

The Catch

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Chapter Ten

Surgeons can be so old-fashioned. Mr Touma, for example. He is the Lincoln Family surgeon, as much as such a thing is possible, doctors being notoriously difficult to tie down. He's always been ready and available for all matters cosmetic, such as Michael's insufficiently aquiline nose, which was rectified when he was eighteen during a summer off; his mother told his society peers that he was performing 'some ghastly noble act or other' in a far-off country. She never told him what or which. Fortunately, none of his peers ever asked, presumably lest Michael take a matching interest in *their* equally noble and equally fictional charitable efforts.

Mr Raghid Touma. Widely considered to be the best. His reputation is such that he has a mug in his consultation office — presumably several mugs, Michael muses, all identical — that says as much in simple block capitals: *THE BEST*. The best at what? everyone always asks.

Everything, Mr Touma always replies.

Michael's nose; his cousin Sophie's chin, as is rumoured; much of his mother, top to toe. Any number of British celebrities. And, soon, Antonia.

But if Mr Touma has a flaw, it is that he prefers not to communicate electronically, which is why Michael holds in his hand a sheaf of courier-delivered colour printouts of Antonia's face from various angles, showing the surgeon's plans for her. The consultation went smoothly, Mr Touma said; they went over the requirements for someone of Antonia's skeletal composition to appear flawlessly female — not the phrasing Michael would have chosen — and conducted a brief tug of war over how much of Antonia's existing brow line, nose and jaw she wanted to keep. He talked her around, or so he claimed.

From the printouts, it certainly looks like it.



Antonia's face is rendered without makeup, with her hair pulled back and her fringe held out of the way with a hairband, and when she is thus exposed, she looks the most like Anthony; it seems to Michael like a vicious cruelty that at the anticipation of her coming apotheosis, she is required to regress. He wonders what she thought, during the consultation. How she felt.

* * *

Yeah, the nice Iranian surgeon doctor guy is going to cut holes in his face.

It's been days since the consultation, since Ant was forced to see himself from every possible angle, naked but for the most minimal of underwear. Days since the good doctor examined him with a clinical eye, an eye that has looked

over — according to the doctor himself — the best and the brightest of British talent; those parts of it with money, anyway.

He looked at Ant and he judged him, showed him the places where he ought to be torn down and reassembled, where his skin might be pulled back so his bones can be accessed, shaved down, reshaped. And Ant tried to push back, he really did. But something about that pleasant little office, with the plants in the windows and the steaming mugs of tea and the smell from the bakery across the street, something about the surgeon, with his kind, handsome face, careful, soothing hands and clinical demeanour, completely obliterated his defences.

The man told him the things that can be done. To make him look female. To make it so no snooty society bitch will ever laugh behind her hand at him again. And though the voice of Anthony tried repeatedly to remind him that he was being presented with surgical options that were ever more difficult to reverse, in the end, Ant could think of only three things:

The women at the restaurant who saw right through him;

Michael, a man to whom he has become unaccountably attached, if only as his sole anchor in this increasingly surreal world into which he has been inducted;

And Anthony himself, the clumsy, unappealing man he thought he had managed to move on from, presented to him in multiple mirrors and minutely examined by someone who, in his kindness, managed to be incredibly cruel.

Ant, in the consultation office, muddled his way through the conversation after, tried to moderate Mr Touma's recommendations, but ultimately could hear only two voices, both of them his own: Anthony, begging to be spared this fate, and Antonia's, reminding him that *this* was truly the opportunity to get rid of that man for good.

He's still not sure of everything he agreed to. All he knows is that this Thursday, he books into a private hospital, that first thing on Friday morning, he will be rendered unconscious, and that when he wakes, he will be forever altered.

Maybe then he'll be able to look in the mirror and see *her* again. She's been gone since the surgeon's office. He's been struggling through work, telling Sharon and Susie he's been feeling under the weather, and fobbing off Bridget. Michael's mostly left him alone, and that's for the best.

He will close his eyes, and she will wake.

* * *

Michael cannot tell anyone why he is so anxious. He cannot tell his mother, because she would be genuinely astonished as to why he cares so much for a lowly employee, for a potential girlfriend, even for the woman who, in his wildest dreams, might become his wife. Look outside, Michael, she would say; there are millions of them. If she dies on the table, pick another.

He cannot tell his lawyer, even though Judith Walker has spent the entire day finding excuses to drop by his office, to assault him with knowing looks, searching frowns, and the odd pointed question about why Miss Steele is back again, because she's just had to call for someone to clean up a coffee spillage out in the corridor, and she expects after another week to start finding chewed ball-point pens littering the halls of Lincoln-McCain like the leavings of a particularly flirty rabbit.

He cannot tell... well, anyone! Bad enough that when Antonia is not around, his circle of trust shrinks to his mother and his lawyer.

Antonia's in surgery. Right now. And though Mr Touma is, once again, the best, there's always a chance... Always that tiny chance...

Damn this. He can't work.

He's going for a run.

The executive shower room isn't far, and Michael, always prepared, keeps a set of jogging clothes in a small cupboard in his office, and a robe, a towel and a full washkit in a drawer beneath. He stuffs them all into a gym bag — from yet another drawer, which closes into tasteful near-invisibility like the rest of them — and marches out of his office, locking it behind him and updating his status on the intranet to *unavailable*.

