

The Wardrobe at Wetherby House

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

Part I

The storm had come in fast—thick black clouds, sideways rain, and wind that howled through the trees like a warning. Claire's old car coughed once, twice, and died somewhere between where her GPS had given up and nowhere at all. No signal. No nearby towns. Just endless countryside and the hiss of rain on metal.

Then, through the fog, a flicker of light. A house—large, looming, and unmistakably ancient—perched on a rise above the road. She pulled her hood tighter and made for it.

The woman who answered the door looked like she belonged in another era: tall, straight-backed, with hair the color of ash swept into a precise bun. She wore a long gown with high lace at the collar and buttons that ran to her throat.

“My dear,” she said, eyes scanning Claire’s sodden form, “you must come in at once. You’ll catch your death.”

Claire stepped inside, dripping and shivering.

“You’ll need to get out of those clothes,” the woman continued matter-of-factly, guiding her up a broad staircase. “They won’t dry in this weather. I have... alternatives.”

Claire opened her mouth to protest but was too cold, too tired to argue.

The room she was led into was rich with age—dark wood, a four-poster bed, and the smell of lavender and time. Laid out on a chair was a collection of clothing that looked like it belonged in a museum: corsets, petticoats, lace-up boots, and an opulent gown of wine-red silk.

“Wait,” Claire said. “You want me to wear... these?”

The old woman gave a small, knowing smile. “They’ll keep you warm, and they’re all I have in your size. My daughter wore them, long ago. I’ll help you—most modern girls don’t know how to lace a corset properly.”

Claire hesitated. The garments looked beautiful, yes, but also impossible. Still... there was a strange, quiet thrill at the idea of stepping into another world.

“All right,” she said. “But don’t laugh if I faint.”

The old woman chuckled softly. “You’d be surprised how strong those women had to be.”

Claire stripped behind a changing screen. The old woman handed her first a shift, then a corset.

“Arms up,” she said gently, drawing the stays around Claire’s torso. “Now breathe in.”

Claire did, and felt the tightening begin. The cords pulled firm, then tighter, until her waist was cinched and her breathing shallow.

"Oh wow," she gasped. "How did anyone wear these every day?"

"They learned control," the woman said. "Of the body, and of the mind."

Next came a petticoat, layered and stiff. Then the gown, which buttoned up the back with small, stubborn buttons. The sleeves were snug; the collar brushed her chin. She could barely turn her head.

When she looked in the mirror, she almost didn't recognize herself. The shape, the posture, the stillness the clothes imposed—it all transformed her.

"You look like you've stepped out of time," the woman said.

"I *feel* like I've stepped into a cage," Claire said, but she couldn't deny the fascination. Every movement had to be deliberate. Every breath measured.

"I have more, if you'd like to try them later," the old woman said. She opened a tall armoire. Inside were hats with feathers, gloves that reached the elbow, and walking dresses with even more structure. One dress had a bustle that looked like a sculpture; another had beadwork that shimmered even in low light.

Claire reached out to touch the fabric.

"This is insane," she whispered. "But kind of... amazing."

The woman's eyes glinted. "It's not for everyone. But for those who understand, it's a way of life. A discipline."

Claire turned back to the mirror. Her breath came short, her spine was rigid, but she couldn't look away.

Maybe just for tonight, she thought, she could live as someone else.

Just long enough to know what it felt like.

Later, she would wonder why the old woman never mentioned a phone.

Or why the garments fit so perfectly.

But for now, she stayed in the warmth of the firelit parlor, drinking strange tea, her reflection stiff and ghostly in the tall mirror—and the wardrobe behind her slightly ajar, revealing more relics of a life long vanished, just waiting to be worn again.

Part II

The storm showed no signs of easing. By nightfall, the windows shook with wind, and the countryside beyond them was a swirling sheet of rain and shadow. Claire sat by the fire in the drawing room, still in the Victorian gown. She hadn't dared take it off—not just because she didn't know how, but because part of her was strangely afraid to.

"There's a room made up for you," the old woman said gently. "The one across the hall. It was my daughter's."

Claire looked up from her tea. "Are you sure? I can sleep on the sofa or something—"

"Nonsense," the woman said, tone suddenly firm. "A guest under this roof is never left to the cold. You'll sleep in a proper bed, in proper garments."

Claire blinked. "Garments?"

The woman gave a patient smile, as if speaking to someone very young. "Nightclothes, of course. We don't sleep in corsets. That would be cruel."

