked her phone to see if the call had dropped.

"Weller," the woman finally said, slower this time. "Were you... do you happen to be Evelyn Weller's daughter?"

Megan's heart skipped.

"Yes," she said quietly.

Another pause. Then the woman said, "I think it's time you came by. Thursday. Noon. Bring the corset."

Megan hung up, hand trembling.

For the next two days, she thought about canceling. A dozen excuses circled her brain like crows. But something deeper than fear, something like hope or curiosity or maybe even courage, had taken root.

Thursday came. She woke up early, dressed in her best (a navy sweater, black skirt, and the good pair of boots she'd found for five bucks at a church sale). She placed the corset carefully in a canvas bag, wrapped in tissue paper like a gift.

The city was alive in ways Megan rarely let herself see. Honking horns, clattering heels on pavement, smells of roasted coffee and exhaust. She followed the map until she reached a street she'd never heard of, lined with old brownstones and hidden gardens.

Raven's Nest was carved in brass above a painted black door with no display window, just a small bell above it. Megan hesitated. Then she knocked.

The door opened almost immediately.

The woman standing there was tall, with silver hair wound like a crown. She wore an elegant black blouse, a measuring tape draped around her neck like a necklace. Her eyes were lined but sharp, and when she smiled, something in Megan relaxed despite herself.

"Come in," she said. "We have a lot to talk about."

As Megan stepped inside, past walls hung with sketches and velvet, past shelves of ribbons and buttons, she felt like she'd stepped not into a shop, but a secret.

And perhaps, for the first time in her life, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to leave.

Chapter 3: Threads from the Past

The scent inside the Raven's Nest was strange and wonderful—cedarwood, lavender, something like old perfume and polished brass. The door closed behind Megan with a quiet click that sounded too much like commitment.

Estelle led her through a narrow hallway into a larger room lit by skylight. Racks of shimmering fabric lined the walls, and dress forms stood like silent sentinels in various states of undress—some cloaked in velvet, others half-wrapped in muslin pinned with silver needles. It was a world that seemed to breathe with stories.

Megan clutched the canvas bag tighter, feeling more like an intruder with every step.

"Sit," Estelle said gently, gesturing to a tufted chair near a low table with a china teapot already steaming.

Megan obeyed, her fingers fidgeting in her lap.

Estelle sat opposite her, then waited, silent, until Megan finally drew out the corset and laid it on the table between them.

The older woman didn't touch it at first. She simply looked.

"I remember this piece," she said, voice soft with something Megan couldn't quite read—reverence? Regret? "It was a custom commission. Took me ages to find that exact red. Worn only once, I think."

Megan cleared her throat. "Do you know who it was made for?"

Estelle nodded slowly. "Your mother. Evelyn."

Megan blinked. Her stomach flipped.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Your mother," Estelle said, leaning back as she poured tea into delicate cups, "was not always the woman you remember."

The statement hit harder than Megan expected.

"She was so... practical," Megan said. "Quiet. She wore plaid flannel even in summer. She canned her own tomatoes and never liked to go out. She wasn't—" she gestured helplessly to the corset.

"She wasn't that *anymore*," Estelle corrected, handing her a cup. "But Evelyn Weller was a force once. I met her when she was twenty-nine. A dancer. Not ballet—think cabaret. Smart, sharp. She came in one evening and asked if I could make her something 'impossible to ignore.' I did. She wore it once, and then... she disappeared."

Megan stared down at the steam curling from her tea. The words didn't fit into any of the tidy boxes she'd packed her memories into.

"She never mentioned any of this."

"Some people bury who they were so deeply they forget it themselves," Estelle said, not unkindly.

Megan shook her head, eyes stinging. "But why? Why give all that up?"

Estelle looked at her carefully. “Maybe because she had you. Maybe she wanted something safer. Or maybe... she was scared.”

That struck something inside Megan. The woman in the photo had looked bold, yes—but there’d also been a tightness in the jaw, a hesitation in the hand not on her hip. Something about it had felt familiar.

Estelle reached forward, fingers lightly touching the red leather.

“I can’t tell you why your mother left that part of her behind,” she said, “but I can tell you this: that part of her didn’t die. It lived in you.”