Unfortunately, temporarily diverting his attention to his phone results in a collision with Miss Steele, who is for some reason present in the hallway outside the shower room. She stumbles away, apologising, promising to have his suit dry-cleaned and expertly cleansed of the hot-chocolate-and-cinnamon smell that is starting to permeate his sinuses with the bloody-minded effectiveness of a Vick's VapoRub.

He almost makes a note on Miss Steele's calendar to leave the suit be, perhaps as evidence of her artful clumsiness for the inevitable employment tribunal when she manages finally to burn one of his employees badly, but, what the hell, if she wants to clean the damn thing, she can. He pulls off his perfectly grey — and now perfectly soiled — suit, hangs the component parts up on the hooks by the lockers, and puts it out of his mind. If, by some miracle, she manages to clean and return it without staining it further, he'll pick it up when he returns to work.

So, probably, Monday.

Or Tuesday.

Maybe, actually, he ought to work from home for a while. Until Antonia's better.

He fumes on it as he showers, imagining the damn woman showing up at the end of the day to collect his suit and stumbling through a series of mishaps that grow ever more comical; all the while, Antonia, a woman he trusts with more than just the integrity of his suits, is recovering from surgery.

He needs a damn run.

* * *

The city passes in a blur, but it's nothing like it ever has been before. When he started these runs, when he planned his route, when he first stepped out into the streets of Manchester with the intent of making it his home, of divesting his soul of the worst of the habits instilled on the family estate, he was a fundamentally different person. And what is incredible about that, he muses as he aimlessly turns down a sideroad he's never explored before, is that only one thing about him has changed in the years since.

At no point up until now has he ever fallen for someone.

Oh, there have been crushes. He looks back at his obsession with Sharon Blair with a mixture of curiosity and shame. That he thought his infatuation was fraught with desire and dense with meaning! Idiocy! He knows so much better now.

Because now Antonia is in hospital, and though she is going to be fine, he cannot stop himself from worrying. Surgery can have complications, can't it? Patients can turn out to be allergic to general anaesthetic.

He's jogging faster now; running, basically. Sprinting, even. Dodging and jinking through the lunchtime crowds, unsure where he is, but knowing only that it is somewhere between where he was, before Antonia went into surgery, and where he will be, when she gets out, healthy and whole and ready for recovery.

She's doing it for him. And for the money, of course, but money is trivial. She looked into his eyes and said almost as much.

She's doing it for *him*.



Damn. He's hitting the red line, the point at which he has to stop. He's been stretching it further and further, but as his personal trainer pointed out when he first embarked on what the man insisted on calling his 'fitness journey', there's pushing yourself and then there's *pushing yourself*. Michael's fairly sure he understood what the man meant.

He's no use to Antonia if he collapses. So he slows back down to a jog, and then to a walk, and then he leans against a wall between two shops, waiting for his heartrate to return to something closer to normal before he begins his warmdown.

Sweat.

Drenching his t-shirt.

Mixing with the rain.

Revolting.

Still, three showers in one day won't kill him.

He's stretching his calves when he finally starts taking stock, looking around. He's ended up on a small sideroad — one of a series of obscure little roads, he discovers, when he checks the maps app — and it's full of the kind of shops his mother routinely would disdain: small efforts, here one year and gone the next when the rent catches up with them. The shop directly opposite him has an air of permanence that surprises him, though: the decals etched into the windows have faded, and the chairs and tables outside have lost their shine. What causes him to push off from the brick and cross the street, however, is that, whatever the place is, it appears to sell flowers.

* * *

She's home again. She can tell because the apartment is so bafflingly massive that she has yet to discover all its secrets. She keeps finding new cubbyholes, new corridors, new rooms, new walk-in closets; none of them, unfortunately, link back to where she's trying to go, which is back to the hospital. She's got something to do there. She doesn't remember what, but it's probably important, right? You don't just go to hospital on a whim, do you?

Another bedroom. Another. Linked together like scales on a snake's back, and equally infinite, circling around each other, interconnecting, taking her only forward. And every damn room has a walk-in closet and every walk-in closet has enough fucking dresses in it to outfit an army, if you wanted your army to attend a late-evening restaurant appointment and to feel self-conscious about its collective fashion sense, and whether its shoulders look too broad in its chosen outfit.

She can still hear those bitches, too. Laughing, making little comments. At least they're quiet; got to be a dozen rooms away by now. Trapped in the labyrinth just like she is.

With every step, her body seems to change, too. She hasn't been dwelling on that, but the apartment's been presenting her with the information against her will, constantly, with a new mirror around every corner. Some of them distort her, make her grotesque, exaggerate the parts of her that don't fit, that have to be tucked away, that have to be painted over, that have to be scrubbed out. The parts of her that are still Anthony, that drag her back, that slow her down.

And she can't slow down, because then they'll catch her again. Just like they did the last few thousand fucking times she ran this maze. Their perfect pink manicures tear flesh as if they are the talons of a flock of birds of prey.

Sometimes they are.

She's learning to close her eyes when the bad mirrors come up, the ones that slow her down. And when the next mirror comes up, when it's a real one, when it reflects her as she truly is, when it shows her an image of immaculate grace and unassailable beauty, it occurs to her to try something new:

Antonia climbs through.

* * *

They took his request — they don't take *orders*, the older woman behind the counter informed him with a friendly smile — and brought him a cup of tea and a slice of cake, so he has something to occupy himself while he waits. And so Michael waits, though he would prefer not to, and he sips at his tea, which is still too hot, and he slices off slivers of cake.