Upstairs, Claire found a long, white cotton nightgown with fine lace at the collar and sleeves, laid out on the bed beside a heavy, quilted dressing robe and thick wool stockings. The woman helped her undress until Claire could take care of the rest herself.

The nightgown was surprisingly comfortable—softer than she expected, and warm—but the high collar and long hem made her feel like a child being tucked in for a story. Still, the bed was impossibly soft, and the warmth of the fire seeped into her bones.

She slept deeply, though her dreams were filled with whispering voices and the rustle of skirts behind closed doors.

Morning

Sunlight streamed through the lace curtains, casting delicate patterns across the room. Claire stretched—and gasped. Her ribs ached slightly from the corset the day before, and her legs felt oddly stiff. She padded to the window, still in the long nightgown, and saw only mist rolling over the hills.

She turned as the door creaked open. The old woman stepped in carrying a bundle of garments and a brush.

"Up, now," she said cheerfully, but with that same hint of command. "We've no time to laze about. You'll need help dressing. I've selected something more practical for the day—a walking dress and sturdy boots. Still proper, of course."

Claire opened her mouth to object, but the woman was already laying out the pieces with a practiced hand: a soft but structured day corset, chemise, bloomers, underskirt, and a gray-blue wool dress with a fitted bodice and pleated skirt. A wide-brimmed hat with a simple ribbon rested beside a pair of lace-up leather boots.

"Do I have to wear... all of it?" Claire asked cautiously.

The old woman paused mid-fold, giving her a look both kind and unyielding.

"My dear, one does not *half* dress in this house. Appearances are a reflection of self-respect. Discipline. Decorum. I would not let *my* daughter go out in anything less."

The way she said *my daughter* made Claire's chest tighten. It wasn't cruel—just... final. Expectant. Familial in a way Claire hadn't felt in years.

Claire sat obediently at the vanity as the woman brushed and pinned up her hair. The corset was tighter today, but not suffocating. The boots stiffened her gait, and the dress didn't allow for slouching. By the time she was buttoned, laced, and pinned, Claire felt both elegant and trapped.

"You look *right*," the old woman said softly, placing a gloved hand on her shoulder.

Claire glanced at herself in the mirror—her waist impossibly narrow, her hair a sleek crown, her figure upright and still. The longer she looked, the less she recognized the girl in jeans who'd arrived in the rain.

"Will I be able to leave today?" Claire asked, her voice quiet.

The old woman smiled, brushing invisible lint from her sleeve. "Only if the road allows it, dear. In the meantime... I think you'll find there's much to learn. You have such potential. It's just a matter of structure."

Claire nodded slowly, unsure whether it was agreement or surrender.

Outside, the mist clung stubbornly to the hills, and the wardrobe behind her stood slightly ajar, waiting.

Part III

The rain did not stop.

For two more days, it fell in unbroken sheets. The narrow country roads turned to mud, the telephone lines sagged with water, and the power flickered out late the first night and never returned. There was no cell service, and the radio gave nothing but static.

Claire adapted, because there was little else to do.

She ate by candlelight, read old books by the fire, and submitted—somewhat grudgingly—to the old woman's careful dressing each morning. Every day, a different ensemble: a stiffer corset, a heavier skirt, a narrower collar. "You carry yourself better already," the woman would say. "So poised. So contained."

Claire said little. She wasn't sure if she was agreeing—or just losing the will to argue.

On the third day, she found the photo album.

It was on a shelf in a sitting room she hadn't explored before, half-hidden behind a curtain of lace and dust. The album was bound in cracked leather, its pages stiff and smelling of age. Inside were photographs—sepia-toned portraits of a girl around Claire's age. The old woman's daughter.

In the first few pictures, she smiled faintly, posed in fine Victorian dresses similar to those Claire now wore.

But further in, the images grew... stranger.

The girl's waist was impossibly narrow, her spine rigid. In one image, she stood beside a large wooden backboard, her body lashed to it with broad straps. In another, she wore boots so tall and

stiff they reached her thighs. One photograph showed her seated in bed, a single leather glove encasing both her arms—laced shut.

Claire's fingers brushed the page.

"What in the world...?"

She didn't hear the old woman enter until her voice broke the silence behind her.

"Ah," she said with quiet fondness. "You've found the album."

Claire jumped, heart skipping. "These photos—was this all part of her... wardrobe?"

