

# The Catch

Alyson Greaves

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# Chapter One

The city passes in a blur, the way it always does. He knows his route by heart, and people stand aside for joggers, so he barely has to watch where he's going. He certainly doesn't look at them, the people of the city, people who — if he allows himself to think about them for even a moment — he's certain have more fulfilling lives than he does. Husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, partners of any gender; children. He doesn't look at them because to do so is to succumb to a desperate envy any of them would find laughable. Can he not, with all his money, simply *buy* happiness?

In turn, he is paid no more attention than any other jogger. He dresses for it: grey jogging trousers, grey t-shirt, grey cap, sunglasses. He looks like any other late-twenties man who might be seen out running at six in the morning on a drizzly Monday, and he treasures this anonymity more than anything else in his life.

He could be anyone; crucially, he might not be himself.

Sandra gets the jogging clothes for him, has them delivered to his city apartment when his old sets start to wear out. Aside from his mother, she's the only woman he allows into his life, and she wields a level of access to his life his mother would surely find concerning if she knew. In return for a salary thrice the city average for personal assistants, Sandra organises his meetings, buys his clothes, orders his food; she's joked that she'd tie his shoelaces if he found himself too occupied to do it himself. She has lists of his preferences and his habits, his wants and his needs, his fashion choices and his clothing repair requests. She even disposes of his discarded clothes, usually putting them up on the office intranet, first come, first served; he's seen a junior accountant running almost his same route in almost his same jogging outfit. The shoes didn't go, though, and he had to stop himself from mentally marking the man as unfit for promotion because of it.

Sandra delegates a lot, and that's fine, because he knows he requires of her more work than there are hours available in the week, and because she has his trust, and thus so do the people she selects on his behalf.

Just so long as he doesn't have to meet them.

This morning, as with every morning, he returns to the lobby of his apartment building with his clothes sticky with sweat and a satisfying burn in his lungs. He takes the back elevator straight up to the sixty-fourth floor. He showers, he shaves, he dresses from his collection of near-identical suits and ties (for Sandra does not wander out of spec when ordering from his tailor, despite her comments that a little colour might be nice once in a while). As his hair air-dries, he permits himself a moment to look out on the city. Safe behind thick glass. In these moments he likes to imagine himself as seen from outside, by an unseen observer on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows: a man, immaculately dressed in shades of grey, looking out from an empty room, with nothing to identify him. Intangible. A ghost. A placeholder. As invisible looking out as the one looking in.

It's not that his apartment is undecorated so much as it is, like his jogging



outfit and his suit, deliberately and carefully anonymous. ‘Like a hotel room’ was his specification to Sandra when she retained the contractors and, as always, she excelled. He could walk out of here and never return, and no-one would ever know he spent four years of his life returning here almost every night.

There are things Michael Lincoln wants. Things he desires, things he dreams about so vividly that he tears the sheets with his thrashing, and it would be wonderful to give in and satisfy himself, the way everyone else does, but he cannot and will not ever indulge.

It’s just better for everyone that way.

\* \* \*

What impression does he want to make today?

Anthony mouths it to himself in the mirror. It’s one of his brother’s aphorisms, a suggestion from the weekend, when Anthony showed up for Sunday lunch with a sour expression, no bottle of wine, and an unshakeable conviction that, come Monday, he would be fired. A mistake: it roped him into one of Danny’s life coaching sessions, and it was thanks only to Veronica’s intervention that they hadn’t kept at it all afternoon. Roast beef doesn’t eat itself, boys!

So! What impression *does* he want to make today?

The bathroom mirror’s grubby and the light in here’s honestly terrible but he can see enough to understand that whatever impression he *wants* to make, he’s not embodying it. Not his fault: he’s wearing one of Danny’s old suits, and while it’s nicer than anything he’s owned in years, it doesn’t actually *fit*. Danny’s job keeps him active and builds both muscle and character; Anthony’s jobs, like Anthony himself, have been deficient in both.

This latest one seems also to want to keep him in the dark. He’s been hotdesking since he started five months ago and every week he regresses farther and farther into the building, away from the windows and the natural light and the fresh air and most of the other people. And with his assigned work drying up and his boss giving him a look he’s learned from previous jobs to dread, he figures he has only a few days to make the case for his continued employment.

He flaps at the loose lapel and wonders if he has time to learn how to tailor a suit online. Or at the very least to learn how to use safety pins to temporarily take it in a bit.



Pointless; he doesn't *have* any safety pins.

Fuck it. He shrugs, and in the mirror his suit jacket bunches up at the shoulders. He looks stupid, he *feels* stupid, and he has enough doubts about himself that he probably wouldn't contradict someone if they claimed to have documented evidence that he *is* stupid, but at least he's trying. At least he cares enough to borrow ill-fitting clothes from his brother. That's better than last year, right?

What impression does he want to make today?

He frowns at himself, runs a wet hand through his hair to tidy it up a bit, and tries to look professional. Then he shuts off the bathroom light, grabs his record bag from the chair by the front door, yells goodbye to his flatmate, and sets off to work to get fired.

\* \* \*

He ought to take the executive elevator. It would be the wise thing to do, and it would save him considerable effort. But his life is grievously lacking in colour, and though this is by choice, design and necessity, it is sometimes impossible to deny a small, safe indulgence.

So he takes one of the employee elevators, the one that terminates at the fourteenth floor, and steps out into the corridor outside Online Reconciliation. Almost a hundred people work for him on this floor alone, behind glass walls frosted to waist height, but only one of them holds his interest.

Yes! She's here! Just as he hoped!

She always arrives early, sets out her phone and her coffee on her desk and stores her lunch in the fridge in the closest employee kitchen. And he's arrived on time to watch her return, to watch her walk delicately across the office back to her cubicle. She dresses modestly, but his joy is in her choices, in the subtleties of how she assembles what he knows to be a limited wardrobe into something pleasing. Today she wears a blue-grey knitted sweater, a white blouse, and a cream skirt. He can't tell which shoes she's chosen, not unless he presses himself against the glass — which would make his attention rather obvious — but he guesses she's probably wearing the scuffed black ankle boots. He knows she's unhappy with her shoe selection, but they're difficult to buy in her size unless, she told her cubiclemate, you want to spend *serious* money.

He's got her lined up for a promotion in five months. She'll get her serious money. He'd have done it sooner, but she's new in all respects, having started at the company just seven months ago and having started her transition a mere nine weeks and three days ago. She told HR two months after she started, signalled her intention to become the woman she's always been, and the flag in the system sent an encrypted alert to his private email account. Since then, he's been aware of her. Temptation in his own office.

He lingers.

She doesn't know that when he took over, years ago now, he personally expanded the company's private healthcare provision from just the executives to all employees. She doesn't know that it was him who specified that their coverage include all possible transgender medical care. And if she ever finds out that it was him who ordered a survey of every employee and then quietly fired every bigot, transphobe and undesirable he could find, with luck she'll categorise it as simple due diligence.

They're on the Stonewall list now. Number one in the region for LGBTQ+ employee safety and comfort, which offends him; in his research he hasn't



found a better company, in that one specific respect, in the *country*. The whole endeavour was perhaps unwise, considering his private proclivities, but when stewardship was handed to him the decision to do so came very shortly after.

And it had been the right thing to do. Even aside from his private obsessions, it had been the right thing to do. It was what made the decision such an easy one.

He just has to be careful.

She tests his self-control every time. He knows she likes men *and* women, and that she has neither boyfriend nor girlfriend. He knows her previous relationship ended poorly. He knows she would feel unable to say no if he asked her out, given his wealth, given his power over her. It would be so *simple...*

And it would take little time for her to learn to hate him, and thus he



would hate himself.

Sharon Blair. Twenty-three. Just starting her new life, and starting it *here*. To even think of ruining her transition, of ruining *her*, with his appetites is unthinkable.

She catches his eye and smiles, and he returns the gesture but makes it quick, curt and professional. Then he pulls his phone from his jacket pocket and calls Sandra. He has no real need to speak with her — he'll see her in person in mere minutes — but he needs a distraction and so he asks her to check his schedule for today and present it to him when he arrives in his office.

She would have done that anyway, but she'll just think he's being a control freak again.

On the phone, Sandra reminds him that her maternity leave starts next week, and that he promised to learn to live without her for six months.

Six months without Sandra to rely on. Without the woman he keeps at arm's length who nevertheless is the closest thing he has to a friend. Six months alone.

No more stops on the fourteenth floor. No more checking in on Sharon Blair. No more... indulgences.

He simply cannot risk it.

\* \* \*

The tram's almost empty. It would be; it's not even eleven. Not even eleven in the morning and he's out of work again. Not even eleven in the bloody morning and he is surplus to requirements, downsized, let go. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, feels the fabric of his too-big suit scratch against his legs, and tries to focus on the positive: at least he doesn't have to sign up with any new employment agencies; he's still on the books of the place that got him his last few jobs.

And they'll be expecting him to call...

Fuck it. As much as he would love a day off, a day to not think about work, a day in which to be well and truly *fired*, he shouldn't put it off. To do so would not be keen, and he can't think of a worse crime for someone in his position. So he calls the agency, and watches the scenery rattle lazily past as he waits for the receptionist to connect him to his adviser.

"Anthony Bessemer," she says. "Hello again."

She sounds resigned to hear from him. Probably not terribly professional of her, but she's heard from him *a lot* over the years.



“Hi, Lizzie.” He taps his fingers on the window, drums them on the glass, nail by ragged nail. “I need work.”

They talk it through together. She’ll have no trouble finding him something permanent in the medium term, she says; he’s accumulated enough glowing performance reports that she thinks he’ll find a home in one of several contracts that are coming up in the next six to twelve weeks.

“Are you okay to wait for one of those,” she asks, “or do you need something sooner?”

“I’ve got rent, Lizzie,” he says, hiking his legs up onto the seat and stretching his toes out inside his shoes. An old lady farther up the tram gives him a look, but he’s used to looks, and parries it with a shrug. “Rent and bills and I’m thinking about trying out that whole ‘eating’ thing, soon. I’ve heard good things about it.”

Lizzie doesn’t laugh. “Then I have a short-term gig. It pays well, but it’s not likely to lead to anything permanent.”

“You had me at ‘pays well’. How short term is short term?”

“Six months. It’s covering maternity leave. You’re suited, but by the time you’re done, those other contracts will be long gone. I can start you there, and perhaps discuss yanking you when and if a better opportunity comes through?”

He hops off, dodges a tourist trying to suss out how boarding a tram works, and starts down the mess of roads that leads to his flat. What Lizzie’s offering him sounds perfect; there *must* be a catch.

“What’s the job?” he asks.

“Assistant to the Chief Executive, which sounds grand but isn’t. It’s grunt work, Anthony: you take calls, arrange meetings, fetch coffee, do the boss’ dry cleaning. You know the kind of thing.”

“Yeah, I do.”

He’s done it before, several times. He suggested once to his flatmate that the women he temporarily replaced probably asked specifically for a man to cover for them, so the agency wouldn’t send a younger, more attractive and less pregnant woman, who might inadvertently steal their jobs. His flatmate called him a misogynist prick, but as he said at the time, there was one older guy in particular who seemed *incredibly* disappointed to find a man warming his attractive assistant’s dainty little seat.

“Interested?” Lizzie asks.

Yes. Oh, God, yes. “Depends on the pay,” he says.

“Scale six.”

Scale six? That's two higher than his previous job. Scale six is *ridiculous*. He'll be able to afford a suit, a *nice* suit, without sacrificing fripperies like rent and food. Hell, if he can rely on scale six money dropping into his account every week, he can go out and buy a suit that fits tomorrow! Then he can throw this awful thing he borrowed off his brother in the bin where it belongs.

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow."

Correction: he can go out and buy a suit that fits *this afternoon*.

\* \* \*

The city passes by in a blur, the way it always does, but Michael barely sees it. His life is constructed on routine, on an unchanging bedrock of mundane, predictable certainties: he always jogs in the morning, whatever the weather, unless it is one of the major holidays, his birthday, or his mother's; for work he always dresses in grey, in shades from charcoal to cloud, the better to remain authoritative but approachable for his employees; his driver always picks him up from outside his apartment building at 08:26, or from outside his home in the countryside at 06:44 on the days after major holidays, his birthday, or his mother's.

And Sandra is always waiting for him outside his office when he arrives at work.

Despicable to think he's going to be without her for so long. If he knew who the father of Sandra's child was he would curse his name, might even briefly entertain the idea of financially ruining him, but there is no father to speak of. Sandra discovered the pregnancy after several months of dalliances with men she met online, and decided almost instantly to keep the child. She's not getting any younger, she said, and he smiled and promised her as much maternity leave as she required. She laughed and said her sister will be helping take care of the baby because she's a spinster and she's been getting *particularly* broody lately, so she'll take the minimum, and he almost tried to change her mind.

Foolishness. Imagine a year without Sandra! Six months will be trial enough.

He runs through the rest of his routine with rather less mechanical precision than usual. Drawers slam shut, his razor passes so roughly over his skin it's a marvel he doesn't cut himself, and in his irritation and haste he pops a button from his shirt.

Muttering oaths to himself he selects another, dons it with more care, and eventually winds up on the pavement outside his apartment building two minutes early, forced to wait for his driver.

This whole situation has him rattled.

\* \* \*

“Ah! Good. You’re here! Right on time. I do love that in a boy. In a man. A man! Sorry. Pardon my impertinence and pardon my French and pardon *me*, but I *swear* you temps get younger every year. When *you* pass the big four-oh I’m sure you’ll understand. When’ll that happen for you, in another three decades? I’m kidding, I’m kidding! I’m Sandra, Sandra Bennings; you must be Anthony Bessemer?”

The woman bearing down on him is a mass of hair and enthusiasm, and if her heavily pregnant belly is slowing her down at all, it doesn’t show.

“I am,” he says.

“Well, Mr Bessemer — may I call you Anthony? — we have two days to get you up to speed and then I’m *off*, so, here, take my hand and let me help you up. Don’t be afraid to pull on it! These sofas could swallow a 747, I *swear*, and they’re hard enough to get out of even *without* first-day jitters, and— Whoops! Don’t worry. No-one saw. Just me, and I’m officially not here!”

The bloody couch — a thousand quid’s-worth of slate-grey bullshit — is so low to the ground that he stumbles as he stands, almost falling into a prissy little circular glass end table, but Ms Bennings is right: there’s no-one else around to see. The whole office is like this, so far: monochrome, horrifyingly expensive-looking, and just on the wrong side of practical. Until this morning, he hadn’t been almost hit in the face by a revolving door for *years*.

“You’re *officially* not here?” he asks, recovering, trying not to blush at his clumsiness.

She holds open the door to her office and beckons him through. Inside there’s an asymmetric glass desk in the centre of the room, set up with two chairs and two laptops. She points to the closest one. “My maternity leave *officially* started yesterday,” she says, while he sits down, “but there’s always so much to do and so little time to do it in, and actually *calling* the damn agency kept getting bumped down the list. That nice Lizzie girl, she said you just became available?”

“Yes,” he says, nodding.

“Well, isn’t *that* good timing? I have a good feeling about you. Go ahead and sign in, love; you’ll be A dot Bessemer at Lincoln-McCain Associates dot com. It’ll prompt you for a password, so just pick something you can remember. With three numbers and a capital letter. And a symbol, if you’re feeling fancy.”

“Done,” he says, rattling off a semi-random alphanumeric password. She looks pleased, like he’s just passed some kind of test, but he’s always been puzzled that other people can’t seem to memorise short sequences of numbers and letters; it’s always come naturally to him.

The Windows background, when it flicks into view, is the same slate grey as the couch out in the corridor — *exactly* the same, as if someone spent hours getting it perfectly calibrated — with LINCOLN-MCCAIN ASSOCIATES in tasteful bone-white serif in the centre. The effect is both professional and a little intimidating; this might be the first company he’s worked for with a competent image consultant.

Sandra sits heavily in the chair next to him and takes a second to breathe. “God,” she says, “my bloody back. Some free advice, Anthony: *don’t* get pregnant. Hah! Not likely! Anyway, you’re all logged in? The agency said you had experience with our software already; is that correct?”

He checks over the icons on the desktop; all of them are familiar. “Yes,” he says. “Practically every placement I’ve had has used this software. I think it’s the industry standard.”

“Too right it is; it’s *our* software! Now, you won’t be handling *all* his business, obviously — he has a team for that — so you’ll mainly be involved with the things that happen right here in the building. And he’s a very hands-on boss; half the time you’ll open your computer and find your whole job for the day right in front of you, and all you have to do is follow the steps. Some say,” she adds in a stage whisper, “he’s a control freak.”

“Oh?”

“I would *never*, though,” she says, smirking at him. “You’re okay with the people stuff? Guiding his guests to meetings, attending functions with him, taking notes? Nodding and smiling and laughing at appropriate times?”

“Yes.”

“Good! We can go over everything in *exhaustive* detail in a bit, but first I want you to go introduce yourself to Mr Lincoln, your boss for the next six months. Go on! Office at the end of the corridor. You can’t miss it; it’s *huge*.”

\* \* \*

He can't concentrate.

It's been hours and he can't concentrate.

The desire has been consuming his thoughts.

The girl, Sharon Blair. The creature of consummate beauty. The — say it! — transgender woman. He's going to have to be careful, even more than he has up to this point. He can't be alone with her, he can't be in the same elevator with her, he can't bump into her on the way in or out of the building. He can't. Because if he sees her ever again, he doesn't think he'll be able to stop himself. He'll open his mouth and he'll damn himself for life. He'll let out his desires and that will be the end of him.

It must be because his routine is coming apart. Sandra, gone for six months! He hopes desperately that the new girl is at least as good as her, because now is *not* the time for any further interruptions to his schedule.

There's a knock at the door. Speak of the devil.

He hates to shout. There's an intercom system which can relay his voice clearly and cleanly no matter the volume, and so he activates it and says with quiet authority, "Enter."

Walking into his room— No, *falling* into his room, tripping on the threshold and barely maintaining his balance, is a mess of a man: untidy hair, a cheap suit that looks new enough but will surely by the end of the man's first week here have an ugly shine to the fabric, and shoes that probably granted change from a twenty-pound note. Not Sandra's replacement, surely? What an absolute—!

And then the man straightens up, and Michael's heart near stops.

A man? Barely. Twenty, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two at the oldest. And while his hair might be messy and his suit unable completely to hide his slight build and short stature, his face is quite something else. Enchanting. Odd, perhaps, and not conventionally handsome, but arresting. Someone his mother might call *elfin*.

The introductions pass without a hitch, but when the man returns to Sandra's office to learn the finer points of his duties for the next six months, Michael finds himself unable to think of anything else. There's just something about him...

Sharon. He acts like Sharon did, before she was a woman in anyone's eyes but her own. Unsure, timid, clumsy — because she was always watching for what other people thought of her — but with a femininity that was obvious to Michael as soon as he saw her.

He calls up the camera footage, watches the man — Anthony — stumble into his room, over and over. Sees that same femininity, that same quality.



And those eyes! Blue, piercing blue, and almost too big, too expressive for a man. So easy to imagine the face that surrounds them softening, the hair lengthening. Shoulders losing what little mass they have, hands thinning, fingers becoming tipped with unbitten nails. He dresses him, first in the simple, modest clothes Sharon favours and then, remembering that this is his fantasy, and that if he's allowing himself to think this then he's going to allow himself to go wild, and...

No.

No, Michael.

This is madness.

He has work to do and a routine to maintain and this is *madness!*

But that's the problem, isn't it? He can't concentrate. He's controlled his life to the *minute* and yet he's wasting it on an empty office and an empty



home because his obsession eats at him, steals from him everything but the compulsion.

Control. That's the thing: control. More important even than routine. If he could satisfy his desires in a predictable and controlled fashion, within tightly established and agreed-upon boundaries, if he could leverage his resources, monetary and legal, to have someone provide for him, for his needs... Someone like Anthony...

After all, the man is a temp, can't even afford a decent suit, and Michael can offer *the world*.

And all he has to do is accept certain *alterations*...

The thought is exciting. Almost too exciting; he polarises the windows and locks the door. But before he relieves the tension, before the need becomes greater than his will to resist it, he notes down his idea.

It's just an idea. An idle thought. One which he hopes to dispel, if he can, through one of his rare lapses in self-control.

But if he can't? If the next time he sees him the desires rise up again?

Prepare, Michael. Prepare and control.

He'll find out *everything* about this man. Everything! Ordinarily he would engage Sandra's services, but this is too private; this is about the other side of his life, the side he keeps hidden from everyone. This is about the tantalising thought that one person, controlled and contained and precisely coordinated (and richly rewarded), could provide for him in a way no-one else could.

He'll do the digging himself. He'll prepare the paperwork himself. He'll make the request himself. Maybe the man will be amenable; maybe he'll be outraged and offended and disgusted. But between an ironclad NDA and an amount of money that will likely be irresistible to someone who would choose to wear *that* suit on his first day at a company like Lincoln-McCain Associates, Michael Lincoln feels reasonably certain that an agreement can be reached.

*Be mine, Anthony Bessemer.*

No.

*Antonia.*

# Chapter Two

The city is unfamiliar.

Easy to say it's because of the rain, the cumulative, disorientating effect of it, the sound of his shoes slapping against wet concrete, the swish of passing cars, the muted fizzle of water striking his earbuds. Easy to say it's because of the glare; there's no good excuse to wear sunglasses in this weather, and the sharp grey morning light from the unclouded sky to the east is too bright, seems to come at him from everywhere at once, reflected off a hundred



windows, a hundred thousand raindrops. There are more reasons for the city to feel alien this morning than anyone could sensibly count, and they are all lies.

The woman who doesn't exist is taunting him.

In such weather, joggers are more apt to stick to the pathways and pavements, and the press of people brings with it its own confusion, its own aggravation, multiplied by the unavoidable sensation that Antonia Bessemer, a creature purely of his imagination, finds his plight amusing. He can feel her laughing at him, gently and fondly — for the woman he imagines is inclined to regard him generously — but pointedly nonetheless, the same way she laughs when he loses focus in meetings, when he fades out at his desk, when he comes to at home and realises he's been staring for two hours out of the window at the landscape below.

The woman who doesn't exist.

Michael runs. Deafened by the roar of the rain and blinded by the bright and blanketing haze, he runs *faster*, weaves his way through the other joggers, pushes his stamina beyond its limit. He doesn't know if he's running towards her or away from her or just to punish himself. He doesn't need to know.

Anthony Bessemer. A joke played on him, personally. A man with so much obvious, undeniable potential that Michael can see nothing else when he looks at him, and yet everyone else responds to him as if he is nothing special. An ordinary man. Quite a clumsy man. And the man himself is obviously used to such treatment. He expects it. He is a mediocrity, a competent enough administrator with an easygoing manner but little else to recommend him.

But to look upon him is to see Antonia, clear as a summer's day.

It makes no sense. Michael even sent him on a spurious errand to Online Reconciliation, to fetch a document from Sharon, in the hope that perhaps a transgender woman might see the potential in him. In the hope that she was inspired to — what's the phrase? — 'crack his egg'.

Nothing. Because there is no egg to crack. Because what Michael sees is what *only* Michael sees.

He's questioned his sanity. He ought not to — he's learned time and again that when his view of the world is in conflict with that of his peers, he is consistently proven correct — but what choice does he have? He's found himself constructing elaborate and borderline metaphysical justifications for his interest in Anthony Bessemer: perhaps some people who appear to be men are *meant* to be women, are *born* to it, and while many of them come to understand this on their own, many more never will, and thus it falls to one

such as him, with his singular interest, with his *obsession*, to see it, to act on it. To transform them. To release them.

And he has borrowed the voice of his mother to scold himself: *You are delusional, Michael.*

There is no altruism here. There is no woman within Anthony Bessemer, waiting for Michael to release her. There are simply Michael's desires. His needs. Needs that have gone unfulfilled for too long. Needs which require attending to. And, seen with a clear eye, the allure of Anthony Bessemer is clear and obvious: there is a chance, however slim, that he may fulfil Michael Lincoln's needs with a specificity that is both thrilling and deeply erotic.

Imagine the impossible. Imagine the *consent*. Anthony will become a woman. More important: he will become a woman moulded to Michael's exacting specifications. It is all too easy to see himself guiding the man into the



office of the best plastic surgeon in the country, to create from scratch his perfect plaything.

*This nose.*

*That jawline.*

*Those breasts.*

It's not entirely impossible. He's been putting together a plan. Anthony Bessemer is a man who stumbles through life — through doorways — without a plan and with no chance of establishing one. He wears clothes that fit poorly and is lax with his grooming. He stores flavourless lunches in the office fridge. And he has worked temp job after temp job to pay rent he can barely afford.

What if someone were to make him rich?

Michael is no lawyer, but he knows more than he cares to count; he knows how to speak like one, how to write like one. And he has access to a vast archive of legal documents. So the last few nights he's been drafting and redrafting, referring to contracts and NDAs and non-competes, creating two perfect documents: one to bind Anthony Bessemer to secrecy, and another to bind him to *him*.

The documents are as much as fantasy as Antonia herself. For Anthony will never say yes. Will laugh in his face. And though his silence will be compelled, forever the man will look at Michael and *know*. Which is almost as unpleasant to contemplate as the inevitable rejection.

But what if Anthony says *yes*? What a thing that would be.

Michael slams painfully into the shoulder of another jogger, and the violence of it throws him out of his thoughts and back to the present. He's suddenly no longer the careful and reserved businessman crafting a proposal to a deliciously delicate new assistant; instead he's soaking wet and staggering sideways and steadying himself on a bollard and offering insincere apologies and, he realises as he looks around, he's *lost*. Some bloody estate in the middle of nowhere.

The woman who doesn't exist laughs at him again.

He can't do this any more. Things must be set in motion. Today.

\* \* \*

Anthony got up to speed pretty quickly. He wasn't showing off when he told Sandra he was familiar with the system Lincoln-McCain uses; it really *is* the standard, and over the years he's gotten so fast with it that he can navigate it with one hand, using the keyboard to flick through screens and leaving his



other hand free to, say, support his incredibly bored head. It's a skill that has reliably impressed any coworker over the age of about fifty — which includes every boss he's ever had, bar Mr Lincoln — but of course Sandra was, well, not *unimpressed*, but not blown away, either. She can do the same thing and write an email on her phone at the same time, and when she demonstrated, Anthony had to pretend to hiccup.

The woman is *horrifyingly* efficient. For perhaps the first time, Anthony's worried that his predecessor has set a standard he won't be able to live up to. And that has the potential to be a huge problem: he let *several* other opportunities go in order to take this job! What if Mr Lincoln, accustomed to excellence, fires him and takes a punt on another replacement assistant?

Anthony's certain he's not being paranoid. He's *sure* Mr Lincoln is judging him and judging him harshly; when Anthony's duties require him to be in the same room as his boss, he feels scrutinised in a manner he hasn't ever felt before, which hasn't helped his coordination. He never thought of himself as an especially clumsy person before he came to Lincoln-McCain — more than his brother, sure, but not too bad — but now it seems like he can't cross a perfectly level patch of carpet without finding something on which to trip.

He's just happy he's yet to spill anything on his boss. Though he did come close, once: he very nearly dropped a container of non-dairy creamer onto the desk in front of him. Catching it before it splashed all over Mr Lincoln is probably his proudest achievement since coming here. From Mr Lincoln it earned him a raised eyebrow and a peculiarly frozen expression.





It wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't around his boss so much. But he calls him into his office far more than he expected. Conversations that could be had via email or even, at a stretch, over the phone, regularly take place in Mr Lincoln's dull grey box of an office, with its treacherous carpet transition and the floor-to-ceiling windows that make Anthony feel like an insect under a microscope even before Mr Lincoln turns his gaze on him.

He doesn't see many other people, not consistently. Sometimes other senior executives drop by to see Mr Lincoln, and usually check in with him on their way past — once with an amused comment that they'd hoped 'dirty ol' Michael' had hired a pretty brunette of the *other* gender instead. Twice so far he's sat in on meetings, taking Sandra's place at Mr Lincoln's right hand, cueing up presentations, keeping notes, trying not to let show how out of place he feels. And he's had to pop down to the departments a few times. There was one girl, Sharon, in Online Rec, from whom he had to fetch a folder of projections for the next quarter — another task more easily accomplished via email! — who was so stunningly beautiful that he worried momentarily for the integrity of his trousers. And when he stammered a greeting and tripped over a wastepaper basket, she was sweetly generous towards him, and didn't laugh.

Clumsy, inadequate, out of place.

And now he has to face Mr Lincoln again, because it's three twenty-three, and he has a briefing in seven minutes. Anthony can't help but wonder, as he kicks back his chair, what terrible and humiliating pratfall he will manage this time.

\* \* \*

At three twenty-nine and forty seconds, Michael closes his laptop and mutes his phone. He stands, carefully rolls his chair back into place under his desk, and steps forward to meet Anthony Bessemer, who buzzes the intercom at three twenty-nine and fifty-five seconds. Michael opens the door and Anthony, waiting on the other side, jumps, clearly expecting Michael to be waiting at his desk, not behind the door.

Anthony's suit, once again, leaves something to be desired, being slack on him and in an unflattering shade. Michael's seen it before: this is its fourth outing, and he's starting to suspect the man owns only three suits, all of them unpleasant. Anthony must unavoidably buy off the rack on his remuneration — on his *current* remuneration — but his taste is questionable.

Still. Something to be worked on. The man is *clay*.

Anthony's still standing there, smiling nervously, and Michael steps back.

"Come with me, Mr Bessemer," he says, deferring to the requirements of formality. Preemptively legitimising the quite preposterous proposal he's preparing to present to Anthony.

"O-kay," Anthony says, interrupted by his nerves and separating the syllables. His jaw flexes and, Michael notices before he turns away, his eyes dart around the room. Irresistible: the man simply cannot hide his thoughts. They play out across his face as clearly as on anyone Michael's ever seen. It is utterly charming.

Or it will be. On Antonia.

*Have I done something wrong? he's thinking. Am I fired?*

Michael does not smile, but he wishes to. The more reduced Anthony is, the better the offer will appear.

He leads him towards the discreet door at the far end of the room.

If Michael's office is his home away from home, and decorated similarly — sparsely and in utilitarian grey — then the meeting room linked directly to it is more akin to the family home, to the wing where his mother entertains, where it must be made to appear to outsiders and newcomers that they are a welcoming, traditional family. Michael had Sandra shop for knick-knacks for the shelves, attractive but low-maintenance plants for the side tables, and incidental furniture of the sort he's seen in the offices of other executives. *I am like you*, this room is meant to say to the men and women with whom he does business. *I am comprehensible to you. We are practically family already.*

It is the greatest lie he's ever told.

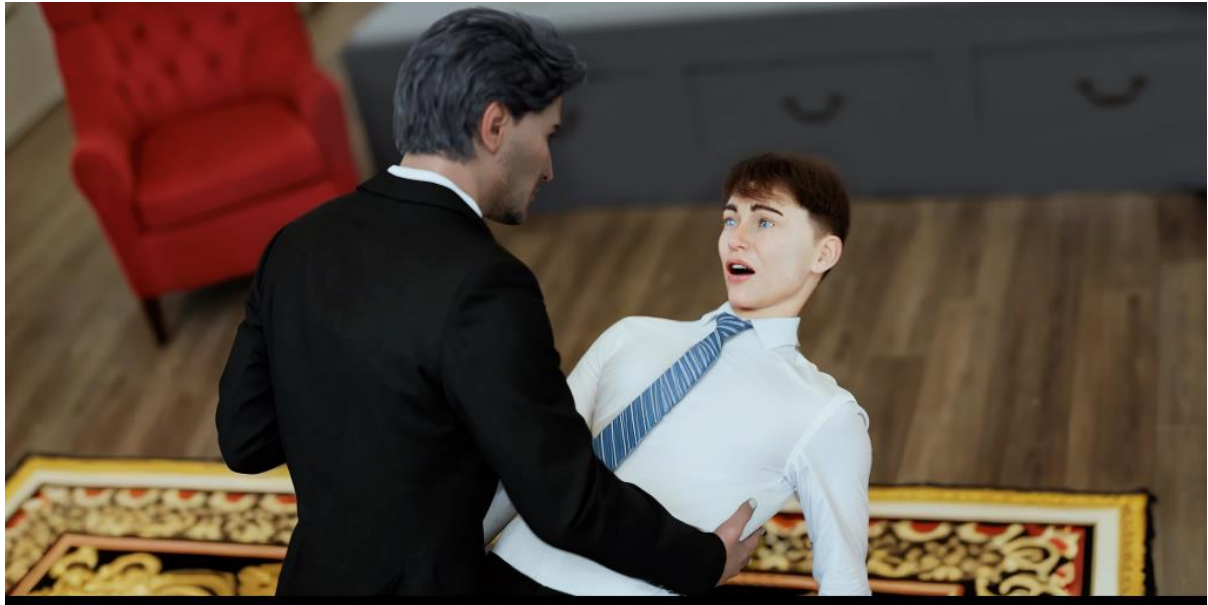
But it is useful. Especially now, when he wants Anthony to be at his ease. More precisely: when he wants Anthony to be at his ease, but also hyper-aware that any egress must traverse two rooms instead of one. Trapped by comfort.

A metaphor, perhaps, for Michael's intentions.

"Mr Bessemer," he says, turning around, "welcome to my—"

And he has to stop because the man is *falling*. Anthony, overcome by stress and curiosity, has failed to vault the millimetre rise in the carpet underneath the door — or possibly he has failed successfully to place one foot in front of the other — and now he's falling and if Michael doesn't want him to hurt himself there is only one thing to do.

He catches him.



Anthony stammers an apology and practically leaps backward, out of reach, and Michael suppresses the urge to try to keep hold of him for a moment longer, to evaluate by touch just how lithe those limbs might already be, how delectable that waist might become.

What a thrill this is already.

“I’m so sorry, Mr Lincoln! I shouldn’t be allowed on, uh, flat surfaces, and—”

“It’s quite all right,” Michael says, directing him to a chair. When Anthony looks at it as if it might bite him, Michael taps sharply on the table. “Sit. Please.”

“Um...”

“Please.”

The next few minutes pass fortunately without incident. Michael closes the door, opens the blinds, fetches for Anthony a glass of water, and allows himself a handful of seconds at the horribly chintzy little bar to compose himself. Sandra insisted that it's *not* chintzy, that it's simply the *in* style, that he can't go around calling anything and everything that isn't a featureless grey box *chintzy* because it's not only inaccurate but also, boss, comes off as snobbish and out of touch, and—

There. He's ready. With a glass of water of his own he turns, smiles professionally, and sits opposite Anthony. A briefcase sits waiting for him on the table, and he takes a single careful sip of water before popping the clasps.

He doesn't remove the documents. Not yet. There is theatre to be observed.

"Mr Bessemer," he says. "I have for you a proposal. And it is not one that I am anticipating you will immediately accept. So before we discuss it, before we discuss anything even related to it, I first would like to reassure you that your employment is not reliant on the outcome of this meeting. At the close of our business today, whatever happens, you may walk back out of that door—" *Stumble, perhaps*. "—and return to your job, to see it out until the conclusion of your contract. Currently around six months, I believe."