The cake is excellent.

At this shop, you don't 'buy flowers'. The flowers, the older woman explained, are the delivery mechanism, the cliché that conceals the surprise, the *real* gift. And it is that which the younger woman is working on at this moment, sitting atop a stool in an airy workspace at the back of the shop, surrounded by paints and card stock and equipment; and roped off, lest any children get the idea to go wandering.

No children here today. No-one much at all, apart from an elderly couple, who are also eating cake.

Michael checks the time again. She ought to be out of surgery soon. Mr Touma's team will text him as soon as the procedures are complete. And she's going to be fine. She will.

And when she wakes, Michael will be there, with a bouquet of flowers and a custom-painted thick-stock card dedicated to her recovery, and to his sincere thanks for what she is doing for him.

* * *

Not her apartment.

Good! Progress. Hell yeah. Now, where the fuck is she? And what the fuck is she wearing?

Oh. Right. The dress from the restaurant. Only it fits properly now. Not like it did before, like Antonia was a rough cut of meat, like everything that was real about her had to be hidden so that everything that was fake could be properly displayed. No, now it fits, it fits like it was designed for her, it fits like it would fit no-one else.

A real woman now.

She can tell, because this place, wherever it is, is full of yet more fucking mirrors. Enough of them that she is reflected a millionfold, her new body, her perfected body, her designed body interlocking with itself into infinity, its every curve on display in every possible way.

That's her. But it's not him. And it never will be again.



Is it true safety if you've abandoned your whole self to obtain it?

The million-upon-million women staring back at him, at her, at Antonia, seem to whisper, yes.

Be safe.

Be hollow.

Because you are no longer your own person.

You have been purchased. And this is the price you paid.

The reflections consolidate. Become one. Become her. And she blows a kiss, strikes a pose, and says, it's not so bad, now, is it? You might be his toy, but at least you're filthy rich.

Antonia — or Ant or Anthony or whoever she is — wants to answer back, but she doesn't know what to say, seems struck dumb by her own image, and before she can pull herself together, the image fades, the mirrors shatter, and another room appears.

Simple.

Functional.

Grey.

Michael's bedroom, extrapolated from what she's seen of it on their video calls.

And in it, sitting on the bed, waiting for her, is Michael. Or something that looks like him, anyway.

Something that looks like him but does not move like him, something that reminds her of the women from the maze, from the restaurant; something rapacious. As he stands, he flickers, as if the image of him cannot decide whether it wants to display the plumage of the businessman or the bloodied hide of the predator.

"Antonia," he says, his mouth thick with darkness.

She should run. But she stepped through the mirror, didn't she? Hours and hours ago, she stepped through the mirror to escape one horror, and now she has nowhere to go.

Michael, she says. Or tries to say, but the syllables are stuck in her throat, seem to tear her up as she speaks, and she doubles over, hands grasping at her neck, suddenly slick, opened up, spilling out all over her pretty party dress.

He's closer now. Holding out a hand. And she cannot go anywhere, cannot even release her throat lest she die before he reaches her. So she folds into his embrace.

His arms close around her, and she knows that they will never release her.

"Now," he says, "truly, you belong to me."

* * *

Ant didn't know what to expect, waking from surgery. Maybe instant, crippling pain. Or, perhaps, a bliss of painkillers so intense that random inanimate objects in the room might come to life and start singing to him, Disney-style.

Of course, in that scenario, he would have to be the princess.

Anyway, it turns out that waking up from surgery is a process by which you become gradually aware of how fucking uncomfortable you are right now. The other stuff — the pressure of the dressings, the antiseptic smell, the background hum of hospital activity — all fades in, sure, but the first thing Ant really knows is that he really wants to crack his back.

He shouldn't. It's on a list of things he shouldn't do, alongside random shit like coughing. He shouldn't cough, he shouldn't crack his back, he shouldn't talk; he shouldn't move. He's become a plant, basically. Hopefully someone will be along to water him soon.

That's one thing he fucked up, though: she hasn't come *back*.

Stupid to imagine she would, really. It's not like he's even seen himself yet. And it's not like there's going to be anything to see beyond dressings, swelling, bruising, stitches, and all sorts of unpleasant shit. Funny, he came here to be made beautiful, and he's probably never been more ugly in his life. Not even immediately after his birth, when he was covered in that weird white stuff. He's seen the pictures; thanks, Mum.

Christ. Mum! He's been trying not to think about how she's going to react, how Dad's going to react, and all the while he thought he had the luxury of time, because hormones, the thing about them is that they're *slow*. He was going to do the thing he did with his brother, just throw his hair extensions under a hat and wear a tracksuit or something. So what happened? One crappy encounter with some catty bitches in a restaurant and he went into a tailspin that ended *here*, with his face carved up.

Unable to cough. Unable to crack his back.

He's stupid. Oh, God, he's so fucking stupid.

Anthony won't see his parents ever again. Antonia will, and she's a stranger right now. A doll created by a rich man to dress up and kiss and fuck. Be proud of *that*, Mum and Dad!

And then there's a knock at the door to his private room, the tentative knock of someone who's going to enter anyway but who wants to *feel* like they're not intruding, and that means it's not a nurse or a doctor or the surgeon, Mr Touma, because all of *them* know bloody well where they're supposed to be. They were in and out of his room yesterday, while he was

sitting in this same bed in a ball of anxiety, wondering what it was going to be like to be anaesthetised, scrolling Instagram on his phone and looking right through all the pictures.

