

# The Unspoken Rule

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

At nineteen, Claire lived with a secret she carried like a stone in her chest: she still wet the bed—frequently, unpredictably, and with mounting shame. It was a part of her life that had refused to fade with childhood, a quiet humiliation that followed her into every sleepover skipped and every college dorm avoided.

Her parents, Janet and Victor, were not cruel, but they were impatient. They saw Claire's condition not as a medical issue, but as a failure to take control of herself.

"You're too old for this," her father said flatly one morning as he stripped the soaked sheets for the third time that week. "We're not going to keep doing this."

Claire had tried everything—alarms, medications, schedules, even hypnosis. But nothing worked consistently. Every time she woke in a wet bed, the familiar guilt rose like bile. Her mother, tired of laundry and excuses, insisted Claire wear protective briefs—what they never dared call "diapers."

Claire hated them. They were bulky, demeaning, and made her feel like a child trapped in a loop she couldn't escape. Worse, even half-asleep, she'd rip them off in the middle of the night, sometimes without remembering.

Her parents' patience finally cracked.

The bodysuit arrived in a discreet box, but nothing about it was subtle.

It was made of thick, stretch-resistant fabric in a dull gray-blue shade—clinical, almost prison-like. A single zipper ran from the collar down to the small of the back, with lock at the top. The sleeves were long and snug, and the legs stopped just above the ankles. No front opening. No room for rebellion.

Claire stood frozen in her room the first time she tried it on. Her mother knocked once before stepping in, holding the folded brief in one hand like it was just another chore.

"I'll help," she said curtly.

Claire flinched as the brief crinkled between her fingers, then stepped into it, face burning. Her mother tugged the bodysuit over her shoulders and zipped it up with a sharp finality that echoed louder than words. When she turned the tiny lock at the collar, Claire's throat tightened. Not because it hurt, but because it sealed her silence.

She said nothing that night as she climbed into bed, encased like a child in an unspoken punishment.

Every morning, Claire had to wait for one of her parents to come unlock her. It made her feel helpless, infantilized. Her father would grunt something indistinct and unlock the collar without making eye contact. Her mother would sigh, check the bed, and walk out if it was dry—walk out slower if it wasn't.

Claire hated them for it. She hated herself more.

Eventually, she scraped together the courage—and money—to leave.

She moved into a tiny studio apartment on the edge of town. It was hers. The freedom was intoxicating, but short-lived. The first week, she wet the bed four times. The smell clung to her sheets like shame. She bought mattress protectors, then forgot to put them on. The mattress began to reek.

She tried washing everything herself—lugging damp bedding to the laundromat at midnight, hoping no one would ask why. She avoided guests. She slept on towels, then the floor, then a cheap air mattress that deflated halfway through the night.

Eventually, the mattress had to go. The new one cost more than she could afford. Her credit card cracked under the weight of her denial.

Exhausted, broke, and defeated, Claire stood outside her parents' front door four months later. She didn't knock for a long time. She considered turning back.

But then the door opened. Her father stared at her silently.

"I want to come back," she said quietly. "And I... I'll do it your way."

Her mother appeared in the hallway behind him, neither warm nor cold—just tired.

That night, Claire stood in her old room, now freshly laundered. Her mother laid out the suit on the bed like a uniform. Claire stepped into it without a word. The brief went on like second nature. She turned her back silently as her mother zipped it up and locked the collar once more.

No words were exchanged.

But the sheets stayed dry.

And for now, that was enough.

## **The Unspoken Rule — Part II: The Return**

The first week back home was thick with silence.

Claire moved like a ghost in the halls—present, but distant. Her parents didn't press. Each night, the bodysuit was laid out on the edge of her bed. Each morning, the lock was turned with a quiet click.

She resented it. Resented needing them. But the truth was in the dry sheets and the unspoken relief on her mother's face.

Still, rebellion simmered.

Some nights, she refused to speak at all. Other nights, she sat on her bed and didn't move until someone coaxed her into putting it on. One night, she even hid the key. Her mother didn't yell—just walked away, disappointed. Claire cried herself to sleep in the unlocked suit that night, soaked and shivering.

The next morning, her father didn't say a word. He just handed her a trash bag with the soiled bedding and pointed to the laundry room.

It broke something open in her.

As she scrubbed the mattress pad, Claire realized the silence wasn't punishment. It was exhaustion. They had been fighting this with her for years. And now that they finally had something that worked, she was fighting *them* instead of the condition.

It wasn't about control anymore. It was about peace—however imperfect.

Gradually, the resentment faded. She began to talk again at dinner. She helped with dishes. She even asked her mother one night if they could pick a different color for the bodysuit—something less "hospital gray."

Her mother smiled—genuinely—for the first time in weeks.

The next delivery box was smaller, softer. Inside were three new suits.

One was pale yellow with tiny sheep on the cuffs. Another was a soft pink with clouds along the collar. The third was light blue with cartoon moons. Still lockable, still snug—but warmer, softer, almost childlike in their comfort.

Claire laughed when she saw them. Not mockingly—just surprised by her own reaction.

"They're ridiculous," she said.