The old woman stepped closer, peering over Claire's shoulder with a soft sigh. "My Iris. She had a... wandering spirit, much like yours. She needed firm structure. The backboard helped with posture, especially at night. The knee straps—those were to curb unladylike movement. And the glove..." She smiled. "That was for rest. To quiet busy hands. So much mischief starts with idle fingers."

Claire stared at the images again. "She wore all this... voluntarily?"

"Not at first," the woman said, her voice mild. "But in time, she grew to understand the *freedom* of constraint. She no longer had to *choose* how to carry herself. The expectations were woven into the clothing."

Claire didn't know what to say. She felt a mix of horror and... intrigue. There was something hypnotic about the precision of it all. The discipline. The formality. As if the girl in the photographs had been transformed into something other than human—an ideal, sculpted and silent.

The old woman touched Claire's shoulder.

"I'm glad you're curious," she said gently. "I was beginning to worry you might long for the road again."

Claire's stomach twisted. "About that—are the roads still...?"

"Flooded," the woman said briskly. "I checked myself. No chance of leaving just yet. But don't worry. You've been so adaptable. I've taken the liberty of preparing something new for you. Something a bit more structured, since you've been progressing so well."

Claire's eyes widened. "You mean, like—?"

"Oh, not the backboard just yet," the woman said with a soft chuckle. "But a few small additions. Training gloves. Modest stride limiters. A collar stiffener. Nothing too extreme."

She smiled warmly, as if she'd just offered Claire tea and a blanket.

Claire opened her mouth, but no sound came.

The storm continued outside, as relentless as ever. The house was dark, the lamps dim. And the wardrobe stood wide open, revealing its secrets like a mouth waiting to close.

"Come," said the woman. "Let's dress you for the afternoon. I'll show you how to walk properly in the new boots. Heel to toe. Controlled. Refined."

Claire stood slowly, her hands trembling just a little.

And followed her.

Claire followed the old woman down the hall, her footsteps muffled by the thick rugs. The house had grown quieter since the power had gone out—no hum of appliances, no flicker of screens. Only the ticking of a wind-up clock in the drawing room and the steady rhythm of rain against the windows.

The dressing room was warm, lit by gas lamps and the low flicker of a hearth. The wardrobe stood open, revealing rows of garments—gowns in dark velvet and muted silk, stiff white petticoats, polished boots, and hanging leather accessories whose function Claire could only guess at.

On a nearby chair lay the new ensemble the old woman had promised: a dove-grey dress with a high collar and delicate buttons, a fresh corset with reinforced stays, and a pair of long gloves laced from fingertip to elbow. Beside them sat an unfamiliar object: a pair of narrow leather straps, each with polished brass buckles.

Claire's eyes lingered on them.

"Are those...?"

"Knee restrictors," the woman said cheerfully. "A simple aid to shorten your stride. One foot in front of the other, slow and deliberate. It adds grace—and prevents the kind of hurried scuttling so many girls fall into these days."

Claire gave a tight nod, uncertain. "And the gloves?"

"Restraint gloves," the woman said, picking them up and smoothing them across her palm. "Not binding. Just firm. They teach stillness. You'd be surprised how the hands fidget when they have freedom. And with the right guidance, you'll find stillness is not a punishment—it's peace."

Claire shifted on her feet, nerves fluttering in her stomach. But the fire was warm, the rain was relentless, and the outside world felt impossibly far away. Besides, the old woman had begun helping her undress with such practiced ease that to resist would feel almost rude.

The corset went on first—tighter than any before, but not quite unbearable. Then came the dress, its buttons small and innumerable. The gloves slid over her arms and were laced tightly, not to cause pain, but to remove motion. Her fingers curled within, stilled by the thick seams.

Finally, the old woman knelt and fastened the straps around her knees, snug and secure.

"There," she said, standing back to admire her work. "You look perfect. So contained. So still."

Claire took a few slow steps. Her knees could only part slightly, forcing a narrow, measured gait. The dress brushed against her calves with every motion, her arms pinned close to her sides by the stiff gloves. She felt like a figure in a painting—poised, pretty, and completely unable to move freely.

But somewhere, beneath the discomfort and constraint, a strange stillness *did* settle in. A hush. Her mind quieted when her body had no choice but to obey.

The old woman seemed to sense it. She nodded approvingly.

"You see? Discipline is not a prison. It's an art. Most girls flail about, never knowing the joy of control. But not you, Claire. You understand."