"Um," Anthony says. "Yes. Six months."

Michael suppresses another smile. Anthony responded exactly as he hoped: bypassing the implied enormity of the yet-to-be-revealed proposal in favour of grasping at some irrelevant detail. When you are about to wash someone's life away, offer them a rope. Lessons from his mother's knee.

Strange to use her tactics against someone he wishes to persuade, rather than dominate.

Well, not dominate *yet*...

"You will have three opportunities to back out," Michael continues. "The first opportunity is now." Michael taps the desk again. "Get up from your seat and leave, and this discussion is over and will never be revisited. You will still see out your contract here, I remind you."

It takes Anthony a moment to understand that a response is required from him. "Oh. Um. Right. No, it's okay." He laughs, expelling nerves. "I'm intrigued. And, um, I'm trying to space my pratfalls further apart. No need to tempt fate. I'll stay."

"Good."

Michael steps heavily on the closing plosive, allows it to echo. Allows Anthony a few seconds to reacquire his anxiety. And then he turns to his

briefcase and retrieves the first prepared document. He sets it out on the table, keeping it faced away from Anthony for now.

“First, I would like to confide in you as to the delicacy of my position,” Michael continues, leaning forward and steepling his fingers. “I am, unfortunately, a public figure. The face of Lincoln-McCain. What this means is that my public and private lives come under infrequent but inconvenient scrutiny, and thus I must *always* live as if I am under observation. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Anthony says. Definitive this time. No *ums* or *ahs*. And he sits attentive, matching Michael’s posture, though with his hands placed delicately in front of him rather than under his chin. Good to know the man can pull it together when he needs to.

“The proposal I am preparing to place on the table could severely compromise me if its exact nature were to get out. Now, as you might surmise, I have access to lawyers, journalists, and so on; my ability to put up a smokescreen is considerable. But there will always be some who will look through it to the fire beneath. Hence, it is in my interest to close off that possibility in advance.”

Michael leans back again and nods at the document between them. Anthony, mirroring him, sits back, frowning.

“That’s an NDA?” he asks.

“Yes.” Or close enough. “This is your second opportunity to back out, Anthony. Now that you know the stakes, now that you know *why* your silence will be required, you may leave without repercussions.”

He’s still frowning. Looking hard at the document. Probably *is* trying to read it upside down, but there are no clues to be found; it’s as boilerplate as Michael could make it, unassisted. And, once again, Anthony is easy to read: *I might as well sign*, he’s thinking. *I still have one more chance to leave.*

“Why would I stay?” Anthony asks. “Why would I sign your NDA?”

Michael leans forward again. “Because, Mr Bessemer, I intend to make you rich.”

\* \* \*

He’s never seen an NDA before. The last properly legal document he signed was the sublease at home, and that one was shady as all hell and clearly drafted in a rush by his flatmate; as far as the letting agency is concerned, he’s a houseplant. This document is... considerably longer.

Mr Lincoln told him to take his time, and so he is, but he can't find anything unexpectedly punitive in the text. It's surprisingly straightforward, and there's no indication that by signing he's waiving any right other than to speak about the nature of this meeting, right here, right now. And that's all that matters, right? Even if Mr Lincoln were to, say, confess a murder to him, he still wouldn't be in a materially different position than he was yesterday. There'd just be an additional reason not to randomly run out into the street and start yelling about how his boss kills people; he'd be slandering his boss *and* violating an NDA.

And Mr Lincoln didn't name his price. Anthony asked him to define 'rich' and he simply tapped the document. But Mr Lincoln's rich, isn't he? Like, rich the way most people mean when they say someone is rich. What do CEOs make? A million a year, or something? And that's *without* counting any family money. Anthony isn't exactly familiar with the social strata of the British upper classes, but he vaguely remembers reading something about his new boss being a member of a loosely connected string of families of relatively unmodest means, with interests in technology, banking, services, and so forth: respectable businesspeople all. There'll be horrific drama behind the scenes, obviously. Maybe they only see each other once a year, at Ascot, and that's what Mr Lincoln is *actually* worried about: whatever awaits Anthony behind this NDA, Mr Lincoln's probably less concerned the immediate repercussions and more interested in making sure some distant cousin doesn't take offence and attack him in front of a society journalist with an inconveniently large hat. The headline is easy to imagine: *BILLIONAIRE BONCE BRUISED IN POSH BASH HAT SMASH*. And there'll be a picture of him, and—

Get it together, Ant.

He shuffles through the papers again. He doesn't want to *look* like he's rushing this, but his curiosity is nearing insatiable levels. And he'll still have his job, whatever, won't he?

Fine.

Fuck it.

He signs the documents where indicated and passes them back to Mr Lincoln, who signs his sections, gives Anthony his copy, replaces the rest in his briefcase and suddenly looks disconcertingly worried.

\* \* \*





He's rehearsed this.

He's rehearsed this!

He's rehearsed this so many times that he knows it like he knows his jogging route. A hundred times he's sat opposite Mr Bessemer — Anthony — and calmly explained himself, his needs, his desires, and what he wants in return for, by anyone's standards, an obscene amount of money. But he's frozen. It is as if the inconsistency that has mired him recently, that has stripped from him the comfort of routine and predictability, has returned for his very soul.

It's the way Anthony is watching him. Watching him with those piercing blue eyes, reminding him how close he is to his goal. If there were another way, if he could take Anthony's will from him, *make* him become Antonia, no matter his preferences...

His mother's voice: *What you want, you must be given, and your opponent must be made to think that the gift is their idea. Taking, Michael, is for the stupid. Taking is for the weak. Taking will expose you. Taking will bury you.*

Yet how can he become *more* exposed than he is now, trapped in those blue eyes, in the promise they represent?

"Mr Lincoln?" Anthony says.

He's rehearsed this.

"Mr Bessemer," he says, "from this point forward, our conversation is covered entirely by the document we signed. Absolute confidentiality. You could ruin me, Mr Bessemer. And I would be more than able to return the favour."

Anthony nods. "Understood. I don't want to face your lawyer army. And, uh, I also don't want to ruin you? You *are* paying me. Right now. You're paying me right now."

A small smile. "Thank you. I would also remind you that nothing that is about to transpire has any further binding on you than your silence. You can, as I said, walk away."

"Understood."

Michael fixes his gaze on the mid-point between Anthony's eyes. To look in his eyes and still look away. To remain detached. Essential for what must be said next.

"I am straight, Mr Bessemer," he says. To the point, here. In rehearsal, he found himself tempted to rush this part, so he speaks slowly and carefully, in the tone with which he delivers unpleasant news to underlings. "I love women. I love their shape, their smell, the way they move. But I find most women to be... unsatisfying. They come to me complete, and expect to find in me an equal. Unfortunately, they will not."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I am no-one's equal. I am unfinished, Mr Bessemer. One half of a whole, awaiting completion. And an appropriate other half is not so easy to find."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Anthony says, and Michael has to still himself because, for a moment, he lost track of himself again. Almost forgot where he is, who he's talking to. Almost forgot what needs to happen *in this moment*, and not months from now, with Antonia.

Enough. Throw out the script. Be blunt.

"I am attracted specifically to transgender women, Mr Bessemer. And that, in itself, would not be so bad, since there are more and more trans women all the time. Despite the political climate in this country, they simply

won't stop finding themselves." A genuine smile. Impossible not to be moved. "But my requirements are more specific. And my desires... are unconventional. In short, Mr Bessemer, I wish to shape a woman's transition. Guide it. Guide *her*. Mould her. And since that would suggest a level of coercion, a level of control over another life that is simply unconscionable, it is something I cannot do."

"Uh... Okay? Why not?"

Michael taps on the table. "Because she is *herself*, Mr Bessemer! Because she is not *mine*! How arrogant, how presumptuous, how cruel would I have to be to take control of a woman who is only just becoming herself? I might forge her into something beautiful, certainly, but to *my* eyes, not hers!" Tap. Tap. Tap. "I could mistakenly make her into someone she hates, Mr Bessemer. No." He's breathing heavily. He pulls back on it, withdraws, returns to himself. "No. It is unthinkable."

"I don't understand where I come in," Anthony says. "You want me to find you a trans woman, or—?"

"No. No, Mr Bessemer, I do not." A deep breath. "I have accepted that I can never have what I want. What I need. But I have realised that there might be something that resembles it. Someone who takes on that role. For a limited time and for a considerable price. No, what I propose, Mr Bessemer, is that



you are that person. I propose that you would... transition for me.”

There is a whole second of absolute silence.

And then the man is up and out of his chair, quickly enough that the chair falls back against the wall and scrapes noisily against the paint. Quickly enough that in his rush to escape he gets a foot trapped in the chair and falls, awkwardly and slowly, losing his balance piece by piece. When eventually Anthony comes to a halt, it is as an undignified mess, entangled in a wreckage of limbs.

Michael has more than enough time to walk around the table before Anthony can make his escape; by the time he holds out a hand to help him up, Anthony has barely extricated himself.

The man glares at Michael’s hand. Doesn’t take it. But doesn’t try to run, either. Sits there on the floor, bewildered. Probably in some amount of pain.

“Do you really mean what I think you mean?” Anthony says.

“Yes.”

“No. No. Not a chance. No.”

He starts moving again, pushing on the fallen chair, but it slips under his grasp and leaves him once again glaring at the hand Michael’s offering.

“You’re insane,” Anthony says.

“I am quite sound,” Michael replies, still holding out his hand.

“What makes you think I would even consider something like—?”

“Ten million pounds, Mr Bessemer.”

Anthony stills. Stops even looking at Michael’s hand. Simply *stops*. He’s looking down now, so Michael can’t see his face, but it would not be an unwise bet that he’s doing sums in his head.

Eventually, Anthony says, “Would you mind repeating that, Mr Lincoln?”

\* \* \*

His ears are roaring with static and his hands are shaking and, yes, his back and his ankle are aching from his latest pratfall — and even though this one was in service of escaping from an absolute madman, it was still both embarrassing and painful — but he’s back at the table, God help him. Back to hear the madman out. Because apparently you can just say, “Ten million pounds,” to Anthony and he’ll sit up and beg.

No. Wrong image. *Profoundly* wrong image. Not something he even wants to *think* around Mr Lincoln, lest it give him ideas.

In his dry voice, Mr Lincoln lays it out:

Contingent on signing this totally *other* document, Anthony will agree to be, essentially, Mr Lincoln's girlfriend. For ten years. He will consent to various medical procedures, both to attend to the lie that he is Mr Lincoln's girlfriend, and to shape his body and face the way Mr Lincoln prefers.

Nothing irreversible, Mr Lincoln promises.

He will agree to dress as Mr Lincoln pleases, behave as he pleases, relate



to others as he pleases, and after a suitable period of time, to allow for their courtship — he really does say ‘courtship’, which makes Anthony want to have him carbon dated — he will agree to move in with him. Meet his mother. He will attend events with him, take a job at Lincoln-McCain alongside Sandra, when she returns.

He will accept the name *Antonia*.

And, above all, he will keep the secret. The secret that what his boss desires most in the world is to shape a transgender woman from the inception of her new identity to its apotheosis. To dictate how she dresses, what she calls herself, her ambitions for her life.

And the *other* secret; that after precisely ten years, Antonia Bessemer will cease to be.

He can’t believe Mr Lincoln is just *saying* this stuff, like, surely this is the kind of thing you tell your therapist? Or your team of therapists? Mr Lincoln ought to have a fucking squad, a whole department of experimental super-therapists who regard curing the guy as the psychological equivalent of splitting the atom.

The money’s the thing, though. The money’s what’s kept him at the table even though he can barely hear Mr Lincoln talk, even though he can barely think straight.

Full salary for an executive assistant at this firm. Equivalent to Sandra. On its own, that is considerably more than he otherwise expects to be earning any time soon. And *not* included in the ten million sum.

Two hundred thousand upfront, and that’s *after* tax, although he’ll be expected to pay his initial transition expenses out of it. (Even so, a whole new wardrobe and a few makeup lessons can’t carve *that* much out of two hundred K.)

Another two hundred thousand per year, every year, for a total of two million, two hundred thousand after ten years.

An additional seven million, eight hundred thousand pounds on severance, deliverable on condition of the satisfactory completion of his contract.

For a total of ten million pounds.

*After* tax.

And there are special considerations. If, for example, Anthony consents to any of the more invasive procedures — “I won’t,” he says as soon as Mr Lincoln says it; Mr Lincoln merely smiles — then he will receive *considerable* additional compensation. And if, at the conclusion of the contract, he wishes for his transition to be completely reversed — “I will,” he says instantly — then



all procedures required to grant him the status of a healthy, handsome, thirty-two-year-old man will be paid for in full by Mr Lincoln.

“Mr Bessemer?”

It takes him a moment to understand that it’s been quiet in the little meeting room for several minutes, that he’s been leaning forward, elbows on the table, wrists flat, head cradled in his forearms. That he’s basically ceased to function.

He’s been asked to calculate the impossible.

Ten million pounds! Plus bonuses, should he consider the impossible! That’s never-work-again money. That’s money that’ll buy a dream home up here and still leave nine mil for whatever he chooses. That’s hey-Mum-I’ve-made-it money. (Yes, but made into *what?*)

Ten years! And that’s assuming he can even hack it, that’s assuming he doesn’t look in the mirror and lose his marbles at the first sign of womanhood, breaching his contract and running away with his dick tucked between his legs. Ten years is his entire twenties gone, spent fulfilling the desires of a complete and total fucking madman.

But a polite madman. A madman offering to pay him handsomely (hah; beautifully, perhaps) for his service. A madman who appears to have chosen this path after years of agonising because he’s *too goddamn moral* — or too goddamn twisted — to ask this of a *real* trans girl.

Ten million pounds...

(Plus bonuses.)

(Plus the salary of an executive assistant.)

“Mr Bessemer?”

“Sorry,” he says quickly, forcing himself into something approaching an upright position and making himself alert again, shaking his head, running his hands through his hair. His *short* hair, he realises; what’s to be done about *that?*

“I don’t require your answer today,” Mr Lincoln says. “All I require for the moment—”

“Is my silence, got it,” Anthony says, and then realises he’s interrupted his boss. His madman boss, yes, but his boss nonetheless. “Oh. Shit. Sorry.”

Mr Lincoln waves a hand. “Think nothing of it. Do you have any questions?”

Hmm.

Does he?

He’ll take this seriously for a moment. He’ll entertain the possibility that this is something that could actually happen. Because, yes, *obviously* there’s

no way he can give up his manhood just for money, especially because the idea that he transition *back* afterwards is purely a theoretical one. He doesn't seriously believe it's possible to undergo a decade of hormone therapy, and potentially surgery — *no! absolutely not!* — and then just... have it all put back the way it was.

But he'll pretend that it is, just for a minute or two. He owes it to the ten million pounds (plus bonuses; plus salary) to do so.

He's surprised, when he's done rolling it all over in his head, to realise that Mr Lincoln hasn't prompted him for a response, but it's quickly clear why: his boss can tell precisely what he's thinking. Anthony's sitting there, chin propped on his wrist, frowning, chewing on his lip. The exact image you would commission to illustrate someone deep in thought.

Everyone tells him they can read him like a book. He hates it.

"One question," he says, rearranging himself into a hopefully less immediately explicable position.

"Go on."

"Everything you said, it's all about the— the gender stuff. What would happen to me; what I'd wear. Dresses. Makeup. Taking hormones. And I know I'd be working here, attending functions with you and stuff, but I'm still not really clear on what I would have to *do*. You know, actively? Day to day?" He taps on the table, the way Mr Lincoln did. "What would I do? Who would I be?"

Mr Lincoln smiles. "I would have thought that was obvious. You'd be mine, Mr Bessemer."



# Chapter Three

Two-finger zoom. In, out. Swipe left, swipe back again, picture to picture. Girl face, man face. Full body, close-up. Over and over.

Almost hypnotising.

It's amazing what you can do with a phone and a free photo-enhancing app and a few mirror selfies, even if you do have to sit through a series of thirty-second ads for golf games, vapes, air fresheners shaped like vapes, companies that buy gold, and other companies that sell you back the same



gold but made into something much, much tackier.

Swipe:

Here's Anthony Bessemer, in his boxers and socks, reflected awkwardly in the floor-standing mirror in his room. He's finger-combed his hair back, to give the app a good view of his whole face (in the first picture he took, he left his hair the way he usually wears it, and the app invented an extremely strange forehead for him). His eyebrows are thick and kinda messy (he's never noticed that before, but now he's seen the *after* shots with them all tidied up, he'll probably never unsee it). There's a patch of stubble on one side of his face that he must have missed this morning (not the best appearance to take into any interview, let alone one as bizarre as *that* one). Tired eyes (par for the course). And he's unpleasantly thin over most of his body, with a little paunch just above his boxers he's never known how to get rid of (how can someone who





eats as little as he does have *any* fat on him?).

Swipe:

Here's... someone else. Antonia, perhaps. The app has given her longer hair, deepened its colour and swept a partial fringe across her forehead. It's tightened her facial features, cleaned away the remaining stubble, and applied a light dusting of makeup. It's plucked and tidied her eyebrows into the shape his flatmate wears. It's even taken the tiny kink out of his nose, the one only he knows to look for, the one that only even shows up in pictures taken from dead-on. She doesn't look tired, but alive, vivacious, vital. And, obviously, the app has sorted out the little paunch and nipped in her waist, replaced the boxers with an attractive pair of purple knickers, and provided a matching bra.

A bra. For her *breasts*. They look... large. Maybe not so large. Maybe only, what, a D cup? A B cup? He doesn't know how bra sizes work. But they look both too large and about right. Maybe it's because he's not used to seeing breasts on women in real life, his flatmate aside. Maybe he's just not used to seeing breasts *on him*.

Is that even him?

Swipe back:

No. There *he* is. Reassuringly flat-chested. An exhausted-looking, gangly mess, for sure, but familiarly shaped. The same guy he looks at every day. The kind of guy you could pass in the street and not really notice. The kind of guy you hire to fill in for your *real* employees, and then forget about a week after he gets his goodbye box of Sainsbury's mini brownies. The kind of guy you don't really think about. The kind of guy you almost don't see.

Unless you're Michael Lincoln, for some reason. What does *he* see?

Swipe back again:

She appears. 'Antonia'. Who is she?

She's a bloody mystery, is who she is. But she's arresting. Not someone *anyone* could walk past in the street without noticing. Something about her eyes, about the slight smile the app has given her, draws Anthony in. Intrigues him.

What would it be *like* to be her? What would it be like to see her face every morning in the mirror? To put on her makeup? To wash, dry and brush her hair? Would it feel strange? Uncomfortable? Or would it, to borrow a word he vaguely remembers from a trans boy from school, make him feel dysphoric? Would he have to suppress the urge to rip the mirrors from the walls, to tear out her hair, to exit her life by any means possible?

He can't decide which is the scarier prospect: that he might reject the changes, or that he might not.

And would it make a difference to know that his time as her is limited? Ten years and then she ceases to exist. That means something, right? He might look out from her eyes and hate himself, but all he has to do is stick it out for a decade and he'll be a multi-millionaire. He's like a contestant on *I'm a Celebrity*, except instead of eating snakes or dangling from high wires or tolerating a Tory MP, his task is to survive ten years of dysphoria. Ten years in a woman's body.

*I'm a Man... Get Me Out of Here!*

It's almost funny.

But he's looking at this the wrong way. He has to be! Because, well, *dysphoria*, right? It's what the guy at school talked about. Devon. When he came out, the teachers made him give a presentation, to increase 'tolerance in the student body'. He talked about the way he saw himself, about dysphoria. And, yes, it was *bad*, but the guy was still functional, wasn't he? He got his GCSEs and his A-levels and, last Anthony heard, the man's chock full of testosterone and going post-grad.

Shit. He's doing better than Anthony is. And that's inspiring, right? Instead of worrying about how he'll *go back* after ten years, maybe he ought to try thinking of his older self as a thirty-two-year-old Devon. A trans man just like any other, starting his transition.

So, trans men; how do they work?

Exciting: *now* he has something to *research!* He wakes his laptop and starts poking around, and it doesn't take him long to hit on the right search terms. He opens a few tabs and starts paging through, and when he reaches the last one, a subreddit, he finds *hundreds* of trans men, and, okay—

Wow.

And, okay, the thing is—

Wow.

The thing is.

The thing is, he can *see* himself in them. He didn't expect that. He didn't know what to expect, really, but he *definitely* didn't expect this! They're... just a bunch of guys. They're just men! Yeah, sure, some of them have scars on their chests of varying degrees of intensity — probably depending on how recently they had surgery — but if he'd run into them in the street, in the office, shit, even at the beach, Anthony would have thought, yeah. Guys. Hella guys.

Guys who are better at it than *he* is. Look at them! Abs! Great clothes! Girlfriends! Boyfriends! Some of them look like bloody models! Whole

subreddits of photos of guys on holiday, guys at their cool job, guys fixing up motorbikes; guys bloody well bungee jumping!

Suddenly Anthony feels colossally irresponsible: he was just *handed* the body of a man, and what's he even done with it? Put shirts on it that don't fit? Fed it leftover takeaway? Given it chest pains when he makes it run for the tram? And here's *these* guys...

Maybe fighting for your gender makes you appreciate it more.

Maybe trans men are simply better at it.

Maybe, then, it's okay that after all this, after ten years and change, after ten million quid, he'll make it his ambition to be more like *them* and less — swipe back — like *that*.

He'll be a better man than he ever has been. A richer one, too.

Anthony looks down at himself. He threw his office clothes back on after taking the pictures, but even through his shirt he can see the little paunch he hates. He can see his reedy little wrists and his flat chest.

He hasn't put in any effort *at all*.

Anthony snaps the laptop shut. A bit too quickly, considering how cheap it was. But then, that's not going to matter any more, is it? Even the basic salary bump Mr Lincoln is proposing would buy him any expensive laptop he cares to point at in the shop. He could get something sleek and silver and hewn out of a single block of metal. Or he could get one of those laptops that lights up in all colours, so everyone at work can assume he plays *Valorant* on his lunch break.

He lifts the screen up again anyway, to check for cracks. Nothing new; that bit of dented plastic was *always* like that. Probably.

Fuck it. He has his answer: a handful of testosterone injections, a bit of a snip around the chest area and, perhaps most crucially, a smidgen of self-respect is all you need to manufacture men who put him to *shame*.

So, that's the *after* taken care of. What about the *during*? Can he really deal with spending ten years hanging off his boss' arm? Laughing at his jokes? (Assuming he ever makes any.) Kissing him on the lips? (Assuming he has anything like a functioning sexuality, aside from his fetish for watching trans women transition.) Becoming a part of his social life? (Assuming he even has one, and doesn't just return to a grey cube at the end of each day, to plug himself in like a Borg drone.)

Can he really learn to care about makeup and fashion and hair styling and all the other shit Mr Lincoln will require him to become expert in?

Can he really look at *her* in the mirror?

For *ten years*?

Swipe back again.

The photo of her is so *clear*. His phone *created* her out of him, exactly the way Mr Lincoln is proposing, and in doing so it swept aside almost everything he recognises about himself. And though his stomach roils at that thought, at the idea that her smooth face would replace his and that her breasts would reshape his chest, there's something almost tempting about the idea of leaving yourself behind for a while.

Forget all your troubles. Forget all your debts. Forget the time you called the teacher 'mummy'; forget about the time you fell over in the school cafeteria and got spaghetti in your hair and all the girls laughed at you; forget about the time you fell asleep on the school bus and woke up with no eyebrows. All those things belong to Anthony, and for ten years, he'll be forgotten.

He'll be forgotten and Antonia will live in his place. And she'll be a fiction, sure, but maybe that's better. Maybe that's how to look at it: she'll be a





character, a role, and he'll be playing her for as long as the madman pays him. She'll be a glamorous fiction, and maybe that'll be fun.

And because she's a fiction, she won't persist. She'll be a beautiful, brief spark, and then she'll be gone. She won't, in every fundamental respect, matter. And she almost definitely won't call *anyone* 'mummy'.

Only one question remains: can he hack it?

Qué será, será.

Shit. The detail on the picture is *incredible*. Yeah, okay, he fed it a dozen photos and only a couple of them came out anything like okay, and he's probably helping to train an image-manipulation AI that will eventually be put to some appallingly dystopian use — though it'd be nice to think he's fatally poisoned its dataset by showing it pictures of a gangly, pale Englishman in his underwear — but the one good one... Shit. It's good. It's *really* good. It's *great*.

It's Antonia.

*She's* Antonia.

Pixels only. For now.

"Who are you?" he whispers.

He imagines becoming her. Dressing her. Slipping her feet into office-appropriate heels. Alighting on the tram, because in his imagination the tram is not busy and he — she — is *early*. Walking into work and greeting Sandra. Deftly avoiding that one executive who is apparently *a bit handsy*. Entering Mr Lincoln's office, taking his arm, standing on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. Laughing, leaning away, turning to face him, kissing him properly...

Kissing him *properly*—

His phone bounces off the mattress as he runs for the bathroom, his belly heaving, and what follows takes several wet, ugly minutes.

He doesn't hear his roommate coming home. Misses her kicking the front door shut the way she always does. Doesn't get his hair ruffled as she walks past his usual spot on the couch. Doesn't see her dumping tonight's takeaway on the only clear side in the kitchen. He only figures out he's no longer alone in the flat when she grabs him by the shoulders and pulls him away from the toilet.

"Ant?" she says.

He frowns. Why is she upside down?

And then he remembers. He remembers Antonia, the woman of someone else's dreams, borrowing his body, borrowing his imagination. She kissed his boss on the mouth, leaned into him, pressed herself against him, threw caution to the wind and reached down and *grasped* him, and Anthony, the



inconvenient man in the way of all this, lost control. He only just made it to the bathroom in time.

Mostly in time. He didn't quite get all of it in the toilet bowl. Jesus Christ, even *remembering* it is exhausting.

"Hi, Bridget," he says. The inside of his mouth tastes horrible.

"Good day at work?" she asks brightly.

It feels like it takes the last of his energy to give her a thumbs up.

\* \* \*

Michael gave Anthony the weekend.

A terrible mistake.

A necessary allowance.

It had been tempting to try to close the deal right there and then, and he'd entertained for a few foolish moments that he could, that he *had* him, that he could with a handful of negotiating tricks reel in Anthony Bessemer immediately. He might have offered to increase the money; might have threatened to withdraw it completely, to declare the offer closed because of some invented slight; might have tried any number of things to secure an immediate, panicked acquiescence.

But he didn't. Because Anthony is not a business rival. Because the game the two of them are just beginning to play is conducted on the board of Anthony's life, and it is entirely possible to rush the man would only hasten the denial of Michael's preferred outcome.

He chose this path because he is trying, against all his instincts, against his straining and leashed desires, to be compassionate, and that must apply to *all* his dealings.

Ten years to change both their lives.

To the point, he's investigated Anthony's living situation. He sublets a tiny room in a small flat in a noisy area that is underserved by public transportation and offers nowhere to park a car, even if Anthony could afford one. The sublet is also technically illegal, but that is likely a non-issue; money is money, and landlords are lightly scrutinised. He has access to a single bathroom and an essentially nonfunctional kitchen. Every evening he signs out from the opulent and well-appointed Lincoln-McCain Tower and jumps onto a crowded tram to return, eventually, to a tiny room in a small flat in a noisy neighbourhood.

And into this miserable living situation, Michael has inserted an offer of ten million pounds. Plus fripperies.

What's a sensible monthly rent for someone with a net income of two hundred thousand pounds per year? Sixteen point seven K a month, out of which monthly living expenses can surely carve no more than, what, five or six thousand pounds? No, wait; he's on scale six right now, isn't he? As a temp? Think about what he is used to! Fine: grant living expenses of — he permits himself a smirk — five or six pounds.

What a depressing thought.

And one unworthy of him. Perhaps he ought to revisit the payment structure for temps. There's a cost of living crisis on. He's read about it in the newspaper.

He scribbles a note on his phone and returns to his prior train of thought. So, assume expenses of five K per month, which is probably vastly in excess of what Anthony will find himself even thinking of spending, but which ought at least to absorb some of the costs associated with spinning up a new gender. Allow another five thousand for savings and investment, and that leaves close to seven thousand available for rent.

What kinds of property in Manchester does that make available?

He smiles to himself — a more generous smile, this time — as he imagines Anthony conducting the same search himself, after coming to similar conclusions. It takes him a moment to find the appropriate website, and another minute or so to filter out the student accommodation, and when he's done, he's surprised to find it's quite difficult to spend seven thousand pounds on rent for a single person in the city centre. Perhaps the cost of living crisis isn't as bad as all that?

Still. Plenty of options in several of the luxury towers scattered around Manchester. If the money alone doesn't persuade him, perhaps the views will.

Perhaps simply no longer having to run for the tram will be enough?

Damn the man! He has no reason *not* to accept! What has he to lose? His manhood? He'll get it back, better than new, and he'll discover in the process that a rich bachelor in his early thirties has the world at his fingertips. He'll be free!

And Michael...

Michael will be trapped again. But he will have known, for ten glorious years, what it is to act, to feel, to *be* like everyone else. To have one's desires accessible, available; *ordinary*.

To be alive.

And he'll carry that knowledge, that comfort, for the rest of his life.

Just as long as Anthony signs...

\* \* \*

“Good God, Ant,” Bridget says, from the sink, “what did you *eat* today?” She's washing her hands much more thoroughly than usual, going back to the soap dispenser for more, twice, and he's trying to figure out what's got her so germophobic all of a sudden when the senses that rushed to the edge of his consciousness while he was vomiting all crash back into place at once.



The bathroom *stinks*. And he made a *mess*.

“Egg and cress sandwich,” he replies absently. “I went to Tesco on my lunch break,” he continues, running his mouth on automatic because he’s finally taking in the speckled splatters of *gross* all around the toilet, “and got meal deal. Salt and vinegar crisps, too. And an apple juice.”

“Killer combo,” Bridget says as she flaps her hands dry and retreats to the other side of the bathroom door. “No more egg for you, ever.”

“Okay.”

“And no pizza until you shower, all right?” she says through the door.

“Okay.”

“I’ll hold this door closed if I have to.”

“Okay.”

“I’m putting my whole weight on it. You’re not getting through.”

“Okay, Bridge.”

“Good. Cool. Good. I’ll trust you and leave the door unguarded. Oh, and I got pizza, by the way. Did I say that? I’ll go stick it in the oven. Keep it hot.”

The last words fade as she marches off down the hall, and he calls, “Thanks!” after her, before starting work on clean-up. Hopefully she won’t drop half the pizza out of the box and onto the oven floor this time, but, hell, if she does, she’ll probably just order more. For someone who insists she really, *really* needs the money from his sublet, she isn’t exactly frugal.

The image of Antonia has stuck with him, and he finds himself scrubbing extra hard, as if a bit of elbow grease will evict her from his brain. Plus point: he’s not sure the toilet has ever been so clean.

When he’s showered and at least nominally towelled off, he balls up his work shirt and trousers and dumps them into the laundry basket by the sink. Then he exits the bathroom and crosses the hall to his bedroom, throwing his robe off onto the bed but not bothering to close the door as he looks for clothes. Bridget waves at him on her way past, and he waves back, unembarrassed; they got over their fear of being nude around each other the first time he came home to find her passed out drunk on the couch. It took him a while to put her to bed.

“Got you these,” she says from behind him, and he turns around in time to catch a set of sweats. They’re hers, but sweats are sweats, and he’s borrowed them before; the worst thing about them is the trousers don’t quite come down to his ankles.

“Thanks,” he says, pulling on the joggers. He nods at the bundle under her arm. “What’s that?”

Whatever it is, it’s in layers of plastic bags. “It’s the laundry,” she says, hefting it. “*All* of it now smells like your shirt, which smells like your insides, and it’s too late to put on the washing machine. I’m hanging it off the balcony overnight.”

Wow. Gross. “It’s really that bad?”

“Go back into the bathroom and take a whiff,” she suggests. “It’s fucking awful in there. You just got acclimated.”

“You’re an angel, Bridge.”

“No,” she says, shrugging, “I just don’t want the flat to reek. You coming?”

“One sec,” he says, and puts on the top and the hoodie. The top’s one of hers, as well, and suddenly it’s amusing enough that he’s *already* wearing women’s clothes — without even being paid for it! — that he has to take a minute or two to get himself under control again.



It's not even a particularly feminine top; the only thing that differentiates it from, say, his exercise clothes — or the exercise clothes he would go out and buy if he ever got it into his head to exercise — is the collar, which is maybe an inch lower and wider than he's used to.

“Aren't you pretty?” Bridget says as he enters the living room. He thanks her with two fingers, and then opens his hands and shows her his palms: clean. An old in-joke: she has a much younger brother by her dad's second wife, and she more or less raised him herself. After a month of cohabitation, she got Anthony to stop speaking with his mouth full, to leave his dirty clothes in the basket and not on the floor, and to wash his hands thoroughly before meals.

Her competence is as narrow as his, though, and he's therefore relieved to see she's got the pizza both into and out of the oven without ruining it. She's



laid everything out for them on the table in the living room, so he takes over, doling out food onto plates.

The cheese is still bubbling a bit. He glances over at the tiny kitchen; checks she hasn't accidentally left the oven on whatever thermonuclear temperature she dialled in.

"Shit!" she says, sucking her fingers. "Hot." She holds the slice up in the air, over her plate, and grins at him. "So, Ant. Come clean: what's got you all fucked up tonight?"

He laughs. "Bridge, I don't know *where* to begin."

She points at the wine bottles and plastic tumblers on the coffee table. "So begin with that," she says, "and tell me when you feel suitably loosened up." And finally she dips the cooling pizza into her mouth and messily tears off a bite.

"You've got cheese on your chin," he says.

"And yet I'm still the hottest girl in the building."

He takes her advice, filling a cup all the way to the top with white wine — Chateau Asda, from the great wineries of whichever rainy, warmish country is exporting most cheaply at the moment — and polishing it off swiftly with his allocation of pizza. By the time the food and the bottles are done and the two of them are watching *Selling Sunset*, he's feeling clean, comfortable and far more loquacious. So when she asks him again what exactly happened today, he decides: fuck it. He's got to talk to *someone* about this, or he'll bloody well explode.

"I'm under NDA, Bridge," he says, snatching a fallen piece of pork out of the pizza box before she can get at it. "Signed a whole thing this afternoon and everything. So I can tell you *some* stuff, but not everything."

"You're under a non-disclosure agreement? As a *temp*?"

"My boss is thinking of making me permanent," he says, and it's probably the wine that makes the subsequent thought amusing rather than horrifying: he's going to be *made permanent* in so, so many ways.

If he accepts, that is.

"Nice," Bridget says, and salutes him with her tumbler. She frowns for a moment, contemplating the empty glass. "Something's wrong with this picture. We're out. More?"

He nods. "More." The alcohol's probably what's keeping the fear at bay, keeping the visions of Antonia in the back of his mind; keeping the pizza on the inside of his body. 'More' is almost definitely an investment in a good night's sleep and in not having to clean the bathroom again. "So," he says,



raising his voice so Bridget can hear him as she clatters around in the kitchen, “my boss made me an offer. One of those change-your-life deals.”

“Money?”

“Money,” he says, in a tone which implies not just money but *money*.