Her mother gave her a tired smile. "But better?"

Claire nodded. "Yeah... better."

Each night, she chose one. Sometimes sheep, sometimes moons. She stopped resisting the routine. She still hated needing it, but she hated the chaos more. She slept better. She started journaling again. She even began working part-time at a bookstore downtown, saving for the day she'd try living on her own again—this time prepared.

But for now, she was home. And for the first time in a long while, home felt less like a battlefield and more like a place of quiet truce.

### **The Unspoken Rule — Part III: Soft Places**

Months passed, and the nightly rituals became less of a surrender and more of a rhythm. The locking bodysuits, once symbols of shame, had softened into something else—strange, yes, but strangely safe.

It started with the sheep-print suit. There was something soothing about it—about the rounded shapes, the warm yellow. On especially hard days, Claire found herself choosing it without thinking, like someone reaching for a childhood blanket in the dark.

She caught her reflection in the mirror one night—zipped up, dry, calm—and tilted her head.

It didn't look ridiculous. It looked... gentle.

That weekend, she found herself drifting through a thrift store downtown. She wasn't shopping for anything in particular. But in the children's section—tucked between racks too small for her—was a mannequin wearing a pair of oversized overalls. Adult-sized, but with a childlike cut: loose, soft denim, with cartoonish buttons and a front pouch shaped like a bear's face.

Claire paused.

She tried them on.

They fit.

At home, she wore them when no one was around—then eventually in the evenings, when her father watched TV or her mother made tea. No one commented. If they noticed, they said nothing. And maybe that was a kind of acceptance too.

She began collecting other soft things—rompers, jumpers, pajamas with pastel prints. Her wardrobe became a strange mix: muted earth tones for work, cozy and playful things for home. The contrast made sense to her. It was like having a world where she could finally rest from being “normal” all day.

The biggest change came on a cold January evening.

The house’s heating had gone out temporarily, and Claire’s room was freezing. That night, she pulled out something she’d been quietly researching: a custom-designed sleeping bag with an enclosed hood and secure zip. It was thick, quilted, and warm as a cocoon. Once zipped inside, she couldn’t get out without assistance.

She chose it over the bodysuit that night. Called her mother in. No words were needed—just a nod as the zipper was pulled to the top, sealing her into warmth and silence.

The next morning, she lay curled up in the bag, dry and comfortable, listening to the faint sounds of birds outside her window. When her mother came in and unzipped her, there was no judgment. Only a quiet smile.

“I think that one suits you,” she said softly.

Claire didn’t reply. But she smiled, too.

What had started as necessity had become... something else. Not regression, not surrender. Something gentler: the creation of a soft space to heal in. The childish clothes, the sleeping bag, the prints—they weren’t about being less. They were about feeling safe, at last.

And in that safety, Claire was finally starting to grow.

## **The Unspoken Rule — Part IV: Safe Spaces**

Claire’s life had grown quieter, but not smaller.

She’d long stopped viewing her bedtime rituals as punishment. They had become part of a deeply personal language—one where softness, security, and control could coexist. Her parents, once rigid in their discomfort, had shifted too. They no longer tried to “fix” her. They saw her joy returning. The moods had evened out. The sheets stayed dry. And they were grateful.

It started with a large, novelty bottle Claire found online—marketed as a “hydration companion,” meant for adults who struggled to drink enough water. But it looked suspiciously like a baby bottle, just scaled up. Claire hesitated. But she ordered it.

That night, as she lay curled in her sleeping bag, the bottle resting on her pillow, she found a strange comfort in it. It wasn’t about pretending to be a child. It was about letting go, if only for a moment, of all the ways she had to be composed during the day.

Over time, her room transformed—not into a nursery, but into a space that reflected what made her feel calm: pastel curtains, a shelf of plush animals, cloud decals on the ceiling, and music boxes that played gentle lullabies.

One afternoon, her father was cleaning the shed when he stumbled upon some old fence panels—sturdy, whitewashed, and unused since they'd replaced the backyard gate. He paused, looking them over, an idea slowly forming.

That weekend, he called Claire into the garage.

“What if we used these?” he asked, tapping the wood. “Maybe frame your bed in. Give it more of that... cozy den look you’ve been going for.”

Claire blinked. “Like a crib?”

Her father’s brow twitched—but he didn’t recoil. “Like a place you feel safe. If you want.”

She nodded slowly. “I’d like that.”

They worked on it together—sanding, painting, securing the frame to her bed. It didn’t fully enclose her, but the rails were high enough to give a sense of enclosure. A place to nest. A place where the outside world couldn’t get in.

Her mother sewed a quilted bumper to line the inside. Her father even found an old mobile in a box of Claire’s childhood keepsakes and hung it from the ceiling. It spun silently above her as she fell asleep, dry and content.

This wasn’t regression.

This was reclamation.

And in that crib-like bed, drinking warm milk from her comfort bottle, Claire no longer felt broken. She felt safe.

## **The Unspoken Rule — Part V: The Sleepover**

Claire had never expected to tell anyone about her routines—let alone find someone who shared them.

But things change when you stop hiding.