No, it's Michael.

Oh, fuck, it's *Michael*.

"Um," Michael says. He's paused halfway through the door, waiting for... what? Permission? Because Ant can't speak; that's another thing he's not supposed to do. They go in and they shave down your Adam's apple and you're supposed to fuck with it as little as possible for several days after.

Perhaps a glare will provide the answer Michael's waiting for? Ant tries it, but nothing happens.

"Um," Michael says again, "hello, Antonia."

And just where the fuck is Antonia? Ant wants to ask. Because she's not in this bed, that's for sure.

She's a lost toy.

"I brought you something," Michael says, stepping into the room. In the same action, he brings out a hand that was behind his back, and presents a bouquet of flowers, holding it with a level of uncertainty Ant wouldn't wish on anything that still clings onto life.

Flowers! Wow. Just like you'd give a real girl. Michael's role-playing *hard* right now, huh?

"They're in water already," Michael says, taking another step closer, and, yeah, they're in a jar. He must have got them somewhere classy, like a petrol station. Michael's edging around the bed now, not wanting to get too close. "I'll just put them on your table."

How do you say, 'Thank you, now please fuck off,' when you can't speak and you can't move any of the relevant parts of your face? Maybe he should just glare some more. It seems to work, because Michael doesn't dawdle. He stands there awkwardly for just a moment, nods at Ant like he's in a fucking meeting or something, and then marches stiffly from the room, hands clasped behind his back, as if he would not be able to control them, were they free.

It occurs to him only as Michael leaves: Ant's hands are fine. He could have given Michael the finger.

Next time.

* * *

She hated the flowers. He's an idiot. He's a stupid, asocial, maladjusted man who learned everything he knows about social graces and personal interaction from a pile of tedious classic literature and his ghoul of a mother.

He shouldn't have visited.

He shouldn't have disturbed her.

She's only just out of surgery! The nurse said as much! You can have only a minute, he said!

She doesn't want him now. She doesn't *need* him now. She needs a friend, and Michael is too compromised for that. As much as she insists that she likes him, it's honestly not something Michael finds it possible to believe.

He should have a message sent to that Bridget woman. The woman who's not supposed to know what's going on, but does. She'll be Antonia's friend. She'll visit her until she's well again.

And Sharon Blair. She knows something of what Antonia is going through. He'll have her contacted, too.

Only when she's better will he ask to see her. And beg her forgiveness for putting her in this position at all.

In the meantime, there's only one solution for the dirt he can feel clogging his pores right now, the filth and the guilt and the knowledge that he is the one who *did this to her*; he's going to shower. He's going to wash it all away and emerge clean.

Cleaner. Someone like him, he is brutally aware, can never be entirely without stain.

As he turns on the water, he can almost hear his mother chastising him for his weakness. She would want him to take control of this girl, to use the contract against her, to remind her that she is *his*, that she is employed for one specific function, and that if she has a problem with the terms of her employment, she should take it up with her lawyer, if she even has one.

But there's a catch: Michael, even if he had once been capable of such things, could not so much as form the first word of the first clause of the first sentence required to chastise Antonia for her anger. Because he's fallen in love.

And love, as Michael knows well, means guilt.

* * *

Someone waters the flowers. Ant doesn't know who; he spends as much time as he can unconscious, and the rest with his eyes closed, AirPods placed with

extreme care in his ears, listening to books, podcasts, whalesong, and ASMR. He's effectively immobilised, he is not supposed to speak, and every time the morphine starts to wear off, he becomes acutely aware of just how much of him has been cut into. He still hasn't seen himself under the dressings, and won't for a while longer, but he imagines himself carved deep under the skin, imagines great sections of bone cleaved away, incinerated. Imagines himself forever fragile, reliant on men — on fucking *Michael* — for protection.

Days pass, and he allows the hours to blend together. Fucking wills it, actually, because if he makes himself be *present*, if he climbs out of the swirl of near-unconsciousness, if he dams the river of words from his headphones, if he wakes the fuck up, then the minutes pass like centuries.

Unfortunately, he has visitors. Bridget's the first, and Ant spends a whole minute reckoning with the implications of that — he didn't tell her which hospital he would be staying at, so she *couldn't* visit and thus risk giving the game away; that she knows — and then decides, fuck it. Implications are for people who are allowed to fucking cough.

Bridget visits and she chats away about the goings-on in her life, and it's almost as soothing as his ASMR, so he doesn't mind her so much. But when Sharon from work arrives the day after, Ant's *got* to pull himself all the way up, got to concentrate, so his surly disposition doesn't somehow imply the wrong thing and clue her in on how he's nothing like her, actually, that the dressings strapped to his face are yet more artefacts of the sordid little deal he made. And he worries the whole time that she'll look at his flowers, because there's a card stuffed in there that he hasn't yet been able to bring himself to read, and if it says they're from Michael, well, that's something he can't explain right now, because, apart from anything else, he's not supposed to be *fucking speaking!*

She doesn't look at the flowers too closely and she doesn't linger too long, fortunately. She blows him a kiss, says she looks forward to seeing him back at work, and suggests he message her if he gets lonely.

Ant nods. He can, at least, do that.

He can also give people the finger, but that doesn't seem appropriate in this situation.