Megan swallowed hard.

“I’ve never been that person,” she said, almost whispering. “I’ve never... taken risks. Or performed. Or even worn something like this.”

Estelle smiled, a little wistfully.

“Well,” she said, “maybe now is your time.”

There was silence between them for a while, broken only by the ticking of a clock somewhere in the back room. Megan looked down at the corset again.

“What would I even do with it?”

“Wear it,” Estelle said, as if that were the most obvious thing in the world. “Try it on. See who you are when you do.”

“I can’t just... become someone else,” Megan protested.

Estelle’s gaze was sharp now, but kind.

“No,” she said. “But maybe you can become more of yourself.”

Something shifted in Megan then—not a transformation, not yet, but a loosening, like the first sigh after a long-held breath.

She looked at the corset, her mother’s secret, her own inheritance, and realized: this wasn’t about changing who she was. It was about *discovering* who she might still become.

And for the first time in years, she felt something she hadn’t felt in so long she’d almost forgotten it.

Excitement.

Chapter 4: A Mirror, Unfamiliar

The corset fit.

That was the first surprise.

It had taken Estelle no more than a glance and two fingers to judge the fit. “Your mother had your frame,” she’d said, her voice gentle. “Just more posture.” With practiced precision, she showed Megan how to thread the laces, how to tug—not pull—tight, and how to breathe, deeply and slowly, *with* the garment, not against it.

Standing in the fitting room, Megan felt absurd at first. She wore her thrifted skirt and a simple camisole, the corset over it, wrapped like fire around her middle. The mirror was tall and unforgiving. She almost didn’t look.

But when she did, she didn’t recognize herself.

The woman staring back at her stood straighter. Her shoulders were pulled back, spine elongated. The red leather cinched her waist just enough to alter her shape but not distort it. It was like armor and invitation at once.

More than that—it was theatrical.

She wasn’t beautiful, not in a conventional sense, but she was *striking*. Arresting. Someone worth watching.

And her expression—was that a smirk?

She turned slightly, then back. “I look... dramatic.”

“You look *seen*,” Estelle replied from behind the curtain. “There’s a difference.”

Megan stepped out, unsure. “This feels like playing dress-up.”

Estelle gave her a look. “Everything is dress-up, darling. We just forget we’re allowed to choose the costume.”

They sat again, corset unlaced now, folded neatly on the table.

“Why did you keep the shop?” Megan asked. “If no one comes here anymore.”

Estelle smiled. “Not everyone needs to come. Just the ones who are ready.”

The sentence made Megan pause.

Ready. That word echoed in her as she walked home. The city buzzed around her, but she felt apart from it all, wrapped in some invisible cocoon stitched with memory and red thread.

That night, she took the photo from her nightstand and pinned it above her desk. Not for answers. For a reminder.

She pulled the corset from the bag again, touched it like a question. Then she opened her laptop.



She didn't know exactly what she was searching for—classes, maybe? Open mic nights? Theatrical workshops for beginners? It felt absurd, typing *“adult cabaret for shy people”* into a search bar, but it also felt *alive*.

One result caught her eye: **“The Velvet Echo: Intro to Performance for the Quiet Soul.”** Weekly workshops, no experience required. Encouraged attire: “Anything that makes you feel more you.”

It was held in a low-lit studio above a used bookstore downtown. The next class was on Tuesday.

Megan stared at the screen for a long time.

Then she registered.

Just like that.

No one clapped. No lightning split the sky. But something old inside her shifted. Clicked.

The next morning, she dug through her closet, pulling things she hadn't worn in years. A too-bold blouse. A pair of shoes with unnecessary sparkle. Earrings she'd bought once and never dared wear.

Then she placed the red corset atop the pile.

Not to erase who she was.

But to *uncover* what else might live under the quiet, beneath the flannel, beyond the well-worn books and secondhand cardigans.

Some stories don't start with love. Some start with a mystery in a box, a name whispered on a phone, and a woman finally asking herself the question no one ever thought to ask her:

What do you want to be—if no one is watching... or maybe if everyone is?

And Megan was just beginning to answer.