It started with a soft post on an online forum—anonymous, carefully worded. Claire had written about her bodysuits, her sleep rituals, the crib-like bed, and the comfort she found in reclaiming a sense of safety. She didn’t use the word “little.” She didn’t even know if that word applied to her. She just wanted to know if anyone else understood.

Within hours, a reply appeared.

“Hi. I’m Mae. I thought I was the only one.”

The conversation that followed felt like exhaling after years underwater.

Mae was 22, a part-time art student who lived with her older sister. She had struggled with nighttime accidents until her teens, and had clung to soft habits ever since—plush toys, oversized footie pajamas, even a pacifier she kept hidden under her pillow. She didn’t think she was regressing. Like Claire, she just felt calmer that way. Safer.

They chatted online for weeks. Then came the idea neither dared suggest until it was out:

### **A sleepover.**

Claire's parents were hesitant at first, but they saw the spark in her eyes. The Mae who stepped through the door that Saturday afternoon was shy, with oversized sleeves and a backpack decorated with enamel pins and a plush elephant poking from the zipper.

Claire gave her a tour of her room—the bodysuits neatly folded in a basket, the bottle on her nightstand, the crib rails her father had built. Mae looked around wide-eyed.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "Like a sanctuary."

That night, they watched cartoons from the '90s and drank warm milk from their bottles. They changed into their soft sleepwear—Mae wore a lavender onesie with stars, Claire chose her sheep-print suit. Claire's mom helped zip and lock her in, glancing briefly at Mae.

Mae flushed. "Um... I brought one too. If that's okay."

Claire's mother hesitated for a beat—then nodded. "Of course, sweetie."

She helped Mae zip up her own bodysuit, no judgment in her hands.

Later, Claire and Mae curled under the quilt, the soft spinning of the mobile casting gentle shadows across the ceiling. They whispered into the dark.

"I never thought anyone would understand this," Mae said.

Claire reached out, their pinkies brushing. "Me neither. But I'm glad you're here."

For the first time in her life, Claire fell asleep not just dry, not just safe—but truly understood.

### **The Unspoken Rule — Part VI: Soft Strength**

Claire and Mae's friendship deepened with an easy kind of magic—like childhood friends reunited in a life where they'd never actually met. Their shared world of softness, safety, and quiet rituals wasn't a cage—it was a cocoon. And out of it, both began to stretch their wings.

Their sleepovers became regular—rotating between Claire's crib-framed bed and Mae's pastel room in her sister's attic, where blankets were piled high like clouds and twinkle lights traced the sloped ceiling. They learned each other's comfort codes: Mae found peace in lullabies, especially sung live, and Claire began humming to her without thinking. Claire, for her part, felt calmest when gently swaddled, and Mae—careful, affectionate Mae—learned how to tuck her just right.

Together, they started a project: a shared sketchbook titled "**Safe Things.**" They filled it with drawings, quotes, textures glued to pages, and entries like:

- *Warm fleece with clouds*
- *Being zipped in with someone watching over you*
- *A blanket that smells like home*
- *Quiet mornings with no clocks*

But it wasn't all soft corners and quiet evenings. They started venturing out.

### **Their First Adventure: The Blanket Fort Retreat**

Mae found it online—a weekend “comfort retreat” hosted by a local art therapy group. At first, they hesitated. Would it be weird? Too public? Too structured?

It wasn’t. It was a cozy lodge in the woods, with indoor tents made of sheets, journaling circles, soft lighting, and no pressure to speak unless you wanted to. Claire brought her bottle (hidden in her tote), and Mae wore her favorite footed PJs beneath a long hoodie.

They met others—not all like them, but kindred. Adults reclaiming safety in softness. A man who brought his old stuffed giraffe. A woman who built a sensory nook from old theater curtains. No one laughed. No one judged. Claire and Mae stayed up late in their fort, whispering like campers, feeling brave for the first time in public.

### **Their Second Adventure: The Great Crib Hack**

Inspired by their growing confidence, they decided to modify Mae’s bed the same way Claire’s had been. Mae’s sister was wary at first—until she saw how proud Mae was sketching out the plans.

With borrowed tools and repurposed furniture, they built it together. Claire’s father even came by with extra rails. “You’re good with your hands,” Mae told him. He nodded quietly, handing her the drill.

That night, zipped into their bodysuits under Mae’s new crib frame, Claire whispered, “We built this.”

Mae giggled. “We’re like tiny architects of peace.”

### **Their Third Adventure: The Festival Test**

Claire and Mae loved music. But big crowds, long days, and public bathrooms? Terrifying.

Still, they wanted to go to the town’s spring folk festival. So they planned ahead—snacks, spare clothes, a tent in Mae’s sister’s car, even discreet pads under their clothes just in case. They wore soft sundresses over comfy leggings. The day was full of sun, kettle corn, and dancing to banjo music under paper lanterns.

Claire had one small accident, and for the first time ever, she didn’t cry.

Mae just took her hand. “It’s okay. We planned for this. You’re still you.”

That night, they pitched a tent behind Mae’s sister’s car, zipped into their sleeping bags like little peas in pods, and fell asleep to the sound of distant fiddles and laughter.

