

The Catch

Alyson Greaves

illustrated by

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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. Aaaaaaand... 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,

concealing 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.

