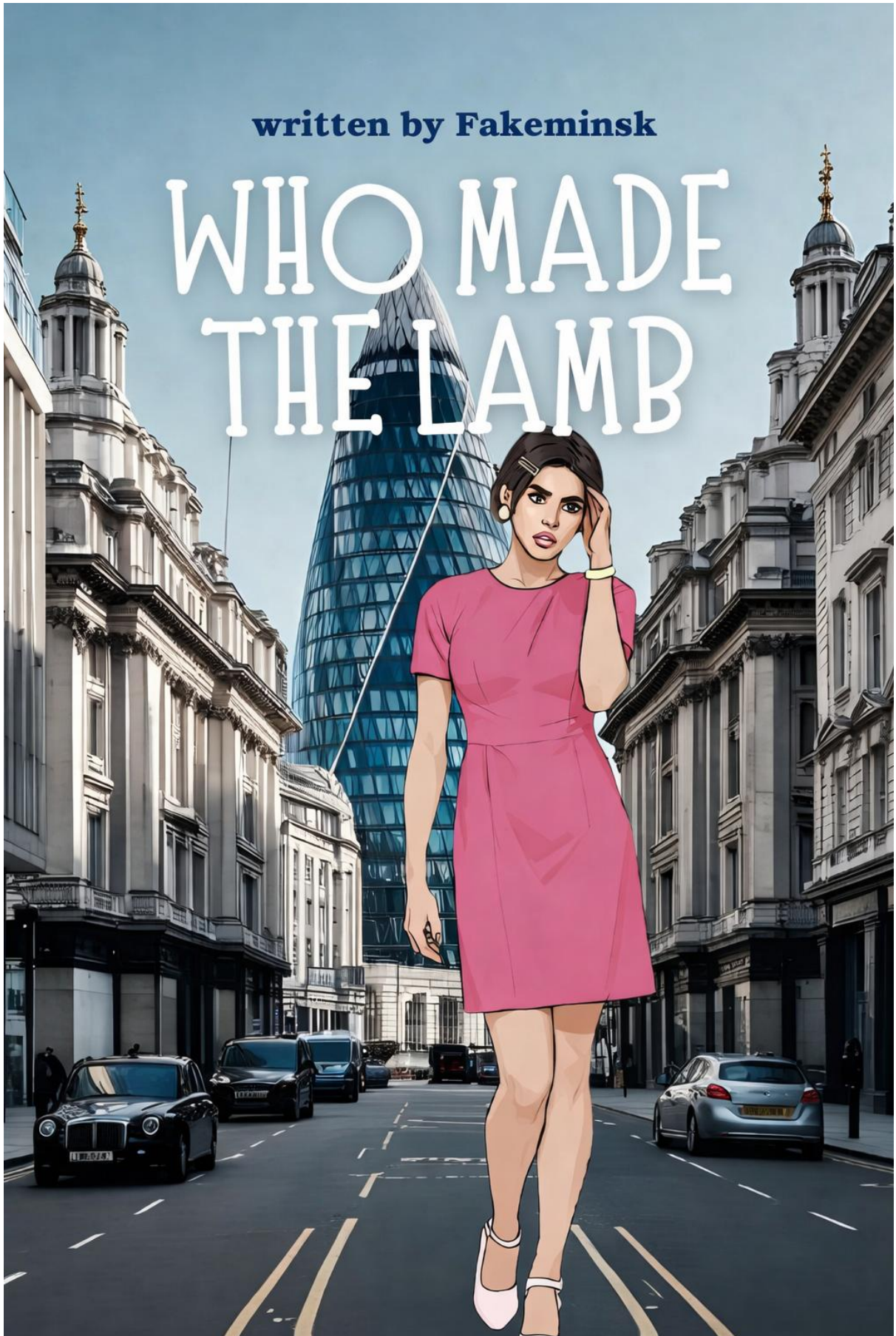


written by **Fakeminsk**

WHO MADE THE LAMB



Who Made the Lamb

By Fakeminsk

Little lamb, who made you?
Gave you clothing of delight,
Softest clothing pretty and bright,
Gave you such a tender voice?