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As the months passed, they didn’t become “normal.” They became real.

And real, they found, was better.

### **The Unspoken Rule — Part VII: Dressed in Trust**

With each passing week, Claire and Mae grew more comfortable in their shared world—not only behind closed doors but also in how they dressed, moved, and carried themselves out in the world.

It started with small additions: a pair of soft corduroy shorts for Claire in a dusty rose, a lavender romper with scalloped sleeves for Mae. Then came a full afternoon at a secondhand boutique in the

arts district, where they tried on jumpsuits, overalls with embroidered patches, and loose cotton play clothes that blurred the line between fashion and comfort.

Claire held up a yellow romper with snap buttons on the back. "Too childish?" she asked.

Mae shook her head. "No. It's *you*."

By the end of the day, they had filled two tote bags. They took turns trying on outfits at home, modeling for each other like children playing dress-up but with real joy—no irony, no shame. Each piece they added to their wardrobe wasn't just fabric—it was a declaration: *I don't have to pretend here*.

And at night, they still kept the bodysuits. The zippered, lockable suits had become as much a part of their bedtime ritual as brushing their teeth or turning on the nightlight. Some were cozy and fleece-lined for cold nights; others were thinner, short-sleeved, with cheerful prints—ducks, clouds, bunnies. Mae had even sewn heart-shaped patches on one of Claire's older suits.

One rainy evening, as thunder echoed gently outside and their shared sketchbook lay open between them, Claire grew quiet. She'd been drawing a picture of a soft bed with high rails and pillows stacked like castle walls.

Mae looked over. "That looks like yours. But safer."

Claire nodded. "Yeah."

She was quiet for a long moment before speaking again. "I never had a friend like you before."

Mae tilted her head. "Really?"

Claire looked down at her fingers, picking at the edge of a page. "There was always this fear. Every time I got close to someone—at school, at sleepovers—I kept thinking, *what if I wet the bed? What if they find out?* So I kept my distance."

Mae nodded slowly, her eyes soft. "I always thought I was too much. Too weird. If people saw the pacifier under my pillow, or the plushies, or—just *me*—they'd leave."

Claire met her gaze. "But you didn't."

"And you didn't either."

They lay side by side for a while, the sketchbook between them like a shared diary.

"I think," Mae said quietly, "this is the first time I've ever felt... chosen. Not just tolerated."

Claire smiled, and her voice cracked a little when she answered. "Same."

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They didn't need to say much more. That night, zipped into their matching blue bodysuits with silver stars, they lay in Claire's crib-framed bed, holding hands under the quilt. The storm outside faded into a lullaby of rain.

Neither of them had to worry about being found out.

Because they had already been seen.

And loved anyway.



## The Unspoken Rule — Part VIII: Building the Dream

The sketchbook had grown thick, the spine creased and corners worn from use. Its pages were filled with pastel crayon drawings, washi tape, fabric swatches, and tiny notes scrawled in the margins like whispers.

Some were daydreams—like a bedroom that glowed soft pink at night, or pajamas that sang lullabies when zipped. But some ideas stuck. Some began to feel like blueprints.

Especially *the bed*.

The sketch—Claire's, though Mae had added flowers to the headboard—was of a crib-like bed with tall wooden sides, taller than her current rails. There were soft mesh panels for airflow, and a curved arch canopy above like a tent. A lockable side panel slid open to let her in and out. It was part crib, part nest, part secret fort. A small note in Mae's handwriting in the corner read: *"Let's make this one real."*

So they did.

Claire's father offered to help, though he never asked too many questions. He treated their plans with the same quiet respect he once used fixing fence posts or rewiring a lamp. Together they sourced materials: smooth pine boards, rounded dowels, brushed metal latches, foam padding. Claire painted the frame a muted robin's-egg blue while Mae sewed fabric liners with cloud patterns.

It took them three weekends.

The final piece was the canopy—stitched from gauzy fabric and strung across curved rods like a gentle dome. Beneath it, the mattress sat deep within the frame, surrounded by three high sides and the one sliding gate. It clicked shut with a soft finality Claire hadn't known she craved.

The first night she slept in it, zipped into her favorite sheep-print bodysuit, Mae tucked a plush bunny into the crook of her arm and sat on the edge.

"Do you feel safe?" she asked.

Claire nodded, voice soft. "I feel... contained. Like the world can't reach me here."

Mae smiled. "Good. Because I think we just built your dream."

They started adding more sketchbook projects to their "real-life list":

- **The Hug Chair:** A beanbag-wrapped recliner with weighted blankets stitched into the arms. It became their reading throne.
- **The Toy Shelf:** But not just for toys. For safe things—lavender oil, their favorite lullaby player, their bottles, and a few worn children's books they both secretly loved.
- **The Door Sign:** Painted together and hung on Claire's bedroom door. It read in gentle script: *"Soft Space. Please Knock Kindly."*

Their room, their world, grew richer not because they withdrew—but because they finally had a safe place to begin.

And slowly, they realized they weren't building a retreat from the world.

They were building a foundation to walk back into it—stronger, softer, together.