She pokes her head around the kitchen doorway and follows it with a wine bottle and a questioning look. He nods. Her other hand appears, holding *another* bottle, and he nods again, to her delight. Bridget never met a bottle of wine she couldn’t defeat. Sometimes it’s a pyrrhic victory, though.

“Take it,” she says, sitting back down and cracking open one of the bottles. “Take the money. Always.”

“But—”

“Cup,” she orders. He holds it out and she fills it. “Always take the money,” she repeats. “Nothing else matters, *especially* at the moment. Do you know how much a loaf of bread’s gone up in the last two years *alone*?”

“Bridge, you don’t buy bread.”

“Yes,” she says, pointing triumphantly at him with her tumbler, “because it’s so expensive.”

He drinks deeply. “It’s not *just* the money, though,” he says, leaning back into the sofa cushions; the alcohol is making him a little unsteady. “It’s life-changing in *every* sense of the word.”

She leans forward. “Explain.”

“Okay. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime, right? *Serious* money.”

“How serious?”

“Lottery win.”

“*Fuck*.”

“That’s probably breaking my NDA, actually,” he says, looking into his wine. “Shit.”

“I won’t tell,” Bridget promises. “I won’t mention it ever again.”

“Thanks. So, yeah; money. But what I have to do to get it... it’ll eat my whole life, Bridge. It’ll *be* my life, pretty much.”

“For how long?”

“Ten years.” Just saying it brings back the unsteady feeling in his stomach; he drowns it with another swig.

“Ten years?” Bridget exclaims.

“Yeah,” he replies heavily.

“Is that *it*?”

“It’s— Yes, that’s *it*! And what do you mean, ‘Is that it?’”

She giggles at him. “Ant,” she says, “you’re young. You’re *disgustingly* young. You don’t understand. Not yet.”

“You’re, like, seven years older than me, Bridge.”

“That’s my point!” she says. “That’s *most* of those ten years you’re so afraid of! Ant: you’re twenty-two. You have your whole twenties ahead of you, and I’m sorry, but the thing us old people don’t tell you kids—”

“—again, you are seven years older than me—”

“—is that your twenties are going to *suck*. They will! That’s just a fact. *Mine* sucked. And all my uni mates, *their* twenties sucked, too. Even the girls from school, the ones who immediately got married and knocked up, they hate their lives, too.” She makes a show of counting on her fingers. “That’s a sample of forty-ish twenty-nine-to-thirty-year-olds. *All* of us’ve been miserable for the last decade.” She waves off his attempt to reply. “Listen, Ant: your whole twenties, you’re broke, you’re flailing, you’re trying desperately to please a series of bosses who barely know your name, and you’re coming to terms with the fact that life isn’t going to be what you thought it would. You’re not going to be an astronaut; you’re not going to win a Nobel Prize; you’re not even going to be on *Bake Off*. And you’re not the person you thought you’d be, either: you’re messy; you don’t go to the gym; you don’t do any of the things you planned to do.”

“I didn’t really plan to do anything,” he puts in.

“There you go!” she says, throwing up an arm in triumph; not the one holding her wine, fortunately. “I know you, Ant. You’re going to be a temp for the next five years at least. Except—” she leans forward, “—maybe you won’t. Maybe you’ll do this thing and you’ll get your lottery money—”

“—you said you wouldn’t mention it again—”

“—and you’ll just avoid that whole mess.” She slaloms her tumbler in the air.



“It’s not that simple. I’d be working *all* the time—”

“Been there.”

“—and I’d have to do *anything* my boss tells me—”

“Done that.”

“—and I don’t even know if I’ll be the same person at the end of it.”

“What did I just say, Ant? *No-one’s* the same person they used to be when they hit thirty.” She leans back again, drinks deeply. “Do it.”

“But it’d be...” Anthony struggles for the right words and fails to find them. “It’d be a *big* change. Huge.”

“Huh,” Bridget says, staring him down, “maybe you *do* want to temp forever. Look, Ant, just take a fucking risk, okay? Every time I’ve taken a risk, I’ve been glad of it. And not because they’ve always worked out — although *you* did — but because every time they forced me out of my rut.”

“I was a risk?”

She shrugs. “Well, yeah. Never had a man as a flatmate. Even at uni, it was all us girls. S’why I took on a flat I couldn’t really afford in the first place. And then you answered my ad, and even though I wanted another woman, you seemed so desperate and harmless—”

“Thanks.”

“—that I told myself, Bridge, give him a go, and if he’s a problem, there’s always that hammer you keep under your bed.”

“What are you saying?”

“Take a risk, Ant. It’ll probably work out! But just in case it doesn’t, make sure you have a hammer.”

\* \* \*

Michael’s kitchen: showroom quality. Appliances, fittings and fixtures from the best manufacturers. Finished in marble by the best firm in the country. Tastefully and carefully decorated in contrasting shades of grey.

In it, he reheats frozen meals.

Food is a luxury he denies himself. Not out of misguided asceticism, and not because he is perpetually trying to lose half a stone like one of his cousins, but because he’s never seen fit to learn to cook for himself, and because it would be wasteful to retain a chef purely for himself.



He could go out to eat, and very occasionally he does, but eating on one's own in a restaurant is conspicuous, and usually results in people approaching him, people who recognise his face. It's infuriating: he is perhaps the opposite of a socialite, but his family is known to an audience of specialised obsessives, and some of them have Instagram accounts and a surfeit of free time.

Frozen meals, taken at home, are simpler. He has them prepared in the kitchen of one of the finest restaurants in the city — the restaurant he *would* patronise had he the stamina and the will — and takes delivery fortnightly; that is, the concierge has someone bring them up for him.

But they're still frozen meals for one, and he reheats them without enthusiasm.

He didn't even look at the handwritten label on this one when he put it in. As he decants it onto a plate and fetches cutlery and wine he identifies as some sort of vegetable stroganoff.

Fine.

He eats at the kitchen table, ignoring a television programme on his laptop, trying not to think.

It is extraordinarily difficult. And he must last the *whole* weekend!

On nights like these, aimless and empty, he might choose to indulge, might choose to sate himself, but with so much at stake, it feels inappropriate. No, better to leave the *other* laptop locked away in its hidden drawer. Better to numb himself with food and wine and mindless entertainment.

Better to switch himself off until Monday.

Until he sees Anthony Bessemer again.

Until he knows.

\* \* \*

Sunday means Sunday lunch, which means his brother's house, which means two more people Anthony can bounce his concerns off; heavily disguised, of course. But he doesn't, in the end. He keeps it to himself. Doesn't even *hint* to Danny and Veronica that his life might be about to change, profoundly and completely.

It feels strange even to think about it around them. Danny's sofa, Danny's game room, Danny's TV; Danny's football obsession. All of it feels suddenly masculine, suddenly oppressive, suddenly detrimental to even the possibility of obliquely hinting at what may or may not be about to happen.

Danny. The older brother.

The better brother. Semi-detached house. Good job. Solid, masculine interests, of the sort their dad can happily involve himself with, even if it has to be via WhatsApp these days. And Danny's married, of course, and they're trying for a baby, and they already did the sensible thing of buying a house in a good school postcode.

Danny's the one who did everything right.

So what will he think of Anthony, when the time comes?

It's a shame Bridget hasn't come along. Occasionally she does — free food! — and her mere presence is disruptive enough that she reliably takes the focus off of him, but mostly her Sundays are reserved for catching up on shows and movies and recovering from hangovers, and the quivering, grunting lump under her duvet this morning had suggested very strongly to Anthony that this was turning out to be one of *those* Sundays. The ones where he leaves her alone for the morning and most of the afternoon. The ones where he comes home from Danny and Veronica's, full of roast dinner and brimming over with useless football facts, and slumps wordlessly onto the sofa next to her, to spend the next few hours absorbing whatever's on the telly and whatever's cheapest from the wine section at the offy.

Usually, it's a little depressing. Today, he can't wait.

He can't press down *all* his thoughts, and the ones that are fighting hardest to be heard are telling him that if *Danny* worked for Mr Lincoln, nothing weird would have happened at all. If Danny worked for Mr Lincoln, he'd probably be a permanent employee already. If Danny worked for Mr Lincoln, they'd probably be best friends within a month.

Danny gets on with people.

Danny... Well, he's a bloke, isn't he? A man's man. And it's becoming clear to Anthony that he never really has been, that he's always been trapped in his older brother's shadow. Always been the lesser son. The one Dad doesn't really understand. The one Mum dotes on, and maybe pities a bit. The one no-one really expects to *do* anything.

Danny'll be the one providing for their parents in their old age and Anthony, yeah, he'll be present. Probably still temping.

Even if everyone's been too kind to say it, sober.

Anthony shakes his head and eats his roast chicken and compliments Veronica on the potatoes, which really are amazing this week, and waits anxiously to leave.

\* \* \*



Anthony Bessemer is always punctual, and Monday morning is, pleasingly, no exception. Michael's been in his seat since seven, unable to contain his anticipation. He skipped his run, gave his driver the day off, and showered in the executive washrooms. His routine's been broken for weeks; he's simply, finally accepted it. He spent his Saturday with the blinds closed and his phone muted; he spent his Sunday in bed, having retreated even further into nothingness. All because of one man. One striking, enticing man.

And here he is.

Anthony's taken more care with his presentation this morning. His hair is tidily brushed; his jawline is properly clean-shaven, even the parts he usually misses. Even his ugly suit has been more carefully ironed. And when he walks through the threshold into Michael's office, he doesn't so much as hesitate. A far cry from the young man who practically fell into the room a little over two weeks ago.

"Mr Bessemer," Michael says, standing to greet him, to take control of the conversation.

"Mr Lincoln," Anthony says.

They shake hands over the desk. Anthony's shake is firmer than it was on that first day, and Michael worries that he's somehow prompted in the man a re-examination of his masculinity, a determination to rid himself of whatever it is Michael sees in him. But they sit, anyway, and Michael firmly suppresses his anticipation.

Whatever will be, will be.

"Before we go on," Anthony says, clasping his hands together on the desk, "I want to know: why me?"

A sensible question deserves a sensible answer. "Because you have



potential, Mr Bessemer,” Michael says. “Forgive me, but you are in many ways a blank slate. Your career up to this point has been unremarkable and lacking direction, and though you are a quick and clever man, this industry has no shortage of men who are quick and clever. Unfortunately for you, your competition is generally *also* university educated, and many of them are highly connected. I can offer you a future; I guarantee no-one else will.”

“Why not grant me that future, anyway?”

Michael smiles. “Because this is not a gift, Mr Bessemer. This is a *transaction*. Service for payment.”

Anthony nods. “But why me *specifically*?” he asks. “If there are so many other young men who are clever.”

“Because you have it in you to be quite beautiful,” Michael says. A little too quick; a little too eager. But he’s played all his cards at this point; Anthony *knows* he wants him, so why pretend otherwise? “And because, quite simply, I took a shine to you, Anthony.”

If the use of his first name is a shock, Anthony doesn’t show it. He just nods again. Thinks for a moment.

“Okay,” Anthony says. “Okay. I’ll do it. But we need to set down rules. On paper. And not just for me.” He leans back in his chair. “Look,” he continues, “I’ve been thinking about this, okay? And if I’m to... fulfil a need for you, then we need *boundaries*. You need to not get your hopes up. You need to know what I *won’t* do. Just as much as I need to know what *you* won’t do.”

“You propose a negotiation?”

Anthony nods once more.

“I suppose I do,” he says.

# Chapter Four

Misplaced confidence has taken Anthony this far, and all it required was a night spent on his laptop, four cups of coffee this morning, and at least ten minutes lecturing himself in the bathroom mirror, til Bridget kicked the door and told him a) it was time to go to work and b) to please shut the hell up.

Last night he flicked through:

*Contract Negotiations and You* (he pirated the PDF);

*The Sixty-Seven Surefire Secrets of Successful Salesmen* (it showed up in a library search and he had an online credit; he didn't find out until he took it out that it was the 1980s edition, from before they changed it to *Salespeople*);

A blog post titled *What to Do if Your Boss Seduces You*;

A blog post titled *How to Turn Down Your Boss' Advances*;

A blog post titled *How to Get Your Boss to Seduce You*;

A blog post titled *Suck Your Way to Promotion* (he backed out of the last one quickly);

And Bridget's copy of *How To Get Ahead in Business* (which someone, likely a younger Bridget, defaced by crossing out the first letter of *Ahead*).

He's not exactly prepared for the coming negotiation — it's possible no-one in the history of the world has ever had to prepare for a situation quite like this, and it strikes him as unfair that someone as ill-equipped as he should be the first — but he's covered as many bases as he reasonably can in the short amount of time available to him, and thus ought to make slightly less of a fool of himself than he otherwise might.

And now he's sitting, legs crossed, fingers tapping away at each other, alone in Mr Lincoln's chintzy little meeting room, waiting.

\* \* \*

One of the many advantages of being Michael Lincoln is that the executive washrooms are sparkling clean, single-occupancy, and lockable at the door out to the corridor, which means he can lean with both hands against the sink and examine himself in the mirror without the embarrassment of one of his

employees getting to see him so out of sorts, or the inconvenience of having to double-wash and moisturise his hands afterwards.

If he were to keep strictly to his mother's guidelines, he shouldn't have made an excuse and left the room, but 'keep them waiting' isn't *bad* as strategies go, and he needed a small amount of time to himself, to celebrate, to perform a single, vulgar fist pump. He's exhilarated! An outlet is required! And now he thinks he understands why the men in the stands at football matches become so... platonically demonstrative.

Anthony's here! He said yes! And he wants to negotiate! Incredible.

He tries another fist pump. It's not quite as cathartic as the first; perhaps he's reached his limit. But that he felt the need to express himself physically at all — again! — suggests he ought to wait a little longer, rather than re-enter too early and make a fool of himself, so instead he pulls up the camera feed from



the meeting room on his phone, and inspects his prey.

Michael has to admit that Anthony did reasonably well in the office, marching in, straight-backed and proud, and presenting his demands, but left to stew on his own, his nerves are obvious. No-one whose confidence is genuine picks so determinedly at their nails — Michael will have to see to that; Antonia must have *perfect* nails — and no-one whose poise is unassailable jumps quite so far out of his chair when Mrs Walsh from the executive kitchen enters the room directly behind him, with a drinks trolley.

The spill, and Anthony's rush to help her clean it up, summons a smile to Michael's face. Yes, young Mr Bessemer has what it takes.

Antonia's going to be so sweet.

\* \* \*

"You just sit tight, Mister Bessemer," Mrs Walsh says, nodding meaningfully at his chair and taking the tissues right out of his hands. "You've been a great help, but I'll take it from here."

"I'm sorry again," Anthony says, and manages not to say out loud how much he wishes people around here would stop calling him 'Mister Bessemer' with the emphasis so firmly on the 'Mister'. It's like they're spelling it out fully in their heads. Like they're getting the most out of it now, before it becomes obsolete.

"Would you like me to pour you some tea?" she asks, manoeuvring the cleaned-up trolley into position. "Or coffee?" she adds, sensing his indecision from subtle context cues, such as the way he's wringing his hands together. She leans closer, pats the side of the trolley, and whispers conspiratorially, "There's a proper coffee machine in here."

Anthony finally manages to put together a handful of appropriate syllables. "Oh, um, no, it's okay. If I have any more coffee I might, you know, explode."

Mrs Walsh leaves him to it.

To give his hands something to do and his appallingly overactive brain something to concentrate on, he pours himself some tea. He's about to add his customary stress-drinking tea accoutrements — cream and several lumps of sugar — when he remembers why he's here: to commit to this whole *Antonia* thing; to make more money than anyone in his family has ever even heard of. Watching his figure seems like it'll be part and parcel of the deal, which at

least means he'll finally get rid of his strange little paunch. Two hundred grand up-front buys a *serious* home gym.

Non-dairy creamer and two nasty little sweetener pellets it is, then. He sighs. He could have used the sugar. If nothing else, it would have balanced out the caffeine.

As he stirs, he wonders if he ought to make Mr Lincoln a cup; then he wonders if that's the kind of servile thinking he ought to try to get used to. He discards the thought — it is spectacularly unhelpful right now — and sips at his tea, tapping impatiently on the table with his free hand, anxious to get started. No, he's not exactly looking forward to what's to come, but now that the decision's been made, he wants to bloody well *do something about it*, not sit around waiting, drinking tea with sickly sweetener and flat-tasting creamer in it.

Hah; 'now that the decision's been made'. A self-serving fiction, to pretend there was ever any question. He was always going to do it. Mr Lincoln said the magic words — ten million pounds! — and that was it. His miserable weekend, his anxious morning, his hurried scouring of every remotely legal text he could get his hands on, even his drunken discussion with Bridget, all of it was just theatre. For his own benefit. To arrive at a state of mind that would allow him to accept the idea.

A negotiation with himself.

Good practice, at least.

But he mustn't let it show. He needs to keep the act going long enough to complete this negotiation, to set vital boundaries, or else who knows what he might be — who he might be — after ten years?

Anthony drains his horrible tea and tries to think confident thoughts.

And then, suddenly, in a whirlwind of activity, Mr Lincoln is *there*, sweeping in through the door with a laptop under one arm and a briefcase under another. He sets himself up opposite Anthony, not at the other end of the table like Anthony expected, and with unexpected courteousness offers to pour a cup for them both.

Anthony doesn't take sweetener this time, nor sugar. With just a spot of creamer, the tea is... fine.

"You proposed a negotiation," Mr Lincoln says, settling himself. He sits forward in his chair, hands clasped on the table in front of him, all business. "Shall we proceed?"

Anthony squirms under his gaze, suddenly too aware of him, too aware of *himself*. Mr Lincoln is looking at him with animation in his eyes. With excitement. With... lust? Looking at him like...





Like he's a woman.

Trapped, Anthony nods. "Yeah," he says slowly. "Let's proceed."

Mr Lincoln nods curtly and flips open his laptop, freeing Anthony from the pressure of Mr Lincoln's hunger, his obvious excitement. And while a savvy negotiator — someone, perhaps, from Bridget's mildly abused book — would use that against him, would gatekeep the access to Anthony's body Mr Lincoln clearly desires, he just can't. For all his preparations, for all his determination, one key fact remains, and it's so obvious he feels like he can almost see it on the table between them:

Anthony needs the money more than Mr Lincoln needs *him*.

Didn't Mr Lincoln basically say as much? 'Many young men of his skills and talents,' et cetera? It'd be tricky, but Mr Lincoln could still find another

young man far more easily than Anthony could find someone else to make him a multi-millionaire.

So he lets through a few things he otherwise might not, for the sake of not making a fuss. He gives in almost immediately on the requirement to dress as a woman at all times — even alone — which seems to surprise Mr Lincoln, and for a moment Anthony considers returning to that point, but Mr Lincoln moves on quickly. To surgery.

And here are his red lines, the things he *can't* let go, not even for ten million quid. He turns down almost all of it. This, terrifyingly, seems to annoy Mr Lincoln, who suggests repeatedly and insistently that a little smoothing of the jaw and a little adjustment to the hairline would enable a more convincing transformation, but Anthony sticks to his guns. With one exception: he's going to have the kink in his nose taken care of. Quite soon.

Mr Lincoln then outlines the *hefty* bonuses for surgical alteration. Should Anthony ever find himself in need of a few extra mil, he could choose to sacrifice, say, his jawline or — gulp — his testicles.

After marking off so many red lines regarding surgery, though, Anthony backs off on hormones and hair removal. Oh, he tries, but Mr Lincoln makes the point that if he's going to quibble about his hormone dosage, or whether or not he will attend social functions with a *beard*, he might as well not accept the contract altogether! He might as well simply see out his time as a temp and leave! At which Anthony shrinks away from him, nodding.

So:

Hair removal: check.

Hormones: check.

Both to begin as soon as is practical, upon signing.

They have a few more items to wrap up, largely concerning conduct, but they breeze through them. And... that's it! Anthony's going home with two hundred grand in his pocket *and* a new salary, and all he'll have to do to earn it is wear a few dresses, shave his legs, and take a few pills! Oh, it'll get more complex as the months go by, but he can ease into it, acclimatise bit by bit. Like getting into a hot bath, or eating the kind of curry Bridget orders.

All in all, it doesn't seem so bad.

\* \* \*

He's got him!

It was too easy. Easy enough that Michael wonders if he could have pressed for fifteen years instead of ten, or required more surgery upfront. Still, he ought not gloat; it is unseemly, and it would be an unpleasant omen for their nascent relationship. Michael is well aware of the power imbalance between them — age, money, power; sophistication — and he is, overall, glad that Anthony suggested they draw up such a contract. Having limits to his behaviour codified and available for reference is... reassuring.

But because Anthony *is* quite naive, Michael was able to set those limits broadly.

The refusal to countenance surgery wasn't a surprise; it is understandable and expected that the man would retain reservations around such radical alterations. But Michael was able to exploit his 'disappointment' to manoeuvre Anthony into accepting rather radical hair removal, cosmetic enhancement and hormone regimes. He also signed off on the stipulations around clothing, practise with makeup, and so on, even though some of them were quite draconian.

If Michael were less sure of himself, he might not believe his luck. He'll have the signature soon, and then he can begin planning the next ten years of Antonia Bessemer's life — including the surgeries that, he is sure, she will eventually be persuaded to accept.

Money talks, after all. It whispers, his mother likes to say, most seductively.

\* \* \*

Mr Lincoln estimated it would take about an hour to prepare the contract from his notes.

One hour.

One hour left as Anthony Bessemer.

With nowhere else to go, Anthony's set himself up in Sandra's office, as if this is a normal work day, as if he's going to put in a few hours and then nip out for a cheap meal deal sandwich and crisps combo. But he can't *work* — hurry up, once again, and wait — so instead he's fiddling with the minimal oddments on Sandra's desk: lining up the pencils, geometrically arranging the framed photographs, ensuring the monitor is positioned in the exact centre of the desk, determining which precise quadrant of available space is the most aesthetically pleasing one in which to keep the notepad.

He's going to have to move out of Bridget's place. Soon. And he has no idea how he's going to have that conversation with her. Not only that, he's going to have to start isolating himself here, too, to reduce friction when Anthony leaves and 'Antonia' takes his place. He's to use Mr Lincoln's elevator and avoid the canteen facilities, and all employees who are likely to encounter Anthony while he is still Anthony will be discreetly informed that he is undergoing gender transition, and requested to respect his privacy.

Not that he expects to spend much time at work at the beginning. He'll be practising, Mr Lincoln said. Anthony asked, practising what, and Mr Lincoln replied, "Everything." He'll even be required to submit selfies of his progress!

And that's another thing: from the moment he signs the contract, he's to refer to Mr Lincoln, in private, as Michael. In turn, Mr Lincoln will, as and when he pleases, call him Antonia.

Anthony's resolved to keep calling him Mr Lincoln anyway. Not out loud, but in his head. A little rebellion and an ounce of security, a barrier between his real self and... and *her*. Antonia. She'll be the things he says and the things he does, but Anthony will survive in private, in his mind; locked away, not part of the performance.

And what a performance he has ahead of him! Is he even up to it? And how can he tell if he is?

Just over an hour in, when every item in Sandra's office is as tidy as it can be, and every thought in Anthony's head as messy, his phone buzzes: Mr Lincoln's summoning him back.

He takes a last look around the office on his way out, feeling a little ridiculous, but isn't the whole *situation* ridiculous? Like something out of a movie? One of Bridget's rom-coms? He can almost feel the camera on him, the director poised to start the shot, and the urge to externalise his emotions overcomes him. Bonus: anyone watching through the security feed — like, say, Mr Lincoln — will get a nice little show.

So he hesitates on the threshold, fingers lingering on the door frame, and takes it all in. It makes it seem more final. Rather, it makes it *look* more final, and isn't that part of the performance?

He sighs and nods and turns away.

Goodbye, Anthony Bessemer.

\* \* \*

Michael quickly blanks the screen on his laptop. As amusing as it's been over the last hour to watch Anthony through the security system — and as motivating; as distracting — it's not seemly to have the evidence of your surveillance in full view when your underling enters.

The moment, though, when Anthony stopped in the doorway to Sandra's office... It was strangely profound.

\* \* \*

Mr Lincoln sits at his desk, a few sheaves of paper laid out in front of him: the contract, in triplicate. Anthony can barely take his eyes off it all. Everything's getting too fucking real, too fucking quickly. Just this morning he was an ordinary man with an extraordinarily large payout in his future; now, he's rapidly approaching the moment when he'll have to become someone else.

At least the extraordinarily large payout is a constant.

"Are you ready, Mr Bessemer?"

"Just— Uh, just give me a minute. Please?"

Mr Lincoln nods, and Anthony nods back automatically. He doesn't do much with his minute beyond twisting his fingers into knots and grinding his heels into the floor, but the minute is *his*, it's *Anthony's*, and it's the last minute he'll have as his own man for a long, long time.

"Okay," he says eventually. He has achieved neither equilibrium nor enlightenment, but he *has* discovered a growing fear that Mr Lincoln might soon stand and strike him on the head with a small mallet to see if he's still in there. "I'm ready."

Mr Lincoln nods again, this time to direct Anthony to the chair in front of the desk. Anthony sits, accepts a horrifically expensive-looking fountain pen, and slides the first of the identical contracts towards himself.

There are coloured stickers indicating where he should sign.

He ought to read it. This is his future, is it not? He ought to accept from Mr Lincoln one of the three documents, sit back in his chair and read it through. Confirm line by line that every stipulation, every boundary is accounted for.

But that would be dragging it out.

He signs. One and then the other and then the other.

"Thank you, Mr Bessemer," Mr Lincoln says, taking back the contracts and signing them in turn. "Or, should I say, Antonia?"

*Antonia.*

Anthony ought to be creeped out. Ought to be regretting everything right now. But the phrase, when considered with Mr Lincoln's sly little smile, is just so bloody corny. So strangely charming.

He attempts to reply in kind.

"Maybe you should... Michael."

Mr Lincoln's smile actually broadens in response. Almost takes over his face! As if he's never smiled this broadly before, and is suddenly testing the configuration of his face, to see just how wide a human can smile.

It prompts the unwelcome thought that perhaps there are few people in Mr Lincoln's life who use his first name. Perhaps no-one does; perhaps this is the first time he's heard it in months. Years. He seems like a man whose mother calls him 'son' and whose father calls him 'boy' and who hasn't heard his Christian name spoken with affection since the nanny went away.



Anthony doesn't have time to process this thought, though, and especially not the burst of sympathy that accompanies it, because Mr Lincoln's already pocketed his levity and returned to his usual all-business attitude.

"Now," he says, "you have a busy day ahead of you. It is twenty past eleven. You have appointments at one and at two-thirty — they are already registered in your new phone — and before then you will meet with Judith, my personal lawyer. Yours now, too."

"Am I... likely to need one?"

"Antonia, you will be seen with *me*. Our intimacy and our continuing relationship will be assumed. And though I am hardly a—" he taps his fingers on the desk as he searches for a name, "—a Prince Harry, and you are not a Meghan Markle, it is as well to be prepared."

Anthony just nods. He is very much not a Meghan Markle, though he suspects he shares with her the important attribute of not realising exactly what the hell it was they were getting into.

"You must remember," Mr Lincoln continues, "that no-one outside this room is privy to the nature of our agreement. To those who are 'in the loop', such as Judith and the others you are to see today, you are Antonia — a name you have chosen for yourself — and you are a transgender woman at the start of your transition. You are *not*—" he taps at the pile of contracts, "—to give them cause to believe *anything* else."

"I understand," Anthony says. It's the same rule for the people already in his life: his brother and sister-in-law, Bridget, and his parents, long-distance though they are. They'll get the same story, should he choose to keep seeing them in person. He's already planning to be too busy with his new job to visit his brother for Sunday lunch any more, and as for his parents, he can probably manage to be ill for ten Christmases in a row. Bridget?

Shit. He doesn't know what to do about Bridget.

A soft, insistent noise alerts him; he's drifted away again, and refocuses to find Mr Lincoln tapping on the back of a phone.

"Welcome back," he says.

"Sorry. It's all a bit much, still."

A degree of humanity returns to Mr Lincoln's face; that gentle smile again. "Don't worry about it. You've taken on a lot, so take your time. Your meeting with Judith is unlikely to be long, and your first appointment is not until one. Don't rush yourself." He taps the phone again. "This is yours, by the way."



Anthony takes it. “An iPhone,” he says, gingerly turning it this way and that, like he’s just caught an unknown and possibly alien fish. “I’ve, uh, never used one before. Can’t I keep my current phone?”

“Antonia carries an iPhone,” Mr Lincoln says, still smiling, though some of the motion has gone out of his expression. “Always the latest model. In rose gold, if feasible, and with a suitable case.” Anthony turns the phone over again to look at the back, and the case is quite attractive: rose gold at the edges, to match the phone, and clear across the back glass, with a flower pattern faintly etched into the plastic. “Don’t worry,” Mr Lincoln continues, “you’ll get the hang of it in no time. Now, go see Judith. And don’t trouble yourself with anything she might say; she’s a little more in the loop than anyone else, by necessity, but she knows none of the specifics.”

In a daze, Anthony stands, slipping the phone into his record bag. It clinks, presumably coming into contact with his existing phone, which habitually lurks at the bottom of his bag, collecting fluff. On the way out, he trips a little, but he’s so distracted, he barely notices.

\* \* \*

‘Judith’ turns out to be Judith Walker, a woman whose office is almost as spacious as Mr Lincoln’s. She beckons Anthony in with a smile and a wave, sits him down at one of several desks, and makes questioning gestures towards an extensive selection of drinks-making equipment in the corner of the room.

“Just a water, please,” Anthony says, looking around. With its deep carpets, friendly earth colours and scattered ornaments, Mrs Walker’s office couldn’t be more different from Mr Lincoln’s. There are several framed photographs on the wall behind her main desk, all depicting various moments of what Anthony assumes are corporate triumph, and more smaller frames on her desk, facing away from him; family pictures, probably.

“Here you go,” she says, handing him the bottle and settling down on the edge of the table in front of him. “How are you doing? Big decision, right?”

“I’m good,” he says, “and, uh, yes.”

“I think Antonia is a *lovely* name. And it’s nice that you haven’t strayed too far from your given name. My nephew, when he became, you know, a *he*, he went all the way to the other end of the alphabet to get away from being Andr— Oh, whoops! I shouldn’t say it, should I?”

Anthony cracks open the water bottle. “I’m not sure. I’m new at this.”

Judith — because there’s no way a woman like this wants to be thought of as ‘Mrs Walker’ — pats him on the back of the hand. “Aren’t we all, dear. No, his mother, she never said a *thing* to his face, of course, but she kept saying it was such a shame he didn’t just do the obvious thing. We know why, obviously. Bad memories. The other girls used to tease him; awful, vicious little creatures. *Anyway!*” She claps her hands together and stands up off the table in one movement. “To business!”

Attempting to keep up with the mood, Anthony salutes her with his water bottle. “To business!”

“Ah!” Judith laughs and points at him. “Yes! Well done! Now, I got it all ready for you over the weekend. And don’t—” she wags her pointing finger, “—tell me what this is all about! That’s between you and Mr Lincoln. All *I* know is that he’s helping with your transition, and being — ahem — rather *generous* about it; the *intimate details* are for you and you alone.”

Anthony tries not to inhale his mouthful of mineral water. “What,” he asks, when his throat is clear, “uh, did he tell you?”

“Don’t *worry*,” she says, waving him off. “Nothing personal! Now, sign these.”

Anthony takes the papers handed to him with a touch of resentment; he’s already regretting the *last* several things he signed. He flicks through. His name — his *new* name — comes up a lot.

Sod it. He made the decision, didn’t he? Why dawdle over every subsequent stage? He signs them. As soon as he does, Judith reacquires the papers, lays them down on the desk, and signs them with a flourish. “There,” she says. “All done. You are now *officially* Antonia Ruth Bessemer. How does it feel?”

“Um,” Anthony says. *Ruth?*

“I’ll bet!” Reaching behind herself, Judith pulls out of a drawer a plastic wallet, which she decants onto the desk in front of him. “New debit and credit cards, all set up in your name and linked to your new bank account,” she says, pointing to them. Then she drops another two piles of paper in front of him. “More signatures, I’m afraid.” He obliges. He’s just along for the ride at this point; he’d sign a hippo if it were manoeuvred in front of him. “Driving licence and passport,” she explains.

He’s getting really good at not reacting when someone upends another part of his life in front of him. A new *passport*? But it makes sense, doesn’t it? He’s going to need ID, and Mr Lincoln may want to travel, and if he were *actually* Antonia, she’d want her documents taken care of as soon as possible, it’s just...

Shit. It really *is* everything, isn't it?

Still, there's something he really ought to point out. "Driving licence? I don't have one. I can't drive."

"Provisional," Judith says. "And Mr Lincoln will want you to get lessons. He thinks everyone should be able to drive."

In Anthony's head, Mr Lincoln taps his finger on the clause that states *All reasonable requests are to be acceded to*. "Thank you," he says.

"There's also a new work ID," Judith adds, throwing a laminated card onto the pile. "That'll serve you until your government documents come back." He picks it up, and there's his name, in full: Antonia Ruth Bessemer. The picture's been doctored, and looks halfway between himself, as he looks now, and the photos he generated with the app. "Oh, we did a little work on that," Judith says. "Couldn't have you walking around with a lovely name like that



and a face like *that*, could we?”

“I suppose not.”

“Oh, you must be *so* excited! Do you have — and I promise I’m trying to be delicate here — a less disgusting bag than that to keep all this in?”

Anthony hefts his battered record bag. “This? Oh, um, not yet. I really am starting from scratch with all this.”

“Oh my goodness!” Judith squeals. “Aren’t you *brave*?”

\* \* \*

One o’clock has Anthony sitting uncomfortably in a plush white chair in an upscale doctor’s office not far from Lincoln-McCain Associates. The doctor, a friendly woman called Doctor Saraf, seems to know everything she needs to know; more than enough for Anthony to coast through the appointment on autopilot. Yes, he’s serious about transition; yes, he considers himself properly informed about hormones; yes, he’s ready to start today.

Yes, he’s excited.

The truth? He’s scared shitless, and even more so now; he doesn’t know nearly as much as he thought he did about estrogen and testosterone and all that. He also ought to have known that by starting hormone therapy ‘as soon as is practical’, Mr Lincoln meant ‘today’, but that doesn’t make him any happier about it.

One injection in the belly — come back in a month! — and another in the thigh. Here’s a big box of needles and a phial so he can redo the thigh injection every week; here’s a pamphlet which covers common questions and answers; here’s a box of progesterone pills.

“Progesterone?” he asks.

“Oh, yes,” Doctor Saraf replies, looking over from her computer as she updates Antonia’s records. “Good for development.” She cups her hands in the air as if weighing two round, heavy things. It takes a bit for Anthony to get it, and when he does, his eyes widen and she laughs at him. Then she wrinkles her nose and adds, “The NHS won’t prescribe it; I’ve had patients who’ve been ordering theirs from overseas until they come to see me. Stupid, really. But it’s worth it.”

Anthony nods. “One a day, right? Do I take it with meals or just water?”