Little lamb who made you
Do you know who made you?
(adapted from *The Lamb*, by William Blake)

Dedication

Thank you to my patrons, who've made this story possible, and to the ladies of NMS, who made the story better.

Chapter One: Standing Straight

There's this photograph of his father. Alex rescued it from a pile of old papers his mum put aside, intended for the bin during the cleanup after the funeral. It's a polaroid, turning sepia with time: *Morgan '98, Winch. Arms, Taunton* scribbled slantwise across the back. Morgan is twenty-four, looks work-tired but happy, celebrating a promotion, and relaxed in a way he never did in life. He doesn't know about the two children he'll father, though the first is less than a year away; doesn't know he'll die young, of a heart attack at forty-nine. Left arm severed by the photo's edge, the right sits comfortably around the waist of a girl in a floral print dress. There's a table covered in pints, anonymous hands flourishing flag ends flaring bright white spots in the faded image. His father grins, dressed in jeans, white shirt with the top button undone, loose-fitting jacket. He's looking to someone out of frame.

And wouldn't you be proud of your son? Alex thinks. He goes to slide the photo into his pocket, then remembers he doesn't have any, not dressed like this, stupid girl trousers. Instead, he places it in the handbag balanced on the sink, then retrieves the lipstick his sister packed for him. If only you could see me now, Dad. He touches up his lips. It's one of the few things he can manage with any degree of confidence, and without his sister's help.

This whole charade's her idea.

"Misandrist dyke bitch!" He slammed the door behind him. "Fuck!"

The interview, he explained to his sister, did not go well. The woman took one look at him and made up her mind. She frowned, looked down at the open folder on her desk and what he assumed was his CV and job application. Truth was, he didn't remember sending the application. He'd sent so many over the past three months, he couldn't keep track. This was the first hit he'd had in weeks, an actual invitation to interview for a real job.

"Alex?" the woman asked. She never introduced herself. Her frown intensified. "It says here, Alexandra."

"Alexander, actually," he corrected. He'd seen the typo on the invite and assumed it was a computer glitch.

She levelled a look at him generally reserved for the street scum you scrape off your shoe. "I would've had a job for Alexandra," she muttered, just loud enough for him to hear. "After due consideration," she continued, louder, "I'm afraid you're not suitable for the role." He tried to protest, and she cut him off. "Don't waste my fucking time, okay? The listing was clearly for a woman. Think you're the first guy to come in here, spouting shit about diversity discrimination? Fuck!" She leaned back in her chair, glaring at him. "I've got a job to fill, and I don't have time for this bullshit. If I don't fill this slot today, I lose my budget." She swept his CV into a waiting bin. "Tits and a pulse, that's what I'm looking for at this point. Tell you what, *Alex*. Know any women looking for work? I've got an open interview slot this afternoon at four. Send her in, she's got a job."

"It's not fucking fair," he told his sister. "Fucking diversity and inclusion bullshit."

"Yeah." It was nearly eleven am, and Sophie sat at the breakfast table in her morning kimono over coffee and morning bagel. She looked washed out after a late night, bags beneath

her eyes, dark hair a tousled mess. “White guys being totally underrepresented in the workplace.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean,” he said.

“I know you sound like a MAGA dickhead,” she said. “Again.”

“Whatever.” He stalked back and forth, tugging his tie loose. “It’s not fair,” he said. “The best person should get the job.”

Sophie laughed. “And that’s you?”

“I’ve got a pulse!” he said. “And a 2-1 from Bristol. I’m just missing the tits.”

The bagel paused halfway to her mouth. “What if you had them?”

Her idea was simple and stupid. Dress as a girl, she explained, grinning. Show for that four o’clock interview, give that woman the tits and pulse she’s looking for. Alex sat at the table with her, laughed at the joke.

“Can you imagine?” he said.

“Yeah, I can,” she said.

He frowned. “I don’t look like a girl.”

“You made a damned convincing Juliet.”

“That was a school play five years ago.”