### **The Unspoken Rule — Part IX: Out in the World**

The spring folk festival had been magical in so many ways—music, sunlight, laughter—but also humbling.

Claire had been so careful. She and Mae had planned every detail, down to backup outfits and a tent for quiet time. But in the rush of the afternoon, distracted by a long line at the food truck and a sudden burst of nerves, she hadn't made it to the restroom in time.

It was minor. Nothing catastrophic. But it was enough.

Enough to stain her confidence. Enough to make her go quiet on the ride home.

That night, zipped in side by side in their bodysuits, Claire whispered, "I think... I think I need to wear during the day. At least when we go out."

Mae didn't hesitate. "Then I will too."

Claire turned her head. "You don't need to—"

"I *want* to," Mae interrupted gently. "If you're going to be brave enough to do this, I'll be brave too. We don't do this alone. Ever."

They held pinkies under the quilt.

But daytime presented a new problem.

The bodysuits they used at night—soft, snug, and zippered in the back—made it impossible to access their protection without help. That was fine in the safety of a bedroom. But in public? That level of dependency didn't work.

Still, it made them realize something important: it wasn't just about managing accidents. It was about preserving *peace of mind*—about creating a sense of emotional safety that wouldn't vanish just because the sun was up.

So they adapted.

### **The Project: Daywear with Purpose**

They returned to the sketchbook. This time the title on the page read:

#### **"Outfit Ideas for Feeling Brave."**

They brainstormed features:

- Lockable or hard-to-reach back zippers for security and consistency.
- Soft but structured materials—playful, but sturdy.
- Hidden snaps at the shoulders or hips for discreet assistance if needed.
- Overalls, rompers, and jumpsuits that looked like streetwear but gave them that same safe feeling.
- Reinforced lining inside, just in case, so they could move freely.

Claire designed a short-sleeved romper in denim with rainbow buttons and a full back zip. Mae created a jumper dress with built-in bloomers and a hidden shoulder snap under the collar. They sewed prototypes with help from Mae's sister, who had a background in costume design and didn't blink at their request.

"Functional fashion," she'd said with a grin. "I've made weirder for stage shows."

The result was a small but growing wardrobe of "soft armor": clothes that let them walk into public spaces feeling held, prepared, and—oddly—stylish.

Their next outing was a botanical garden.

### **The Unspoken Rule — Part X: Locked In, Let Out**

The garments hung neatly on the wall of Claire's room—pressed, freshly stitched, and somehow glowing with anticipation. Two pieces, side by side, each a small triumph born from sketches, whispered fears, and one shared promise: *we don't do this alone*.

Claire's was a soft, mint-green romper with short puffed sleeves and little embroidered bees near the hem of each leg. The back zipper ran smoothly from the base of her neck to the top of the bloomers-style waist, where the fabric gathered slightly in a gentle poof. Inside, the lining was quilted cotton—a little thicker at the seat, soft but reassuring. There were no snaps, no shortcuts. Once zipped and locked, it was secure.

Mae's piece was pale yellow with deep overall-style straps that buttoned at the shoulders—fake buttons, hiding tiny metal snaps beneath. The jumper fell just above the knee, covering built-in bloomers with elasticized leg holes. It had a hidden zipper up the back, smaller than Claire's, with a tiny ring for the key sewn discreetly into the collar.

They had sewn matching patches inside each neckline, hand-embroidered with their initials—C & M—framed in tiny stitched hearts.

The moment came slowly, gently.

Claire picked up Mae's jumper first, holding it out like a gift. Mae stepped into it, lifting her arms wordlessly. Claire guided the straps over her shoulders, adjusted the seams, and then moved behind her to zip the back.

It slid up with a soft *zzzzip*, until it met the nape of Mae's neck. Claire paused, holding the tiny silver key between her fingers.

"You ready?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mae nodded.

Claire turned the key with a quiet *click*. The lock was subtle—an adapted piece from a dance costume supplier—but final.

Mae inhaled. "That feels... real. Like I can't back out now."

"You don't need to," Claire said. "You're perfect like this."

Then it was Mae's turn.

Claire stepped into her mint romper, pulling the fabric up over her hips, smoothing it with gentle fingers. Mae helped adjust the sleeves, brushing a stray hair from Claire's cheek before moving behind her.

The zipper closed slowly, deliberately. Claire stood still, letting herself be tucked in, held.

Mae hesitated with the key. "You sure?"

"Yes."

The lock turned.

Claire exhaled.

"I didn't think I'd like that sound," she said, "but I do. It means... I don't have to think about it anymore. It's decided. I'm safe."

They stood together, looking at themselves in the mirror—two young women in playful, polished outfits that looked like ordinary clothes to the outside world, but meant so much more to them.

Armor stitched from vulnerability. Locks that felt like trust.

Mae took Claire's hand, giving it a light squeeze.

"Ready for the garden?"

Claire smiled. "Let's bloom."



## The Unspoken Rule — Part XI: Walking Through the World

The garden path wound gently between flowering hedges and tall glass walls of the conservatory, where butterflies flitted between vines and sunlight filtered through leaves like stained glass. Claire and Mae walked side by side, fingers brushing, hearts steady.