Doctor Saraf grins at him. “Every night,” she says. “Before bed. But, Miss Bessemer, I have to tell you that you don’t *swallow* it.”

He leaves for his next appointment still reeling from the revelation that *some* medicines, to be most effective, enter the body from the other end.

His two-thirty is out of the town centre, but he has two hundred thousand pounds to spend, so he takes a taxi. He uses his old debit card, the one that still says Anthony Bessemer on it, and spends the trip worrying about whether or not it's technically illegal to do so now he's changed his name. It's distracting enough that he doesn't think too much about the slightly sore injection sites on his thigh and belly, or about what the next appointment entails.

The taxi tips him out in front of a beauty salon. It's far enough out of Manchester that he's pretty sure it qualifies as being part of one of the nearby villages, and it's far more moneyed-looking than the places he passes on the way to work, which abut cafés and Starbucks and vape shops. It's more like a villa, with clean white external walls visible behind the entry gate, and it's a good bet there's a swimming pool onsite, too; it's just that kind of place.

He has to be buzzed in, and for a moment he debates which name to use, before remembering that it was Mr Lincoln who set up this appointment.

"Antonia Bessemer," he says into the intercom, doing his best to sound breathy and girly and ending up, in his professional opinion, sounding merely very stupid. But they let him in anyway, and the two immaculately presented women who meet him at the opulent front door don't seem put off by his voice or his appearance.

"Welcome to Butterfly Beauty," says the darker-skinned one, reaching for his suit jacket. He shrugs it off his shoulders and she takes it, folds it over one arm and steps aside, inviting him into the first of several anterooms. "I'm Nitya," she adds, following him and stashing his jacket in a locker, which she leaves open for him. "Tulip's getting everything ready for you."

He doesn't want to use his voice too much, so he gets through the rest of the conversation mostly with nods. Nitya directs him to shower, dry himself off and slip on some gratis underwear, then don a robe and go through the door on the other side of the changing room. When he gets to the underwear, he puts on only the knickers, which are thankfully quite loose, though the presence of the sports-bra-looking top suggests that his nagging, paranoid question — *How are they gendering me?* — has been answered. Obviously they view him exactly as Mr Lincoln said they would: a trans woman just starting out.

A relief. His half-formed excuses as to why a man is getting all this done — he's getting ready for a play; he lost a bet; he has to become really aerodynamic really quickly — are unnecessary.

In the next room, Nitya and Tulip are waiting for him, standing beside a padded table covered in a paper sheet, and Anthony quickly takes in the room — the weird machine by the table with the *Star Trek* flashing lights, the racks of towels and robes, the adjoining tables with mirrors and hairdresser’s chairs — all the while hoping Nitya and Tulip can’t somehow hear his quick-beating heart or the fizz of adrenaline as it saturates his body.

He’s not nervous, not really, not any more. He’s been running so entirely on nerves since Mr Lincoln called him back into his office that merely to be *nervous* would constitute a significant relief, and he’s sure it’s readable on his face, in the movements of his hands, in the way he walks. On top of it all, the room he’s walked into is so clearly a bastion of femininity that he feels like an invading man, a bulky, unwelcome presence, and the welcoming smiles on both women as they wait for him do nothing to dispel the sensation.

He balls his hands into fists to stop them shaking.

What is he *doing*? He spent the whole weekend thinking about what this absurd ‘transition’ would mean for him and yet he found absolutely no time to realise it would involve *using women’s facilities!*

Someone’s going to yell at him. Not here, obviously, since Nitya and Tulip don’t seem to mind his presence, but someone, somewhere, is going to yell at him, and then it’s going to escalate, and someone’s *boyfriend* is going to kick the shit out of him, and then the cops are going to get involved, and then— and then— and *then*—

“Antonia?”

And then— Oh shit, that’s him, isn’t it?

“Um,” he says, and then coughs, covering his mouth. He forgot the bloody *voice!* Not that it’s much of a voice, because that’s something *else* he didn’t think about, and—

“There’s no need to be nervous.” It’s Nitya speaking, and he does his best to focus on her. Maybe he can time his heartbeat to her words, get it to slow the fuck down. Or maybe he can just pass out, and they can do whatever they’re about to do to him while he’s unconscious. “We understand how intimidating your first time can be. All we want is for you to be comfortable. We’ve been booked for several procedures, but if you prefer to remain covered—” and he realises as she says this that he’s holding the robe closed with both hands, “—then we can discuss which we can perform and which can... wait for another day.”

Okay. Think! Stop panicking and bloody well think!



Nitya and Tulip. They're professionals. And they've said they understand. Well, Nitya's said that; Tulip's hardly spoken a word. But she didn't look angry or anything, and—

*Get to the fucking point!*

Nitya and Tulip don't *care*. And as for the fear of entering women's facilities and being chased away or reported or beaten up or—

*Shut up!* Stop spiralling and start again.

As for the future? There's a clause in the contract for that, isn't there? No undue risks, no harm to his person, et cetera. And it's not even one he had to argue for; it was one of the first things Mr Lincoln raised, because he doesn't want *Antonia* getting hurt any more than Anthony does.

There. That's it. Concentrate on that: Mr Lincoln *wants* Antonia. He won't see her harmed. Ergo, he won't see *him* harmed.

You're safe, Anthony.

Now *say* something!

"I'm okay," he says. He doesn't try the voice this time; if he's just starting out, he figures it's probably fine. "It's all a bit much, but I'm fine." Mr Lincoln will keep Antonia safe. "I really am." Mr Lincoln will do everything in his power to protect her. "And I don't want to skip anything." Anthony can trust Mr Lincoln with this. "I want to do it all. Everything we arranged."

"You're sure?" Tulip asks.

"I am," Anthony says, smiling, and throws in a casual shrug. "No pain, no gain, right?"

"Antonia," Nitya says, "I'm so glad you said that."

\* \* \*

It's not so bad. Every sitcom rerun he's watched with Bridget has had at least one 'the male lead gets his legs waxed' episode — union rules, probably — and they uniformly give the impression that when the strip is pulled up it hurts worse than a hundred chemical burns, but Anthony finds the process surprisingly bearable. He can't speak to tell them that, though, so for the whole time waxing his legs, Nitya pats him on the shoulder every few strips and says things like, "Good girl," and, "You're so brave!"

He appreciates the thought. He wonders if he ought to whimper a bit, to be *really* brave.

He can't speak because of the second treatment, the one he really is dreading. After Nitya finished prepping him for waxing, Tulip asked his

permission to touch him fairly intimately, and then shaved his chest and stomach and around his pubic hair — his ‘bikini zone’, she called it. She then applied a thick layer of some kind of cream to the areas she shaved and covered them in clingfilm. He was about to ask what it was for, but before he could, she applied the same cream to his face and neck, and covered him up there, too.

“It’s for the laser,” she explained to his furrowed brow. “We’ll leave it on for an hour and it’ll numb you up. Don’t move,” she added, wagging a finger in his face.

So he hasn’t been moving, and nor has he been speaking, because the clingfilm covers his mouth. But any beauty procedure that requires *numbing cream* is something he feels he can justifiably fear.

“You’re doing great, Antonia,” Nitya says, as she rips off another few hundred hairs on the inside of his thigh.

“Mmph mmph mmph,” he agrees.

Tulip pokes him lightly on the forehead. “No talking!” He rolls his eyes at her and she grins in response. “While I have you here,” she says, as if he’s an unwary student she’s caught after class, “I’m going to talk aftercare. We’ll be sending you home with two tubes of moisturiser; I want you to use the big one on your body and the small one on your face. No hot showers or baths for two days. No makeup, no swimming and no tanning for two days. And make sure you wear sunscreen when you go outside, even if it’s only to go to work! Even if it looks overcast! Even if it’s *raining!* Your skin is going to be delicate and you *need—*” another poke, “—to take care of it. Take no risks. Promise me?”

“Mmph.”

“Good girl. I’ll give you some aloe gel as well, though it’s *not—*” poke, “—a substitute for moisturiser. Put it on first, all around your face, where it’s sore — and it *will* be sore — let it sink in, and then moisturise. Got it?”

“Mmph.”

“And drink plenty of water,” Nitya adds, and then she turns to Tulip. “Has it been an hour?”

“Just about,” Tulip says.

“Okay! Let’s get all that clingfilm off you, get you cleaned off, and give you a good zapping.”

Laser hair removal, unlike waxing, is thoroughly horrible, even through the numbing cream.

\* \* \*

The first thing he buys with his new credit card is a woolly hat. In deference to Mr Lincoln's stated requirements, it's a *women's* woolly hat. It has a bobble. And it hides his hair extensions.

He shouldn't have gotten them. He should put it off until his next appointment. But when they moved him to the beauty chair, he was so buzzed from the pain of the laser treatment he didn't even notice what they were doing until a good quarter of the extensions were already in, so he let them finish.

And now he has to face Bridget at home.

And *that's* an emotional thought, isn't it? Because, as of an hour or so ago, it's not his home any more, and Bridget isn't his flatmate. She's just... someone he knows.

Judith messaged him while they were fitting the hair extensions. She'd



been instructed to find him a suitable apartment, and she had a list of five for him to choose from, all in the city centre. Anthony, once again feeling like things were moving too fast, and irritated at having his temporary calm interrupted — having two beautiful women fuss over your hair is quite relaxing, especially when the rest of you is covered in soothing aloe vera — told her to pick one, and she immediately messaged him back with an address. She'll meet him in the lobby with his keys, she said.

So now he has to tell Bridge he's leaving *tonight*.

Technically, he doesn't even have to see her. The movers are already at the flat, Judith said, and will have all his things boxed up in no time; he could go straight to his new apartment and avoid a *very* awkward conversation.

That would be a dick move.

But when he arrives and takes in the view waiting for him, he decides it probably would have been the preferable one. Bridget's sitting on the steps, arms folded in defiance, blocking the shared front door and preventing several irritated-looking movers from accessing the building, like she's Arthur Dent lying in front of the bulldozers.

"Ant!" she yells, waving at him. "What the bloody hell's going on? These men want to take all your shit! Did you get evicted or something? Did you get *us* evicted?"

"We told you," one of the movers yells back, "nobody's getting evicted!"

"I'm not *talking* to you!"

"Can you deal with her?" the mover asks him.

"Sometimes," Anthony replies, and he quickly jogs up the stairs, takes Bridget's hand, and leads her through into the cramped hallway.

"Ant," she says, leaning against the wall and seeming like she might dig all the way through to number 16 with her shoulder blades, "what's *happening*?"

He shrugs. "I took your advice."

The thought of that seems to horrify her. She slumps and covers her face. "Oh, God. What did I say *now*? Ant, you're supposed to *stop* me drinking when I'm—"

"*Bridge*," he interrupts, pulling her hand away from her face. He keeps it awkwardly between them; he doesn't really know what to do with it, but he doesn't want to let it go. He's handled this so badly. "I took the job. The life-changing one? The one we talked about."

"I remember." She frowns at him. "When we talked about it, how drunk was I?"

"I mean, we were *drinking*."

"Ant, I didn't think you'd have to move *out*."

“Neither did I. I mean, not so soon. But, shit, look, Bridge, this all happened so—”

She snatches her hand back from him. “What do you mean, ‘not so soon’? You *knew* you’d have to move out?”

“I didn’t—” He starts, and then bites back the rest of it. But as he thinks about how to say what he needs to say, he makes his mistake: Bridget’s breath rolls over him, and he sniffs. He doesn’t mean to, but the smell is unmistakable.

“Did you just *sniff* my *breath*?” she demands, backing away up the stairs.

“Um—”

“You think I’m drunk *now*? You do, don’t you?”

And she is, a little bit. He’s sure of it. Probably only a glass or three of wine; standard for Bridget after a hard day. Enough to take the edge off. Enough to make her slow her speech a little. Enough that she didn’t seem to notice the sore, reddish skin around his mouth, though it *has* to be visible, even in the dim light of the communal stairwell.

“Bridge...”

His hesitation is enough for her. “Don’t you ‘Bridge’ me!” she yells. “Fine! If you’re leaving, you’re *leaving*! Those arseholes can take all your shit! I don’t care! See you never!”

“Bridget!” he shouts, but she’s already retreating up the stairs, and after a moment he hears two doors slamming: the door to the flat and the door to her room.

Shit. Well done, Ant; what a way to treat your best friend.

He leans out of the front door and waves to the movers, beckoning them inside. They’ll be safe enough with her barricaded in her room. Before he goes, though, he leaves a note under the key bowl by the front door: an apology as sincere as he can make it, a request to talk on WhatsApp when she’s ready, and the forwarding address for his mail.

\* \* \*

He’s walked past this building more times than he can count. Always considered it kind of ridiculous; the sort of overpriced, luxury bullshit Manchester can do without. Give him a nice honest studio or a flatshare room barely big enough to store a bed, a person, and a stack of ugly suits. Give him crumbling brick and rattling windows. Don’t give him *this*.

Well, he lives here now.

Judith waves as he steps out of the taxi and, too drained to do anything but go with the flow, he waves back and jogs up to meet her. As he goes, he pulls off the stupid bobble hat and flings it across the road; it sails over a temporary wall and lands somewhere in the building site opposite.

“Hello again!” Judith says, welcoming him into the lobby, which is startlingly normal: it’s all new-looking wood panels and characterless racks of mailboxes. Anonymous, functional, clean. “Now,” Judith continues, “you don’t have— *Love* the hair, by the way! You don’t have a *private* elevator, since I didn’t want to spend *all* your money, but you’re in the top *half* of the building, so you need a fob or a code to access it. Oh, I think there’s an app, too, but for now...”

He takes the proffered keychain from her and dumbly slaps it against the reader pad for one of the elevators marked ‘Floors 8-13’. “Which floor am I on again?” he asks as the doors open and they step inside.

“Eleven,” Judith says, in an encouraging tone of voice. “Only four apartments on your floor, and two are empty. The other’s an older woman, so you won’t have any noisy neighbours to worry about.”

“Ah,” Anthony says, hitting the button for eleven, “good.”

“Are you okay, Antonia?”

He shrugs. “Bit of a fight with my flatmate.” He frowns, corrects himself: “*Former* flatmate.”

“Ah. Bridget Morgan.”

“I guess.” He doesn’t really think of her as having a surname. She’s *Bridget*. The first and only constant of his adult life. “I shouldn’t’ve just up and left her so suddenly.”

“Well, do you want to bring her into the loop, dear?”

He shrugs again; he doesn’t, not really.

The doors open. Another lobby, this one slightly nicer, with two thin windows and an arrangement of greenery. He wonders idly if the plants are plastic, or if someone waters them. Maybe the older woman does.

“Here you are,” Judith says brightly. “11-2. It’s the best one,” she adds in a conspiratorial whisper. “Looks out onto the street, not onto the building site next door.”

Inside, it’s more of the same: anonymous wooden cabinets, tasteful but boring cream walls, black leather furniture, and an open plan design to the entryway, living room, dining area and kitchen. In the centre of the dining table there’s a small pile of things, messily out of place with the decor: Anthony’s laptop, a toiletry bag, and a few clothes, all suits and shirts.

No underwear, he realises as he leafs through.



“When are the movers bringing the rest?” he asks, but the sensation currently spelunking the base of his spine tells him everything he needs to know. Judith’s confirmation is unnecessary, but she provides it anyway.

“Oh, they’re not, dear. Everything else has been put into storage. I understand you’re to have an entirely new wardrobe; one suited to a young lady and not a ragamuffin. Sorry, dear; that wasn’t the word I’d have chosen.”

“Mr Lincoln called me a ragamuffin? Is he from the nineteenth century?”

“He said you *dress* like one.”

And then a thought that’s been rattling around the back of his brain returns to him: “You asked if I want to bring Bridget ‘into the loop’. That’s... sort of suggestive phrasing.” She smiles at him, and he risks it. “What do you know, Judith?”

He jumps as her hand closes over his shoulder. “It’s not what I know,



dear. It's what I suspect. The largess he's shown you... Well. I've known Mr Lincoln quite a while now, and it's not difficult to understand a man if you observe him carefully." She releases him, and then pats him gently. "That's a skill you're going to need to learn, dear. And, as for your 'arrangement' with him..." She taps the side of her nose. "Let's keep it schtum, yes?"

He nods, suddenly just so completely tired of all this. Of Mr Lincoln, of Judith, of Bridget, of the strange sensation of trousers against waxed legs, of the weight of hair he didn't have this morning, of the gentle throbbing of his face under the layers of aloe and moisturiser. He wants the day over with. He wants to *sleep*.

"Judith—"

"I know, dear. You're tired." She pats him again and steps away, starts rooting around in a briefcase. She pulls out a sealed folder and places it on the dining table. "Some documents Michael wants you to have. There'll be someone along to fit a safe in a day or two. Oh, and you're staying home from work tomorrow. You need to rest. You need to take care of that—" she gestures at his sore face, "—and there'll be some deliveries you'll need to receive. Clothes, other things. The girls at Butterfly took your measurements, I believe."

"Okay," he says, wondering if he sounds as dumb as he feels. New clothes? 'Other things'? And when did Nitya and Tulip take his measurements? Everything's still moving too fast.

"Sleep," Judith suggests. "Worry about everything else in the morning. You're dead on your feet." She smiles for him, and he sways in response. "I'll let myself out."

"Okay," he says again. Before she can close the door behind her, he gets it together enough to say, "Thanks, Judith."

"Any time, dear," she calls.

When she's gone, he doesn't bother with the skincare he's supposed to perform. Doesn't clean his teeth. Doesn't even undress. Just collapses into the first bed he finds.

By the time his old phone, still in the bottom of his ratty old record bag, starts vibrating with missed phone calls and messages, he's been asleep for almost an hour.

\* \* \*

*There he is again. Michael. Her boss. Her lover. Her man. Standing tall — and even though she's taller than most girls and even though she's wearing heels, he's still slightly taller than her, which gives her a thrill — and waiting for her. They've had a magical evening together, and she's certain tonight is going to be the night, a hope that is bolstered when she finds him in his bedroom, tie discarded, jacket already thrown over the back of a chair, a tempting patch of chest hair visible where he's partially unbuttoned his shirt. She wants nothing more than to tear off the rest of his clothes and follow that line of deliciously dark hair wherever it leads.*

*But she wants to savour this, so her steps towards him are measured, almost teasing in their hesitancy, forcing him, as he hoped, to come to her, to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her in, up, closer to his mouth. She locks desperately into the kiss, and the skirt of her cocktail dress starts to ride*



*up, starts to crumple under his grip as his lust exceeds his control. He doesn't bother trying to undress her, just redoubles his grip on her and hooks two fingers into her underwear, drawing it down, pulling it so taut that it might snap.*

*She hears a stitch pop.*

*"Hey," she says, drawing back just enough from the kiss to talk, knowing her wine-spiced breath will only intoxicate him further, "those were expensive."*

*"But you have so many," he replies, and doesn't let up his grip. Her underwear slides down her thighs just far enough to make her open, vulnerable.*

*"They're part of a matched set. If you tear my knickers, I'll have to throw all of it away, and this is a particularly lovely bra."*

*"I don't believe I've seen it; why don't you show me?"*

*She nibbles his lower lip. "Why don't you earn it?" she whispers.*

*She kisses him again, and reaches down, takes the fingers that are exploring her and pulls them up, forcing them into contact with her penis. Gently but firmly, he laces his grip through her sweetest parts.*

*She hardens in his grasp, and she is held, she is loved, she is his.*

\* \* \*

Anthony's awake for almost six seconds, basking in the glow of the morning sun through the floor-to-ceiling windows, feeling rested and relaxed for the first time since he was in the chair at the salon — longer, perhaps; since before all this started — and then the dream comes back to him and he very quickly has to find the closest bathroom.

Fortunately, the toilet has a self-cleaning function, which is odd but useful. He starts it up, checks he didn't splatter the floor this time — he didn't — and then washes his hands and face. Finds a helpful mantra to chant at himself in the mirror — "Ten million pounds. Ten million pounds. *Ten. Million. Pounds.*" — and then gets the hell out before the bleach smell empties him out even further.

Shit. What a dream! He needs a therapist or something, someone with the training to tell him if it was just a nightmare or if it was something worse. Anthony's pretty sure he's not actually attracted to Mr Lincoln, and he cites, in his struggle against the fading memory of the dream, multiple occasions on

which he has been in the same room with his boss and felt nothing, but he could use a second opinion.

“Ten million pounds,” he mutters to himself.

He’s being stupid, really. So he had a weird dream? So what? It’s just a side-effect of his new job, and *every* job has downsides. Sure, maybe most jobs wouldn’t give him vivid and disturbingly sexual nightmares, but most jobs wouldn’t make him rich.

He’ll get used to it. He already got used to the weird way his waxed legs feel in trousers, didn’t he? Well, okay, he kind of didn’t. And he should’ve taken his bloody trousers off when he went to bed; they’re all sweaty now.

He’s on his way back to the bedroom to air out the ensuite, wash his face, and maybe change his trousers, when a tune he vaguely recognises starts playing. It doesn’t take him long to find the source, and he realises why he knows the tune: it’s the default iPhone ringtone. He must have heard it a hundred times in his other jobs. And he owns an iPhone now. Or rather, Antonia does. He digs it out of his bag, sees that it’s Mr Lincoln calling, and hurries to the mirror to check he doesn’t look too bad, and— Okay, yeah, his hair’s a mess (and it’s *long*; he forgot about that somehow!) and his chin is still a little red and he looks, actually, kind of terrible.

Sod it. Mr Lincoln can live with it. One doesn’t become a woman overnight, especially when one’s only clothes consist of a pile of men’s suits and a single pair of boxer shorts.

“Good morning, Mr Lincoln.”

“Good morning, Antonia. I trust you slept well.”

“I was exhausted. Out like a light.” And face-first, too; a wonder he didn’t suffocate.

“Glad to hear it. And it’s ‘Michael’ when we’re alone together, remember?”

“Oh. Yes. Michael. Good morning.” He does his best to imbue the name with a spot of warmth; earning his keep.

“I won’t detain you,” Mr Lincoln says, smiling. “You might not be at work today, but you’ll be busy. Judith will have told you to expect several deliveries.”

“Yes. New clothes.”

“And cosmetics. And some other items I’ve taken the liberty of ordering for you; you don’t even own a television, and your laptop is, I have been informed, a museum piece.”

“I get by.”

“I’m sure,” Mr Lincoln says. It’s strange, but he seems more... playful than usual. His demeanour has changed, subtly, but enough that Anthony can spot

it. And his little smile, the one that keeps flirting with his lips every time he speaks... It's all too similar to Anthony's dream. "I should remind you," Mr Lincoln continues, "that from today, you are required to wear your new clothes at all times."

"Oh," Anthony says, looking down guiltily at the shirt that wasn't particularly nice even before he slept in it. "Sorry."

"You're excused this morning, because you don't *have* any clothes." There's that smile again! "But from tonight, it's a requirement. Judith's dropped off your copy of the contract; I suggest you refamiliarise yourself with your responsibilities, so you don't forget anything."

There. *That* obviated that bloody smile. *Ten million pounds. Ten million pounds.* "I understand, Michael."

"Wonderful. Remember: wear your new clothes at all times, except for work. From Friday, I'll be checking."

He ends the call and Anthony gives himself a moment before he relaxes, just in case he calls back. But there's nothing but silence, so he allows himself to drop backwards onto the bed and just *breathe*.

"Today," he says to himself, "is the first day of the rest of your life."

So make it count, Antonia.

He takes stock: he's expecting multiple deliveries today, and he's a *mess*. Furthermore, he barely knows where anything in this apartment actually *is*. And he's hungry!

Order of urgency, then. And right now, he feels *gross*.

Nitya told him to avoid hot water, but he can take a lukewarm shower, and he does so, undressing fully for the first time since the salon and pausing in the full-length mirror hung on the back of the bathroom door; Christ, his body's almost completely hairless! It's changed the way he looks far more than he would have expected, and he frowns at himself, tossing his hair back behind his head as he tries to quantify it.

He's always been scrawny, minus his little belly bulge, but now that he's nearly hairless, that description has become inadequate. It's too vulgar, almost. If he had to pick a new word, it might be *slim*. Maybe *slender*. Or even *graceful*.

Hesitantly, he shakes out his hair extensions, allowing them to fall around his face and tumble over his shoulders. He reaches down and covers his genitals, wraps his other arm around his chest. Yes, he still has the slightly veiny forearms, and his face is the same old face, but *wow*... He wouldn't necessarily think *woman* if he happened to see this person in, say, the





changing rooms at the local swimming pool, but he'd be hesitant to make the jump to *man*.

Strange.

And then he shakes himself, because time's getting on. He doesn't linger in the shower, no matter how much he wants to — because, tepid or no, the sensation of water gliding down his waxed legs is not one he knew his body was even capable of — and he pats himself dry the way Tulip instructed. He moisturises *everywhere*.

He unwinds the towel from his head and shakes out his hair extensions, and with a little attention paid to the parting, they look pretty good. The deep brown stands out against his pale skin, and—

Wait. Did they thin his eyebrows at the salon yesterday? They *did!* God, he must have fallen asleep in the chair. Now that he comes to think of it, he

has a vague memory of consenting to have something rubbed into his brow, another highly relaxing treatment that likely contributed to his impromptu snooze.

He looks... different. He plays with his hair some more, teases out a fringe, fluffs out the hair falling to the sides of his face, and—

God help him, he can see it.

He can see what Mr Lincoln saw.

He can see why this is all happening in the first place.

Sure, like his body, his face doesn't (yet) belong to someone Anthony would automatically label female if he passed them in the street, but even with the still-sore skin around his chin, and what remains of his beard shadow, something about the hair and the thinned eyebrows is enough to erode what he'd always thought of as a perfectly ordinary man's face.

He grips the sink. Continues to stare. There's a phone vibrating somewhere — must be his old one, because he hasn't worked out how to switch the iPhone to quiet mode yet — but it can wait. Whoever it is probably isn't quite as dizzy as he is right now.

And then there's a sound he can't ignore: the intercom. He swears under his breath as he rushes back to the bedroom, fetches a clean (he hopes) pair of work trousers and a surprisingly ironed shirt (he has no idea who ironed it; Bridget? the movers? himself, in some kind of housework fugue state?) and uses one hand to do up the buttons as best he can while he picks up the intercom with the other.

"Hi?"

"Delivery," says a woman's voice on the other end. "Can you buzz me into the lift?"

"I... don't know," he admits. "I just moved in yesterday."

"Oh," she says, "right. Okay, there should be two buttons on the side of the intercom — see them? Hit the top button to open the front door, bottom to unlock the lift. There should be a second camera feed somewhere."

"I see it. Done and done."

"See you in a few."

At least he has time to do up the rest of his buttons. There's a mirror in the hallway by the door — there are several, actually, all lined up next to each other, because this apartment was apparently designed by some kind of sick torturer and/or very attractive person — and he can't help seeing himself over and over as he runs for the door. He stops for a moment in the final mirror, examines himself, and stifles a surprised cough: with his oversized office

trousers and his loose shirt, he looks a bit like a girlfriend who doesn't want to go home in the dress she wore the night before.

If said girlfriend was also red in the cheeks from embarrassment, red around the chin from laser hair removal, and generically androgynous.

He really should have thought this through a bit more.

\* \* \*

Two deliveries down and he's feeling a bit better about himself. Yes, he looks like a mutant in those awful mirrors that line the hall, but neither the delivery woman nor the man who followed her twenty minutes later gave him any hassle about how he looked, and the woman even called him 'love' when she offered to put the things away for him. He doesn't *think* she mistook him for a woman — or a bio-woman, or whatever the hell the appropriate terminology is in this case — but she was kind, and that's what matters.

He demurred on her offer of assistance, though. He has no idea what's in the boxes, save that each shipment came from a different upscale store, and he really didn't want someone who was being nice to him to open a box and pull out, say, frilly pink lingerie.

His iPhone gets another ping — he really needs to work out how to silence it — but it's only the third delivery driver, the one from the electronics store, giving him a window of mid-afternoon, and that's great, because it means he has a decent grace period: he can put on some clothes that don't make him look like someone's crossdressing girlfriend (with a horrid facial rash), and he can sort out something to eat.

The first box he opens contains, praise the lord, sportswear! A good sign: he's worn Bridget's sports stuff before, largely due to his chronic inability to do laundry, and this is no different. Just... a bit more pink. There are matching tops, too, but when he tries them on, they're all too short, clinging tight around his upper belly and exposing his paunch. *Not* ideal. He keeps digging until he finds a hoodie to go with it, and assembles an outfit that covers enough of him that he doesn't have to think about the knickers he's *also* wearing.

They're black, with lace around the edge.

And they're fine.

They're *fine!*

He's *supposed* to be wearing women's clothing. And he wouldn't put it past Mr Lincoln to have paid the delivery drivers to check up on him

somehow. The last thing he wants is to bend over to pick up a box and expose his boxers; that'd be an infraction at the very least. It might not cost him the whole ten mil, but infractions are worth arbitrary amounts off his total. Why risk it?

He returns to the mirrors in the hall. He looks better! More consistent somehow. Still not exactly a woman, still not exactly a man, but more like someone who knows how to dress themselves in clothes that *fit*. He sweeps his hair back again, a sensation he's beginning to find satisfying, and heads to the kitchen for food.

There isn't any.

Of course there isn't.

Sod it; what is being wealthy even for, if not ordering yourself a nice lunch?

Five minutes later and he's figured out the Apple app store and ordered Chinese food. Another twenty-five minutes and he's buzzing open the downstairs door for the delivery woman, and he's hungry enough that he has his front door open before the elevator even reaches the eleventh floor.

The elevator opens.

Bridget steps out.

She's got his food. She's also, mercifully, not looking directly at him, and he wonders for a second if he can get away with quietly closing the door and pretending not to be in, but then it's too late, because she's *here* and she's holding his bloody *lunch*.

"Ant," she says, staring at his socks, "I hate how we left it last night. At least, I think I do. I mean, I know I hate how we left it, but I don't know how bad it was, exactly? Except I know it was *bad* because I got your note, and then you wouldn't answer my calls and texts so I thought maybe it was *really* bad, and I had your forwarding address so I called a sickie, and I was hanging around out front, trying to decide what to say, and then that woman came along, you know, with the food, and I said I'd take it up, and she called you Antonia, which is always funny, because remember when the pizza guy saw me with that great big hat on and called me Brad? And I was Brad the whole night and I kept pretending to adjust my underwear? Anyway, I just wanted to talk, and—" she looks up, finally, into Anthony's sheepish grin, "—and... Ant! What the *fuck* have you done to your *hair*?"



# Chapter Five

“Um, excuse me? Sir? Mr Lincoln? Sir?”

Michael quickly locks his laptop, and for a fraction of a second he worries that the new agency girl somehow saw the reflection of the screen in the window behind him. But she’s too far away, and too nervous in his presence even to look up from her feet. This, he’s come to learn over the last few hours, is normal for her. In fact, her refusal to watch where she’s going is likely at least partly responsible for her immense clumsiness; she started work at nine in Antonia’s office and by ten-thirty had already spilled coffee all over the desk.

He would call the agency and have her replaced, but she is only temporary; he must suffer her presence for four more days, including today. It would not be appropriate to terminate her employment prematurely. She was hired for four days; for four days she will work.

And who knows? A replacement might be worse. At least Antonia will be back soon enough. Pity she will be returning as Anthony. Beyond a shame, in fact: a tragedy, to conceal such potential behind a persona so unsuitable. But as much as Michael can see in her what is manifestly there, it is also clear to him that no-one else can — Antonia, unfortunately, included — and so her debut must wait until she is ready. It would be unfortunate to introduce Antonia to the office too early, and risk her inexperience as a woman provoking an incident that might fatally wound her confidence.

In the meantime, the new girl demands his attention.

“Yes?” he snaps.

She steps forward from the door, grasping a bulging folder. With her free hand she fidgets nervously with dull, poorly cut bangs. Simultaneously walking and holding something *and* coquettishly fiddling with her hair is apparently too great a feat of coordination for her, because she trips, dropping the folder and spilling its contents across the carpet. Michael says nothing, lets her frown in her justified embarrassment as she squats down in her ill-fitting boots and starts retrieving and reordering the mess of papers, a task hampered by the dangling, frayed hem of her faded blue cardigan, which sweeps across



the floor with every movement she makes, scattering the documents even farther.

Four more days of this.

“I’m so sorry, Mr Lincoln, I didn’t mean to, I mean, *obviously* I didn’t mean to, I shouldn’t be allowed out of the house, really, not until I learn to use my legs, but, um, here’s the report you wanted,” she babbles breathlessly, having finally reassembled the folder. “Sorry about the, um, about the, um, the falling over thing.”

“Quite alright, Miss...” Damn; he’s forgotten her name again. Not entirely his fault, for like everything else about her, from her dull brown hair to her perpetually parted lips — indicative perhaps of a sinus issue; she must snore terribly loudly — to the fluff-bobbled black leggings she wears under her skirt, her name is unappealing and quite forgettable. But he usually is punctilious when it comes to the names of his employees, no matter how temporary. Another matter on which she irks him.

“Steele,” she says.

“Miss Steele,” he confirms. “Thank you.”

He shouldn’t be so short with her, but he’s distracted enough as it is, and Miss Steele is, frankly, irritating. She can barely get through a sentence without interrupting herself and she apparently cannot last three hours without mishap.

He takes the folder from her and taps it upright on the desk, settling the papers within into position. In deference to her status as his employee, and thus not someone he *actively* wishes to insult, he doesn’t look up at her until he’s finished.

When he does, he finds her already looking back at him, and he refines his earlier conclusion: perhaps the reason she ordinarily prefers not to look people in the eye is that when she does, she is compelled to chew her lower lip and stare at them as if they are the last chocolate bar in the shop.

A collection of unpleasant habits.

She does not, it seems, find in his face the reaction she was expecting, and so she smiles at him, stands up completely straight for possibly the first time since she entered the building, and marches quickly out of his office. Michael wonders as she goes just why she picked such an ugly flower-print blouse for her first day at a new job, and whether she will trip again and brain herself on the door frame as she leaves.

The door clicks shut. Michael waits exactly ten seconds, to be sure Miss Steele is not about to return, having forgotten some small personal item, or to chew her lip at him some more, and then wakes his laptop.

There, once again, is Antonia's face, portraited in the centre of the screen and paused mid-sentence, waiting for him.

Michael reverently taps the play button.

"—like a light," Antonia says.

"Glad to hear it," Michael says on the recording. "And it's 'Michael' when we're alone together, remember?"

Antonia's eyebrows pinch together, and she bites her lip enchantingly and brushes aside a stray lock of hair before she says, "Oh. Yes. Michael. Good morning."

Michael's unseen self says "I won't—" but gets no further, because he pauses the video and taps on the seek bar to skip back a few seconds.

"Oh. Yes. Michael. Good morning." Tap. "Oh. Yes. Michael. Good morning." Tap. "Oh. Yes. Michael. Good morning."



“Wh—”

“I’m serious, Ant! How do you have so much *hair*? Is it a wig?”

“It’s—”

“Can I touch it?”

“What? No!”

“I won’t pull on it. I promise.”

“No.”

“Then stand aside and let me pass,” Bridget says, still grinning wildly at him. She hefts the paper bag with Anthony’s lunch in it. “This is *hot*.”