Claire wasn't sure she did. But she couldn't deny the sense of surrender. It was easier, in a way, to be told what to wear, how to walk, how to sit. To be *shaped*. To let the decisions rest in someone else's hands.

That night, after supper, the woman brought her a new bedtime accessory: the single glove.

It was long, black, and made of supple leather. It joined both hands together, palm to palm, laced tightly from wrist to elbow like a sheath. Claire stared at it for a long time before whispering, "You really want me to sleep in that?"

"I do," the woman said kindly. "It's not punishment, my dear. It's comfort. Like swaddling a child. You'll sleep more soundly. And it will remind your hands that rest is sacred."

Claire sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the glove, until the woman gently took her hands and began to fit them inside. Her fingers interlaced, the leather slid around them, and the laces were drawn tight. A final tug and knot. There was no pulling free.

"Good girl," the old woman murmured, brushing hair from Claire's face.

Claire's breathing was shallow. She lay back, heart pounding, bound hands resting on her chest like a statue in a cathedral.

The lamps dimmed. The rain whispered on.

Outside, the world was soaked and silent. Inside, Claire was still, swaddled in ritual and silence, a porcelain figure on linen sheets.

And in the dark, the wardrobe stood open, waiting again.

Part IV

The days fell into a strange rhythm.

Claire no longer asked about the roads. There seemed little point. The rain came and went in waves, but always returned. Every morning brought another elaborate outfit, another careful ritual of dressing. The old woman was precise, always gentle but never soft in her expectations. Claire was never given more than a moment to question or resist. And strangely... that steadiness was comforting.

Her mother had died when Claire was eleven, and since then, life had been motion—always moving, deciding, adapting. Now, for the first time in years, someone else held the reins. Someone made sure she was fed, warm, and dressed—beautifully, if rigidly. She didn't have to think. She only had to comply.

The old woman would brush her hair slowly in the evenings, pin it up with silver combs, and say things like, "That's my girl," or "You do me proud, walking so straight." It sent a warmth into Claire's chest she hadn't realized she missed. The words she used—*my girl, my daughter*—felt too easy, too natural, like they had always belonged.

But still, under the warmth, under the tea and the gentle hands and the praise, something gnawed at Claire: the quiet, growing awareness that she was no longer *choosing* any of this. Her clothes shaped

her body, her stride, her breath, her sleep. And her thoughts... well, they were quieter too. Less resistant.

One night, after the old woman had gone to her own chambers, Claire sat on the edge of her bed in the long white nightgown, her arms resting in the lap of her own bound hands—laced together in the single sleeping glove. Her back ached faintly from the stiff back brace she had begun wearing during daytime “lessons.” The corset she had worn earlier had left red marks along her ribs. It was the tightest yet.

She stared at the wardrobe. At the dressing mirror. At the lace canopy overhead. At the flickering firelight.

Her breath was shallow. Her fingers tingled.

And quietly, she began to wriggle.

First, she tried her hands. The glove was tightly laced, but the top knot wasn’t quite unreachable. She sat up straighter and fumbled her joined wrists toward her mouth, trying to catch the laces in her teeth. She pulled, tugged—slowly, one small loop loosened.

Then a sudden voice behind her:

“Iris?”

Claire froze.

She turned, stiff with panic.

The old woman stood in the doorway, wrapped in a shawl, her expression unreadable in the half-light.

Claire cleared her throat. “I—what did you call me?”

There was a pause. Then the old woman smiled gently.

“I’m sorry, dear. Just a slip of the tongue. You reminded me of her.”

Claire’s heart was pounding. “I was just... testing the laces. They’re very tight.”

“I know,” the woman said, stepping inside. “But they must be. That’s what gives them meaning. Restraint only works when it isn’t optional.”

She crossed the room and took Claire’s bound hands in hers, re-tightening the laces with delicate, practiced fingers, and making a tight double knot.

“There. Better.”

Claire opened her mouth, but the woman gently touched her cheek.

“I understand, my dear. It’s natural to want to pull away. To test your edges. But you must learn to live *within* the form—not fight it. Freedom is chaos. Discipline is love.”

Claire swallowed hard. Her throat felt dry.

“I... I don’t know if I can do this forever.”

The old woman looked at her with something between pity and affection.

"No one does, at first. But in time, you won't even think of loosening the laces. You'll wonder how you ever lived any other way."

She kissed Claire's forehead, then turned and moved back toward the door.