They had done the hardest part already: stepping outside in clothes that were *theirs*. Not costumes, not hiding places—just expressions of what made them feel safe and held. And now, they were walking through the world wearing those choices.

Claire's mint romper with the tiny bees earned a glance from a pair of teenage girls sitting on a bench. One whispered something to the other and giggled—not cruelly, but clearly amused.

Claire stiffened, her breath catching for just a moment.

Mae didn't flinch. She stepped slightly closer and said, softly, "They don't know what it means. But we do."

Claire exhaled and nodded.

Near the koi pond, an older woman with silver hair smiled as they passed. “Those are adorable,” she said. “Did you make them yourselves?”

“We did,” Mae said, beaming. “They’re designed for comfort.”

“More people should dress like that,” the woman said, then went back to sketching in her notebook.

A little boy nearby tugged his dad’s arm and pointed at Claire. “Her outfit has bees!” he exclaimed.

His father chuckled. “You’re right. That’s pretty cool.”

Claire smiled, her cheeks coloring.

Not everyone understood. A few people gave them curious looks. Some seemed confused by the back zippers or the structured cut of the garments. But no one stopped them. No one mocked them out loud. And most importantly, **no one took away how they felt.**

They found a quiet corner in the shade, nestled under a flowering tree, and laid out a soft picnic blanket Mae had brought. Bottles of water, small snacks, and a tiny thermos of warm milk for later—just enough familiarity to soothe them.

As they sat, Mae leaned back and said, “You know what I noticed?”

“What?”

“Every reaction we got came from *them*. But how we feel—that’s ours. And it hasn’t changed.”

Claire looked down at her outfit—the soft seams, the comforting structure, the little patch near her knee with her initial stitched into it—and smiled.

“No,” she agreed. “It hasn’t. I still feel like... me. Maybe more than ever.”

They stayed at the garden until the sun dipped low, painting the conservatory glass in gold. As they packed up, Claire turned to Mae.

“Next time, let’s bring the sketchbook,” she said.

Mae grinned. “Already in my bag.”

## **The Unspoken Rule — Part XII : Outfits for the Orchard**

After the botanical garden, something had shifted—not just in the way Claire and Mae felt about going out, but in the way they *prepared* to go out. Now, every outing was a tiny story, a soft mission, a reason to sketch something new.

Mae was the first to suggest it:

“Apple picking?”

Claire nodded with a bright grin. “With tree climbing, cider, and maybe a picnic?”

They opened the sketchbook together.

Mae wrote at the top of the page in rounded handwriting:

**“Clothes for Climbing, Carrying Apples, and Feeling Secure.”**

Claire immediately began sketching a forest-green corduroy romper—elastic waist, reinforced knees, discreet back zipper under a stitched leaf patch, and little acorn embroidery on the hip.

Mae started with her usual idea: a rust-orange jumper dress with scalloped hems over a cream knit top. But then she hesitated.

“I love this design,” she said, tracing her pencil over it, “but... if I wear bloomers under a dress, it doesn’t stop me from accessing it. I want the same boundary we have at night. That locked-in feeling.”

Claire thought for a moment, then pointed. “What if the dress has built-in culottes instead of a skirt? Wide-legged shorts that *look* like a skirt but are sewn shut at the back—maybe even buttoned to the bodice under the waistline?”

Mae’s eyes lit up. “Yes. And the bloomers can fasten to loops inside the culottes—so they can’t come down unless you *unhook* them.”

They refined the design:

- Rust-orange culotte-style jumper with a hidden rear zipper, secured at the neck with a flat clasp.
- Built-in bloomers made from soft terry cotton, with subtle tabs that snapped to the inner waistband.
- A gently flared shape that still looked like a dress, but functioned like a barrier—protective, affirming.

They sewed for two evenings, Mae’s sister helping discreetly with reinforcement stitching. By the time they stood before the mirror the morning of the orchard trip, they weren’t just dressed—they were armored in softness.

Claire wore her bee-trimmed romper over thick leggings, boots laced up to her calves. Mae stood tall in her new outfit, twirling slightly.

Claire tugged gently on the zipper at the back of Mae’s collar.

“Ready?”

Mae nodded.

*Zzzip.*

*Click.*

Mae exhaled slowly, letting her shoulders relax. “Perfect. I feel like I’m buckled into myself.”



The orchard was everything they'd imagined—red and gold leaves underfoot, baskets swinging at their hips, cider warming their hands. Children giggled as they passed, and a woman with a DSLR camera asked if she could take their photo “because you two look like a storybook.”

Later, behind a tall hedge, Mae needed a change.

Claire knelt down, unfastening the hidden snaps at Mae's waistband, gently releasing the bloomers from the culotte loops after unlocking the back of the jumper.

It was quiet. Respectful. Intimate in the way trust is, not romance.

Mae touched her arm afterward. “Thank you for making this with me.”

Claire smiled. “We're writing something together. One outfit at a time.”