Chapter 5: The Velvet Echo

The studio was harder to find than Megan expected. Nestled above a weather-worn bookstore, its entrance was marked only by a painted arrow on the alley wall and the faint thump of music above. She almost turned back twice, heart hammering harder with each flight of stairs.

But she didn't.

At the top, the door was slightly ajar. The sound of laughter, the soft scuff of heels on wood, and something else—something like freedom—spilled out into the hall.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The space was dim and warm, lit by lamps with colored shades. Velvet curtains lined the back wall, and a row of mismatched chairs curved in a loose semicircle. There was no stage, no spotlight. Just a room. A safe one, maybe.

A woman with purple hair and a clipboard smiled as Megan entered. “You must be new,” she said brightly.

Megan nodded, suddenly self-conscious in her carefully chosen outfit—a deep plum blouse, black jeans, and the corset discreetly packed in a tote bag over her shoulder.

"I'm—Megan."

"Welcome. I'm Poppy. No pressure here. You participate as much or as little as you like. We're all here to find our echo."

Megan didn't know what that meant yet, but she nodded anyway.

Others began to arrive—an older man in a sequined scarf, a young woman in a top hat and combat boots, a couple who looked like accountants by day and burlesque stars by night. Every kind of person. All shapes, sizes, ages. All of them glowing in their own way.

The workshop began with breathing.

"In through the nose. Out through the lips. Let yourself land inside your own body."

Then movement. Simple things. Circles of the shoulders. A hip sway to a slow rhythm. Laughter bubbled as people exaggerated, improvised, let go. No judgment, only discovery.

Megan was stiff at first. Her arms moved, but her thoughts were louder than her body: *You look ridiculous. You're not like them. Go sit down.* But she didn't. She moved. Slowly. Hesitantly.

And then, without meaning to, she smiled.

Poppy guided them into voice next. "Say your name—not how you usually do. Say it like it's poetry. Say it like it's power."

When it came to Megan, her voice cracked on the first try. "Megan," she said, barely above a whisper.

"Once more," Poppy urged. "Like it's yours."

"Megan."

Louder. Fuller.

Something inside her chest warmed.

The workshop ended with a simple prompt: *Bring something next week that makes you feel bold. Something you'd never wear to the grocery store.*

As people gathered their things, chatting in small knots, Megan stood near the back, unsure. Poppy approached her, kind and unhurried.

"You did beautifully," she said.

"I barely spoke."

"And yet you said everything."

Megan smiled, and for the first time in years, it reached her eyes.

She walked home that night under the glow of streetlamps, her tote bag clutched to her side. When she reached her door, she paused, then pulled out the corset.

She held it to her chest and exhaled.

Next week, it would see light again.

Not in secret. Not in a mirror.

But on her, fully.

And maybe—for once—Megan wouldn't disappear into the background of her own life.

She would stand. Bright red. Strapped and buckled. Unapologetically seen.

Chapter 6: Laced In

The following Tuesday, Megan arrived at *The Velvet Echo* a few minutes early, the red corset already snug in her tote, nestled beside a compact mirror and a small tin of cherry-colored lip balm she'd never dared wear until that morning. Her hands trembled slightly on the doorknob, but her spine was straighter than it had been a week ago.

Inside, the studio felt different this time—less like a place she didn't belong, and more like a room that had been waiting for her to arrive.

Poppy spotted her immediately.

"Megan," she said with a bright, warm smile that somehow melted all the nerves and none of the mystery. "Come early for a reason?"

Megan nodded, biting her lip. "I... brought it. The corset. I thought maybe—if it's not too much trouble—you could help me get it on properly? Tighten it the right way?"

Poppy's smile softened, and for a moment, she looked at Megan like she was looking *into* her, not at her.

"Of course. Come with me."

She led her to the back, where a small curtain partition hid a makeshift dressing nook. A freestanding mirror leaned against the wall. The light was soft, flattering. Forgiving.

"Take your time," Poppy said, gesturing toward a small bench. "We're not rushing anything here."

Megan exhaled, pulled the corset from her bag, and undressed down to her camisole and leggings. Her hands were clumsy, but Poppy helped without comment, holding the corset open behind her like it was ritual.

"You ever been laced in before?" she asked, fingers nimble on the satin laces.

"No," Megan said. "Not like this."