* * *

They move him. Out of the private hospital and into somewhere called The Laurels, which sounds to Ant like it ought to be the name of a long-running

BBC Radio 4 dramedy about an incestuous herd of sheep farmers, butchers and other assorted country-dwelling folk who fill out a small village in the Cotswolds and bicker about whose daughter should marry whose son and, Christ, they've been weaning him off the morphine and it's making him kinda fucking loopy.

Can't think straight. Everything is sore and swollen and ugly. Most of the dressings are off now, and he looks like he lost a fight with one of those huge iron balls they hang from cranes and smash into buildings to demolish them. Hell, maybe he did; maybe that's exactly what happened to him. Maybe he never had surgery at all, and he's recovering from a horrible accident that happened to him on the way to the hospital.

Yeah, a horrible accident called *signing that fucking contract and agreeing to become another man's plaything*.

Oh, hello, intrusive thoughts, come to remind him that he's taken a step he can never reverse; he's missed them. That's what all the ASMR is for, and the audiobook omnibus of *Dune*, helped along by all the morphine: to shut himself up.

They brought Michael's flowers when they moved him, and they keep them watered. Ant prefers not to look at them. He's sure he's being unfair, that when the discomfort wears off and he lets himself remember the good stuff, he'll be glad he didn't get to say all this shit out loud.

But right now, if he could, he would call Michael into his room, and he would scream.

* * *

Michael is usually so much more disciplined than this. He decided he would not bother Antonia again until after her recovery was complete, but here he is, in the back of his car, being driven to The Laurels, desperate to see her, to talk to her. He needs to apologise, is the problem. He needs to make her understand that he never meant for it to go this far.

Only that would be a lie, because he *did*, because he wanted all of this, because when they met, Anthony was to Michael nothing more than a vessel for his perfect woman. An organ donor. A blank slate.

But everything he loves about Antonia was already there, and in exposing it, he has behaved intolerably.

He's been so catastrophically careless and selfish.

And she's having another procedure tomorrow. A small one, thankfully, one that can be done at The Laurels — but it's some kind of correction, something so minor she doesn't need to wait until she's fully recovered, and that's actively *offensive* to Michael. She should be allowed to rest!

Antonia gave the okay, though. She wants it done so she can get out of there sooner. Which doesn't imply that she's having a good time.

He's worried about her. The nightmares, in which Mr Touma was replaced at the last minute as Antonia's surgeon by Miss Steele, have not helped.

He looked up what a *laurel* is; it's a large shrub. He doesn't know what about that implies a calming, healing environment. Perhaps, he considers as his driver opens the door for him and he steps out onto a gravel drive, flanked on three sides by the encroaching concrete walls of The Laurels Spa & Wellness Centre, it is supposed to make the patients think of soothing green, rather than the institutional grey concrete that surrounds him.

It's nicer inside. But he wonders, as he walks the corridors to Antonia's room, if they would benefit from a small grant to spruce the place up a bit. Perhaps a large grant, for a full external refurbishment. Maybe a Bessemer Wing.

An attendant lets him into Antonia's room, and he's pleased to find her sitting up in bed in an airy, pleasantly decorated environment, with a window looking out on the garden outside. If you forget about the concrete entryway, it's about as far from central Manchester as it's possible to get.

Michael's flowers are sitting on her bedside table. She must have brought them with her from the hospital. The thought puts a smile on his face, and he carries that through, approaching her and saying—

“Oh, God,” Antonia says. She's been staring out of the window, but as she hears him approach, she removes her AirPods, drops them into their little case, and fixes him with a glare not unlike the one she found when she was wrapped in dressings and unable to move. “It's you.”

She sounds scratchy and sore. As well she might: she is bruised and swollen, looking very much as if she has lost a particularly brutal fight. The bruises extend down her neck, and he wonders if her chest hurts, too.

He can't help looking, even though through the sleepwear and the hospital bedsheets, there is nothing to see. Unfortunately, she notices.

“Come to see if you've got your money's worth, have you?” she says.

“I'm sorry—”

“Are you satisfied with your purchase?” she demands, leaning forward in bed and wincing at the pain but not settling back. “Does the product conform to the specifications you supplied?”

“Specifications? I don’t—”

“That doctor,” she says. “Surgeon. Whatever. He just kept *talking*, Michael. Talking and talking and prodding at different pictures of me with a pen, drawing dotted lines and circling problem areas and I got fucking *lost*. And I kept thinking that if he doesn’t know what’s really going on, I can’t act like I *don’t* want any of this shit, right? I wasn’t ready. And I know that’s not entirely your fault, because I said I wanted it, but— but you’re supposed to *care* about me! If I’m supposed to be your perfect girlfriend or whatever then you’re supposed to stop me when I’m about to do something rash, like go see a fucking plastic surgeon when I’m still feeling humiliated!”

“I’m s— sorry,” Michael stutters.

“I was just going in for the tits, you know? And to have my nose taken care of. Stuff that was either reversible or that I wouldn’t mind being a forever



thing. But he kept talking and talking and selling me on things that would make me more confident and I didn't understand *half* the shit he was saying, and now..."

She leans back in the bed, crashing hard into the stacked pillows behind her. Wincing again. He wants to help. He *needs* to help. But he understands that if he takes one more step, she will respond with a viciousness her body has clearly not yet recovered enough to support.

He needs to calm her down.

"You look lovely," he says.

Wrong.