“Yeah, and you totally nailed it,” she said. “Beth told me about the afterparty. You had everybody fooled, right?”

He felt a prickling in his skin, and his mouth went dry. “Whatever, this is stupid,” he said, stood up and walked away. Five minutes later, Alex stalked back and thrust a finger in her face. “And if I got the job, what then, did you think of that? I don’t want to work as a fucking secretary, or whatever the job is, not as a girl.”

Sophie shrugged: “expose their unfair hiring policy for the bullshit you think it is, threaten to go to the press if they don’t keep you on. At the very least, you get some interview practice. And I bet you could get an article out of it, publish it online or in the *Spectator*.”

“Or *The Guardian*,” he mused. “I can see it going either way.”

“See? You’re always complaining you’ve got nothing to write about.”

He shook his head, scratched at his beard. For ten months he’d been trying on and off to grow it out. “I like my beard,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “Give it up, Alex. That’s not a beard. It’s not even beard-adjacent. It’s a soul patch with delusions of grandeur.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t pass for a real girl,” he said.

“You did in the play.”

“I was a kid! And on stage. This is different. This is stupid. Why are we even talking about this?”

“Because you need a job.”

“Not like this, I don’t.”

“Yes, like this,” she said.

This past week, Sophie started dropping hints that she wanted him out. Escalating comments about the effect of having him around all the time left him feeling guilty and angry. She resented him cramping her lifestyle. And Alex wanted out, too. He came to London expecting to find a job quickly, settle into his own flat, make friends, get out, get laid. Instead, the summer had come and gone, and he’d only gotten laid twice, one of those times with Jenny, his ex from back home, the other with some girl he met at a networking event the first week here.

“There’s no way you can make me look convincing,” Alex said.

“I’ll take that bet,” Sophie said.

An hour later, Alex grudgingly admitted his sister was right. First, she had him shower and shave off his beard and moustache. Truth be told, he wasn’t that sad to see it go. “Legs too,” she said. “Nope,” he said, “no fucking skirts, no fucking dresses.” Sophie didn’t push him. By the time he finished showering and shaving his face, Sophie had several outfits laid out on his bed in the guest room, clothes she’d outgrown this past year. It was the happiest he’d seen her in weeks. “This is fun,” she said. “For you,” he said. “This is fucking embarrassing, I can’t believe I’m even considering this.”

She held up a skirt, a brown check mini from John Lewis. “You sure about the skirt thing? This would look great on you, with this—she held up a ribbed white long-sleeved top—and a belt, some sheer tights.”

“No skirts,” he insisted. “No dresses.”

Eventually, they settled on a pair of tapered beige trousers from M&S and a tight black button-down shirt from Next, long-sleeved and paired with a slender gold belt. A blazer, too—let’s keep attention away from those shoulders, Sophie said. A pair of clip-on fake pearl earrings and a slim watch finished the look. Beneath it all, one of Sophie’s old bras, white with lavender decorative lace, tight around the chest and Alex wasn’t too pleased to discover she was a C-cup. She filled a pair of stockings with rice, tied them off and stuffed the bra. The makeshift breasts sat heavily against his chest, knots pushing out like nipples.

“How’d you know to do that?” he asked.

She laughed. “Before you moved in, I rented your room out to all sorts,” she explained. “Had a drag queen living there for a few months, Madame Bouffante, big burly lad from up north but wow, what a performer. Fucking awful mess to clean up afterwards, let me tell you, pancake makeup everywhere, and half their stuff left behind. But I learned a few things. It’s why I’ve got this, it was left at the back of the closet,” she added, and passed it to him.

“What the fuck is this?” he asked, holding it at arm’s length. *This* turned out to be a high-waisted girdle for padding out hips and bum. “I’m not wearing this,” he said flatly.

“You are,” she said, “or the trousers won’t sit right, and it’ll keep your belly in, you’ve put on weight.”