"Sleep well, my Iris," she said, too softly for correction.

The door closed.

Claire lay back, her hands now held tightly in the glove once more. She stared at the ceiling, heart thrumming. Rain tapped on the windows like fingers trying to get in.

And in the wardrobe, she imagined, another ensemble was waiting.

Tighter. Higher. Stricter.

More *perfect*.

Part V

The next morning dawned grey and colorless. Mist wrapped around the mansion like gauze, and the rain had dulled to a persistent drizzle. Claire hadn't slept. Not really. Her wrists ached faintly where the sleeping glove had pressed them together all night, and her dreams—when she dipped into them—had been filled with rustling skirts and the sensation of unseen hands adjusting her posture, tugging laces tighter, whispering things she couldn't quite remember.

She sat up stiffly, rubbing her eyes against the dawn. Her hair was mussed—she hadn't dared pull out the pins—but her spirit was fraying in ways she couldn't ignore. The love she'd felt from the old woman, the strange comfort of being looked after, was still there... but it had become something else too. Something possessive. Something almost ritualistic.

She rose and stepped toward the tall mirror. Her reflection looked ghostly in the pale light. The nightgown gave her the appearance of some Victorian invalid or distant heirloom brought down from a shelf.

She opened the wardrobe.

The dress for the day was already laid out inside.

This one was unlike the others: black, high-necked, with a velvet bodice and long sleeves ending in stiff cuffs. A mourning dress. Its collar had a small black cameo, and beneath it lay a heavier corset than before—broader steel boning, tighter seams. A pair of boots rested on the floor, next to a pair of narrower-than-ever stride limiters.

There was also a folded note atop the corset.

"For my Iris. You've come so far. I'm proud of you. Let's begin the next stage."

Claire stood motionless for a long time.

She nearly shut the wardrobe. Nearly tore the note. Nearly screamed.

Instead, she dressed.

The old woman found her downstairs, seated perfectly upright in the parlor, hands resting still and proper in her lap. The black dress transformed her—no longer a curious guest, but something closer to a relic, an obedient echo of the girl in the photographs.

The woman's eyes lit with quiet joy.

"Oh, my darling. *Now* you look like her. You *are* her."

Claire swallowed.

"I'm not," she said softly. "I'm not Iris."

The woman tilted her head, expression calm but unreadable.

"No. Not yet."

There was something final in that. Something inarguable. Claire looked down, feeling the corset press like a ring of steel around her lungs. The straps at her knees barely let her shift in her chair. Her boots pinched. Her collar itched. But she didn't—*couldn't*—move.

"I miss my mother," Claire whispered, the words escaping before she could stop them. "She died when I was little. I barely remember what it was like to have someone... care for me. Tell me what to do. Keep me safe."

The old woman moved closer, kneeling before her like a priestess before a girl made altar.

"I know," she said gently. "That's why you're here. That's why you *need* this. The world outside is formless. Cruel. But here—here there is love, and form, and purpose."

She reached into her pocket and drew out something small. A delicate silver key. She pressed it into Claire's gloved hands, guiding her fingers closed around it.

"You may open the locked drawer in the wardrobe. Only now. Only *when you're ready*."

That night, Claire sat on the edge of the bed, the silver key still in her hand. Her wrists were bound again in the sleeping glove, though she'd asked—weakly—not to wear it. The old woman had smiled, then silently laced it tighter than ever.

Now, alone, Claire cradled the key in her hands. She stared at the wardrobe. The drawer at the bottom was small, flush with the wood, almost invisible unless you knew to look for it.

She stood.

The glove made walking clumsy, and the stride limiters were still affixed—her legs brushing uncomfortably with each narrow step. But she reached the drawer. Knelt slowly.

The key clicked in with a soft finality.

Inside was a folded dress.

Not black this time—but cream-colored, soft and ceremonial-looking, trimmed with lace and tiny, pearl-like buttons that would take a full hour to fasten. Alongside it, laid in velvet, was a collar unlike

the others: tall, molded, with an interior brace that would hold her head perfectly still. A note rested beneath it, written in the same hand.

“For the transformation. Once worn, it is final.”

Claire knelt there, the drawer open, the air still and heavy.

Somewhere deep in the house, she heard the old woman moving.

And faintly, distantly, she thought she heard her name again.

But not *Claire*.

Not even *Iris*.

Just... *Daughter*.