### **The Unspoken Rule — Part XIII: From Soft Rain to Strong Stitching**

Rain had always been comforting to Claire and Mae—something that matched the quiet rhythm of their rituals. They'd imagined rainy-day outfits as far back as their earliest sketchbook pages: oversized hoods, waterproof rompers, snug legging covers, cozy linings. Things to shield and soothe.

So when the forecast finally promised a week of showers, they decided: *It's time.*

They got to work sewing. They used coated cotton for light waterproofing and added soft fleece lining for warmth. Mae designed a sage-green poncho with a snap-up collar and scalloped edge. Claire made a navy-blue short raincoat with deep patch pockets and a matching cap. Both wore thick bloomers underneath and high socks with boots. The pieces weren't fully sealed, but they looked adorable and made them feel brave.

Their first rainy walk through the park was nearly perfect—light drizzle, puddles to stomp, laughter under shared umbrellas.

But by the end of the day, reality set in.

Water had leaked in through the seams.

The cotton lining sagged under the weight of absorbed rain.

And the bloomers, despite their effort, had gotten damp around the legs.

They stood in the entryway of Claire's house peeling off soaked outerwear and exchanging rueful smiles.

“I loved the look,” Mae said, wringing out a sleeve, “but it's not built for this.”

Claire nodded, holding up her squishy poncho. “We need something stronger. Sturdier. Not just cute—*capable.*”

Mae was quiet for a moment. “What about leather?”

Claire blinked. “Really?”

“Or waxed canvas. Something durable. Protective. It doesn't have to be harsh—it just has to *hold.*”

But they quickly hit a wall.

They had **no clue how to work with leather**.

Cutting it was hard. Stitching it was harder. And waterproofing? They didn't even know where to begin.

So they tried what they always did when they were stuck: they asked for help.

Mae brought it up first with her sister, who used to work in community theater costumes.

"There's a leatherworker who does commissions for cosplay props," her sister said. "Not cheap. But friendly. Might even be willing to trade time or sketching for tutoring."

The next weekend, they visited the workshop — a warm-smelling little studio filled with belts, bags, and cloaks in deep brown, forest green, and oxblood red. The leatherworker, a soft-spoken woman in her thirties named Andi, was intrigued by their designs.

"I've never made anything like this before," she said, flipping through their sketchbook. "But I love the intent. These aren't costumes. They're boundaries."

Claire nodded. "Exactly. They keep the world out, but they don't hide us."

Andi agreed to mentor them — in exchange for helping clean the shop, organize templates, and digitize some of her pattern drafts.

They learned slowly:

- How to soften hides without cracking them.
- How to reinforce seams with waxed thread.
- How to punch holes for adjustable straps that could lock.
- And how to line even heavy materials with fleece or soft flannel, so tough didn't have to mean rough.

After three weekends of cutting, gluing, stitching, and swearing through pinched fingers, they finished their first pieces.

#### **Claire's Outfit:**

A chocolate-brown waxed romper with heavy straps that buckled at the back — wide-legged enough to hide bloomers, short enough to climb and play. Her hooded poncho, waxed cotton with a fleece inner lining, snapped shut at the collar and flared gently like a cloak. The back zip locked with a simple brass hook she could only open with Mae's help.

#### **Mae's Outfit:**

Olive-green culotte overalls made from supple, sealed leather — lined in brushed cotton, with side flaps that could be fastened down to make them airtight. She wore a rain jacket stitched from repurposed vinyl with hand-painted leaves across the sleeves, fastened with toggle buttons that gave it a woodland feel.

They wore them proudly the next rainy day, stomping puddles in high boots, hoods up and laughing under the gray sky. Passersby glanced and smiled — curious, amused, or simply admiring their unbothered joy.

Claire spun in a circle, her cloak billowing. "We made armor."



Mae grinned beneath her hood. “And it feels like a hug.”



### The Unspoken Rule — Part XIV: Design for Others

The storm passed, but Claire and Mae’s momentum didn’t. Their leather rainwear had weathered more than the sky—it had survived doubt, soaked cotton, and the slow curve of learning something new.

Back in Claire’s room, the sketchbook was getting heavier. Literally. They had taped in swatches of waxed canvas, bits of snapped thread, and tiny leather test patches. The pages were layered with new entries:

- **Festival Layering Sets**
- **Winter Warm-Overalls with Lock Tabs**
- **Stretch-Rain Bloomers with Snap Gaiters**
- **"Secret Security Pockets" (for keys or comfort items)**

But then something unexpected happened.

One afternoon, Mae’s phone buzzed. A text from Andi, their leather mentor:

*Hey. Do you two take design commissions? I’ve got something special I’d like to collaborate on. It’s not cosplay. Real-world need. Let me know.*

They met that Saturday in Andi's workshop. The air smelled of cedar oil and warm leather, and the workbench was covered with paper sketches and mock-up pieces.

Andi didn't wait long. "I got contacted by a client. Young adult, neurodivergent. Wheelchair user. She wants something custom for both function and comfort—protective, sensory-friendly, but also stylish. She's tired of 'hospital gray' and stuff that screams 'adaptive.' She saw a cloak I made and asked if I could help."