"Oh, I know I do," Antonia spits. "I asked how much all this cost, and, yeah, for *that* kind of money, if I didn't come out looking like ScarJo's sister, it would have been fucking fraud." She grinds her shoulders against the pillow. Once again, it looks like the action hurts her. "I still don't know the technical names for half the shit he did. But he shaved away my Adam's apple and my forehead, he brought my hairline forward... He fucked with my nose. More than I thought I was getting. Look!" She turns her head sideways, and, yes, more than the tiny kink in her nose has been removed. "He did some stuff to my jaw, though I think that was mostly lipo? I don't know. You know what? I sort of don't want to ask. I think I'd like to close my eyes and pretend—" she coughs, and when she continues, her voice sounds even more hoarse, "—that it's all magic or something. Shit. Water. Water, Michael!"

She claps her hands, which makes him jump, and then finally he processes her request. He starts looking around the room for a water dispenser or bottles or—

"Down the hall," Antonia says. Almost whispering. "There's a machine. Don't worry; you won't need cash."

Feeling suddenly like he needs to prove a point, Michael reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. "I have cash," he says, gesturing with the thing, showing her the notes sticking slightly out of the top.

Idiot.

"Are those fifties?" she asks.

"Yes."

Shaking her head and smiling just a little — against her will, judging by her simultaneous frown — Antonia whispers, "Down the hall. There's a machine. You can pay with your black credit card, if you like. But it won't take a fifty."

He rushes out, finds the machine, and buys enough bottled water to keep her going all afternoon. Cradling the pile of bottles in both arms, he has to open the door to her room with his bottom, and enter backwards.

“Just one is fine for now,” Antonia says wryly, holding a hand out, so Michael leans over a chair by the wall, drops most of the bottles onto the cushion, and hands her the one that remains, opening it as he does so.

She takes a very long drink. When she’s done, the bottle is almost empty. She recaps it and drops it in her lap.

“How can I make things right?” he asks quietly, when she’s just looking up at him, silent, her face unreadable.

It takes a long time for her to answer. “You can’t,” she says, what feels like a whole minute later. “There’s no making things right.”

“We could put you back—”

“*Michael*,” she interrupts, a hint of her earlier anger returning to her voice. “Look. You don’t get it. I’m sorry, but you don’t. And how can you? *I* don’t get it!”

He sits at the end of the bed, very carefully. She doesn’t move her legs, and he can feel the closest one only by the tenting of the bedsheets. It’s not quite physical contact, but right now, he’ll take it. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asks.

She finishes the water bottle. Throws it at the bin, where it clatters noisily to the bottom. Regards him for a moment.

“You’ve never had to worry about rent,” she says quietly. “You’ve never eaten leftovers you thought were dodgy, but they were all you had. You’ve never had to wear a suit that doesn’t fit or go without getting your hair cut or work out when’s the latest in the year you can get away with turning the heating on. You’ve been living in a dream world, Michael. And you offered me that dream. Why wouldn’t I take you up on it?”

He nods. He worked some of that out for himself.

“I’m in your dream,” she continues, “and suddenly, all the things I used to worry about don’t matter. My apartment is just *paid for*. I don’t even think about the electric or the gas. I buy food without checking my balance. All those worries—” she claps her hands again, but more softly this time, “—gone. And if I let myself, I can forget they were ever a thing. But the problem is, Michael, unlike you, I can still wake up. I can rip up the contract; I know you sketched it out yourself, and that means that a real lawyer could walk right through it. If I shopped my story around a bit, I could probably get one of the papers to pay for the lawsuit to get me out of it, in exchange for exclusive rights. It’d be the story of the century.”

Michael nods again. Another thing that had occurred to him. “Perhaps you ought to,” he says.

Antonia laughs. It's painful, and she has to make herself still immediately after, so it's almost thirty seconds before she speaks again.

"I would never," she says. "Because, fuck me, Michael, I like you. And it would be a shitty thing to do to *anyone* who was trying to give me millions of quid. No, I'm confident that if I really wanted out, or to pull back or something, you and I could have come to an agreement. I'd've had to wake up from your dream and start thinking about rent and food and all that shit, but I would have made it work.

"But I can't any more. The moment I came around, I knew it. I've changed too much. My face isn't Anthony's, Michael; it's Antonia's. This isn't like before, when I had extensions and fillers and I was dieting and I'd had, like, a couple of hormone injections and some laser hair removal. This is *drastic* work. And I'm fairly sure you can't safely build a nose back up when it's been sanded down this much. I remember Michael Jackson." She sits forward again, out of the pillows. "The dream world's come for me, and now I'm trapped in it. Now I'll *never* wake up, and this new life? It's mine forever. The good *and* the things I'm... still struggling with."

"I thought you liked being Antonia," Michael says. It's probably unwise, but all this feels like an unexpected and massive betrayal. By whom, he's not sure.

"Yeah," she says, smiling a little. "Yeah, I kind of do. Not so much when I feel inadequate and ugly and there are people looking at me, but that's the kind of shit that makes me rush to expensive surgeons and let them go mad with a scalpel. But you've got to understand, this is all new again. It's not makeup. I can't take it off. I can't go back. Not truly. And that means it's not just ten years any more."

Oh.

Right.

Of course.

It's new again. As new as her first step out of the apartment in a skirt. As new as the first time styling her hair. As new as the first brush of blush across her cheek. But the safety net is gone.