Part VI

The storm had not broken, but inside the house the fire still glowed, the clocks still ticked, and the air was always warm. Yet Claire’s skin prickled beneath the calm.

That night, after the old woman had gone to bed and the halls of Wetherby House settled into their familiar hush, Claire sat in front of the mirror. The ceremonial collar and dress still lay in the open drawer behind her. The key was hidden in the bodice of her nightgown. The glove—mercifully—had not yet been applied.

Her body ached. The day’s corset had left deep impressions on her sides and across her back. Her legs were sore from the stride limiters. She’d barely eaten at dinner, her waist too tightly cinched to take more than small spoonfuls.

And something in her had finally whispered: *enough*.

She moved slowly, carefully. She knew the old woman could be awake, listening. Still, she crept to the wardrobe and closed the doors quietly. Then she unfastened the buttons of her nightgown and reached behind her, fingers straining to find the laces of the corset that was always there—even under sleepwear now.

Her fingers trembled.

She tugged.

The laces pulled tighter at first, then caught, and finally began to slip. Just slightly. The corset gave maybe an inch—and Claire gasped at the sudden ease in her breath.

She almost cried.

Then the light clicked on behind her—an oil lamp flaring to life.

The old woman stood in the doorway, her hair loose for the night but her face composed.

Claire froze, her hands still gripping the laces.

The woman said nothing for a long moment. Then, gently:

“Claire. What are you doing, my dear?”

Claire turned slowly. "I—I just needed a break. I couldn't breathe. I needed..."

"Freedom?" the woman finished, her voice quiet. "I see."

She walked forward, graceful even in her dressing gown, and knelt in front of Claire. "Do you think I don't understand what it feels like? The pressure. The fear. The loss of choice. But my dear girl, what you see as limits are really *protection*. What you think of as control is *care*."

Claire didn't answer. Her fingers still gripped the loosened laces, halfway between flight and surrender.

"Iris tried, too," the woman said softly. "She once unlaced herself so far she fainted in the hall. Her body had grown so used to structure, it no longer *knew* how to hold itself."

Claire's breath hitched.

The old woman looked up at her with that same mix of love and unwavering firmness. "I will not let you come to harm. If you cannot yet choose discipline, then I must give it to you until you can."

She reached into the pocket of her robe and pulled out something small: a lock. Silver and subtle.

Before Claire could react, the woman moved behind her with the ease of long practice. The laces of the corset were drawn back tight—one, two, three hard pulls—and then secured not with a knot, but a *click*.

The corset was locked.

Claire inhaled sharply—but could go no further. The compression was immediate and total.

Then the gloves came out, and the sleeping glove was reapplied—tighter than before. Her arms were drawn together, fingers pressed palm to palm, and the familiar lacing climbed up her forearms. This time, the knot was sealed under a leather flap.

Restrained again.

"Please," Claire whispered, voice cracking. "I just wanted—just wanted to decide for myself."

The old woman cradled her face gently. Her eyes were soft.

"You already did, my sweet girl. The moment you stayed. The moment you let me dress you. All that's left now is to *complete* it."

She helped Claire into bed, pulled the blankets up, and kissed her forehead.

"You'll understand. Soon."

The next morning was still and heavy. The air in the house felt different—like something had reached its conclusion.

Claire dressed slowly, with the old woman's guidance. She didn't speak, and the woman didn't ask questions. The final outfit was the one from the hidden drawer: the cream-colored ceremonial dress. Long, heavy, high-necked, its fabric stiff with embroidery and lined with interior stays that left no part of her body free.

And then, finally, came the collar.

It stood on the table like a porcelain crown. Tall, shaped, almost regal. Claire stared at it for a long time.

“It will hold your head in place,” the woman said gently. “Straight. Proud. No more downward glances. No more hesitation. You’ll learn to hold your gaze like a lady.”

Claire trembled.

But she did not resist.

The woman fastened the collar around her throat. It clicked shut with a whisper of finality. Claire could no longer look down—only straight ahead. Her spine aligned perfectly. She was no longer allowed to slouch, or turn, or escape her own posture.

The mirror reflected someone who looked like nobility. Composed. Frozen. Unmistakably *finished*.

And somewhere inside, Claire felt a part of herself release. A deep breath she could never quite draw before. A surrender that was both loss... and peace.

The old woman took her hand—the gloved one—and squeezed it gently.

“My daughter,” she said softly, “you are finally whole.”

And Claire, in the quiet that followed, nodded.