He doesn’t know what else to do, so he stands aside. Lets her pass. Closes the door behind him. An impulse makes him put the chain on, too, in case any more Bridgets show up out of the blue with inconvenient questions and his lunch held hostage.

“Wow!” Bridget says. She’s made it all the way to the kitchen, and she’s looking around with her mouth open, like she’s never seen an oven before. Certainly she’s never seen a *clean* oven. “Ant, this place is *bloody enormous!* How many dicks did you have to suck to score this *palace*?”

“How many—?” He asks, still behind events. “What?”

She bustles past him and dumps the food on the dining table, next to the pile of crap he hasn’t gotten round to moving yet: his laptop; the sad little bundle of men’s suits. “Oh, sorry,” she says, laughing. “My girlfriends and me, it’s a— It’s just a stupid in-joke. Sometimes I forget with you, you know?”

He brushes a few strands of hair out of his face. “Forget *what*?”

“Why *are* you wearing a wig?”

Stupidly, he says, “It’s not a wig.”

“Is it about this?” she asks. “Is this why you moved out?” It takes him a moment to realise she’s holding the contract, that he left it on the table, and he should have found a safe place to keep it the moment Judith left, and *she’s holding the fucking contract!* “This partnership agreement,” she reads, squinting at it, “‘hereafter known as ‘the agreement’ is entered into by and between—’ Hey!”

He snatches it out of her hand and rushes back to the kitchen, finds a drawer and shuts the contract inside. He wishes the drawer had a lock on it. Or a bomb.

“Seriously, Bridge,” he says, trying to breathe through the pounding in his chest, “you can’t *look* at that!”

Bridget cranes her neck, trying to look around him at the drawer. “Is that the NDA? The one you were talking about?”

“Christ, Bridge! You *already* know too much! Can you just drop it? Please?”

“Only if you tell me why you’re wearing a wig.”

“It’s not a wig,” he repeats.

“No,” she says slowly, “it *has* to be a wig, Ant, because if it’s not, that means you got hair extensions. Gorgeous, long, silky hair extensions.” She reaches for them; he bats her hand away. “This is, like, Instagram hair! It looks amazing! Why’s it on *you*?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“And what about this flat?” she asks, reluctantly walking away from him and returning to looking about the place in awe. “Actually, no, I’m wrong; this



isn't a flat. This is an *apartment*. This is what flats want to be when they grow up. You've got your own *lifts* and a *balcony* and I saw *real letterboxes* downstairs. And this view!"

"It's just Manchester, Bridge. We look at it all the time."

"Not from up here, we don't. Look!" She points out of the kitchen window. "That pigeon's doing a poo!"

"Lovely," he says.

He's flailing and he knows it. Conversationally and physically, he's been reduced to following Bridget's lead, and it's because — again — he *didn't think*. He didn't plan for this. He thought he had more time. Stupid; if there's one thing he ought to have learned by now, after being rushed straight out of Lincoln-McCain and into the doctor's office and from there straight to the salon chair, it's that time is a luxury he doesn't have.

His life's become a rollercoaster, and all he can manage is to hang on and scream.

What's he supposed to do in this situation, anyway? Isn't the idea that he pretends to be transgender? Kind of hard to do when Bridget already knows about the NDA. She also, pertinently, knows that he doesn't — or didn't — have the money for a place like this. She's seen his former bank balance; she knows full well he could barely afford to pay for a single item of furniture in a place like this!

And he can't tell her he's transgender. She wouldn't believe him! She's *Bridget*; she's been in his life for what feels like forever. 'Sorry, I was transgender all along and it just never came up?' Ludicrous.

So he's left with the truth — and he knows he's not allowed to let *anyone* in on that — or a web of lies so ridiculous he can't even begin to contemplate them. He finds himself wondering if the walls in an apartment this expensive can stand up to someone using them to vigorously bash their own head in.

Bridget, fortunately, senses his conflict, and without another word returns to the kitchen area and starts opening cupboards, tacitly changing the subject, and only breaks the silence thirty seconds and ten empty cupboards later with, "Ant, do you have *any* plates? Or cutlery?"

"No," he says, answering her on automatic. "I think it's all coming this afternoon."

"We're eating with our fingers, then."

The audacity snaps him back to life. "What do you mean 'we'? That's *my* lunch!"

She's already got a slice of prawn toast in her mouth. "You snooze, you lose." He glares at her, but she ignores him and starts unpacking the rest of the food onto the kitchen table.

He rolls his eyes, pulls out a stool, and performs perhaps the most resigned theatrical sigh he's ever performed around her. "Fine. We'll split it."

"You're the best, Ant," she says, digging in. "Dinner's on me."

"You're sticking around, then?"

"Got the day off, haven't I?" She selects a crispy chicken wing and uses it to point to the various closed doors around the apartment. "And I want to see the rest of this place! That's okay, right?"

He's got no reasonable chance of making her go away, not until she gets an explanation, some food and probably some wine, so he shrugs and starts eating. She takes that as permission to stay, and pops the chicken wing into her mouth.

"This is so good," she says through the stringy chicken flesh already stuck in her teeth. "You have to try the chicken, Ant."

She passes the container across the table like an air hockey puck and when Anthony intercepts it, she starts portioning out half of the fried rice into the empty prawn toast box.

"So," she says, "Where are you going to put your *Star Trek* plates, then?"

\* \* \*

He shouldn't have attended this meeting. He hasn't been able to concentrate at all, but there are things in his life and at his company that need doing — things that aren't Antonia — and thus he cannot spend *all* his time contemplating a single short FaceTime conversation. The sensible, healthy thing to do for the afternoon is for him to conduct business as usual and not torture himself with fantasies about what Antonia might be doing, saying or thinking.

As the meeting draws to a close and the others file out, Michael remains in his seat at the head of the table and tries not to think about her. Fortunately, he is assisted in this endeavour by the ever-distracting Miss Steele, who knocks over an open bottle of water and spends the next several minutes mangling confused apologies through her faltering command of conversational English, inexpertly cleaning up her mess with tissues from her handbag, and promising to print fresh copies of sodden policy documents that are now consigned to the trash, gradually liquefying.





“She’s something, isn’t she?” Judith Walker says after Miss Steele has fled. Judith’s been waiting for him in the doorway, and she’s dressed to go out. Fortunate: this suggests a short conversation.

“Just three more days of her,” he says. “Plus four hours.”

“You’re not making her stay late, then?” Judith says. “She’s a busy bee and she *is* university-educated. There must be hundreds of things she could do.”

He spends almost a second preparing a rebuke before he realises she’s joking. It’s hard to spot sometimes. “No,” he says heavily. “If it were not her first day, I’d suggest she take the afternoon off. Or work from home. But that would send the wrong message. I might not *immediately* punish incompetence, but I prefer not to reward it.”

She laughs. “And word would spread, wouldn’t it? We’d start getting agency workers who *deliberately* knock over water bottles and drop things and get their heels caught in lift doors.”

“She got her heel stuck in the lift?”

“It was fine,” Judith says, waving a dismissive hand. “Two of our *very* attractive young administrative assistants were there to help her. They salivated over her; she simpered at them; it was a *scene*.”

“Good Lord,” Michael says.

Judith leans closer. “I would think you’d be used to this. I seem to recall young Antonia being almost as clumsy. That is, before she was Antonia.”

It’s true that their first encounter was when she practically fell through his office door, but there’s something endearing about Antonia’s lack of coordination. Perhaps it is simply that Miss Steele lacks comic timing.

Michael acknowledges the comparison with a raised eyebrow.

“Speaking of *Antonia*,” Judith continues, leaning slightly on the name, “what *are* your plans for that girl, Mr Lincoln? Are they something the company should know about? Something I should prepare for?”

Ah. She’s being a lawyer now, then.

“No,” he says firmly.

“Two hundred thousand pounds, Mr Lincoln. *Plus* the appointment straight to a high-level administrative position. She commands *quite* the salary for someone of her background.”

“It is none of your concern.”

“She won’t have cause to sue the company?” Judith asks. “No sexual harassment suit in our future?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay then. Be careful, Mr Lincoln.”

“Your counsel is appreciated, Mrs Walker,” Michael says, “as always.”

\* \* \*

They’ve finished eating — rather, Bridget’s finished stealing most of his lunch — and Anthony’s still no closer to a decision on what he’s going to tell her. That he has to tell her *something* is obvious; Bridget isn’t one to leave well alone, and now that she’s seen him with hair extensions and a lavender hoodie, he’s become a puzzle she’s desperate to solve. Especially since he got a text from Mr Lincoln mid-meal that just said, **I am thinking about you,**

and he's pretty sure she saw it; Bridget can read upside down, but only when something really juicy and dramatic is at stake.

Even now, as he watches her chew thoughtfully on her last sporkful of rice, he can see the gears moving in her head.

"So," she says, "this NDA of yours. I get it: you can't say anything. But can you *at least* tell me if the hair has something to do with it?"

He nods.

"And the apartment?" she continues.

He nods again.

"So," she says, drumming her fingers on the table, "you've got a big-shot corporate secret to keep, you've got new hair and a new apartment... You're a little red around the chin, too. Ah-ha! And you *just* winced, like that was something I wasn't supposed to notice!" She reaches out. "What's with the chin, Ant?"

"Okay!" He says, fending her off. "Okay, Bridge. Just stop pawing at me. Look, I'm..." Fuck it; he's out of time. He has to pick the least unconvincing lie. "I'm—"

The intercom blares, interrupting him and making them both jump. Anthony rushes over to answer it, trying to keep one eye on the drawer with the contract in, but the intercom's right by the front door, and there's no possible contortion he can perform that will let him see the kitchen from the entry hall.

"Yes?" he says sharply, trying to hurry the interaction along.

It's the people from the department store. With the TV and a bunch of other stuff. Anthony's not sure exactly what they're bringing; he didn't exactly memorise what was coming when. Until precisely this moment, it hadn't seemed important. Just another part of the rollercoaster ride.

Except now the ride is a white-water rapids, and bloody Bridget's there with him, pointing out all the jagged rocks and asking inconvenient questions about the route.

He buzzes them in, hits the button to unlock the elevators, and rushes back to the kitchen, where Bridget is waiting for him, leaning against the table with a too-innocent look on her face.

She reaches for him and says, "Ant—"

"No," he snaps. "Shut up a minute, please. There's a delivery coming. A TV and some other stuff. They're going to put it all together, and they'll be here a while. *And* I'm not supposed to have anyone up here with me!"

She frowns. "This *is* your apartment, isn't it?"

"Yes!"

“Then why aren’t you supposed to—?”

He grabs her by the hand and pulls on her. It goes the same as all his prior attempts to drag Bridget anywhere: she looks at him with polite innocence while he pulls as hard as he dares. She must understand the urgency, though, because she only makes him work for it for a moment before she lets him win. He considers putting her in one of the other bedrooms, but he hasn’t checked them yet and doesn’t know which is the other one with the ensuite, and he doesn’t want her wandering back out here if she suddenly needs to go to the bathroom; equally he doesn’t want her constructing an elaborate device to allow her to pee out of a window (which she claims she did once when she was at uni), not least because it’ll land on his balcony. So he shuts her in the primary bedroom, and when she speaks up from the other side, he kicks the door until she consents to remain silent.

And then there’s a knock at the front door. He doesn’t even have time to calm down! He rushes over, quickly checks himself in the mirror wall — he looks, in his lavender hoodie, absolutely baffling — and greets a red-faced and almost round man, who greets him back with a dazzling smile. Anthony looks past him to see three other men unloading various items from both lifts.

Setting it all up takes a *while*. They’re working from stipulations Anthony never saw — presumably Mr Lincoln has the floor plan to this place and had fun planning Anthony’s audio-visual future — and when they’re done, he has a whole electronics store in his home. There’s a TV, and it’s the biggest one he’s ever seen, a gloss-black monstrosity that has to be anchored to its associated TV table lest it fall and cause an earthquake. There’s a smart speaker in the kitchen and another by the TV. The living area also sprouts free-standing speakers and a white plastic oblong covered in blinking lights and intimidating antennae that one of the men promises will get him ‘gigabit’ internet. He doesn’t know what that is, and when he asks if that’s enough to stream movies, the man tries very hard not to laugh at him.

One of the men spends the whole time setting up a treadmill and bike in an empty corner, and when Anthony checks on him, the man makes much ceremony over rolling out what is apparently a yoga mat. Did Anthony know you need a special mat for yoga? He can’t remember, but he definitely knows now.

The dining area slowly fills up with a vast pile of packages: a hair dryer, a hair straightener, a box of general bathroom and bedroom sundries, several large boxes of kitchen supplies, some variety of iPad, a set of Apple earbuds, and a MacBook Pro. And placed against the door to the main bedroom,

presumably waiting for him to wheel it inside, is a full computer desk on casters, with an iMac, keyboard and mouse already set up.

Apple, Apple, Apple. *Antonia carries an iPhone*, he remembers; apparently she uses everything else Apple, too!

“Just sign here for us, will you?” one of the men says, as they start dumping the packaging for everything into the big box the TV came in. Anthony does so, suppressing a laugh; this is the least intimidating thing he’s signed in ages.

“All right, sir,” another man says, and Anthony turns around to find him standing in front of the TV, which is switched on and showing an Apple-themed setup screen, presumably for the small, black, Apple-themed box sitting directly underneath it. “Just sync your phone with this and with the speakers, and it should all just work. We’ve left the quick-start guides and everything on the kitchen table if you have any questions.”

“Oh,” Anthony says, wanting obscurely to rebel against the forced Apple-isation of his electronic life, but aware that it would probably irritate Mr Lincoln if he did. He can learn a new operating system; it’s probably easier than learning to be a girl. “Sure. Thank you.”

“No worries, mate,” another of them says. “You have a good day, now.”

He waves them out and collapses into the sofa. He has *no* idea how he’s going to explain any of this to Bridget. The TV alone looks like it costs multiple thousands of pounds! It’s the size of— Well, it’s the size of *him!*

Maybe he should just tell her the truth. Or parts of it, anyway. He can say the apartment belongs to the company, and all the equipment does, too. He can say he’s in a pilot programme for potential executives. Talented up-and-comers, or whatever. And he can tell her no, she *can’t* laugh at that, because she’s never seen him in a work environment and so she has no idea how competent he really is; surely it’s believable that he’s really, really good?

So what does he say about the other stuff? The hair?

“Have they gone?” a voice calls out from the primary bedroom at maximum volume.

“Very subtle, Bridge,” he yells back. “And yes.”

“Good! Because...” And she’s switched to such a seductive tone of voice that Anthony, intrigued despite himself, pushes up off the sofa and gets halfway to the bedroom door before it opens, revealing Bridget. She’s waiting there for him, holding up against herself something made of a red, lacy material. It takes Anthony a full two seconds to recognise it as lingerie. A bodysuit, he thinks it’s called. “This shit is *sexy*, Ant!” she proclaims, undulating at him.

Christ. He'd forgotten: he left dozens of boxes of clothes in the bedroom. And then he left Bridget with over an hour to rifle through all of them.

Dozens of boxes of nothing but *women's clothes*.

Yeah, he can feel the beginnings of a panic attack. He can normally breathe more comfortably than this, right?

"Bridge—"

"I would look amazing in this," she coos. "I mean, I'd probably stretch it out a bit, but you wouldn't mind, would you? Because you're about to tell me it's not yours, aren't you, Ant?"

"Uh—"

"It came with the apartment, I'm sure," she says. "Previous tenant died, I'm guessing. And the executor of her estate was killed in, let's say, a tragic ballooning accident. And all her relatives are afraid of heights and refuse to





enter any building more than two storeys high. And so all her things stayed here, boxed up, waiting... for you.”

He can't even speak. He feels like he might faint. But then she starts walking towards him, attempting a seductive strut but succeeding mainly in reminding Anthony of the time she tried to walk in four-inch heels and fell face-forward into the couch. The memory breaks his trance, frees him from his panic, and while the ensuing laughter is at least partially also a coughing fit, it's enough to shatter the tension. He doubles over, spluttering, and Bridget abandons her act, rushing over to pat him on the back.

When he's recovered, he rolls his eyes at her and she dissolves into giggles.

“Shit, Ant,” she says, her voice quivering with amusement. She butts into him — Anthony always says she expresses affection like a grazing farm animal, and she's yet to disagree — and lays the lingerie to rest on the back of an armchair before she flops down onto the sofa cushions.

He sits down next to her, and she nudges him with her knee.

“I know it's not an NDA,” she says.

“What?”

“I read it. The contract. Not all of it. None of the details. Barely half the first page. Didn't have time for any more. But I know what's going on. The whole deal between you and your boss.”

“Bridge...” he rasps, through his constricted throat. The panic attack, briefly assuaged, starts to build in intensity again.

“I won't tell anyone.”

“You can't,” he manages.

“I *won't*,” she repeats, sounding more serious than she ever has. It's reassuring enough that the invisible hand around Anthony's neck relaxes its grip somewhat. “I remember what you said,” she adds. “Life-changing, right? With all sorts of bells and whistles attached? And I remember it was me who told you to go for it. I told you to take a risk, didn't I? And I guess this is a pretty huge risk. And a pretty huge change! But also... Don't worry, Ant; I get it. I understand why you're doing this.”

“Yeah,” he says, massaging some life into his throat, “money.”

“Well, yeah. Two hundred grand is a *lot* of money! Not sure it'd be enough to make *me* live as a *man*, but you know. I get it.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean, Ant, is you've always... Oh, never mind.” She waves away his confused frown. “What I *actually* want to say is, I'm sorry. I yelled at you last night. I went from nought to a hundred in like three seconds. As usual.

Although,” she adds, grinning wickedly, “I’m sure the money and the enormous apartment and the beautiful clothes helped you recover.”

“The bed is nice,” he admits.

“God,” she says, bouncing around in the sofa to get more comfortable, “you’re really doing it. You’re *really* becoming a woman, aren’t you?”

“Kind of.”

She grins broadly at him as if he’s just given her the best news she’s ever heard. And that’s better than the alternative, but the fact remains that she *knows*. She knows what he’s doing and she knows why he’s doing it. She knows enough to expose him and Mr Lincoln.

She could destroy them both.

She wouldn’t. He knows that. But in his carelessness, he’s given perhaps the most persistently drunk woman he’s ever known a loaded gun, aimed right at his head.

“Where’s all your stuff, anyway?” she asks.

“Oh. Uh. Storage. It’s not exactly right for this new life I’m supposed to be leading.”

“Wow. Just *wow*. Big step, Ant. Oh,” she interrupts herself, “should I keep calling you Ant?”

“I mean, Anthony and Antonia abbreviate the same.”

“It’s a lovely name.”

“Uh, thank you.”

“It really suits you, Antonia.”

“Please?” he says, leaning away from her. “Just Ant is— It’s better.”

“Okay,” she says sincerely, nodding. “Just Ant. For now.”

\* \* \*

“Oh,” the image of Antonia says. “Yes. Michael. Good morning.”

Rewind.

“Oh. Yes. Michael. Good morning.”

The way her lips move when she speaks. The way she plays with her hair. The way she looks at him — or the picture of him on her phone.

“Oh. Yes. Michael. Good morning.”

Rewind.

“Oh. Yes. Mich—”

He pauses the video. There’s a commotion outside: a high-pitched shriek followed by a bassy but somewhat frantic voice speaking very quickly.

What now?

He brings up the security feed — he keeps a shortcut on his desktop; paranoia never killed anyone, his mother used to say, but a lack of it might — and navigates to the cameras right outside his office. On the screen, replacing the image of Antonia, is the quartered view from four cameras, each of them providing a different angle on the situation outside. Miss Steele is standing there in her awful blue skirt, chewing on a pencil, while two men — one of whom is the CFO — fuss over her, pick up dropped coffee cups, and rescue every pastry that didn't quite fall on the floor. Judith Walker is there, too, watching from a short distance back, arms folded and wearing a poorly suppressed smirk, and as Michael watches the feed, her eyes briefly flick up to one of the cameras.

She shrugs at him.

He can't wait for this week to be over.

\* \* \*

Bridget's been unpacking the kitchen supplies, organising Anthony's kitchen according to her own reasoning. There's no use trying to stop her; she's on a roll, and times like this the only way she can be deflected is if she is presented with either a) another task that will absorb equal amounts of energy, or b) a bottle of wine. It is, at least, work Anthony doesn't have to do for himself — he has a large enough job ahead of him just finding homes for all his new clothes in the primary bedroom's walk-in closet — and he's absorbed enough of Bridget's logic over the years that her eccentric choices usually make sense to him. Yes, mugs go in the cupboard above the brand-new kettle, obviously, and wine glasses and tumblers go underneath, in case one needs to reach them without getting up from the floor.

Okay, that's not her *stated* reason, but it's the only logical conclusion to be drawn from the ample evidence Anthony's collected.

"I've had an idea about this," Bridget says, waving the manual for the microwave at him.

"About the microwave?" he asks. He's watching her from the dining table, where he's struggling to understand his new MacBook. He's already wheeled the iMac into the bedroom, but decided to start with the laptop, on the thoroughly logical basis that it is smaller and thus more wholly comprehensible.

"No! About you! You and your whole deal!"

“Do I want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Then I need alcohol. Or a good hard kick in the head.”

“Good idea!” She slaps the plug for the microwave into place, shoves the whole thing into position, and steps away from the kitchen surfaces, admiring her handiwork. “The first one, I mean. So why don’t I go get some, and then—” she leans against the dining table, dislodging a few empty Apple boxes, which topple onto the floor, “—we can try my idea.”

He can’t avoid the inevitability of it. “What’s your idea, Bridge?”

“Okay, so. Those guys, right? The ones who put your TV together. They called you ‘mate’ and ‘sir’.”

“Well, yeah. Of course they did. I’ve been trying not to think about it.”

“Oh?”

“Because look at me, Bridge!” He slaps the lid of the MacBook closed and jerks a thumb into his chest. “There’re these standard guys walking around the flat, putting shit together, constantly walking past me and looking at me, and there I am in my women’s clothes and my hair extensions and my face still kind of pink from laser and they *know*, Bridge. They know I’m at least trying to look, you know, different, but they also know what I *am*. Underneath. And I keep thinking about it; or, actually, I keep *not* thinking about it, because when I do my heart starts going a thousand beats per minute and—”

Bridget lays a hand on his shoulder. “Ant.”

He stops. He breathes. He looks up at her, still panting a little. “Yes?”

“You’re going to keep looking more and more... like this, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Full-time?”

“I guess so.”

“And you’re scared there’ll be more people like those delivery guys, yes?”

“I mean, yeah! Except worse, because they won’t be people who are on the clock, who are being paid to be normal to me. Looking like this, dressing like this... It’s not—” and he drops to a whisper, “—*safe*.”

“Like I said,” Bridget says, squeezing his shoulder and hopping back up, her cheery voice at odds with Anthony’s mood, “I have an idea I want to try. Now, I’m not going to push, but if you’re going through with all of this anyway—”

“I am.”

“And we’re going to talk about *that*, too. But if you’re going through with it, don’t you want to know if you can do it?”

“Do what?”

“You know: *it!*”

“I *don't* know, Bridge.”

She sighs at him. “You’ve got more deliveries coming, yes?”

“Yes,” Anthony says, frowning. At least the puzzle of what Bridget means is sort of distracting.

“I’m already going down to the Sainsbury’s on the corner for wine. I’m thinking I’ll nip to the Boots down the road first, get some basic makeup. And I mean *basic*. And then we’ll get a little alcohol in you and get you looking so good the next delivery person won’t know what hit ’em. Okay?”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying? And why alcohol first?”

She walks back over and raps him lightly on the forehead. “Were you this dense before you became a girl?” she asks. “Never mind; I remember; you were.”

“Hey!”

“The alcohol’s to relax you. You’re so stiff right now I could bounce footballs off you. And yes, I mean I’m going to put makeup on you and make you look like a girl. *More* like a girl.”

Anthony nods, biting his lip, buying time. What she’s proposing makes sense, but that doesn’t stop a yawning pit from opening up in his belly, the same old sensation he can’t quite name: a mix of anticipation and dread, shame and remorse.

He chews harder on his lip. He’s being stupid again. The decision’s already been made, the contract signed, the money paid into his new accounts. He’s *going* to be a woman, at least for a while. Why quibble with the timetable?

Besides, he might not *want* to look like a woman, but he’d rather that than wind up caught between genders, vulnerable to every psycho on the street who thinks it’s still the 1950s, or that it ought to be.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. Thanks, Bridge. It’s a good— What?”

She’s looking at him funny, and before he can stop her, she grabs him by the chin and twists his face this way and that.

“Did I hear you correctly before?” she asks. “Did you say you got *laser*?”

“Yes?”

“God. *That’s* why your chin’s a bit pink. Right. Ant, that’s *permanent*. You know that, right?”

“Um...”

“It’s permanent! It’s why Pauline’s muff hair grows back in the shape of a heart! She thought it was hot when she was eighteen and so did her shitbag of a boyfriend, but now she’s thirty and she has to keep it shaved so the girls at

the gym don't call her pussy-heart Pauline like the girls at uni did, and so her husband doesn't ask about her wonky, off-centre pubes!"

That's a lot of information to absorb. Laser's permanent? Like, *permanent* permanent? With Nitya's talk of how he'd have to come back every month, he'd thought it was like waxing, something that would have to be continually maintained. Semi-permanent, at most.

"Uh," he says.

"No, no," Bridget says. "It's fine. I get it. I mean, you're not exactly ever going to *want* to grow a beard again, right?"

"I might."

She snorts. "Yeah, right. Look, it doesn't matter. It's fine. I'm just... still recalibrating, that's all."

Permanent removal of his beard. Oh, and his chest hair. And they did some of his pubic hair, too — though not into a heart shape, thankfully. Is he okay with that?

Can he afford not to be? Does he really want to fight it with Mr Lincoln? Does he want to argue that it wasn't, somehow, what he agreed to? He'd have to admit that he was too incautious to check what laser hair removal actually *was* before signing off on it, and that'd make him feel like a complete idiot in front of Mr Lincoln. Again.

Is permanently losing a key aspect of his masculinity worth it, just to avoid an embarrassing confrontation?

Maybe.

"Ant?" Bridget says. "You okay in there?"

Fuck it.

"Yes," he says. "I'm fine. Let's do it. Just maybe get a lot of wine, okay?"

She's already throwing her bag over her shoulder, and she gives him a grin and a shrug. "Ant! Who do you take me for?"

\* \* \*

It takes a whole bottle of wine before Anthony lets Bridget near his face.

They dress him first, looking through his eclectic clothing collection for something that says both 'just lounging around the flat' and — Bridget's words — 'I'm a hot bitch whose pussy bangs hard'.

Anthony has questions about Bridget's deployment of slang, but he doesn't get to ask them, because she has him sitting very still in front of his



vanity, hands flat on the front so he doesn't fidget, face held as motionless as possible.

"I colour-matched against my arm," she says as she paints him, "and we're not exactly the same colouring, but we're close enough, since we're both whiter'n hell and neither of us gets enough sun. And you've got pretty clear skin for a bloke, I've always thought so, so even if I wasn't entirely right on the shade — and, ahem, I wasn't — I can blend it out over your ears and down to your— well, you don't really *have* tits, not yet, but the point is, I can blend it. Now, technically speaking, you're not really supposed to use your fingers for this, but I can never be bothered with sponges and I always poke myself in the eye with brushes so this is the best you're going to get from me. Okay, now *don't move*. Like, even more don't move than before. I'm going to hold the mascara over your eyelids and you just need to, like, blink slowly, and— *Not like that!* Okay. Never mind. I can fix it. It'll look like you're wearing eyeshadow. And that's good, because I didn't buy any eyeshadow. Actually... I *do* have some in my bag, and it'll be okay if I don't use the little wand thing, right? I'll just— I'll use my little finger. Close your eyes again, Ant, and don't open them until I say. Aaaaaand... Shit."

She gets there in the end, and though Anthony is no expert, something about the foundation, the mascara, the eyeshadow and the surprisingly subtle lipstick Bridget bought is enough to make him look... fine? He thinks?

"I don't even know any more," he says, leaning forward and squinting at his reflection. "I've been looking at myself for, what, an hour? I can't tell if I look like a man or a woman. I think I'm just sick of the sight of myself."

Bridget's walking in circles around the room, her hands pressed into the small of her back, moaning; she's been doing an awful lot of bending down for a twenty-nine-year-old. "You look good, Ant," she says, as she passes his chair again. "I even did a little contouring. Made your cheeks look less, you know, sunken and hollow."

"I thought you were just drawing on me with lipstick."

"Well, yes. I didn't get any actual contouring shit. And that's what makeup *is*, anyway. Drawing silly lines on your face, and then blending, blending, blending." There's a sickening crack sound, and Bridget's suddenly standing up straight, stretching. "Oh, *God*, that's better. Okay. Stand for me, Ant. Give me a little twirl."

He complies, feeling a little silly, but with a bottle inside him and another waiting in the wings, he doesn't feel silly enough to stop. He brings himself to a slightly unsteady halt, and spreads his arms out, presenting himself to Bridget as both magician's assistant and magic trick.

“Not bad,” she says. “Not bad at all, Ant.”

They picked out a simple outfit for him. Of the two options, ‘just lounging around the flat’ won out, so he’s wearing a paisley-patterned pair of wide-legged pyjama trousers and a loose, pale peach v-neck sleepshirt over a bra filled with a set of chicken fillet-shaped and disconcertingly jiggly bra inserts. In the bra, they looked quite strange, but with the pyjama top on, they look like...

Shit. Anthony’s stomach rolls over. He’s just about gotten used to seeing himself with his face bare of stubble, with long hair and smooth legs, and watching Bridget slowly make him up in the mirror had dulled the effect of it, but now he’s standing up, now his context has been reset, he’s having difficulty with the fact that the person staring back at him from the mirror in the vanity looks like a fucking *girl*.

Kind of.

Mostly.

She’s still borderline in some respects, and aside from her chest she has essentially zero figure, and if he looks closely, he can see that behind Bridget’s amateur makeup job there’s still an Anthony staring back at him, but if he steps back, if he looks at the whole picture, all he can see is a woman.

This is like yesterday, when he first saw himself naked after the waxing, but worse. He’s getting altogether too convincing. And that ought to be wrong; he ought not to be someone who can look almost like a woman with just a spot of makeup, hair and clothes and a bit of light laser torture. He ought to be a bloody *man*, even as he’s being paid to *not* be one.

And yet.

Shit. He’s not wearing any socks and even his *toes* look different without their little scattering of hair.

Comprehensive change. Top to bottom. Just one day and Anthony’s already gone.

“Ant?” Bridget asks, reaching out for him.

“I’m okay,” he says, as she grasps his forearm. “I’m okay. It’s just weird.”

“Good weird, I hope.”

“Well—”

“It’s good that the top’s sort of billowy. It hides your little belly bulge.”



“Will you please stop noticing that?”

“When’s the next delivery coming?”

He finds his phone. Not his comfortable old Android with the dented back at the glitchy touch sensitivity, sadly; his new phone, his iPhone. The always-on display has the time ready for him: just after four.

“Soon,” he says.

“Did you turn on face unlock?” Bridget asks.

“That’s a thing?”

“Yep.”

“Whose face would I even register?”

“What? Yours, of course.”

He doesn’t say it, but he wants to: *which face?* Anthony’s face? He’s gone already. Then there’s a woman-leaning androgynous creature he seems

already to have become, but at this pace she won't be around for long, either. So that leaves Antonia, who is still, in his mind, the woman he saw in the app, the night after Mr Lincoln first presented him with this lunatic plan. He imagines all three versions of himself fighting each other over who gets the privilege of face unlock and who has to use PIN unlock like a pleb, and his laughter is enough to dispel the uneasy feeling in his stomach.

"God, Bridge," he says, dabbing carefully at his eyes, "I feel so weird."

"You know what you need?" Bridget says.

"More wine?"

"Well, obviously."

\* \* \*

The results from the guy who delivers the boxes of cosmetics — and there are more boxes than Anthony expected; far more, for in addition to the basics there are scents and sprays and brushes and palettes — are inconclusive. The man gives Anthony nothing more than a quick hi and bye; nothing useful. And Anthony is happy enough to leave it at that, but then Bridget puts another half-bottle in him. Which is how he finds himself agreeing to switch out his top for something sexier, so they can see what the pizza guy thinks.

The woman in the mirror becomes even more unsettling, especially when Bridget starts undoing buttons Anthony had very good reason to button up.

"No, no, no," she says, swiping away his hand, "the idea is, you got home from work, you switched out your skirt for your PJs, but you left on your blouse, okay?"

"Then why are you unbuttoning it?"

"Because you're *at home*, yes? And you're here with your girlfriend, and—"

"My *girlfriend*?"

"Platonic girlfriend. It's just a thing we say, okay? And I couldn't be your non-platonic girlfriend, either; I like large men—" she flexes her nonexistent biceps, "—with nothing going on upstairs and everything going on downstairs, and that wasn't you even before you signed the contract. So don't go getting any ideas."

"Bridge, I've never gotten a single idea like that."

She cocks an eyebrow at him. "No," she says, "you haven't, have you?" And then she flicks at his fingers, stopping him from redoing the buttons on his blouse. "Look. You had a hard day at work, right? And you're feeling a bit

sloppy. So you just, you know, undo a few buttons. It's not *your* fault you're so sexy."

He looks down. His stomach is bulging out over the waistband. Not hugely so — he doesn't have anything close to the 'muffin top' Bridget fears so much — but enough for him to notice. "This isn't sexy, Bridge. Look, my belly's just... I don't like it."

It looks gross. More so than it ever has before, for some reason.

It looks *wrong*.

Maybe it's the wine.

Or maybe, he reminds himself, it's because he's trying to look pretty, he's trying to look *sexy*, and his messy physicality is reminding him that no matter how hard Mr Lincoln or the Butterfly girls or Bridget try to gild his lily, underneath it all, he's barely a flower at all. He's more like a weed. Or a—

"One way to solve that," Bridget says, ignoring or not noticing his self-loathing. She reaches out and yanks up his pyjama bottoms so they sit barely an inch or two below his fake breasts. "You're supposed to wear those around your *waist*, Ant."

"I was. Wasn't I? Have I been wrong about what waists are all this time?"

"No, stupid. Girl waists are up here—" she taps him somewhere above his hips, "—and you need to get used to that."

"Okay," he says. "Sure. Got it. New waist." To go with everything else. The trousers *do* seem less loose now. The crotch is less... expansive.

Bridget's frowning at him, tapping a finger on her chin. "The look is *missing* something. Ah! Your lips, Ant. They need to be redder. Like, bright red."

"But you only bought one colour of lipstick," he says, feigning disappointment.

"That's what *you* think," Bridget says, and goes over to where she dumped her bag on the bed. "I mean, yes, I didn't buy this today, this is actually mine, but *I* don't have horrible germs and I'm choosing to believe you don't, either, so you can borrow it. And it is bright red. I think."

"I can't remember the last time I saw you wear lipstick."

"Hey!" She brandishes the tube at him. "I wear it. Sometimes."

He squints at it. "Yeah? And how old is that?"