"When I was sixteen," he finds himself saying, "I told my mother off. I am not a man given to raising my voice, but I shouted at her. I told her how much I hated how she treated people. How she talked about them. How she talked about them *to me*." He's still sitting on the end of Antonia's bed, and his hands are forming fists in the mattress, winding the sheets in a little. "I told her that if the family name was all she cared about, then she could disinherit me, because I had no intention of upholding the values she seemed to think were intrinsic to it."

“What did she say?”

“Oh, she threw me out. Said I could live on the streets if I wanted so much to exercise my conscience. She knew it was a toothless threat, and so did I — any number of relatives would have extended me a line of credit at a moment’s notice — but I think she enjoyed the power of it. It was a week before she called me. I was staying at my cousin Sophie’s apartment, trying to gather the nerve to talk to her mother, or to another one of my cousins. Trying to decide if I was actually going to be independent.” He rolls his eyes. “As far as someone like me has ever had to be truly independent. You were right about that,” he adds, looking sideways at her. “Even when I didn’t have a place of my own, I never had to worry about food.” He shrugs. “Anyway, she called me. Said that if we could mutually assure each other that there would be no more outbursts like that, that she would restore my access to the family accounts. I’d be able to come home.”

“What happened?”

Michael laughs. “Oh, I came home right away. I was only sixteen. I think... I think my point is that I understand what it is like to have something that seems like a dream become suddenly and terrifyingly real. Oh, the magnitude isn’t even remotely the same, I’ll grant you — though, at sixteen, everything feels like the end of the world — but I touched my dream, of a life away from the trappings of the family name, of being my godawful mother’s only son, and I ran from it. You didn’t, Antonia.”

“No offence,” Antonia says, “but your mother sounds like a fucking bitch.”

“Yes! She *is* a bitch!” Wow. That’s rather a rush. “Antonia,” Michael says, twisting around on the bed to face her properly, unable to keep the broad, ecstatic grin off his face, “my mother is a fucking *bitch*.”

Covering her mouth, Antonia says, “Well done.”

Michael’s lost control of his point. He grasps for it again. “You didn’t run from your dream, Antonia. Not like me. So if there’s anything I can do to help you acclimatise — including tearing up that stupid contract — you let me know.”

She smiles at him. Properly, happily. “That’s kind of you,” she says, leaning back, stretching her arms out. Wincing again. “I think, for now, what I need is some space. I need to... relearn who I am. Again. I need to get used to this.” She waves a hand idly at her face. “And I need to heal, obviously. I have a little revision tomorrow.”

He doesn’t say, *I know*. It seems gauche to remind her of the depth of access he still has to her life.

Instead he says, “Space.”

“Space,” she repeats. “To figure myself out.”

Nodding, he stands. If she needs space, that is something he is eminently qualified to offer her. His mother once told him he was capable of making her feel lonely while he was still in the room.

Besides, he has work to do. A company to run. A disaster-prone temp to avoid. And Antonia doesn't seem angry at him, not any more. Tired? Yes. In pain? Yes. And even more scared than she's letting on?

Yes. Very much so.

“I'll call you, okay?” Antonia says. “When I'm ready. And thank you for the flowers; they're beautiful.”

* * *

She doesn't leave The Laurels until six weeks after surgery. The bruising's gone, which is wonderful, and most of the initial swelling has, too; the rest is far subtler, easy to cover with makeup — which she has been practising in her ample free time — and will eventually fade to nothing, finally transforming her from the merely beautiful woman she became while recovering at The Laurels into someone truly remarkable.

Mr Touma is very happy with her progress. He told her that her face was a pleasure to work with, and she replied that she very much enjoyed lying motionless and unconscious for him. He laughed and gave her a goodie bag. Among other things, it contained one of his mugs. “Everyone is the best at something,” he said, when they parted ways for the last time.

She spent a lot of the latter few weeks in their gym, building on the diet they had her on with cardio and some gentle yoga. Strange to leave an extended period of convalescence feeling fitter than she has done in her life.

One of the most satisfying things to come from her stay was that Sharon and Nitya both happened to visit her on the same day. She introduced them, saw their chemistry immediately, and didn't mind at all that the conversation slowly pivoted to exclude her. Sharon texted just last week to say that they finally kissed.

And the other thing that happened is, well, Antonia. She came back. And how could she not, really? Six weeks of everyone calling her by that name. Six weeks of every nurse, orderly, physiotherapist, and every other employee calling her Antonia or Miss Antonia or ma'am or love...

Six weeks of looking at herself in the mirror in her room. Of watching the bruising fade and the swelling recede, to reveal her new, more open eyes, her

new, more elegant nose, her new, more slender jaw. Of watching her figure continue to realign itself.

Six weeks of watching Antonia emerge again.

It's where she finds herself now, on the morning of her departure, standing in her underwear in the mirror in her room for a final time, examining herself. Her new face, already made up, already beautiful. Her hair, carefully brushed out. Her breasts, enclosed in the special bra she's supposed to wear for another six weeks still, but firm, unyielding, and, honestly, fucking magnificent.

If she covers the lump of her genitals with her hand, she could believe that Anthony had never existed.



Bridget's delighted that Antonia's finally free again. More precisely, she's delighted that Antonia's finally able to *drink* again, and she shows up at the apartment just hours after Antonia gets home, brandishing a couple of bottles of plonk and an e-coupon for half-price pizza delivery. And Antonia's delighted to see her, even if she does have to correct her a few times: she's Antonia now, or Ant, if Bridget prefers; Anthony was cut away by the surgeon's knife, and is no more.