Claire's eyes lit up. "And you thought of us?"

"You *are* the only two people I know making zip-lock bloomers with flower embroidery and stormproof overalls," Andi said with a grin.

Mae sat forward. "What does she need exactly?"

Andi pointed to a list she had scribbled on a pinned-up sheet:

- Full back zipper for ease with caregivers
- No buttons or tight snaps — sensory sensitive
- Soft lining, breathable but durable
- Water-resistant cape or coat
- Cute. Very cute.

Claire and Mae looked at each other.

Mae said, "We'd love to help."

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## The Collaboration

It became their first *external* project—designing not just for themselves, but for someone else's very real, very personal needs.

They met the client, a girl named Nina with a spark in her eyes and blunt honesty that Mae admired immediately.

"I want to look cool," Nina said, "and I want my back to stop itching. Also, I hate Velcro."

They all laughed.

Working together, they developed a capsule wardrobe just for her:

- A soft denim jumpsuit with interior fleece lining and a hidden zipper that ran from shoulder to mid-back, lockable if she wanted privacy during assisted dressing.
- A waxed cotton capelet with satin-smooth lining, designed to drape over wheelchair handles without bunching.
- A sensory-friendly bodysuit with flat seams and gentle compression, made in a lavender-and-berry color palette Nina picked herself.

When Nina tried on the prototype, she looked in the mirror, did a little spin (in her chair), and declared, "I look *magical*."

Claire teared up a little.

Mae smiled and whispered, "We did that."

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### **The Shift**

After that, something inside both of them changed. Their sketchbook didn't feel like *just theirs* anymore.

Claire turned to Mae one evening as they sat in their softest PJs, sketchbook between them.

"What if this is more than just clothes for us?"

Mae nodded. "What if it's a language?"

"A language of comfort," Claire said, "for people who've never had a way to ask for it."

### **The Unspoken Rule — Part XV: Quiet Solutions, Loud Impact**

What started as a sketchbook shared between two girls had, somehow, become a movement — not loud or viral, but real. Word spread slowly, almost reverently, through small communities: caregivers, therapists, disability advocates, even parents in support groups.

Claire and Mae didn't advertise. They didn't have a brand. Just a reputation for listening.

And one feature that set them apart: **locks**.

Not for control. Not for punishment. But for peace of mind.

For people who removed clothing unconsciously due to sensory overload or trauma. For people who needed caregiver assistance with dignity. For people who simply *felt safer* knowing something wouldn't come undone by accident.

Their inbox filled steadily.

Some requests came in single sentences:

*My sister with cerebral palsy wants a bodysuit that feels more like a hoodie.*

*My son removes his clothes during meltdowns and feels ashamed. Can you help?*

*I need bloomers I can't take off when I'm disoriented. But I want them to be pink with lace. Please.*

*Do you do wedding dresses that lock?*

Claire and Mae read every message aloud to each other. Some made them smile. Some made them cry.

But all of them made them *act*.

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### **Design by Listening**

For each person, they created not just a garment, but a conversation.

They asked:

- “What do you hate about what’s currently out there?”
- “Where do you feel most unsafe?”
- “What *color* makes you feel strong?”

They sketched in real-time, sometimes on video calls, sometimes by mail. They sent swatches. They offered to add hidden comfort objects sewn into lining, soft tags with affirmations, backup zippers that only a caregiver could reach.

#### Some of their early custom projects:

- A **sleep-safe bodysuit** for an autistic teen who frequently removed clothes at night — designed with bright sea-foam green fabric and cloud-print interior, zipped down the back and gently locked with a tab at the neck that made a soft *click*.
- A **garden work romper** for an adult with early-onset dementia — sturdy canvas with reinforced knees, locking shoulder tabs, and a pocket for labels and notes stitched inside.
- A **gender-neutral jumpsuit** for a nonverbal adult with Down syndrome — made of brushed flannel, in sunset colors, with a discreet lock at the hip and snaps concealed by a rainbow-piped seam.

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#### Growing Without Selling Out

Word of mouth grew, but Claire and Mae were cautious. They didn’t want to become just a factory for “special needs clothes.” They wanted to stay intimate. Attentive.

So they created "**The Soft List**" — a rolling, always-capped waiting list of commissions. Every client got a hand-drawn illustration of their piece, a fabric kit, and a promise: *You are not a number here.*

Andi, the leatherworker, helped them build sturdier options. Mae’s sister helped scale patterns. Occasionally, friends and former clients even volunteered time — folding, stitching, offering insight.

Their workshop was still Claire’s room, then eventually Mae’s sister’s spare sunroom. But it smelled like lavender, tea, and fabric glue. And it felt like something sacred.

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#### The Core Truth

Despite all the variety — the colors, shapes, zippers, snaps — one feature kept appearing, in nearly every request:

##### The lock.

Not a restraint.

Not a punishment.

But a promise.

*This won’t fall away.*

*This is yours to decide.*

*This space is safe.*

And in a world where people were so often told they were difficult, messy, or inconvenient, Claire and Mae had built a language of care out of brass hooks, soft fabrics, and the smallest sound in the world:

**Click.**