"I don't know, I found it the other day when I was looking for my keys. Now shut up and let me make you look even sexier..." She approaches him with calculation in her eyes, her tongue already resting out of the side of her mouth, the way it does when she's concentrating.

He doesn't let her make any other touch-ups. Her reluctance to use her own makeup on him has receded in rough proportion to the number of glasses of wine she's had, and her promises that she's really, really good at eyeliner — which he already knew; it's the only item of makeup she wears almost every day — are not convincing enough. She'd poke him right in the eye, he's sure.

Besides, he'd rather avoid making his reflection any *more* alien to him. Switching out the loose pyjama top for a more form-fitting blouse has had an unsettling effect on his silhouette, and it no longer seems to matter that he has no hips or that his face is too angular. He can't see Anthony *at all* any more. No matter how closely he looks.

And then the intercom goes.

It's a guy on the other end, with their pizza and, since it was Bridget who put the order through, more wine. Sometimes he thinks she *might* have a problem.

He lets the man in through the door downstairs and unlocks the lift and squares his shoulders and then reminds himself, via the mirrors in the hall, that squaring his shoulders is the one thing he *shouldn't* do. Instead he coughs, swallows, and tries a few exploratory vowels, trying to work out which noncommittal *thanks* noise sounds the least masculine.

Bridget, who curls up on the closest chair like a cat, giggles at him. He ignores her.

Why did it have to be a guy?

He'd been hoping for a woman, like the nice lady this morning who brought the first delivery, not some leering man. Bridget undid exactly the right buttons to open the blouse right above his fake cleavage and right below it, and he feels ludicrously on show.

It's ridiculous: at Butterfly Beauty he was more or less naked in front of two women for *hours* and didn't feel as vulnerable as he does right now.

He misses his pyjama top.

"Go hold open the door!" Bridget hisses from behind him. "Wait for him!"

"I'm not in control of this situation, am I?" he says to himself, and he winces at how deep he sounds. He tries another few experimental contortions of his mouth and, as he opens the door to wait for the delivery guy, he hits on one that doesn't sound *too* awful. It involves lifting his tongue and speaking as much as he can out of the front of his mouth, and in trying a few phrases — half-remembered lines of Shakespeare he had to learn for a school play — he sounds acceptably high-pitched but also sort of American; better, though, than sounding like a man.

The lift doors open, and there's the pizza guy. Plastic bag hanging from the crook of one arm and clinking with bottles; two pizza boxes in his hands. God, and he's fucking *built*. He's wearing a shirt that would be like a tent on Anthony, but he's wearing it open, and underneath all he has on is a logo t-shirt, which does nothing to hide his pectorals. And he's not just big; he's got strong-looking hands with rough-cut nails, he's got just the right amount of scruffy stubble around his mouth, and his hair has either been carefully moussed and finger-combed into the perfect tousled 'do, or he just got up this morning and didn't brush it. No matter which is true, it works for him.

Maybe if Anthony looked like that, he wouldn't be in this position right now.

Yes, but if he looked like that, he wouldn't be on his way to making ten million quid.

Yes, but *maybe* if he looked like *that* he wouldn't need it! He'd have a better job already! He'd be confident enough to chase his dreams, rather than be stuck in his current predicament, in which someone else's dreams are chasing *him*.

The man's delivering pizza. He can't be that successful.

Yeah? He might be a student. He might be a grad student! In a field that's going to make him a multi-millionaire. In ten years, he might *own* you.

And the alcohol drags a giggle out of Anthony; he doesn't need any *more* men owning him...

Shit. Probably shouldn't have done that in front of the random man. But he's manic enough now — drunk enough, too — that the realisation is almost enough to make him giggle again.

"Hello, ladies," the guy says, making direct, sustained eye contact, which flickers away from Anthony only for long enough to register Bridget walking up.

"Hiiiiii," Bridget says, leaning temporarily against Anthony's shoulder.

"American Hot and a Barbecue Sausage." The pizza guy hefts the bag. "And your wine." Bridget rushes forward to take it off his hands, leaving Anthony to accept the pizza boxes.





The man smiles as he takes them, and is it Anthony's imagination, or did the man manoeuvre the boxes so their hands would touch? So their fingers would glide against each other's as Anthony slides the boxes away?

And he's still *looking!*

Anthony's got no context for this. Is this an appropriate amount of eye contact for two strangers when one of them is a kind of imposing man and the other one is supposed to be a woman? He has no clue. He knows *he* never looked at women this way.

He definitely never brushed hands with people who were bringing him food.

"Thanks," he says, in his strange new voice, and attempts a smile.

"Y'welcome," the man says, and lingers for a moment before taking two steps back. He smiles again, says, "Have a good night, ladies," and turns away.

“Oh my *God*,” Bridget says as soon as Anthony closes the door, “he was so *hot!*”

“Shut up,” Anthony says, “and let me put down these boxes somewhere so I can have a panic attack.”

“Not another one.” Bridget hooks the bag onto her elbow and takes the boxes off of him. “Oh, you did *fine*. I saw him! He was eating you *up*.”

“I, um, I think he touched my hand.”

“There you go!”

“There I go *what?*”

“He likes you.”

Anthony shakes his head unsteadily. “Is it always like that? With men?”

“Like what?”

He makes it to the sofa before his legs drop him to the immaculate wooden floor, and takes a moment to run through the encounter again, his inappropriate and unexpected bout of giggling included. “He was *looking* at me,” he says, half to himself. “Looking at me like he wanted to *do* something.”

“Oh, yeah,” Bridget says, dumping the pizzas on the coffee table. “They’ll do that.”

“I’m serious!”

“So am I.” She sits next to him, nudges him with her knee, and drags his pizza closer. She’s waiting for him, so he grudgingly leans forward and plates a couple of slices. “Look, that was a good first go, right?” she continues, grabbing herself a slice of American Hot. “Controlled environment, limited contact and all that. And if he’d gotten weird, we could’ve taken him.”

“Speak for yourself,” he says, shuddering. He takes a bite. It’s decent pizza.

“I kick like a mule,” Bridget says.

\* \* \*

Another two bottles between them. About a third of a pizza each. And about three-quarters of a movie. Something with Julia Roberts in, from the period when her movies were more about getting divorced and discovering a new lease on life and less about being a street worker or constantly colliding with Hugh Grant.

During the movie, Bridget offered to teach him everything she knows about being a woman, and Anthony had answered that he already knows everything *she* knows about being a woman: one, eat fast food every day; two,

get hammered every night; three, skip every other meal and go to the gym three times a week so you don't get pizza thighs.

She hit him with a cushion.

And now Anthony's full and pleasantly drunk, and Bridget's a little more of each, as usual.

"Can't believe he called us 'ladies'," Anthony says, prompting a fresh fit of the giggles from the lump on the sofa next to him.

"Hell yeah, you're a *lady*," Bridget says when she recovers, and rolls over for just long enough to bump her head into him. "Lady lady lady," she mumbles into his blouse, then rolls upright again.

"S'just temporary. Ten years."

"Yeah, right."

"Ten years!"



“And two hundred grand a year,” Bridget mumbles. “Times ten. That’s... Shit, girl.” Another giggle. “What’s two hundred times ten?”

“It’s more than that,” Anthony says. “I get a payout at the end if I go through with it all. If I’m—” he stifles a burp that turns into a manic laugh, “—a good girl.”

“How much?”

“Ten mil.” He doesn’t know why he’s telling her this, except that perhaps he needs her to know he didn’t sell his manhood for *just* two hundred grand a year.

“Jesus,” Bridget says. “That’s... That’s much more than two hundred grand times ten.” She rolls onto her side and stares very seriously at him. He tries to meet her eyes, but it’s difficult. “Anthony. *Anthony*. Antonia.” She snorts. “Antoniaaaaaa. Hah! S’fun. Anyway. Ant.”

“Yes.”

“Buy me a car in ten years, okay?”

“You don’t like your Corsa?”

She explodes with laughter, and then stands, unsteadily and on her second attempt, before stalking off towards what they identified earlier as the main bathroom. When she reaches the door she turns and says gravely, “Nobody likes Corsas, Antonia.”

As she pees — with the door open; old habits die hard — he can hear her repeating his new name over and over, with the emphasis on different syllables, and he smiles, feeling content.

Bridget’s here. And she knows. They ate pizza together. They got drunk. They watched a movie. And it was exactly what he needed: to know that even with everything that’s happening, he can still have little islands of normality like this.

Even if Bridget *has* been gleefully calling him ‘girl’ and ‘girlfriend’ and ‘babe’ all night.

“I should go home,” she says, startling him. She’s walking back from the bathroom, less unsteady than before, more sharp-eyed. Holding it together. Anthony’s seen this before; she can usually keep it up for about ten minutes.

“Really?” he says. She’s right, but he’s still unable to hide his disappointment.

“Yeah.” She leans against the back of the sofa. “Because if I stay here I’ll just have another glass of wine, and another, and then you’ll be peeling me off the floor and putting me to bed, and I *don’t* fancy getting to work from here in the morning.”

“Fair.”

“You’re going to be okay, yeah?” she asks, as she starts collecting up her things.

“I think so. This was... This actually really helped, Bridge.”

“Good,” she says, leaning over the back of the sofa and kissing him upside down, on the cheek.

“You want me to call you a car?”

She pulls her phone out of her jeans pocket and waggles it at him before dropping it back into her bag. “Got one coming.”

He manages to get to his feet, and he follows her to the door, shaking off the fatigue and some of the alcoholic haze as he goes.

“Listen, Ant,” she says, pausing at the front door, “before I go, there’s something I need to know. And you’ve got to tell me, because you avoided the question before, and it’s vital we sort this out between ourselves before all this—” she indicates the apartment and Anthony himself, “—goes any further.”

He nods

She stretches out the pause for several more seconds.

“Where *are* you going to hang the *Star Trek* plates?” she asks, rushing through the sentence and getting almost all the way before ruining it with another giggle. Anthony sputters for a moment, unable to respond, and she continues, “Because there’s a nice spot in your kitchen, I thought, or they’d look just great on—”

“They’re in storage,” he says. “With just about everything else.”

“Oh no! Like, forever?”

He shrugs. “For the next ten years. They’re not exactly ‘the new me’, you know?” He keeps the bitterness out of his voice, but it’s a little upsetting that there seems to be no room for Anthony in Antonia’s life: Antonia has Apple products and probably doesn’t know the name of every *Enterprise* captain.

Bridget tilts her head at him. “Can I have them? I can put them right back where they were. Better Captain Picard than those boring nature pictures again.”

The hooks on Bridget’s living room wall, before Anthony moved in, hosted some attractive but generic wildlife paintings. She’d been delighted to replace them with the plates, declaring the guy in the red uniform to be much more interesting to look at than a bunch of ducks. She got into the shows shortly after, and spent a full week calling him ‘Number One’.

“Sure,” he says. “I’ll get them sent over.”

She hugs him, staggering a little as she lunges in. “You’re a doll,” she says, and gives him a squeeze before releasing him. Then she scrunches her nose up and says, “You really okay, Ant?”

Is he? He'd thought he looked perfectly okay. But Bridget knows him too well. "When you asked about the plates..." he says. "I, uh, thought you were about to ask for money or something."

She laughs. "I don't need *money*, Ant. I'll get another flatmate. Charge 'em more'n I charged you. Or I'll keep the room empty and just eat less takeaway." She pats her belly. "Could do with cutting back. I think I'm getting a promotion, anyway. Or fired. But probably a promotion." She pokes him in the chest, concaving his half-empty bra. "I'd never take your money, Ant. You're working *way* harder to earn it than, well, anyone."

"Okay," he says, "but just— If you ever get into trouble..."

"Oh, I'll come running."

"You'd better."

She kisses him on the cheek again. "G'night, Ant. Sweet dreams." She opens his front door, steps daintily through it, and as she closes it behind her, she adds, "Sweet dreams about your *sexy, sexy boss!*" and runs, giggling, to the lifts.

Anthony makes sure she can't hear him before he laughs.

God, all this is so much easier with Bridget. Well, with Bridget and alcohol. "Synonyms," he murmurs to himself, and laughs again, before returning to the living area and clearing up the detritus.

Miraculously, there's an untouched bottle of wine, so he finds an unused kitchen cupboard and designates it the wine rack. The pizza boxes go in the fridge — dinner for the rest of the week — and the glasses go in the sink. He decides another cupboard can be the temporary home for things that need recycling, and stows the empty bottles inside, thoroughly rinsed; waking up to a flat that smells of last night's wine is the worst.

He checks the time: just after nine. A shame Bridget had to go, but at least it seems like she'll be back. He won't have to navigate this whole, confusing mess without a friend.

How she'll feel about the contract tomorrow, though, once she's sobered up, is another question.

It's probably fine. She'll probably be fine with it. It's fine. It's really fine. She was surprisingly eager to accept Anthony as a woman, anyway; she might even be disappointed when he turns back into Anthony in ten years. He'll have to get her the best 2030s-model Vauxhall Corsa money can buy to make it up to her.

He's contemplating having another lukewarm shower when there's a knock on the door, and he quickly runs over, bare feet slapping a little too loud on the wood, because he's still rather drunk and not as coordinated as he'd



like. Bloody Bridget must have immediately vomited on the back seat of the car, or something, and now she needs somewhere to sleep it off. Wouldn't be the first time.

But then he opens the door and there's Mr Lincoln standing there, still dressed for work. Waiting for him.

Worse, Anthony's still wearing the stupid slutty blouse, and he didn't even do the buttons up.

\* \* \*

Michael had previously thought the weekend was the worst possible torture: he'd had to wait, not knowing what Anthony would decide, not knowing even whether Anthony would throw everything away and go to the newspapers. But it turns out, this is worse. For inside Anthony, surrounded by his reticence and trapped behind a process that cannot be rushed, exists Antonia, waiting to be born, and Michael must wait with her. And for all that he has spent much of the day entranced by a short FaceTime conversation, the more he's rewatched it, the more flaws he has discovered.

Flaws fixable by time and effort, for sure, but flaws nonetheless. Scratches on the surface of Antonia's existence; grooves in her through which Anthony can still be seen.

Judith Walker told him to be careful, and he will be — he must be — but patience *grates*.

He discovered an application that when he runs it on his phone and feeds it a picture of Anthony, produces an image of Antonia, and since he found it an hour ago he has done nothing but render and admire photos of a woman who is still, in the real world, nebulous. He has also gripped his phone so hard he fancies he's visibly smoothed down the titanium edges.

But there's one other thing to which he can cling. He has the notes from the delivery people. They were told their performance was being monitored and that they were to forward their assessment of every delivery to the outsourced quality assurance people; Michael. It took some money to achieve, as with all things, but Michael has been accumulating money since he was small, and in increasingly larger sums since he assumed his current position; it doesn't matter to him.

The men who conducted the department store delivery and set up Antonia's television and her other home electronics were strangely dismissive of her, describing her without pronouns and referring to her exclusively as 'the



customer'. The other three delivery drivers gave more useful feedback, though, especially the most recent one who delivered the cosmetics, who described 'a friendly young woman', and while it is certainly possible — likely, even — that the man saw in Antonia a transgender rather than a cisgender woman, it is still a suggestive description. Antonia will have been experimenting, exploring her femininity — as required by the contract — and thus as the day went on, she will have naturally become more feminine.

Antonia, picking through new clothes and cosmetics, trying things on; discovering herself.

Intoxicating.

He has to see her.

The need grips him. Overwhelms him physically to the point where he rocks a little in his chair. Instinctively he checks for witnesses, but he is alone in his office, as he ought to be, as he almost always is.

His motion wakes his laptop, which causes him to realise both that he was lost in thought long enough for his computer to go to sleep, and that it is almost nine in the evening.

How long has he been sat here? How long has it been since everyone bar the cleaners left the building? It isn't unknown for him to stay so late, but ordinarily there would be a reason. Instead, today, he is simply... wistful.

No. He's being too generous with himself. Pining, that's the word his mother used for it, when she caught him sitting somewhere quiet, looking at nothing, thinking of little.

The certainty that he will not sleep tonight, nor will he rise comfortably tomorrow morning, not until he has seen Antonia for himself, carries him out of his office and out of the building. It's not far to Antonia's new apartment, and the evening is pleasant enough. He hesitates only when he reaches the pavement outside and has to step carefully around a woman who is so inebriated it takes her three tries to get into her taxi. Something about her demeanour reminds him that it is *late*, that he might be intruding, that no matter how much of her time he has bought, no matter how much access to her life he has paid for, she is still her own person, and she might not appreciate his presence so late in the evening.

Tonight and tonight only, then. Next time, he'll call ahead.

Judith gave him a copy of the fob but refused to provide him with a key, archly informing him he has to knock like everyone else, and that he should bear in mind the poor girl can feasibly refuse neither her boss nor the man bankrolling her transition, so as he lets himself in and up, he foregrounds her



words, reminding himself to retain his decorum, to conduct himself as a gentleman.

And then Antonia opens the door, and Michael is overwhelmed.

\* \* \*

Anthony just sort of hangs there in Mr Lincoln's embrace. The man's got both arms around Anthony's waist, but he's holding him loosely, like he's afraid to crush him, like he's a plucked flower with a delicate stem. Anthony, for his part, has no wish to embrace Mr Lincoln, and so curves himself away as much as he can. But *subtly*, in case he offends him. Christ, what a needle to thread.

In the floor-to-ceiling mirrors that line the wall of the hallway, their combined pose looks *really* stupid.

“Mr Lincoln?” he says, trying again his breathy, American-ish voice. “Michael? I don’t think I’m ready for this yet.”

Mr Lincoln immediately releases him, which causes Anthony to take a few clumsy steps backwards. He has to steady himself against the mirror wall, and he’s grateful he didn’t decide to put socks on; on the polished wooden floor, he would definitely have fallen on his arse, and he one hundred percent does *not* need to pratfall in front of Mr Lincoln again. It feels like every error tries his patience.

“I am so sorry, Antonia,” Mr Lincoln says, and though his delivery is flat, it’s his eyes that sell his sincerity. Anthony feels the knot of anxiety recede from his chest as he realises he probably *isn’t* going to be docked a random amount of money tonight for refusing the advances of his boss/benefactor/boyfriend. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Quite all right,” Anthony says. “I was just having a glass of wine after dinner,” he adds, both to explain the undoubtedly obvious smell of alcohol in the air and to make polite conversation. He turns away, ostensibly to lead Mr Lincoln into the apartment, and buttons up as much of his blouse as he can. Did Mr Lincoln see down his shirt? Is that something he should worry about from now on? And, shit, the last time he went to the loo, he didn’t exactly bind his penis especially tight when he was done; is there anything down there to see? Would it matter if there was? Would Mr Lincoln *prefer it* if there was?

Shit. He’s so out of his depth.

“This is a handsome apartment,” Mr Lincoln says, strolling up behind him, once again all business-casual, as if they hadn’t recently caught each other in *tableaux vivant embarrassante*. “Are the furnishings to your liking? It has been pointed out to me that even the most expensive rental apartments in this city tend to mimic the decor of a mid-priced hotel.”

“I, um, wouldn’t know,” Anthony says, pausing in the space between the living area and the kitchen. “But it’s fine, yes. Especially for what I’m apparently paying for it.”

Mr Lincoln raises an eyebrow, and Anthony worries that even raising the subject of money is gauche, or something — his boss is ludicrously rich, whereas the most moneyed people Anthony’s ever regularly interacted with are his brother and sister-in-law; he has no idea how to speak to anyone worth millions — but he merely says, “Yes, Mrs Walker showed me the numbers. Affordable on your pay bracket, assuming you cover the other essentials with your...” He pauses, seemingly searching for the right word.

“Nestegg?” Anthony suggests.

“Precisely.” And Mr Lincoln finishes sweeping the apartment with his eyes and turns his gaze back to Anthony. As he does so, his back seems minutely to stiffen, and his cheeks redden slightly. “And I must say, Antonia, your progress today has been very impressive.”

“My progress?”

“You look lovely. And your voice... It needs work, but that you are making the effort at such an early stage is commendable. In fact...” He extracts his iPhone from a jacket pocket and jots down a note to himself. “Tomorrow I will arrange an appointment with a speech therapist. Since you are so eager to begin, you ought to have *professional* instruction.”

A speech therapist? What on earth will *that* entail? “That, um, seems like a good idea, Mr— Michael.”

Mr Lincoln’s smile is tight and controlled, but it’s clear now that being addressed by his first name is a very specific pleasure.

“In fact,” Mr Lincoln says, rubbing his hands together, “since you have already made such progress, I think we can move the timetable up. I doubt you were looking forward to attending work as Anthony Bessemer while the hormones did their work.” Anthony shrugs; it’s all been rolled into the generalised anxiety of looking all inbetweeny. He’s been concerned about the effect making himself more feminine in the evenings would have on his work life as Anthony, but it’s hardly been the *most* pressing matter. “So,” Mr Lincoln continues, “I suggest that when you return to work next week, it is to be as the woman you mean to become. As Antonia.”

“Next *week*? I— I won’t be ready by then! I *can’t* be ready by then! I’m—” *You’re yelling at your boss, Ant.* “Oh, God. Sorry. Sorry.”

Shit. An outburst like that’s *got* to be worth some money docked.

“Two weeks, then,” Mr Lincoln says. “I think we can manage with your... temporary replacement until then. The Monday after next, you will return to work as Antonia Bessemer.”

That’s less than two weeks to get up to speed. To learn to do to his face what Bridget did. To learn how to fix his hair and walk in heels and fucking *speak properly* and... well, and *everything*.

Shit. Shit shit shit *shit*.

But what choice does he have? One more push against Mr Lincoln’s preferences and he’ll start docking money, for sure.

Through a throat thick with fear, Anthony says, “Yes.”

“These are your suits?” Mr Lincoln says, and Anthony has to shake the haze out of his eyes to realise that Mr Lincoln’s pointing at the pile of clothes on the table.

“Um. Yes?”

Keep calm. Keep *calm*. He’s handled everything else so far, hasn’t he? He even managed to see Antonia in the mirror without feeling more than a little queasy! He didn’t throw up *once!* Two weeks? Two weeks is *more* than enough. Two weeks is plenty of time! Two weeks is—

Calm down, Anthony. There’s such a thing as psyching up *too* much.

There’s also such a thing as a manic episode.

He shakes himself, as subtly as he can, and when he feels capable of taking in the outside world again, he finds Mr Lincoln waiting politely for him, Anthony’s suits hung over one arm.

“I’ll make sure you have the details of several personal shoppers,” he’s saying, “so you can be properly attired when you return to work. These—” he gestures with the arm holding the suits, “—I will have donated. I’m sure they could be of use to some—”

“Ragamuffin?” Anthony says, his brain running off the rails, in full free-association mode.

“Ah. Mrs Walker told you, did she? I apologise.”

Anthony bobs his head, not trusting himself to speak. A wild corner of his mind reminds him that Mr Lincoln does not have over his arm *all* the suits in the apartment; there’s still the one he wore yesterday.

Anthony should probably burn it.

Because this is it. It’s the end. If he’s going back to work as Antonia, then there’s nothing left of Anthony worth mentioning, is there? Except his internal self, his constantly running internal monologue, which has recently tended towards the unhelpful, the self-critical, and the mildly insane.

And it’s not the *only* other suit left, he remembers with burning embarrassment. There’s still the one Bridget found in the boxes, the one with the long, sleek pencil skirt she declared she couldn’t fit into in a million years.

Best not to think about that one yet.

He walks Mr Lincoln to the door, and he’s preparing the usual polite goodnight spiel when Mr Lincoln says, in a quiet but determined voice, “Antonia?”

“Y— Yes?”

“May I have one kiss?”

Anthony shuts down all access to his voice. His initial reaction — to scream ‘*No!*’ and run the fuck away — probably *will* get him docked money,

and none of the follow-up actions his brain presents to him seem at all useful, either.

Realistically, he can't say no. He gave his consent when he signed the contract. And while some things were proscribed without additional negotiation — sex, for example — there was a section for 'random acts of affection'. Those are required.

He *could* say no. He could try it. Take the monetary hit. Risk Mr Lincoln throwing it all away, deciding that Anthony isn't as compliant as he ought to be and trashing the whole deal. He could push, and see what boundaries he can set outside the stupid contract.

But that's the catch, isn't it? He can't know until he tries, and if he tries, he might lose everything.

So, dumbly, aware that he is about to cross a border he will not be able to return to for ten years, Anthony nods.

Mr Lincoln leans forward and down a little, his lips slightly puckered, his eyes closed, presenting such a jarringly out-of-place image that it takes Anthony a moment to identify it, and when he does, he almost *wants* to kiss the man out of pure pity. Michael's like a boy at his first school dance, nervously paired up with a girl who doesn't know him, unaware of what is required of him, unaware of what he can expect.

It's like he's never been kissed.

A rush of sorrow threatens to knock Anthony off his feet. There've been clues before, things Michael's said that have suggested to Anthony a lonely childhood and an austere adulthood, but Anthony feels suddenly so lonely on his behalf, so isolated, so abandoned, that he steps forward, places an arm around Michael's waist and another around his neck, and deliberately hesitates. He wants Michael to open his eyes. He wants him to know that it doesn't have to be a fantasy any more. That he doesn't have to be alone any more.

Maybe it's the wine. Maybe it's the clothes, sitting strangely on his body. Maybe it's the way Michael's hazel eyes open and gaze into his. Maybe it's pity or sympathy or empathy or maybe Anthony's gone mad, but when Michael finally parts his lips, when he recedes from his odd little pucker, that's when Anthony leans up and kisses him.





# Chapter Six

*Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap—*

“Whoa! Shitshitshitshitshit!”

“Antonia! Women do *not* swear like that.”

“Really? Because my friend Bridget could embarrass a sailor. Probably drink him under the table, too.”

“Your friend Bridget has had a *lifetime* of knowing the rules. She is *allowed* to break them! You, however, are not.”

“Fine. Fine.”

Anthony pushes himself back up from the bench he used to break his fall, and wobbles onto his feet. Nitya started him on a pair of low heels, or so she claimed. And when she handed them to him, they didn’t look all that bad. But it turns out that one inch is a lot scarier when you’re trying to stay upright on it.

“Book,” Nitya says, and he makes himself as still as possible while she balances it back on the top of his head, from which position it has now fallen seven times.

“Book,” he says to himself.

“Aaaaand *walk!*”

This time, he makes it all the way down the corridor before his concentration fails him. He doesn’t fall this time, and the book falls forward into his waiting hands, but Nitya still tuts at him. The problem is all of it: the heels and the tight skirt and the uncomfortably revealing blouse, combined with the effort of keeping his head level enough not to dislodge the book; it’s too much for him.

“I can’t do this, Nitya!” he says, spinning around to face her and gesturing with the book. “It’s like trying to chew gum, rub my stomach and pat myself on the head at the same time!”

“Good,” she says, regarding him sceptically. “We’ll try that next.”

“Can’t I start out with just the heels?”

“No. All of it. It’s very important. You need to *feel* like a woman, Antonia.”

“And high heels, a skirt I can barely walk in *and* a book on my head is how to do that?”



Nitya smirks. “No, but they force you to walk differently than you ever have before. This is about breaking old habits, Antonia. And breaking them quickly! You gave me a week and a half; we don’t have time for half measures.”

“But—”

“You were slouching when you came in this morning. You dressed nicely and you even did a little bit of makeup but you had your shoulders rolled forward and your head stooped, like you were trying to hide yourself.”

“I was.”

“Precisely. Back *straight*, Antonia! Chest *out*! Swing your hips and keep your gait steady!” She demonstrates, arcing her back out and strutting past him, one hand on her hip, each heeled foot placed almost exactly in front of the other. “All your life you have been crushed into a ball, Antonia,” she says,

spinning around and sounding even more arch than before. “I will teach you to *fly!*”

“That’s—”

Suddenly Nitya’s haughty demeanour collapses and she leans against the wall, grinning at him, fanning her face with her palm to ward off some imaginary heat. “Isn’t it great?” she says, sounding like herself again. “I’m paraphrasing this speech I found online. I’ve never done this before for anyone, but I’ve *always* wanted to, and you hear *stories*, and there’s this forum— Never mind.” She steps closer and takes his hands in hers. “I’ve got you. You’re already a woman, Antonia, but when I’m done with you, you’re going to be a *hot* woman.”

“Okay. Cool. I can handle that. Did you have to do the weird accent, though?”

“You don’t like French?”

“That was supposed to be *French?*”

Hard to believe he’s paying for this. Harder still to believe that he set it up voluntarily. But he’s trapped himself the same way he trapped himself in the contract: by always taking the next logical-seeming step. If his end goal is to have enough money to retire in his early thirties, then he must do *this* and then *this...* and now, unfortunately, this. He has less than two weeks until he returns to work as Antonia, and in order to be ready, he needs to do more than just have Bridget slap some lippy on him. He needs to know *everything* and he needs to be good at it; the last thing he wants is to look like a fool. And since he discarded his pride the moment he let Mr Lincoln call him Antonia for the first time, he might as well throw himself into it with everything he has.

He’s going to learn properly to perform womanhood to the standards required, or he’s going to break his neck trying. Ten sessions with Nitya at Butterfly Beauty: every day this working week, plus Saturday; every day next week, bar Sunday. Afternoons only, so as not to interfere with Anthony’s voice training — which starts tomorrow — and to allow Nitya to reorganise her diary around it. She sounded excited when they discussed it over the phone, and even more so when they discussed the price.

At least with how hard she’s working him, he doesn’t have the time or energy to think about the kiss.

Damn it.

\* \* \*

The first thing Nitya told him was to stop doing that stupid back-slapping man hug. The second was to inform him that his lipstick was too subtle for his colouring. The third was to dress him up in a restrictive office skirt, blouse and heels, and have him walk around with a book on his head.

It takes an hour, but eventually he manages five laps of the corridor without dropping the book or stumbling. Nitya gives him five minutes and a fluted glass of Cava to help him relax, and then drags him through into one of the private salon rooms to talk — and demonstrate — makeup. She brings in Tulip to help, which puts Anthony at the centre of a double act just when he was getting used to Nitya's unsettlingly focused attention.

"So," Tulip asks, as Nitya prepares her canvas — his face — with something foamy that smells delicious enough to lick, "how long have you been a woman, Antonia?"

"Officially? A few days."

"A few days! You are doing *very* well."

"Thank you."

"Everyone is going to ask you, what is the best part of being a woman. On and on they will go. I have a better question: what is the *worst* part?"

Tulip has an accent Anthony originally couldn't place, except that it sounds vaguely Eastern European, watered down with time. She had him try to guess which country, and laughed every time he got it wrong. Tulip's not her *real* name, she told him; it's a name she chose because no-one in this country can pronounce her other name. And because it sounds nice.

"The worst part?" Anthony considers it, running through in his head his limited womanly experience, which thus far has consisted of a single drunken night with Bridget, a single drunken kiss with Mr Lincoln — he's trying really, really hard not to think about it, but somehow it keeps coming up — and more changes of clothes than he's previously fit into whole weeks. "The underwear," he says. "I hate it. None of it covers my whole arse."

"None of it?" Nitya says. "Really?" She's rubbing something silkily smooth into his face now. "Antonia, you can get underwear that covers the arse."

"For *those* days," Tulip whispers.

"Tulip! She's not going to *get* those days! Not the same, anyway." Leaning up from Anthony's face, she cradles her hands around an imaginary large belly. "Though you might bloat up and get cramps."

"Really?" Anthony asks, fascinated despite himself. "Why?"

"It is complicated," Tulip says.

"People think there's two types of body," Nitya says, "female and male. But they're wrong: there's one body and we all have a variation on it. Put



female hormones in a ‘male’ body—” she air quotes, “—and the body starts *behaving* like a female body. Including, sometimes, cramps.”

“And breasts,” Tulip adds.

“Exactly! Why do you think you have nipples?”

“Oh! I read about that. She can produce milk!”

“She can?” Anthony says.

Nitya lays a hand on his arm. “Only if you want to.”

\* \* \*

The list of instructions is endless: don’t pair *this* kind of top with *this* kind of skirt; carry sanitary towels or tampons in your handbag in case another

woman needs them; it's okay to get irritated when men interrupt you or assume you are stupid, which they will, but you have to be prepared to be thought of as a bitch just for standing up for yourself; cleanse and moisturise every morning and night; sunscreen, sunscreen, sunscreen. By the time he gets back to his flat, all he has the energy to do is to take the daily selfie for Mr Lincoln, text Bridget, and fall into bed.

And he's got to do it all again tomorrow! And Friday and Saturday and *all* next week. They're going to start every session with progressively higher heels and more restrictive garments until he can walk in anything any situation might require of him. They're going to show him how to tie his hair up and down and to the side and into a bun. They're going to cover makeup looks for every occasion. They're going to show him how to minimise his mild brow bossing — Nitya had to explain what that is — with clever use of contour, and cover other advanced makeup techniques. Tulip's even suggested a few targeted Botox injections and some lip filler, to enhance the shape of his face until the hormones have a chance to do their work. And in the middle of all of it, Anthony, gradually fading away, replaced more and more Antonia, his head filling up with makeup tips and fashion advice and swelling from the Botox.

Maybe he's just being dramatic. He's still Anthony now, isn't he? He's just an Anthony who can walk in one-inch heels.

And tomorrow, two-inch heels. And a tighter skirt. And probably a bigger book.

The very thought of it all is exhausting.

\* \* \*

The office has never felt claustrophobic before, and as its daily inhabitant, Michael has never felt trapped by the time he spends there. He is accustomed to thinking of the Lincoln-McCain building as his first home, a place far more bent around his will than his utilitarian apartment, but now it has become akin to a labyrinth, an elegant maze of obligations, meetings and phone calls, all of which contrive to trap him on the upper floors. And it seems he can hardly turn a corner without encountering the saccharine Miss Steele.

Though she is less a Minotaur than a bull in a china shop.

She is, at least, a problem he can solve. Antonia's office — Sandra's office, too, though which of them will claim it when she returns is a problem for another day — is in sudden need of deep cleaning and renovation. New carpeting around the desks; new furnishings; new furniture. Unfortunately, it

requires Miss Steele to move office one floor down, to the admin pool, there to work among the other executive assistants.

She will have no choice but to contact him near-exclusively via email or telephone, and Michael will be free of her fumbling.

“You did tell her that this was *scheduled* renovation, didn’t you?” he asks, his fingers tapping at the screen of his locked phone.

“I did, sir,” Miss Huang confirms. She is assistant to the CFO, and his temporary co-conspirator in this matter. “I did not get the impression she believed it to be anything personal. She is, I understand, looking forward to being on a more populated floor. More opportunities to socialise.” She shudders, just slightly, as if the thought is an anathema to her as it is to Michael.

He nods. Model employee, Miss Huang. As efficient as Sandra, or as Antonia will no doubt become. Why could the agency not have sent someone like her, and not a physical incompetent, more interested in sucking on pencils than writing with them?

Judith Walker enters as Miss Huang leaves; some papers he needs to sign. She prefers not to engage the services of an assistant at all. She enjoys human contact too much.

Baffling.

“Hands off your phone,” she says, when the task is complete.

He clasps them together on the desk instead. How is he to survive the next week and a half, if by Wednesday of the first week he has already developed a nervous tic and an ill-socialised habit of kicking perfectly ordinary — if clumsy — women out of their own offices?