"May he rest in pieces!" Bridget says to that.

Which is kind of annoying, actually? That was supposed to be profound, supposed to indicate to Bridget that a deep and significant change has occurred within Antonia, that's she's bloody well different now! And while it's wonderful to see Bridget again, really it is, she can't help but feel like the avatar of Antonia's old life, pushing its way into her new one. Invading the dream, to borrow the metaphor she used with Michael that day, weeks ago.

So she tells her she's tired from the trip, and she didn't get much sleep, and maybe Bridget should go home. She calls her a taxi before she can be stopped, and she waves from behind the glass doors in the lobby.

She'll fix things with Bridget. They just need to have a good talk someday. And the thing about good talks is that they're not generally aided by alcohol.

Not by *that much* alcohol, anyway.

And she's got to admit to herself, she decides, on the way back up to her apartment: there's someone she wants to see. Someone she's been wanting to see again ever since he left her room at the Laurels. Someone she's been *needing* to see again ever since she finally looked at the card that came with the flowers and realised that it wasn't some mass-market crap, that it was a custom request that he put real thought into.

He probably didn't even mean it this way, but because the watercolour was clearly painted from a photo of her, with the artist's hand emphasising her best features and tactfully downplaying her worst, it feels like a remnant of a past version of herself. Not of Anthony, but of the first Antonia, of the girl who realised she *could* live like this, that she could have fun with it, that she could find a future in it. She wasn't around for long, not compared to Anthony, but Antonia's glad that she got to have something so special made for her before she ceded the body, the life, to this new person.

To this new *woman*.

She's put it in a picture frame. It was the first thing she did when she got home. And she *still* hasn't unpacked.



She picks it up now, admires it again, wonders what was going through Michael's head on that day. Fixes it in her mind.

And then she places it carefully on the side again, and whirls around, to find a warm coat and something nice to wear.

* * *

She gave herself an hour to sober up. A single glass of wine goes a long way when you've been dry for six weeks, and she didn't want her hand to shake when she redid her makeup. And now it's almost nine in the evening, and she's followed the GPS on her iPhone to Michael's address, and she's charmed the concierge into letting her up to the penthouse.

So now all she must do is knock.

Why is she so nervous? It's only Michael. He paid for her; he specced her out precisely; so he has no reason to be disappointed with the end result.

Only natural, probably. She doesn't know if she's here as Michael's girlfriend or as his project, though the answer is, inevitably, probably both. Even if he doesn't think of her that way, she still does; it helped just now, actually, when she picked out her dress, to imagine herself as Michael's doll, as something that specifically must please him.

Not very feminist of her, but she'll get to being a woman *entirely* on her own volition eventually, she's pretty sure. Now that she's out of The Laurels, now that she looks the part even when she's naked, now that she's Antonia, through and through, she'll get the hang of it all.

Enough dawdling. She knocks.

When Michael eventually comes to the door, it's clear he's been sleeping.



Napping, probably: there's a scrunchy network of fine lines and dots on his cheek, the kind of imprint you get when you've fallen asleep on the arm of a sofa and not on a pillow. He's wearing a chunky grey sweater and it looks *cute* on him, and Antonia evaluates her perception with a satisfied nod.

Michael's doll would *want* to be attracted to him, so it makes it somewhat easier to deal with the fact that Antonia, the person, the woman, has begun to find him just a little bit irresistible.

She dreamed about him a lot at The Laurels. As monster, as master, as friend, as lover; whatever his shape and role, she dreamed about him. And in her dreams, she was *always* drawn to him.

"Antonia!" he says, shaking off the fatigue and smiling at her. It's a gentler, more natural smile than she's used to from him; either the result of much practice, or from him finally fucking relaxing a bit. She wonders, briefly, if he ever told anyone about his adolescent fight with his mother. If he gave his cousin Sophie some other story. If that was truly his first opportunity to release a burden he'd been carrying for a decade and a half.

She *loves* his new smile.

And she giggles: he's feminised her; she's humanised him.

"Hi," she says shyly, looking up at him. She kept her heels to an inch for this, partly because she didn't want to be unsteady on her feet after so much time away, and partly because she wanted to look *up* at Michael tonight.

"What are you—?"

She steps closer to him, pushes him backwards into his apartment. It's dimly lit inside already; perfect. "I wanted to see you," she says.

"Um..."

Antonia frowns just a little. She practised it in the mirror as part of getting to know her new face, so she knows exactly how she looks when she does it. She knows exactly what Michael will be seeing right now. "I'm sorry," she says. "When we last spoke, I think I was mean."

"Oh, no, not at all—"

"And I wanted to make it up to you." Hands on his chest. God, she can feel his pectorals through the sweater...

"You don't—"

"I went into this with open eyes," she says, still gently pushing him. As they go, she kicks the front door closed. "Yes, I probably should have looked around more carefully," she adds with an amused shrug, "but I signed the contract. I agreed to all of this."

"You still don't need to—"

“Oh, Michael,” she says, pushing up onto her toes. “Shut up, would you?” And she kisses him. Presses her mouth hard against his, loops an arm around him. He doesn’t hesitate, and kisses her in return, opening his mouth for her, letting her in.

For a while, they don’t talk.

And then, satisfied but far from sated, she leans away, and whispers, “Do you want to see the new me?”