"Good," Poppy said with a wink. "First time's magic."

She began to cinch—not yanking, but drawing tight in smooth, slow pulls, like closing the final pages of a secret. Megan felt her ribs lift, her waist narrow, her posture realign. It wasn't just physical—it was like being reassembled.

"You can still breathe?" Poppy asked.

"Yeah. But it's... different."

"Different's where the power lives."

Megan looked in the mirror. She had expected to feel self-conscious. But what she felt instead was a kind of reverent disbelief. The corset hugged her perfectly—sculpting, not squeezing. Defining, not disguising.

She looked taller. Sharper.

Her eyes looked a little dangerous.

Poppy came to stand beside her, arms crossed in approval.

“You look like someone with a secret.”

“I feel like someone I don’t know yet.”

“Good,” Poppy said. “She’s worth meeting.”

When Megan stepped out into the main studio, she felt the shift in the room before anyone even looked her way. The soft murmur of voices faltered. Eyes turned—not in ridicule or judgment, but in something closer to recognition. Like she’d walked in not as a new version of herself, but as someone who’d been there all along, finally showing her face.

A few people clapped. Someone whistled, light and playful.

Megan blushed, but this time, it didn’t make her shrink.

It made her *glow*.

That night’s session was about “embodied presence.” Poppy spoke of walking into a room like you *deserved* to be there, like the floor had waited all day for your feet. Each person was invited, if they wished, to take a turn walking from one end of the studio to the other, under soft lights, to a song of their choice.

When Megan’s name was called, she almost shook her head.

But the laces held her. The mirror lingered in her memory. And the woman she didn’t know yet whispered *go*.

So she stood.

And she walked.

Not perfectly. Not boldly. But with presence.

Halfway through, she met Poppy’s eyes, and something in her unlocked. She let her hips sway a little. Let her chin lift. Let the music wrap around her like the corset had—firm, warm, unyielding.

When she reached the far end, there was a moment of silence.

Then soft applause.

Megan turned, cheeks flushed, heart pounding, and *smiled*. Really smiled. The room blurred with warmth.

Afterward, a few people came up to her—compliments, kind words, even questions.

“You’ve done this before, right?”

“I haven’t,” she answered honestly.

“Well,” one woman said, “you fooled me.”

Back in the dressing nook, Poppy helped her unlace, her hands just as steady on the way out.

“Don’t wait for next week,” she said. “Wear it at home. Try it with music. Try it in silence. Let it become yours.”

Megan nodded, hugging the corset to her chest like a secret kept safe for too long.

She didn’t know yet what this was leading toward. A new chapter, perhaps. A rediscovery. Or just one small, stunning act of courage at a time.

But she did know one thing for certain:

She would never again doubt the power of what waited in a box.

Chapter 7: Straps and Strangers

The corset felt different at home.

In the quiet of her bedroom, Megan laid it gently on the bedspread—still warm from sunlight that had drifted through the old lace curtains. It looked out of place there, vivid and pulsing with memory, like it belonged in a spotlight, not in a life full of soft cardigans and secondhand novels.

She undressed slowly, deliberately, brushing her fingers along the deep red leather before slipping it around her waist. It was harder alone. Her fingers fumbled with the laces, trying to mimic the rhythm Poppy had used—firm, flowing, confident. She tied it off best she could and turned to the mirror.

It was close... but not quite.

It lacked that sharp, secure sensation. The breathless elegance that had held her upright like a string from heaven.

She stared at herself, the corset slightly crooked, the laces loose in places.

She missed Poppy’s hands. Not just the way they’d tightened the garment—but the calm they’d brought. The wordless assurance.

Megan sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, corset half-fastened, feet bare on the wooden floor.

For the first time in years, she reached out to someone.

Hi Poppy, she texted, thumbs hesitant at first. **Trying the corset at home... but can’t get it quite right on my own. Any chance you’d be willing to help me with it again sometime? I know you’re busy. No pressure.**

The reply came quicker than she expected.

Of course I will, sweetheart. Want to come by tomorrow evening? Studio’s quiet then. We’ll make it a proper fitting session. Bring the straps, too.

