

The Catch

Alyson Greaves

illustrated by
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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*?"