“Speak for yourself,” he muttered, but conceded the point. After three months of sitting around the flat, drinking beer and playing games, he’d birthed a little food baby though the rest of him remained slim. Not as much as she had this past year, but still. Grudgingly, and feeling sick to the stomach for the wrongness of it, he pulled the undergarment on, before slipping into the trousers and buttoning the top over his recently acquired breasts, fumbling with buttons set on the wrong side. The top felt cool against his skin, stretchy and tight and accentuating his fake boobs. Then Sophie did his makeup, taking her time, wiping him clean and restarting a few times until she got it right. Finally, she tackled his hair. He hadn’t had a haircut since reaching London, and over three months it’d grown out into a shaggy, mouse-coloured mess. “You’re lucky,” she said. “You got Mum’s hair, I can work with this.” With a copious use of hair product, a little styling and some hair clips later, she tamed the tangled mess into something both presentable and undeniably feminine.

Eventually, she stood him in front of the mirror. “Ta da!”

He looked at himself in the mirror, plucked at his sleeve, and shivered. “I feel like a fucking poof,” he said.

“Homophobe much?”

“Really?” He rolled his eyes. “My best friend’s gay. I’m no fucking homophobe.”

“Fine. Dickhead, then.”

He ignored her, poked at his hair, brushing it out of his eyes, and lightly tugged at an earring. He swept his hands down his sides, felt the shapewear beneath that created convincing curves. “And I’m not some sissy femboy, either. This is stupid, Sophie. I’m not doing this.”

“You don’t think you look good?” she asked.

“I look good,” he said. Truth was, he was taken aback at *how* good he looked. There was a girl in the mirror, and that girl was him. Makeup had softened the sharper features of his face, and the clothes were undeniably feminine. He felt an echo of five years ago: the school play freaked him out then, too, at how convincing a Juliet he made. Single-sex private school, end-of-year production, Mr. Dixon gave him the part, you earned it, he said, you’re the man to play our girl. And he pulled it off, enjoyed it even. He made a very pretty Juliet, seventeen-year-old smooth-faced boyish good looks making for surprisingly alluring girlish good looks, too. There’d been a lot of good-natured ribbing, and some uglier ‘banter’ that bordered on bullying, and a few genuine questions by sensitive classmates.

St Oswald’s wasn’t a school to skip on costs, and Alex experienced the full Juliet: corset and stockings, flouncy dresses and flowers woven into hair extensions. After the final show, his best friend Luca, Romeo to his Juliet in the production, convinced him to go out still dressed like a girl. It’ll be a laugh, he said. And it was. He borrowed a skirt and top from Luca’s sister Bethany, low-heeled shoes and wore them over the Juliet corset. He’d always fancied Beth and went along with everything she suggested and sat quietly as she redid his makeup in a vibrant teenage style. After the after-party, the three of them tried the ‘Spoon in town. They got in, the two of them anyway, but not Luca. His friend never forgave him for that. But Alex looked older, as a girl, like a university kid and he liked that, felt mature, felt powerful in a new and exciting way he didn’t understand.

Bethany and he chatted over pints of Butcombe, the first time they'd really spoken together alone. She held his hand. He remembered vividly the way their nails contrasted, her matte white next to his glossy pink press-ons. Then a creepy older man bought him a drink. That was less fun. Afterwards, he made out with Beth in her car. He remembers sliding his hand under her top, over her bra. She sighed and took his hand and guided it beneath her skirt. It was the first time he touched a girl there.

When he got home, his father was waiting for him. Morgan was away with work again, or so Alex thought. But his father came back early to watch the finale of his son prancing around on stage in a dress. It was the only time Alex could remember his father attending anything he'd done. That night, Morgan stood, fists clenching and unclenching at his side as though he wanted to punch something. His lip curled in an ugly sneer, and he stared at his son standing there wide-eyed in a colourful skirt and midriff-baring top pushed out by Beth's padded bra, teenage drunk with lipstick smeared across his face.

Faggot, his father said.

"I'm not doing this," Alex said to his sister, pulling an earring from his ear.

"You're doing this," she said.

"You've had your fun, Soph. Ha ha. But I'm not doing this."

"Fine. Then grab your stuff and get the fuck out my flat."