Megan frowned. **Straps?**

Poppy’s response was a simple winking emoji, followed by: **Check the lining. Most people miss them.**

Curious, Megan returned to the corset. She turned it inside out, feeling along the inner edge where the seams met. Sure enough—there was a hidden pocket. Small, nearly invisible.

Inside: two rolled-up red leather straps, each ending in a small brass buckle.

Her heart quickened.

She had assumed they were decorative. Maybe extras. But the thought that they had *purpose* filled her with something electric.

The next evening, Megan returned to the studio—this time not as a newcomer, but as someone returning to something that already felt like hers.

Poppy was waiting, dressed in black linen and sipping peppermint tea like some casually magical aunt.

“You found the straps,” she said without prompting.

“I had no idea they were even there.”

“Few do,” Poppy said. “That corset was custom-designed with modular attachments. Your mother had them made special. She wanted options. Freedom *and* restraint.”

That last word made Megan pause.

Poppy raised a brow. “Too much?”

“No,” Megan said quietly. “Not enough.”

They laughed, a soft, conspiratorial sound.

In the dressing nook again, Megan undressed with less hesitation than before. She held the corset up with reverence, almost ceremony. Poppy helped again—lacing tight, precise, smooth. That feeling returned, the one that made Megan stand taller, breathe deeper, become more.

Then came the straps.

Poppy showed her where the tiny metal loops lay hidden along the seams—four of them. Two high near the bust, two low near the hips. The straps attached there, forming an X across the front if desired, or looping around the back for added support or effect.

“They’re aesthetic,” Poppy said, “but also symbolic.”

“Of what?”

“Control. Intention. You choose how you’re held. You decide how far you go—and how far you don’t.”

Megan stood in the mirror again, this time with the straps in place. The corset wasn’t just a garment now—it was a *statement*. A structure. A story.

“I feel...” she started, but the sentence trailed off.

Poppy stood beside her again, a hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

“You feel like yourself,” she said. “That’s what transformation *actually* looks like. Not becoming someone else. Becoming *undeniably* you.”

They didn't talk much after that. Words weren't necessary.

Megan left the studio that night with the corset beneath her coat, cinched and strapped and *right*. She walked taller, her heels clicking against the sidewalk with unexpected rhythm. Not because she wanted to be seen.

But because she *wasn't hiding anymore*.

She still didn't know what all this meant.

Only that something inside her had shifted permanently.

And she couldn't wait to find out what came next.

Chapter 8: Shouldered Boldness

The next week, Megan returned to *The Velvet Echo* for what she thought would be another quiet practice evening—breathing, walking, and maybe another timid twirl at center floor. But Poppy had other ideas.

The studio was empty when Megan arrived—just the scent of incense curling in the corners and the velvet drapes casting heavy shadows. Poppy stood by the long mirror with a measuring tape slung around her neck and something sharp in her eyes.

"Bring the corset," she said. "Tonight, we experiment."

Megan blinked. "We already added the straps."

"You used them *as designed*," Poppy said with a sly grin. "But this piece—this corset—it has more to say."

Megan laughed nervously. "More?"

"Always more."

In the dressing nook, Megan removed her coat and blouse, folding them neatly. The corset came out of her bag already half-laced from her last wear. Poppy helped her cinch again—tighter this time, more assured, the kind of pull that told Megan she didn't have to doubt the woman in the mirror anymore.

Then Poppy stood behind her, holding up the two red leather straps like puzzle pieces.

"Now," she said, "watch this."

With a few practiced flicks of her fingers, she unhooked the straps from the hips and reattached them to loops higher on the back of the corset—loops Megan hadn't even realized were there. Then she brought the leather over Megan's shoulders, buckling them down in front, just below the bust.

It was like armor being locked into place.

"There," Poppy said, stepping back.

Megan looked in the mirror—and gasped.

The straps over her shoulders tugged gently, but insistently. Her posture was no longer just upright—it was *commanding*. Her shoulders rolled back, her collarbone lifted, her chin rose slightly without effort. Her body was no longer *being held* upright. It *declared* uprightness.

She didn't look like she was pretending to be powerful.

She looked like power *was her natural state*.

"I look like a queen," Megan whispered, amazed.

"You look like a woman who finally found the rest of her spine," Poppy said, crossing her arms, proud.