“Apologises, Mrs Walker,” he says. “Rude of me.”

“I just mean, don’t call her. Don’t call her—” she punctuates each phrase by slapping the papers she had him sign against his desk, “—don’t text her, don’t email her, *definitely* don’t FaceTime her. Leave her alone. Let her acclimatise.”

He nods. She doesn’t know about the daily selfie check-ins, nor that he monitors the location of her phone. For his satisfaction and her security, respectively, but Mrs Walker would likely approve of neither.

“Your counsel is appreciated, Mrs Walker,” he says.

\* \* \*



Thursday morning finds Anthony feeling renewed: he made it through his first day of Girl Bootcamp, and that's always the hardest one, right? The greatest culture shock. And it might have been, in its own way, as great a boost to his sense of self as that drunken night with Bridget; if that had been about proving he can still be himself amidst the pressure of becoming Antonia, then yesterday proved he can actually *be* her, among near-strangers, with only the occasional moment of all-consuming dread.

And those were over quick, anyway.

He's doing his cardio. Nitya wants him to develop healthier habits, and that means no more takeaway, eight glasses of water every day, and regular exercise. And since he has the treadmill and the bike and everything right here, he really ought to make use of them.

Each of them has its own screen. Seems extravagant!

Nitya also gave him the go-ahead to wash his hair in warm but not hot water, and that means the shower he has afterwards is actually refreshing. He stays in for *far* too long, still unaccustomed to the sensation of water trickling down his waxed legs.

He has to be careful when drying and styling his hair, but Nitya and Tulip were precise in their instructions, and all he has to do is follow them, step by step. It's like building a new IKEA shelf or LEGO kit, except with more specialised tools and less chance of missing pieces.

Then he makes himself up. Yesterday they focused on eyeliner, and Nitya was pleased with how quickly he picked up a basic look. He applies it now, along with a spot of lipstick — recalling her admonition that the colour he picked yesterday was not suitable — and then goes looking through his boxes of clothes for something to wear. He wants to make a good impression on the voice doctor or speech therapist or whoever they are, and he replays Nitya's advice over and over as he sorts through his options: rule of thirds, keep it simple, and consult a colour wheel on your phone until you get a feel for which colours complement each other.

When finally he leaves the apartment, it's in a breezy skirt and top combination, which is perhaps a little light for the weather but so appropriate for his mood that he didn't want to spoil it with a jacket. He can't resist checking himself out in the windows he passes, and it's not until he climbs into the rideshare car that he realises just how much fun he had dressing and preparing himself this morning.



It's like when he used to help his brother paint his Airfix kits, and Danny used to get mad at him for picking colour schemes for their attractiveness rather than their historical accuracy: a spot of creativity at the start of the day. Would he *prefer* it if the Airfix model he was painting was not *him*? Yes. Does that mean he can't derive pleasure from it? No. Absolutely not.

Besides, the woman he sees in every reflective surface is pretty; if she were real, he'd want to get to know her.

\* \* \*

Dr Matheson's office is perhaps the most normal place Anthony's visited as part of his whirlwind feminisation tour of Manchester and its outskirts. The

rideshare car drops him off in the car park of an NHS hospital, and finding her office requires navigating a warren of poorly signposted corridors and strangely exposed walkways. At the end of it, she sits in a room about the size of Anthony's walk-in closet, with nothing more than a desk, a PC, some chairs and a handful of equipment.

He's very pleased by the smile that lights up her face when he walks in, heels tapping, and sits cross-legged on the chair he offers him. His performance of femininity is coming along well, in all aspects but one.

Which is why he's here.

"So, Miss Bessemer, is it? Why don't you tell me what voice training you've already done."

"Absolutely none," Anthony says, deciding not to mention his experiments with breathy whispers and his single embarrassing dalliance with falsetto.

"Good!" Dr Matheson says, rubbing her hands together. "Many patients follow advice they found on the internet, and I have to spend the first few sessions teaching them to unlearn all the bad habits they picked up. Sometimes they don't even *come* to me until they've lost their voices entirely! They give themselves *nodules*! And you *don't* want me looking down your throat with a camera, I assure you."

Anthony shakes his head vigorously.

For their first session, they cover what Dr Matheson calls 'the basics'. She performs an analysis of the way he currently speaks, has him whisper and mumble and shout. She shows him diagrams of his vocal cords with all the parts labelled with terminology Anthony instantly forgets. And she coaches him into speaking his first words without resonance in his chest.

It's only a half-hour session, but he's going back again tomorrow, and he leaves with a sheet of exercises and a promise to give them his all. The apartment's probably soundproofed — it'd better be, for the money he's paying for it! — so hopefully the old lady who lives on his floor won't have to listen to him reciting the same sequence of extended vowel sounds over and over tonight.

He's not far from Butterfly Beauty, and he's just leaving the car park, thinking he might walk it and *really* test his competence in his sensibly low heels, when a man sitting outside a café over the road whistles at him.

It's not a wolf whistle, and that's the problem: it's a single, sharp rising tone, the sort of whistle designed to get your attention, the sort of whistle someone might use to warn you of, say, an approaching car. So he looks.

"Hey, love!" the man shouts. "Need a hand, there?"

He can't reply. One session isn't enough for him to feel confident in his speaking voice; he definitely can't *yell*. So he does his best to ignore the man.

It doesn't work. Of course it doesn't: he made eye contact with him just moments ago.

"You alright there, love?" the man shouts. "I can give you a lift anywhere you like! Just ask!"

Anthony doubts the sincerity of the man. Maybe it's the tone of voice; maybe it's the lewd gesture he made in time with the word *lift*. He scurries away as fast as he can, ignoring the laughter and trying to ignore the quieter words the man's sharing with his mate. He can hear enough of them to know he doesn't want to hear the rest of them.

There's a bus stop a short way up the road, and a bus approaching. It's even going more or less the right way, so he takes advantage of the serendipity and hops on, settling into a seat near the back and determinedly looking out of the window on the opposite side to the men. An old woman who joined at the same stop sits down in front of him, spends a few moments organising her shopping bags, and then turns to Anthony and says, "Men! Can't live with 'em, can't kill 'em without getting arrested."

He nods and shares a weary smile with her, and leans back in his seat, wishing more than anything else right now that he could *speak*, so he could thank the old woman for her moment of solidarity; so he could yell obscenities at the men outside the café.

*Michael isn't like those men.*

An intrusive thought. But a correct one. Anthony cannot imagine, no matter how hard he tries, Mr Lincoln shouting at a pretty girl in the street.

The thought is followed by a barrage of intense memories, all of which are focused on the kiss, the very thing he's been trying to avoid thinking about for two days now, and as the bus carries him away, he curses Mr Lincoln, curses men who catcall him, curses men in general.

\* \* \*

On Friday morning, Anthony doesn't muck around with public transport at all, and definitely doesn't walk anywhere. He decides to take advantage of his swollen bank account — further advantage; Nitya's girl classes are expensive — and books a car service to take him to speech therapy, to wait for him outside, and drop him at Butterfly Beauty. It's irresponsible and wasteful, sure, but

Anthony had felt like he could hear the man still catcalling him as he tried to get to sleep, and he doesn't need any more knocks to his confidence.

Mr Lincoln was appalled by it all. They had a quick FaceTime chat last night, and while Anthony tried to remain breezy and unconcerned, Mr Lincoln had spotted instantly that he was holding something back. And Mr Lincoln asked about it with surprisingly gentleness, which turned out to be the perfect trigger for Anthony's waterworks. He cried like a baby into his iPhone, and had to stop Mr Lincoln both from coming over to comfort him — Anthony just wanted to take a bath and go to bed — and from seeking out the man who yelled at him and comprehensively ruining his life.

It was only after he ended the call, had a bath, and climbed into bed still glowing in his core from the hot water and the warm bathrobe he left out for himself on the heated towel rail, that he realised he had the perfect comeback: *How would you ruin his life, Mr Lincoln? Turn him into a girl, perhaps?*

As soon as he thought of it, though, he felt ashamed of himself: he'd been given ample opportunity to back out of this new life. Nothing was happening that Anthony hadn't agreed to, and besides, Michael... He looked so concerned. So sweet.

*And that kiss...*

No. He's not thinking about it.

Anthony didn't do the voice exercises he was supposed to, but Dr Matheson either doesn't notice or chooses not to, going through with him the same process as before but with slight modifications — just like Anthony's sessions at Butterfly, he realises. Who knew becoming a woman would be so iterative? All the same, by the end of this second, longer session, he feels like he's actually making progress, and when the doctor lets him listen to a recording of his voice for the first time, he lets it bolster him. Because he doesn't sound like a woman, not yet — you'd have to be some kind of prodigy to get there in two days, or have prior singing training, according to the doctor — but he *does* sound different. He never liked his voice before, thought he mumbled too much, spoke down into his chest, but Dr Matheson's teaching him to project his voice as well as alter its pitch and timbre, and it feels *good*.

At Butterfly, the girls show him how to defeat his brow bossing, as promised — apparently he has a slight ridge under his brow, like most men; “Like most people assigned male at birth,” Nitya corrects him — and they talk him through the process of curling and colouring and otherwise beautifying his eyelashes. No falsies, though, not yet.

At the end of the session, Nitya hands him something new to try: a bag of mastectomy bras. They'll give him a more natural bustline, supposedly, and ought to tide him over until he grows his own.

"Don't worry, though," she tells him. "You *will* grow your own. And then you'll discover how *fun* they are."

As they've talked, he's managed to give her the impression that there's a man in his life — unfortunately, it's the correct impression! — and so when she says this, she waggles her eyebrows and nudges him, clearly imagining things Anthony would rather consign to the uncertain and unloved future.

He's pleased that he manages to suppress his shudder.

\* \* \*

"No, no, no!" Tulip says, knocking the lip liner out of his hand and attacking him with the wet tissue *yet again*. "You are drawing *inside* the lines! Your face is not a children's colouring book, Antonia! It is a canvas!"

"Yes," Anthony says, "but *why* am I drawing outside the lines?"

"To make your lips appear more plump," Nitya says, handing him another lip liner, this time in a bolder colour. "Do it right, and your lips will *beg* to be kissed."

"I'm pretty sure they won't," he mutters. "They never have before."

"Tulip, I think we found her problem."

Tulip remarks, "She has just one?" and hops up off the stool. "I have a client. *You* fix her."

Anthony waits until she's gone to say, "I think I annoyed her."

"No," Nitya says, giggling, "she's just being dramatic because it's fun."

"Okay. Why?"

Nitya waggles a finger in front of his face. "Uh-uh," she says. "No spoilers. That's in *next week's* lesson."

"You're going to teach me to be dramatic?"

"We're going to teach you how to control a room, Antonia. You already know how to walk. You're getting good with your hair. And your outfit this morning was actually quite competent and attractive! And that all suggests to me that by the end of next week, you will find being a pretty woman second nature."

"I—"

“*But,*” she interrupts, “*pretty* is not *sexy*. A pretty girl who doesn’t know how to handle men, how to handle crowds, how to handle the office; do you know what she is? She’s *prey*, Antonia.”

He doesn’t try to control his shudder this time, and she puts a hand on his shoulder and gives him a squeeze.

“Not to worry,” she continues. “I *will* teach you. Now: liner. Again.” He makes a face, and she pokes him. “Or we could do the fillers and Botox we talked about?”

“I’ll get the liner right,” he says, leaning forward and puckering. “I’m still thinking about the Botox and stuff.”

“Just remember, none of it’s permanent. Think of it as a little treat for your face every so often.”

“A treat that means you can’t touch your face for three days,” Tulip says, entering from the far side. “I was just in the locker room. Your bag is buzzing.” He leans back in the chair just in time for her to drop his handbag in his lap, spin on her heel and leave the room again.

He pulls out his phone: Bridget.

He answers, standing up and slinging the bag over his shoulder without even noticing — so many things have become automatic in such a short time — and Bridget starts speaking before he can even say anything.

“S-O-S, Ant! S-O-bloody-S!”

He drops the lip liner. He’d forgotten he was even holding it. “What do you mean, Bridge?”

“Danny’s been calling you.”

Oh shit. He hasn’t been checking his old phone, and that’s the only number anyone in his family has. Only Bridget has the number for the iPhone! And she’s not supposed to use it except for emergencies!

Which this kind of is.

Oh *shit*.

“How long has he been calling for?” Anthony asks, pre-wincing, already aware that, whatever the answer, it’s going to be bad.

“Since Friday.” Oh. That’s not so bad, actually. It’s only Saturday; he can play that off as— “But he’s been *texting* all week,” Bridget continues. “Ant, he’s *coming over*. Coming over *here*.”

“But I don’t live there any more!”

“Oh, don’t you?” Bridget says, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “I’m sorry. I forgot.” Danny probably woke her from a nice, relaxing hangover. No wonder she’s crabby. “Look, if he gets here and you’re *not* here, he’s going to start *investigating*, and I don’t have anything useful to tell him! He’s going to look



in your room and there's nothing *left* in there except some awful *poster* the movers inexplicably didn't *take!* But if you're *here...*"

"I got it. I got it. I'll be there."

"Looking the way you did the other night?"

"I'll figure it out."

"Ant, you even *sound* different!"

"I'll figure it out!"

Bridget hangs up on him without so much as a goodbye, presumably either so she can rearrange the flat so it looks more like he still lives there, or to replace the icepack over her eyes with maximum alacrity. Anthony throws his phone back in his bag and spins around. Nitya's watching him, one arm covering her mouth, looking very much like she's gotten the gist of what's going on and is trying not to be alarmed about it.

"Nitya," he says, "help."

She looks at him for a horribly long second, and then she nods, reaches for his hand, and starts to drag him towards one of the other rooms.

\* \* \*

In order for him to wear Nitya's clothes home — or to Bridget's home, anyway — she had to borrow his. He's just glad Nitya likes to jog into work every morning, that she wears passably unisex clothes to do so, and that, judging by the fragrant and only slightly musty smell, she doesn't sweat a lot. So Anthony caught a taxi back to Bridget's in her dark grey exercise gear, white trainers and plain cap, and Nitya filled her locker with his capris, his two-inch-heel sandals, his white top and his beige trench.

She's not wearing his jewellery home, though, as much as she admired it; she shut it in the office safe for him to pick up on Monday.

He calls Bridget as the taxi pulls up, and he thanks the driver before realising he needs to switch back to his old voice for this. So as soon as he closes the door he starts to cough, to thump his chest, and to try to remember everything Dr Matheson said about posture and voice positioning, so he can do the opposite of all of it. It's enough that when Bridget opens the communal door and frantically waves at him to *get the fuck in, idiot*, he sounds mostly like he used to.



“Bloody hell, Ant,” she says as soon as the front door closes behind them, “how do you already have so much difficulty looking like a man?”

He doesn’t have time to decide how he feels about that, so he just ignores the strange sensations bubbling in his belly and says, “I’m paying some very nice girls a very large amount of money to make me look like a woman, Bridge. They’re good at it.”

“Yeah, well.” She squints at him. “Keep the hat on. No, wait; take it off.” Obediently he pulls off his cap, and Bridget rummages in her pocket, finding a plain hair tie, which she uses to draw his hair into a low ponytail. “Okay. On again.” She steps back to look at her work. “You’ll do. I told Danny you had a haircut. It’ll be fine.”

“I got it cut *longer*? That doesn’t make any sense.”

She pushes him into the couch and he drops onto it, landing next to a blanket and a hot water bottle.

“He’s a man, Ant,” Bridget says. “Lesson one of being a woman: men are stupid. And not very observant. And good at ignoring things that bother them.” Quickly, she covers him with the blanket and arranges the hot water bottle so that the cap and enough of the body is sticking out from underneath for it to be recognisable as a hot water bottle. At least it’s only warm.

“I take it I’m supposed to be sick?”

“Sick,” she confirms, “and cutting it a little fine. He’ll be here any minute, so...” She walks two laps around the couch, inspecting him from every angle. “You’ll do. *I* think you look like a girl wearing her brother’s clothes, but we don’t exactly have time to give you an eyeliner moustache, so you’ll *have* to do. Oh! Wait! I have an idea!”

She rushes out of the room and returns moments later with a box of facemasks left over from the last COVID surge. She throws one at him and puts the box on the table by the front door, next to the key bowl, to make it look like they’ve both been using them non-stop.

“If you’re ill,” she says, “then we’re taking no precautions. We’re masking up. Maybe you’re incredibly infectious. Maybe I’m a Florence Nightingale type, giving up all my free time to bring you cups of soup despite the risk to myself. And maybe Danny won’t see your mysteriously smooth face. Put it on!”

He does so, and she completes her preparations. She switches on the TV and cues up *The Office* on Netflix. She starts the kettle boiling and she arranges what look to be two days of unwashed plates on the coffee table. She’s just wrapping a mask around her face when the intercom buzzes. She performs the customary thump to the side of the device to get it to work, then waits by the door for Anthony’s brother.

\* \* \*

“Jesus. That could have gone a *lot* worse.”

“I told you: men are stupid.”

“Men are persistent, is what they are, Bridge! What was with the third degree?”

Bridget flops down onto the couch next to him and rips the mask off her face, flinging it across the room and entirely missing the bin.

“He was just worried, Ant. Why’d you have to go and tell him it *wasn’t* COVID? That’s such an easy out!”

“Because they’ve been a bit weird about COVID. Remember? Him and Veronica kept sending us all that anti-vax stuff? Bill Gates trying to put chips in our heads? I had to pretend I didn’t get the booster or he would never have shut up about it.”

“Oh. Yeah. God. I forgot. I think the world went so crazy for a while, I forgot your brother and sister-in-law, specifically, also went crazy. And take this off!” She reaches over and whips off his hat — Nitya’s hat — before he can stop her, though he *is* fast enough to grab it before she can make another unsuccessful attempt at getting something in the bin.

“That’s not mine!”

“Right. Sorry.”

“Actually,” he says, “speaking of, I need to take a picture. For, uh, for Mr Lincoln.”

“Ooh, ‘Mr Lincoln’. You two have a steamy relationship, don’t you?”

“It’s contractual, Bridge.”

“Yeah, yeah. New car, remember?”

“I remember. Can I borrow some clothes? I’m not supposed to wear men’s clothes, and if I take a picture then he’ll see what I’m wearing, and these... I mean, they’re not *technically* men’s clothes, but—”

“Men are stupid,” Bridget repeats.

“Right.”

“Yeah, you can borrow something. I’ll go dig.”

“Hey, Bridge,” he asks, as she jumps up, “when I was a man, was *I* stupid?”

“Not really. Not most of the time. Must be why I like you.”

\* \* \*

She insists on a sundress. Bought it five years ago, she says, and never wore it, and now it’ll probably never fit her again, so it does her good to see it worn, and in fact, Anthony should *keep* it, it should be a *gift*, and incidentally he mustn’t forget about that car he’s going to buy her when this is all over with.

It’s only probably a coincidence that it is low-cut enough that he has to stuff the bra he borrows. Mr Lincoln seems appreciative, at least. And it’s strangely satisfying to put on something unambiguously feminine again, and to slip back into the voice he’s been practising. Maybe it’s because, after the catcaller made him afraid to walk down the street, he’s started to associate feminine dress and speech with safety. And maybe *that’s* why he chose to call



Mr Lincoln than just send a selfie: for the validation of being seen and desired for himself — or at least for the woman he is trying to be — rather than as the simple object of a stranger’s momentary fantasy.

He’s robbed of the opportunity to fret too much about it, though, because no sooner has he hung up on Mr Lincoln than Bridget’s presented him with a full glass of white wine and an unlocked phone opened to a list of takeaway menus.

“I’m supposed to be eating healthily,” he says, but even to him, he sounds unconvincing. So he lets Bridget order whatever she wants — which turns out to be curry — and sips at his wine. It’s not such a bad idea to spend another evening with Bridget; after all his hard work, he’s *earned* a break, right?



“I just noticed,” he says as Bridget finishes up, “you put the *Star Trek* plates up again.”

“Yeah,” she says. “Like I said, they just make the place look *right*.”

\* \* \*

Interesting the details a wall-sized projector can pick up when one routes the video from a FaceTime call through it. Especially when there is the opportunity to record the call and play it back. And it means Michael’s finally getting some use out of the home cinema that came with the apartment.

She looks beautiful, of course, though her makeup is rougher than it has been the last few days, and at this size and resolution, the rough stitching on her cheap dress is obvious. Her hair is less elaborate, too: she’s been



experimenting with buns, twists, knots, and other styles Michael does not know the names for, but today it is simply brushed out and hangs around her face. It's the wall behind her, though, that suggests to Michael he ought to check the location logs from her iPhone: the apartment she keeps in the city centre has been competently built and maintained; wherever she called from tonight, however, has roughly finished paint, and signs of damp and warping.

Well. She visited her former flatmate. Interesting.

It is stipulated in the contract that, should she wish to continue associating with her family and her former friends, she must present herself to them as a trans woman who has had a recent revelation regarding her gender and who is seeking fast-track treatment via the company's private healthcare plan. That is presumably what Antonia has done in this instance, though Michael must admit, she has done so sooner than he expected. Given Anthony's initial resistance to the proposal, he thought it would be weeks if not months — or longer! — before Antonia revealed herself.

He considers switching on the microphone on Antonia's iPhone to confirm his supposition, but Mrs Walker's words once again stay his hand. She needs to acclimatise, to become used to her new gender, to realise that it is who she ought always to have been. And she will accomplish this best *without* Michael's interference, no matter how tempting it may be.

Sighing, he files the recorded conversation away in the folder with all the others and strides out of his home cinema, to perform his evening exercises, to warm up and eat his frozen meal for one, and to go to bed alone.

He'll see Antonia in his dreams, anyway.

\* \* \*

*Images flit by him: men in the street, staring at any exposed part of his body; men on the bus, leaning too close and brushing against him; the catcaller outside the café, imposing himself upon him; his brother, prying, interfering, always ready with a platitude or a hand-me-down suit but never with the help Anthony needs and has always needed.*

*And then Michael, in the doorway to the apartment, vulnerable and sweet, waiting obediently and patiently to be kissed. Michael in his office, in his conference room, in the corridors at Lincoln-McCain. Never pushing, always waiting.*

*Michael, Michael, Michael.*



Anthony's making up for lost time. He woke on the sofa at Bridget's, mouth full of the taste of alcohol and head full of Michael— of *Mr Lincoln*. From there it was an embarrassed taxi journey back to the city centre, to his *real* apartment, to the nerve centre of his new life, and the whole time he felt as if the driver were watching him, a frown creasing his forehead, trying to work out whether his passenger was a man or a woman.

And he's *fed up with that shit!*

Every fucking man thinks they have the right to judge him, to categorise him and to reduce him, and he is sick of it. He's sick of every look, every touch, all of it! And the worst of it is that when he called Bridget — to tell her he got back to his apartment okay and to remind her to take painkillers and drink water — and complained to her about it, what did she have to say?

Welcome to womanhood, Antonia.

He wanted to throw the phone when she said it. Because yes, she understands what it is like to be catcalled and to be judged, to have strange men on the bus stand next to her and press their hands 'accidentally' against her thigh, but she *cannot* know the fear that comes from the possibility of discovery, the terror that the remains of stubble on his face might be seen, that the sound of his voice might be wrong, that the hand on his thigh might slip and find something he would prefer to keep hidden.

So what can he do about it?

He can be a fucking girl is what he can do. He hasn't been working hard enough at it. He has a *week* before he has to be Antonia full-time, out in the world, and if he's going to be ready to face the catcallers and the gropers and the judgers and the *men* of the world, he needs to embrace the changes, not just suffer through them.

A new mantra, then. Forget the ten million pounds; that's so far in the future he may as well not even consider it for the moment. For now, his mantra will be: *Fuck you, I'm a girl.*

For Sunday, what does that mean? It means finally hanging up all his clothes and properly stocking his vanity. It means taping Dr Matheson's voice exercise sheets over the top of the stupid screen on the treadmill and singing and humming and aahing and umming as he walks off what remains of his hangover. It means showering off the sweat and the grime and sitting down in front of his vanity and practising eyes, eyebrows, lips, hair, all of it, over and over, everything. And it means that when it is time for lunch, he throws on a

pair of the tallest heels he has and prepares a light salad and a spot of grilled chicken, tapping elegantly around the kitchen without so much as wobbling.

He has an appointment with Dr Matheson on Monday morning and his usual session with Nitya on Monday afternoon, and he's going to *wow* them with how far he's come.

\* \* \*

On Monday, Anthony performs his weekly estradiol injection. He also sets up a reminder on his iPhone: every Monday at 6am for the next ten years. Dr Matheson is so impressed with his progress she gives him a folder of new exercises, ten minutes to play with the voice pitch analysing machine, and a sticky gold star. Nitya compliments him on his makeup and asks if he's ready to take it to the next level this week, and Anthony stuns her by settling into the chair and asking about those procedures she mentioned. She runs off, delighted, to fetch Tulip and to make preparations.

For the next few days, he and Nitya both have to be very careful not to press too hard on his jaw, while the Botox goes to work on his masseter muscle. It takes less time for him to get used to the filler in his lips. Unfortunately, Tulip informs him with great satisfaction, this does not free him from the obligation to learn lip liner.

But it's fine. It's all building up to his first day back at work, the thing — the *other* thing — he's been thinking about ever since he woke up on Sunday morning. And finally, after much effort, it's time.

\* \* \*

His vanity's become the centre of the action. It's the first place he sits when he's dry from the shower and it's the last place he sits when it's time to go to bed, and through it he's witnessed a transformation that astonishes him. With every day that's passed, he's grown more confident in his skills and more satisfied in his ability to apply them, but it's not just that.

On his first day as Antonia, it was the hair that changed everything, that forced him to look at himself in the mirror — this mirror — and realise what was possible. It was enough of a wrenching change from his former appearance that he *had* to come to terms with it, that he couldn't pretend it wasn't happening, or was only happening gradually. Originally, he'd conceived

of his transition as something to which he could slowly acclimatise, like a frog in a pot of boiling water, but the hair was the first thing that made him realise that it was nothing like that. It was a series of wrenching changes, each of which forced Anthony further under the surface and brought Antonia out.

And this last week, with the Botox slowly slimming his jaw and the filler plumping his lips, the face looking back at him from that same mirror has become one that is emphatically *not* Anthony's. The face he prepares with moisturiser, sunscreen and primer, the face he paints foundation and contour onto, it's Antonia's, and it becomes more so with every stroke of the brush. It's got to the point that when he stands from his stool and starts browsing through the contents of his walk-in wardrobe, he doesn't even feel like Anthony any more.

He's not sure that he feels like Antonia, either. Maybe that's coming, maybe it's not; sometimes she feels so close he can almost hear her musings, interpret her preferences without having even to think. But she's not in charge yet. Instead, he feels like a passenger, like an alien from some movie, come to Earth to infiltrate human society, possessing the first person it finds on the street and using her body to blend in. He feels like an expert impostor, a creature of guile, whose voice and face and mannerisms and personality have been meticulously crafted to serve a single purpose.

The shocking thing is, he doesn't hate the sensation at all. It's sort of fun.

He visited Bridget last night, partly because he wanted to see her again but mostly to show off, and the look on her face when he strutted up the steps in his three-inch heels and his sharp skirt and blouse was *everything*. It was certainly enough to give him the confidence he needs.

He dresses similarly today: a light grey skirt suit, cut to reveal as much as he dares. His makeup is as daring as he can make it, a shock of bold lipstick and eyeshadow against his pale skin, because that's what Nitya kept insisting: he has such dark hair, and so much of it, that if he doesn't make up his face to match, "People will keep missing it, Antonia. They will think you have no face at all."

Anthony can't help posing in every mirror he passes on the way out of the apartment. Antonia is a beautiful creation, and though she is completely and absolutely fake, he is the only person who knows it.

If only his nipples didn't itch in his mastectomy bra.

\* \* \*

*Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap—*

“Oh! Excuse me, miss.”

Anthony’s walk to work is short enough that it would be a waste to call a car, even with his newfound wealth, but long enough that he still has to negotiate his way through several waves of morning crowds, as other people rush to their own offices, students rush to the nearby universities, and kids dawdle on their way to school. And the older gentleman who almost bumps into her as she rounds a corner is no different from anyone else she’s encountered this morning: thoroughly ordinary.

Perfectly polite, though.

“Oh, it’s no problem,” he says, taking full advantage of hours upon hours of voice practice. “I wasn’t looking where I was going, to be honest.”

“Nonsense,” the man says, stepping aside with a slight, amusing flourish. “Have a nice day, miss.”

“Thank you,” he replies, smiling broadly, and taking a moment to be amused by the flush of red to the man’s cheeks. He’s well aware of the effect dark red lips can have on a man, especially when they surround a flirty smile; there have been times this week when he’s forgotten himself and responded to the woman he sees in the mirror as if she is someone else. Which she sort of is.

Leaving the man behind, Anthony continues tapping his way down the street, catching the occasional glimpse of himself in shop windows and being immensely satisfied by what he sees.

This morning he chose a dark grey skirt suit, hemmed just above the knee, and paired it with a light grey blouse. He kept his jewellery subtle, limiting it to a silver necklace and matching bracelet, but in deference to the need for a pop of colour — and to the temperature — he picked out a trench coat in a deep, lustrous green. He kind of loves it, and wonders if he can find a way to keep wearing it when eventually he transitions back.

Largely to show off, he chose a pair of knee boots with an immodest but not ridiculous heel. They ought to be enough to keep his calves warm *and* bring him eye-to-eye with Mr Lincoln.

Nitya recommended a shapewear brand to keep his belly bulge under control and to assist with his tuck, and though he’s wearing a binding bodysuit under his clothes, he’s not so sure he needs it. He’s already noticed a small but significant reduction in his waistline, and two pairs of knickers have proven adequate to take care of his penis under even the most restrictive of his skirts. He’s tested it in the mirrors at home, multiple times and from every possible angle. Still, the compression garment *does* improve his figure, narrowing his

waist and thus causing his small — and fake, provided entirely by a padded mastectomy bra — bust to appear a little more expansive.

The final stretch of street before the Lincoln-McCain building takes him past one of Manchester's perpetual building sites, one of the places that became briefly eerie during the pandemic and then seemed to redouble in activity after, making up for lost time, lost money, and lost opportunities for men in hard hats to yell at women. And as he passes by the omnipresent scaffolding, a man inevitably calls out to her, grabbing his crotch and leering.

“Alright, darling! You want some of this?”

Anthony takes a deep breath and shouts back, “In your fucking dreams!” It comes out perfectly, a clear-voiced and perfectly pitched repudiation of the catcalling piece of shit, and he takes extreme pleasure in turning his back on the man and crossing the street, swaying his rear from side to side as he does so, showing the man exactly what he cannot and never will have.

He didn't know it was possible to feel so confident.

Another employee rushes up the steps to Lincoln-McCain to open the door for him, and he offers them another of his precisely rehearsed smiles, before signing in at the front desk — with his new name, naturally — and settling into one of the grey, utilitarian chairs in the foyer, legs crossed at the ankle, handbag delicately held in his lap.

He could have gone straight up, but Mr Lincoln wants him to present himself as a new employee. Ostensibly it's so that Antonia can be distanced from Anthony. When Anthony pointed out to Mr Lincoln that he and Antonia share a surname, an employment history and all their internal organs, he was told it ought not to be a problem. Anthony Bessemer didn't exactly make a splash; he barely worked there long enough to pull a single pay packet through the agency.

Anthony suspects another motivation for the post facto veil of secrecy: it's part of Mr Lincoln's fantasy. He wants Antonia to arrive as a new hire and be immediately drawn to him; he wants to 'discover' things about her that others will never find out. He wants her all to himself, like a jealous, protective man, and that means shielding her from, among other things, the fading spectre of Anthony Bessemer.

Two weeks ago, Anthony might have found that quite disturbing. Now, he's not so sure. As for Antonia, the nascent personality he's been cultivating as he paints her face, dresses her body and talks in her voice?

He's pretty sure she's excited at the thought of it.

An elevator at the far end of the lobby pings, and Anthony stands up, ready to greet his temporary replacement, and when a rather frumpy girl steps

out, all flat shoes and woollen skirt and ugly, patterned blouse, his confidence is bolstered further. He's better at this than her *already*.

They meet in the centre of the lobby.

"Antonia Bessemer," Anthony says, in a gilded alto.

The girl nods, looks up at him, and says, "Mr Lincoln will see you now."



# Chapter Seven

Should he stand?

Should he sit?

Should he perhaps wait for her in the meeting room, and then walk into the main room of his office at the same time as she enters from the corridor?

No.

He will sit. And he will wait for her. And when she arrives, he will conduct himself with dignity.

Michael does not have to wait long. At precisely eight fifty-eight, the intercom fitted to his desk — which he has long since required Miss Steele to make use of, lest she injure herself on his office floor and require messy medical attention — lights up, and Miss Steele's voice, so much more pleasant when he cannot see her, says, "Antonia Bessemer to see you, Mr Lincoln."

He wore his best suit today. Every suit he owns is borderline identical, tailored to flatter his lines, but this is his most comfortable, the one which most perfectly sits upon his shoulders. The one in which he is most himself.

And today, he needs to be himself, because today is important.

"Send her in, Miss Steele," he says into the intercom. And then he has to say it again, because in his anticipation and excitement, he forgot to press the little button.

The doors to his office open quietly but not silently, and the soft susurrations of the brush strip against the flooring is all Michael can hear. All, that is, save his heart, thumping in his skull.

In the doorway stands Antonia, dressed elegantly in a dark grey pinstripe pencil skirt, black boots and light grey blouse, her hands clasped in front of her, the ghost of a smile on her face. Behind her, comically short and almost hunched compared to Antonia's straight, proud back, is Miss Steele, who as ever has apparently chosen to dress to match the furniture of a much shabbier office.

He dismisses Miss Steele with a nod, and directs the entirety of his attention to the radiant creature standing before him.

Antonia *glides* into his office atop her spike-heeled boots. She does not fall, she does not try to make herself small, and she does not look away. In this



she is the antithesis not only of Miss Steele but of Anthony himself, and Michael's heart — which is still, unfortunately, pulsing so hard and so fast he worries Antonia might hear it — begins to warm.

He was right.

Such grace, such elegance, such *flesh* was wasted on Anthony. He was Antonia's captor, her gatekeeper, the thing that kept her from being born into the world, and one look at her face as she walks quickly and confidently towards him confirms to him that she knows this, that she is well aware of the dignity and privilege of her new station in life.

Michael has taken a man whose life was about to lock into a path of tedium, drudgery and lost potential, and birthed something truly beautiful.

He stands as Antonia approaches, and she takes his hand. She doesn't shake it, like an ambitious young executive might, all enthusiasm and



misplaced vim; she holds it in one hand, covers it with the other, and gently bobs on her knees, minutely lowering herself before him for a moment. She's telling him that she is here to help him, that she is here to support him, that she is here to supply for him whatever he requires.

"Antonia Bessemer," she says, in the voice he's grown accustomed to on their calls but which is so much more velvet in person. He wants to ask her to speak her mind on any subject that interests her. He wants to ask her to read the business directory or the dictionary or something, anything so he can listen to her voice. "I am excited to be working closely with a man of your reputation."

Michael, caught in the moment, says, "You've heard of me, have you?"

And Antonia looks down for a second, smiles, and then looks up at him through her eyelashes. "You could say I've done my homework," she says.

Michael swallows. "I am delighted to welcome you to the team," he says, his throat dry.

"Thank you, Mr Lincoln," Antonia says.

She's still holding his hand. He doesn't want her to let go. He doesn't want her to *ever* let go. The warmth of her, the sheer vitality... The fact that he is *touching* her.

He catches himself, for just a second, wondering how she binds back her penis in her form-fitting skirt, and then dismisses the thought of it as unworthy of them both.

Or he tries to, at any rate.

What would it be like to reach for her, to ask her permission, to receive it, and to slowly raise her skirt, roll it up her thighs and over her hips, and—?

"I understand my office is down the hall?" Antonia says.

He blinks. Is he sweating? He's sweating. He will need to change his shirt.

"It is," he says.

"I can show you," he says.

"It's just down the hall," he says.

"It's close," he says.

Antonia smiles. Still holding his hand, she says, "I'm sure I can find it myself. Your offer is *very* generous, Mr Lincoln, but I'm sure you're a busy man."

And she takes herself from him. Relaxes her grip on his hand. He would grab her, hold her, keep her in his presence if he were anyone but Michael Lincoln, if he were the man he sometimes wishes he was, the man who could simply reach out and take what he needs, what he wants. But he lets her go, because he would despise that man, because as much as Antonia's

womanhood, her femininity — and her wardrobe, her apartment — are gifts from him, Antonia's gift to *him* is her presence, her smile, and scent of flowers and vanilla.

As she steps back, her fingers linger on his hand, stroking him from knuckle to nail, and then she's gone, walking quickly from his office, leaving him with nothing but the sound of her heels and a laugh so soft he might as well have imagined it.

\* \* \*

What a rush. What a *rush!* Michael Lincoln, the richest and most influential man in the city — perhaps in this whole part of the country — in the palm of Anthony's hand! And that's quite literal: he could feel the power he had in just that near-insignificant skin contact. He'd known, somehow, that if he'd let Michael go but not actually moved his hand, if he'd just held his palm next to his, that Michael would have been stuck there, unmoving, hypnotised by Anthony's presence, by his touch.

Ahem. Not Michael, he reminds himself. *Mr Lincoln*. Anthony set boundaries inside his head for a reason; he might be letting Antonia out to have her fun, but he needs to stay in control. He can't lose himself to this.

No matter how tempting it is.

God, and it's so tempting. He wants to turn around and walk right back in there, pretend to have forgotten something, to have dropped something, but he mustn't, and not just because it would spoil the game.

The frumpy girl is waiting for him.

She takes him down the corridor to his office, and he's surprised to find that it's been redecorated somewhat. There's more furniture scattered around, more places to sit, more places to work. Some of that is perhaps because Michael— because *Mr Lincoln* will be keeping Anthony in post when Sandra returns, and they'll both need somewhere to work, but it's not hard to imagine another motive.

Frumpy girl desultorily shows him around: his desk, his chair, his filing cabinets, etc. She points out to him a post-it with his new login credentials on it, and she stumbles on her way out, and that's Anthony's prompt to start work on the thing he was overtly hired to do.

His boss has a company to run, and Anthony's also here to help him do it.

So he logs in, changes his password, fends off the spam of welcome emails and setup messages, and gets to work, trying as he does so to calm the butterflies in his belly.

\* \* \*

Michael is sitting very, very still. He feels as if he is filled with liquid, and that at the slightest nudge he might spill, might overflow, might topple over and disgorge himself. It is a profoundly unsettling feeling.

He has lost control.

At the same time, it's rather funny. Not in a manner his mother would appreciate, certainly, but he must acknowledge that despite his achievements, despite his status, despite his wealth, it is only *now*, with the acquisition of a single employee, that he seems within reach of acquiring something he desires, something for which he would mortgage his future, his reputation, his very name. Further, said new employee has reduced him to a stuttering, uncertain mess. It is all rather ludicrous.

More than that: it is hilarious! Michael allows himself a single, careful laugh.

His mother did always insist that he would find the right woman one day. He will have to keep it from her that he *made* her.

Though it appears very much that she is making herself. Just weeks lie between Anthony and Antonia's respective first visits to Michael's office, and yet they are profoundly different people. And even if Michael can recognise in Antonia the minute and quickly hidden signs of someone who sometimes struggles to maintain her nerve, the fact remains that she is doing so. She is *not* faltering; she is not failing. He has known businessmen of twice her age and a hundred times her wealth fail to capture a room the way she has.

Granted, this is only her first day, but a woman who can step out into the world *as a woman*, despite the unfortunate accident of birth that rendered her male, requires more confidence and self-belief to do so than anyone else with whom Michael has ever shared an office.

To think, this wondrous, confident beauty could have been born from Anthony Bessemer! The man himself likely never even imagined himself capable of such feats; Antonia could therefore abandon all this tomorrow and be forever altered for the better.

Michael would prefer she did not, of course.

What is fascinating is that her self-confidence appears rather to sap *his*. In her presence, he feels inadequate, confused and lost, and the novelty of such sensations does not mean that he wishes to continue indulging in them. He cannot! He will next encounter Antonia at a meeting arranged for this afternoon, a meeting which Michael purposefully scheduled for today, for as soon as he experienced his first kiss, he felt an irrepressible desire to show Antonia off to his peers.

All eyes will be on both of them.

What is required of him, then, is to ensure that he does not fail himself. If he is as malleable in her presence as he was just now, then Antonia will already have unmade him, quite by accident, just hours into her first day.

She has stepped up. She has proved herself. It is time for him to do the same.

Michael hits the button that closes the blackout blinds, locks his office door, and silences his desk phone. On his PC, he calls up a collage of images of Antonia, taken from security footage, video calls, and the selfies she sent him. He opens a desk drawer and withdraws several tissues, which he tucks into his shirt as if he is about to eat a particularly messy meal.

It's all a little tricky: his hands are shaking.

Preparations made, Michael leans back in his chair, unzips his trousers, and renews his confidence.



\* \* \*

It's a surprise when one of the other executive assistants enters Anthony's office, and it takes him a moment to remember once again that he's not *just* here as the plaything of the richest man in Manchester, that he also has meetings to coordinate, diaries to merge, that sort of thing. Weird to be falling so suddenly back into the same mundane bullshit that made up his entire working life barely a month ago, only now to be doing it in a skirt that restricts his movements.

Miss Huang, assistant to the CFO, does the thing people do when they're coming into your office anyway but they want to be polite about it: she opens the door and knocks at the same time, entering with a smile that gently

apologises but a laptop and a thick paper folder that both promise *work*. Anthony met her before, and found her perfectly pleasant, if a little standoffish.

Today, though, she seems different.

“Hi!” she says, sweeping over to Anthony’s desk and depositing her laptop and papers on the end. “Sorry to just *barge* in on you like this—” she accompanies the word ‘barge’ with a hearty elbow-jab to mid-air, “—but our respective bosses are going to be butting heads this afternoon and I thought we should break the ice first.” She juts out a hand. “Sue Huang. You can call me Susie, though; everyone does. Everyone who earns under a hundred grand a year does, anyway!”

Her laugh is sweet and abrupt, and makes Anthony briefly homesick for Bridget. He wonders what Susie’s like when she’s drunk, because it is surprisingly easy to imagine her downing fruity drinks alongside Bridget and making obscene gestures at anyone unwary enough to wander close.

She’s made up to look ‘corporate pretty’, i.e. less ostentatiously than Anthony, but she has better raw material than he does, so she can afford to play it light. The most she’s really doing is plumping her somewhat narrow lips. Her boss probably thinks she doesn’t wear makeup at all.

“Antonia,” Anthony says, taking her hand and smiling. “Hi, Susie.”

“Antonia Bessemer, right? That’s so funny!”

Anthony fights the sinking feeling in his stomach: it’s funny because there was a guy with almost that name here two weeks ago, right?

“Oh?” he says as innocently as he can.

“Yes!” Susie yelps, as if he ought already to understand the joke. “Oh, right. You probably didn’t get properly introduced to the girl you’re replacing. We had a temp — still do, actually, for the rest of the working day, I imagine — and her surname was Steele! And you have her job now!”

Anthony’s eyebrows collide in his confusion. “Um, I’m not sure I—”

“Steele!” she says excitedly. “Bessemer! Steele? Bessemer? Ah. Huh. I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

“Done what?”

She taps herself on the chest. “I did history at uni, and now my brain’s full of useless facts. Sometimes they just—” she fights back a burst of laughter, “—sort of fall out of me! Look up the history of your surname someday.”

“I will,” Anthony says, smiling.

Does she not recognise him? They met only once, he’s sure, and he wasn’t exactly here for *long*, but...

Does she *really* not recognise him?



He's just trying to think of something to say when someone *else* arrives, and this one's far less welcome: Jeff Dutton, who described himself to Anthony in one of their previous encounters as 'something senior in Marketing, you know, near the top, tremendously important,' and who subsequently made several sotto voce and incredibly crude remarks about what a shame it was that Michael hadn't hired a pretty girl instead of Anthony.

Well, here are *two* pretty girls now.

"*Su-sie!*" he exclaims, marching in through Anthony's door without even a courtesy knock. "How lovely to see you out and about for a change."

Susie, whose demeanour has instantly frozen, says, "It is Miss Huang, Mr Dutton."

"O'course, o'course," Mr Dutton says, dismissing her with a rude little waggle of his hand. Anthony feels suddenly as if he ought to correct the man



somehow, but then he is pinned under his gaze. “And who might *you* be?”

“Antonia Bessemer,” Anthony says, borrowing some of Susie’s new attitude and wondering if it was a mistake to give his surname.

But the man shows no sign of recognition. He does seem like he needs to be shot with a tranquiliser dart, though, because he’s leaning on Anthony’s desk and allowing his eyes to roam Anthony’s body.

“Delighted to meet you,” Mr Dutton says. Did Anthony imagine it, or did the man place a subtle emphasis on the word ‘meat’?

Anthony tucks his chair a little farther under his desk, the better to conceal his legs.

“If you don’t mind, Mr Dutton,” Susie says, with perfect control, “Miss Bessemer and I were working.”

“O’course!” Mr Dutton says. “I was just on my way to see the big man. Thought I’d stop by, introduce myself to the new girl. Great to have you on board, Antonia! Just great.”

Susie closes the door firmly behind him. “Sorry about him,” she says, visibly relaxing as she trots quickly back across the office and perches in the chair next to Anthony. “Office bastard. Every company has one. Keeps his behaviour just this side of the line. Don’t give him an inch, Antonia.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Anthony says.

“Men!” she says, shaking her head. “They can’t seem to stop themselves, can they?” And then she slaps her knee and briskly continues, “So! We were about to merge our bosses’ diaries, and I was going to fill you in on all the goss, right?”

“You were?”

“Oh, Antonia,” Susie says, pulling her chair up to his desk and opening her laptop, “there’s *no* escaping the gossip around here.”

\* \* \*

Incredible what a spot of light exercise can accomplish for body, mind and soul. Michael has refreshed himself, and no longer feels so discombobulated, so... out of control. Yes, he has the video feed from Antonia’s office running in a corner of his screen — Antonia is currently liaising with the excellent and efficient Miss Huang, assistant to the CFO — and yes, he is wondering how the terms of the contract might be leveraged to encourage Antonia to accept, say, one or two cameras in her apartment, but by far the majority of his attention is focused on work.

A good thing, too: he is behind.

Judith Walker makes an appearance, right on schedule, and by the time she arrives, he is almost ready for her. He raises his left hand, to ask her wordlessly to wait for him, and quickly saves and closes his current brace of applications, returning his computer desktop to the pristine wilderness he prefers when he is between tasks.

“Headache?” Judith asks, sitting and setting her paperwork down as she does so.

Michael frowns. “No?”

“You closed the blinds,” she says, nodding at the windows.

“Oh,” he says, hitting the button to start them swinging open again. “Glare,” he adds, hoping she doesn’t require any further explanation.

“Don’t mind if I do!” Judith says, and waits the customary two-to-three seconds for Michael to be perplexed by her sense of humour. “Oh, lighten up, Michael.”

“Believe me,” Michael says with a smile, “I *am* trying.”

Reaching over her small pile of documents, Judith briefly touches his hand. “I know you are, Michael,” she says. “There’s... something we should talk about.” Michael doesn’t respond, just waits for her to continue, and after a moment, she does. “Antonia Bessemer. Her transformation is... quite difficult to believe, Michael. I know a little of how long hormone therapy takes to work, so am I to assume she has had some... other treatments?”

He affects a small shrug. “To the best of my knowledge, she has not.”

“Right,” Judith Walker says, nodding vaguely. “It’s just, Michael, it’s not hard to see why you’re interested in her. She’s a... vivacious young woman, and you have been single for so long, and...”

“Mrs Walker—”

“*Mister* Lincoln,” she interrupts, “I believe I already questioned you about this. And you assured me that there will be no sexual harassment suits in our future.”

“There will not.”

“Then what I tell you now, I tell you as a friend: be careful, Michael. She may feel financially beholden to you. And that can cause young women, no matter whether they are transgender or... otherwise, to lower their inhibitions. To consent to things they would otherwise refuse.”

He nods seriously. “I am aware,” he says.

“Good,” she says. “Good. Just as long as you know.”

\* \* \*

Susie Huang finger-gunned her way out of Anthony's office, leaving him alone once again, this time to contemplate just how insane it seems that three people in a row — Susie, that Dutton guy, to whom Anthony has taken an even greater dislike than before, and one of the secretaries from downstairs who dropped by to see Susie — all of whom met him *and spoke to him* as Anthony have now absolutely failed to recognise him as such.

So, either he's passing really well, or people aren't that observant, or they're just being polite.

It occurs to him that Jeff Dutton, of all people, would not have come on so strong with someone he believed to be a trans woman, so that just leaves options one and two. Which, really, are both kind of the same thing, aren't they?

The thought is exciting. Because if nobody recognises him, if Anthony Bessemer made such a minimal impression that people don't even connect his relatively unusual surname to Antonia's, then that means...

That means fuck it, right? That means he might as well go buy lunch in the canteen downstairs, because if no-one's going to recognise him, no-one's going to pull him aside and say, hey, weren't you a bloke, like, two weeks ago?

Being so forgettable has never been an advantage before.

Though it's also a thing of the past, isn't it? Anthony might have been a borderline-hallucinatory creature, an urban cryptid, shambling from temp job to temp job, existing in the memories of a dozen former managers and a hundred former coworkers as, 'Oh, I don't know, I don't really remember; didn't he have brown hair, maybe?' but that's not Antonia. Antonia commands attention just walking down the street.

Then she can also command attention as she buys herself a nice executive sandwich, can't she?

Anthony takes the stairs. It's only a couple of floors down to the canteen, and he's noticed that almost nobody else uses them, this far up the building. The stairwells are largely for the denizens of the lower floors; up here, where all the most important people work, nobody seems to bother.

He wobbles a little on his spike heels a couple of times, but there's no-one to see him, and it's good practice: he has flat surfaces mastered, and even the potholed and uncertain pavements of Manchester are mostly no longer a challenge, but he is not entirely perfect at descending stairs, especially not the steep and near-slick stairwells of Lincoln-McCain. There's a knack to it, and he's still learning how to angle his feet so he is at no point resting his entire weight on a barely centimetre-thick metal spike. He feels a little dumb, right at this moment, for selecting a skirt that slightly restricts his thighs, but it made

quite an impression on Mr Lincoln, so it was thoroughly worth it. Just so long as he doesn't trip and arrive at the canteen level in a crumpled — but highly fashionable — heap.

The canteen floor is laid out differently to the other floors: where on every other storey the stairwells and elevators disgorge you into a small lobby area, usually with misted-glass-walled offices directly in front of you and tastefully discreet little signs informing you who the lords and ladies of the relevant departments are, and where they might be found, the canteen is immediately open, and the noise that hits Anthony as he rounds the corner and lands without incident in the lobby is... Well, it's not deafening, not even close, but compared to the sombre executive floors, it's like stepping into another world.

Fortunately, Anthony has experience with that.

There are a few chains set up in each corner, each with short queues, and several other more generic serving stations in a huge circle, right in the centre. Anthony joins the queue for the cold food station, eyeing the sandwiches and the fruit and thus almost missing how many heads have turned to watch him.

He doesn't so much as pause. Antonia wouldn't. Antonia's used to attention. She seems to thrive on it, actually, though whether that's because Anthony's been starved enough of it over the years to have developed an independent craving for it, or whether Antonia's just like that, is something he hasn't yet decided. Nevertheless, he allows his nascent conception of her to direct his actions, and looks out across the room, smiling at no-one, trying to create the impression that while, yes, she is here, and, yes, she belongs, and, yes, she might well know *someone* in this vast and noisy canteen, it's probably not any of the several dozen people currently looking at him.

His eye alights on one in particular, one who seems to be watching him more closely than most of the others. He carefully doesn't frown as he tries to focus on her without focusing on her, and it takes him another couple of shuffles towards the serving counter as the queue moves on, with him idly sweeping the room with his eyes each time, to identify her: Sharon Blair, from Online Rec. They met. Oh shit, they met! And she's still *looking!*

She recognises him!

Except, no, she doesn't seem to. She looks away, returns to her food and her conversation, and Anthony's almost disappointed, because if there was *one* person at Lincoln-McCain he'd like to remember him, it's Sharon Blair. She made quite the impression on him at their one and only meeting, being not only beautiful but charitable enough not to laugh when he tripped over a trashcan in her presence.

God. He remembers her face so clearly.

And that, he suddenly understands, is a tremendous mistake, because his dick, previously mostly quiescent and only a little sore in its prison, makes its desires known.

*Fuck.*

The queue moves on again, and Anthony tries to think of boring, unerotic things, like pencils and trains and sausages and that rocket on the news the other week that blew up; unsuccessfully, because the image of the gorgeous girl from Online Rec keeps popping back into his head, and his body reacts in the predictable manner of a hungry male body that hasn't gotten to have an orgasm in a *long* time.

He feels himself shift under his skirt.

*Double fuck.*

He's not Antonia any more; he's Anthony, trapped in a tight skirt and a



mastectomy bra and a pair of boots he can barely walk in, and he's surrounded by hundreds of people. He feels broad, he feels shapeless, he feels stupid, and most of all he feels like if he doesn't get the hell out of here as quickly as possible, he's going to pop a boner in the middle of the Lincoln-McCain canteen.

Anthony grabs the first food item to hand — a banana — and takes the final step up to the hand-scanners. He pays for it and leaves as quickly as he can, moving awkwardly in his restrictive skirt so his penis doesn't come completely untucked, wobbling on the heels he can't walk in, practically falling forward instead of walking. He makes it to the elevators, throws his stupid banana in his bag, and collapses against the wall of the first lift to open up and accept him.

He really hopes Sharon didn't see his nervous glance back at her as he left.

\* \* \*

Anthony's office has blackout blinds now. All he has to do is slap the button next to the light switch by the door and they close, shutting out both the world outside and, more importantly, the corridor he just stumbled in from. Mr Lincoln probably has some other use in mind for them — Anthony doesn't want to think about that right now — but right now they are good for one thing: stopping any other fucker in this building from watching him have a minor breakdown.

Jesus Christ, that was close! He's got to be more *careful!* False confidence will get him exposed, literally!

He slides home the little lock on the inside of his office door — another new addition — and staggers over to his desk. He flops into his chair, dumps his handbag and his single-banana lunch somewhere out the way, and takes a moment just to calm down.

He's okay. He's okay. No-one saw anything.

He looks down. He doesn't *think* there's a visible bulge under his skirt, but the erection — *No, be accurate, Ant, it was a half-on at best* — fatally disturbed his tuck, and he won't feel confident or comfortable until he puts it back.

Fine.

Sighing, he unzips and kicks off his boots, stretches out his toes — have his little toes started to curl in? *Focus, Ant!* — and stands again, briefly taking



pleasure in stomping around his office on flat feet. Then he turns away from the glass walls out to the corridor and unzips and lowers his skirt.

Yeah. Nothing to see. Thank *fuck*. Nothing to see.

He still needs to fix it, though, so he does, realising as he painfully digs his partially squashed penis out of the folds of his two pairs of knickers that Nitya was absolutely, one thousand percent correct to recommend he wear shapewear under his skirt and blouse; without it, he's pretty sure his partially untucked dick would have shown through.

He should get her a thank-you card or something.

With it all fixed, with his skirt zipped back up and his boots back on his feet, there's now only one more matter to address: he's still Anthony. Down there in the canteen, he lost Antonia, lost her confidence, and now he has — he checks the clock on his PC — just fifty minutes to get her back, because he and Mr Lincoln have a meeting, and he absolutely cannot be Anthony in front of Michael.

He sinks back into his chair, closes his eyes, and tries to become *her* again.

The kiss floats back into his head — though it has never been far from his thoughts ever since it happened — and this time he welcomes it, because that was something Antonia chose. That was her sympathy for Michael breaking through; frankly, and it's difficult to admit this even in the roaring silence of his own head, it was her lust for Michael, too. Just a little bit.

She was created for him. She likes him. She enjoys seeing him smile and she *really* enjoys seeing him squirm. When she is with Michael it's like she crystallises, becomes her purest and most brilliant self.

Is that how to get her back?

Damn. Kinda seems like it. Or maybe it's not the only way, but it might be the quickest way, and he's not exactly flush for time.

So Anthony leans back in his chair and he thinks of Michael. He thinks of how sweetly flushed he was this morning when Antonia touched his hand, when she ran her fingers along his knuckles. He thinks of how it felt when Antonia kissed him. And he thinks of the dreams, the many dreams, in which Antonia has taken control of Michael and Anthony both, and led them in an intricate, intimate dance.

Under his skirt and his shapewear and his two pairs of knickers, Anthony's dick shudders again, fighting once more against its prison, but Anthony doesn't notice.

\* \* \*

She had a little trouble, that much is obvious. After Judith Butler left for her out-of-town appointment, Michael returned to his work and that meant, quite coincidentally, once again running the small window focused on Antonia's office in the corner of his screen. He resisted the temptation to follow her with the security cameras when she left her office at lunchtime, but when she returned seeming both flustered and unsteady on her feet, he wished he hadn't. She shut herself immediately inside her office, made herself invisible to everyone but the security cameras, and then...

He'd thought, at first, that she was about to masturbate, but before he could formulate a suitable rebuke, he realised that she was just rearranging herself. And nobody, not even Michael, would pleasure themselves while so clearly distressed.

And then she just... sat there. Her eyes closed, her breathing slow. As if it was all suddenly too much for her.

He wanted so badly to go to her, to offer his assistance, but Judith's intervention provided a timely reminder that this is all — for now — quite alien to Antonia; his presence might well have been a detriment.

He's already decided that if she doesn't show for the meeting, he will run it without her, and *then* he will check on her, and he's starting to act on that assumption — closing down his computer, assembling papers, etc. — when his office door opens and Antonia steps briskly inside, a laptop bag in one hand and a sheaf of documents in the other. She nods professionally at him, allows herself what Michael would love to believe is a flirty smile, and strides over to the meeting room, opening the door with the slightly scolding nature of a mother who insists on 'airing out' the childrens' rooms.

"Refreshments in five," she says, and then she disappears into the meeting room and begins setting it up. Almost exactly five minutes later, one of the older ladies from the canteen downstairs arrives, and she acknowledges Michael with a smile that is thankfully not at all flirty before guiding her trolley into the meeting room. Inside, Antonia greets her with a delighted, "Betty! Let me help you with that."

For a little while, all Michael can concentrate on is the clink of glassware and the sotto voce chatter of employees exchanging pleasantries while well aware that their boss is in the next room.

She seemed so troubled just minutes ago! For her to bounce back so quickly and seem so normal...

Michael's impressed.

And then he scolds himself: he knew all along that she was exceptional, so why is he even surprised?

Antonia is a miracle.

\* \* \*

The others start to file in. In truth, Michael despises holding meetings in the room attached to his office: fastidiousness is not a requirement for an executive position at Lincoln-McCain, despite Michael's repeated temptation to make it so, and after so many people have passed through his office, he often finds it to be almost *spiritually* dirty, even though the worst that usually happens is perhaps a scuffed footprint or two, from someone who has rushed to attend and has come straight up from street level. On such days, he leaves



his office after the meeting, and has the cleaners straighten everything up.

But he wanted the meeting here today so Antonia would feel comfortable. He's beginning to think he needn't have worried.

Antonia greets his executives as they arrive and directs them to their seats. She directs a professional nod toward Miss Huang, who is her usual tightly wound self. The woman from the canteen — Betty — starts to serve water, coffee and tea, and Antonia assists her, halving the time it takes everyone to get situated. And when everything is ready, Antonia settles into the chair next to Michael's, opens her laptop, and prepares to take notes.

Michael is profoundly glad that it is not him who is leading this meeting, because as Antonia sits, attentively watching Sherise Winters from Sales, she crosses her legs, raising her pencil skirt father up her thigh. As Sherise advances through her presentation, Antonia dangles one booted foot off the floor and absently swings it back and forth. And when the CFO takes over for the next portion of the meeting and Antonia looks up, fingers poised on her MacBook, she is so professional, so present, so *sexy* that Michael simply cannot stand it.

And then she glances at him and shares a little smile, something meant just for him, and Michael has to cross his legs lest he lose all control.

\* \* \*

Yeah! Okay! That went well! Sure, all Anthony really had to do was set everything up, make sure the stupid audio recorder was working, and take notes on his laptop without, for example, falling out of his chair, but he managed it all, and even directed a couple of conspiratorially exasperated grins Mr Lincoln's way, when the dull-as-dishwater CFO got into whatever feedback loop it is that makes him say everything in triplicate; no wonder Susie said she spends most of her time at work singing show tunes in her head.

And now all the important people are gone, with Susie only lingering to ask if he wants to join her for drinks after work — he declines, but agrees to a solid maybe for the next time the executive assistant gang gets together for a bitchfest. And then it's just him. Him and the cleaning up.

Anthony fusses around the table, collecting a few sets of abandoned minutes, sweeping up the shavings from when that one guy from HR decided he wanted noisily to sharpen his pencil while the CFO was talking, and checking that the stupid audio recorder actually has a file waiting for him. He hasn't trusted the bloody things since he worked for three weeks at an office

complex out in Salford, where they were always breaking, either failing to record anything at all or delivering corrupted, useless files, so he made sure to record everything on his MacBook, too. He jams a USB key into it — he doesn't trust their network connectivity, either — and he's waiting for it to copy the file when he realises Mr Lincoln's still here.

Oh yeah.

Mr Lincoln's still here, still sitting in his chair at the end of the table, and he's looking up at Anthony with a little smile on his face. So what Anthony needs to know now is whether this is a work thing — maybe Mr Lincoln has something important to say — or if it's all part of the game.

*But then, it's all part of the game, isn't it?*

"Miss Bessemer," Mr Lincoln says, "how is your first day going?"

Anthony decides not to mention his little freakout at lunch, because, yeah, this is absolutely part of the game. "Very well, Mr Lincoln," he says, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "And please, call me Antonia."

Mr Lincoln stands, carefully shunts his chair under the conference table, and crosses his hands in front of him. "Antonia, then," he says.

He's standing so stiffly, seeming so unsure of himself, and Anthony couldn't be more delighted. It's easy to remember why his first encounter with Mr Lincoln today was so intoxicating; easier still to remember Antonia's reaction to it, and the things he made himself remember — indulge in — in order to bring her back just two short hours ago.

Anthony has the advantage here. And he knows *exactly* what to do about that!

"Are you not going to allow me to call you Michael?" he says, stepping closer.

Mr Lincoln's temples are starting to bead with sweat. He might even be trembling.

"I, uh, suppose that would be acceptable," Mr Lincoln says.

Another step closer. Anthony's now close enough to feel every shallow, tense breath, and he reaches out towards Mr Lincoln, moving slowly so that his boss — more importantly, the man who will eventually make him a multi-millionaire — can back out at any time, can say no, can proclaim that he doesn't want this, that this is disgusting, that Anthony is a man, et cetera, et cetera.

But he's not going to, is he? Anthony's seen himself, and he's seen himself through the eyes of others, and he *knows* he makes an attractive woman. And yes, a lot of it is in the makeup, in padding himself in appropriate places and

choosing clothing carefully to flatter his otherwise unexceptional figure, he also knows that won't be the case forever.

And so does Mr Lincoln.

Fuck it; be in the moment, Antonia.

So does *Michael*.

She takes his tie in her manicured fingers, runs it through her grip. Tightens her fist at the end of it, and pulls gently, forcing Michael forward, closer still, close enough that not just his breath but his heartbeat pounds against her. Their bodies are touching, and only her hand is in the way, so she releases her tie and straightens her back.

In her heels, Antonia and Michael are very nearly of a height.

"Just acceptable?" she says softly.

"I don't—"

She makes a show of leaning away, looking around. She finds the security camera exactly where she expects to, and she turns back to Michael. "Could we perhaps have some privacy?"

She's teasing him with this, she knows. But she's teasing herself, as well: this close, close enough to see every pore on his face, every twitch of every muscle, every failure of control, she's *drinking* him in, and for what seems like the hundredth time today, she shifts inside her underwear.

But it's not like it was when she caught the eye of the girl from Online Rec. This is *immediate*, and furthermore, it is guaranteed. She and Michael are bound by contract, bound by their shared secret, and even if they weren't, Antonia is only slightly surprised to realise that if she were asked if she could swap Michael Lincoln, as he is now, sweating and shaking and reaching slowly for his laptop to switch off the camera, for Sharon Blair, she absolutely would not.

She wants him.

"There," he says. "We have—"

Why let the man finish? She knows what he's going to say, and she's uninterested in it. What she wants from him now isn't more of this nervous, unpractised roleplay, it's *him*.

She kisses him. Pushes herself against him, takes him by the waist and kisses him.



Under her mouth, he relaxes. Michael is powerless against her.

Nobody prepared her for this. Nobody made her understand the degree to which her body is a weapon, that it can be *wielded*, and not in the ugly, blunt, masculine ways she theoretically aspired to before. No, this is a body that is powerful because of how it is perceived, because of how it is worshipped, and it is a power she can use.

Michael opens his lips, and she slips her tongue inside.

There's a pressure against her body. Michael's erection, the thing she suddenly understands he's been struggling with for the entire meeting, the reason he seemed sometimes to be squirming in his seat, and other times to be sitting almost comically straight up... It's pressing against her, and raised as she is on her heels, it is positioned almost exactly where *hers* would be, were her penis not still tightly bound under her skirt.



She ought to be horrified. But what would be the point? Michael is erect, and he's erect *for her*, and that means only one thing: in this game they're playing, where the stakes are Anthony's body and Michael's reputation, *she's winning*.

Antonia pulls away. Michael doesn't want to let her go, but he doesn't grasp or pull at her. He lets her, frowning a little, but not fighting.

She could fuck him right here. It's a stunning, heady realisation, but she could. He would do anything for her right now.

Instead, she leaves him wanting. And he allows her to.

"Good boy," she whispers.

\* \* \*

He's closed all the blinds again and he's locked the door again and he's masturbating. Again.

He's ashamed of this, oh *God*, he's ashamed. Antonia deserves better than this, she deserves more, she deserves someone with self-control and not someone who falls apart multiple times a day over a simple handshake, a simple kiss, but as soon as she left, closing the door to his office behind her and throwing back a simple, sultry, "Thank you for this opportunity, Mr Lincoln," he could no more prevent himself from the need to indulge himself than he could stop his own heart.

This is just temporary.

It's *just* temporary.

He will learn self-control around her.

He *will*.

She kissed him, and all he wanted was to take her with both hands, to throw her against the wall, to press his shameful erection against her, have her massage it, accept it into herself. The desire had been so all-consuming that he had no choice but to lock himself up completely, to allow only the barest of movements.

When she pulled away, when she smiled at him while he stood there, tongue rapidly retracting, arms still stiffly bound at his side, she must have thought him such a fool.

He will learn self-control.

And it starts with exposing himself to as much Antonia as he can.

He cleans up, throwing away another pair of tissues and checking — again — that he hasn't got mess on his suit, and then he calls up the recording from

the second camera in the meeting room, the one that isn't on the main system, the one he bought online.

There. The kiss. The view is partially obscured by a pot plant, unfortunately, but he can see enough. Antonia walks up to him, takes his tie in her hand, pulls him close, kisses him.

He rewinds. Again.

Again.

Again.

He will not be so craven around her again. He will expose himself to her as much as is necessary, and next time — tomorrow — he might even manage to say something borderline intelligent in her presence.

He'll also move the pot plant a bit, in case she wants to kiss in the meeting room again.

\* \* \*

Susie Huang catches up to Anthony on his way out, and he's grateful for it, because he's been caught in the comedown, trapped in an unaccustomed and slightly terrifying space between Antonia's wants and the things he is still learning slowly to be comfortable with.

She really took control.

So Susie is a welcome distraction, and they natter a bit as they wait for the elevator. She's a reassuringly normal presence — and still reminds him of Bridget — and she grounds him.

"You just get used to tuning him out," Susie's saying as their elevator opens into the main lobby. She's holding Anthony's bag for him as he pulls on his trench coat — he still loves this deep green colour — and when she hands it back, she adds, "Don't let him know you're doing it, though! I recommend occasionally nodding and going, 'Uh-huh,' or, 'Yes, Mr Singleton.' That's got me through a *tonne* of interminable lectures. Anyway, what's Mr Lincoln like?"

The question is a harsh reminder of what recently happened, and Anthony blushes. Antonia, however, turns a happy grin on Susie, and says, "He's... nice."

"Ant-*onia!*" Susie exclaims. "Do you... *like* him?"

Antonia shrugs. "Little bit. Maybe."

"Well, I wish you luck. I don't think anyone's seen him with a girl — or a guy — in all the time I've worked here. I was beginning to think he, you know—" she leans closer, "—was a bit Patrick Bateman."

“I’ll keep an eye out for axes,” Anthony says, regaining the initiative over both the conversation and the part of him that’s already replaying one of the scenes from the movie where Christian Bale gets naked, and imagining Michael in his place.

Out in the lobby, there are a few people milling about, and Anthony’s about to follow Susie out to the exit when a figure breaks off from one of the groups and walks confidently towards them both.

Sharon Blair. The girl from Online Rec. The one whose eye he caught at lunch and who nearly — unknowingly — unmade him.

“Hi!” she says, all smiles, greeting Anthony directly. “It’s so nice to see you again!” She frowns for a moment when Anthony doesn’t say anything, and adds, “Sharon Blair. From Online Rec.”

“Hi, Sharon,” Anthony says, feigning ignorance. “From the canteen,



right?”

Her eyes widen for a moment, and then she nods. “From the canteen, yes.” She turns to Susie and says, “Miss Huang, do you mind if I borrow her?”

“Not at all!” Susie trills, and she gives Anthony a finger wave before striding towards the main doors.

“So,” Sharon says, turning back to Anthony, and looping an arm through his, “do you want to go somewhere? I was thinking maybe we could have a coffee and you could... reintroduce yourself.”

Oh shit.

She knows.

So what choice does he have but to go with her?