The shoulder straps changed everything. They made the corset feel less like a costume, and more like a frame—a shape that demanded the truth of her to rise to it.

But the posture... it wasn't just physical.

Inside, something stirred. She wasn't trying to *deserve* the space she took up. She already *did*. She wasn't proving anything. She was *revealing* it.

Poppy circled her once. "Now try walking."

Megan stepped forward.

Her movements were different—fluid, but anchored. Each step deliberate, each breath longer. The strap across her shoulders wasn't tight, but it *reminded* her to remain open, expansive. Not small. Not hidden.

"Again," Poppy said. "But imagine a line of people watching. Not judging. Just waiting to see what you'll *do*."

Megan walked the room again.

She didn't hesitate. She didn't stumble.

By the third turn, her hips had found a rhythm and her eyes met her own reflection like a challenge. Her mouth curled slightly—not into a smile, but into something more dangerous.

Pride.

When she stopped, Poppy clapped once.

"Now," she said softly, "tell me again that this wasn't always in you."

Megan couldn't.

She unbuckled the straps slowly when it was over, almost with regret. The posture stayed, though. Something about the *memory* of it lingered in her muscles, as if her body didn't want to forget.

Later that night, back home, Megan hung the corset on a wooden hanger and placed it on her closet door. Not hidden. Not boxed.

Displayed.

She stared at it while brushing her teeth, still feeling the whisper of leather across her shoulders.

This wasn't a transformation anymore. It was a *return*.

A reemergence.

A coming home to something ancient and alive that had waited in silence for years.

Chapter 9: The Gift

Winter turned to spring, and something had changed in Megan—though not in the way most people would recognize.

Her neighbors still saw her walking to the corner store in her secondhand boots. The barista still wrote her name in neat, quiet script on her coffee cup. Her home still held the same old furniture, the same attic full of memories.

But Megan stood differently now.

Not just taller. *Straighter.*

She no longer avoided eye contact. Her voice didn't catch in her throat when someone asked her opinion. She didn't shy away from mirrors or apologize for taking up space.

And most telling of all: the corset had remained on its hanger for weeks.

She loved it still—revered it, even. But she no longer *needed* it. The posture it once gave her had become hers. The power it had teased out of her now lived fully in her spine, her stride, her smile.

One evening, after a long walk beneath blooming trees, Megan paused at the studio before heading home. The Velvet Echo had become a kind of sanctuary for her, but lately she'd found herself observing more than participating. Watching others awaken.

She noticed a girl sitting alone on the edge of the floor, nervously twisting the strap of her bag. Young, maybe twenty. Dressed in layers too big, hiding in denim and wool.

Megan recognized that posture instantly: folded shoulders, eyes lowered, the quiet shrinking that came from years of being overlooked.

Poppy met Megan's eyes from across the room and gave the smallest of nods.

Megan walked over and sat beside the girl, not close enough to startle, but near enough to be heard.

"First time?" she asked.

The girl nodded. "I don't think I belong here."

Megan smiled, not unkindly. "I thought the same thing once. But someone made space for me until I could make it for myself."

The girl looked at her then—really looked. Something flickered.

Megan opened her tote bag, pulled out the corset, wrapped in its familiar black cloth. The straps, polished and red, peeked from the edges.

"I want to show you something," Megan said, offering it gently. "You don't have to wear it. But I think it might help you stand a little taller—just until you remember how."

The girl's eyes widened. "It's beautiful."

"It used to be mine," Megan said. "But it doesn't belong to me anymore."

There was a pause, sacred and soft.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

Megan looked at the corset, at the red that once scared her, then saved her. She smiled.

"Because I don't need it to feel strong anymore. But I think someone else might."

The girl took it in her hands like it was something alive. Her fingers lingered on the buckles. On the straps.

"Will it change me?"

Megan shook her head. "No. It'll remind you what was already there."

That night, Megan walked home feeling lighter than she had in years.

She no longer carried the corset.

But what it gave her walked with her in every step.

Not pride for how she looked.

But pride for who she'd become.

And behind her, in a studio lit by quiet lamps and blooming hope, a new story was beginning.

Because some armor isn't meant to protect forever.

Some is meant to be passed on.

The End