The hand at his ear froze. "Excuse me?"

"Three months, Alex. I've had it up to here with you. Three months I've put up with your shit. You're my brother and I love you, but I've had enough. You don't pay rent, you eat my food, you bitch nonstop, and you're a sexist cunt, too. If I hear you mansplain another Jordan fucking Peterson video again, I'll scream."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she wasn't having it.

"And how many job interviews have you had, hm? You turned down that offer when you first got here, you fucking idiot, thought you deserved better, holding out for Slaughter and May or some shit like that. And since then—what, one? Maybe two. Are you even looking anymore? Far as I can tell, you lounge around my flat all day doomscrolling Youtube videos, playing Switch and binging Netflix."

"That's not fair," he said. "The job market—the economy—"

"Is shit. Yeah, I know, whatever," she said. "I don't care. You think the market was great when I got here? Tail end of a pandemic, you think anyone was hiring? But I got a job, anything I could find. You need a serious reality check, Alex. Stack shelves at Tesco, pull pints down the pub. I don't give a crap about your fucking degrees, nobody does. Get over yourself and just get yourself some work."

Alex pulled at the silky fabric of his top. His stomach roiled with anger, or disgust. "Christ, you sound just like fucking Dad. 'When I was your age,'" he mimicked in a gruff voice, "'I stacked shelves in the warehouse. Five years later, I ran the joint!'" Alex crossed his arms across his chest, frowned, shifted them below his bra line. "I didn't stick it out for a Master's degree to be a fucking waiter at Café Rouge."

Sophie laughed. "You'd be lucky to get a job at Café Rouge. They wouldn't have you."

"You're just jealous," he said. "You've always been jealous. That I went to uni and you didn't."

He immediately regretted his words and knew then that he'd be doing what she asked. Sophie had always been the stronger personality, had a way of getting her way when they were growing up. In many ways, it'd been a relief when she moved out at nineteen. He missed her terribly, though he'd never tell her that, but at the same time he felt a heavy weight lift from his shoulders, with her gone

"You're going to this interview," she said. "I need to know you're still trying. If you don't, you're out of here. I'll give you until the end of the week to get your shit out of my flat. I'll even buy you a coach ticket, you can go back to Mum."

And the thought of going back to that almost empty house, the weight of failure and the hollowness the thought of home brought to his belly, it felt even worse than the fear he felt at the idea of stepping outside in his borrowed sister's clothing.

He turned back to the mirror. "You really think I can pull this off, Soph?"

"With a bit of effort, yeah, I do."

Sophie completed his look—a coat of clear varnish to his nails—and then a handbag, shoes, and gave some cursory instructions on moving like a girl, had him walk back and forth across the flat a few times, sit down at the kitchen table, shake her hand. "Just don't overdo it," she said. "You remember your girl voice?" He thought back to *Romeo and Juliet* and Mr. Dixon's instructions. He thought of all those videos off of YouTube and Tiktok, those crossdressing Minecraft streamers or Omegle pranksters. "I'm ready for my close up, Mr DeMille," he said, reaching for the right pitch, finding his voice. Sophie laughed and said, "good, not bad, keep practicing." Finally, she filled his handbag: three tampons, a condom, a chintzy little makeup bag, slim girl wallet, hairbands, Ibuprofen, small metal water bottle.

Alex prodded the makeup bag. "What am I supposed to do with all this? I don't know how to use this stuff." He flicked a tampon. "And I definitely don't need this."

"No shit, Sherlock," Sophie said, "but it'll help keep you in character. Just—don't touch your face, okay? The makeup's long-wear, should get you through the interview at least without needing a touch up. Maybe just your lips. Here, let me show you how."

Swipe and wipe, ten minutes of practice, and he just about felt like he could manage. It was just a pencil, after all: fill in between the lines, try not to slip. Still, it felt emasculating, standing at the mirror, painting his lips.

Despite all the effort, he still felt light-headed leaving the flat, nearly collapsed to the ground for hyperventilating. Shaking her head, Sophie took his hand. He froze at the door and couldn't let go of the door jamb. "I can't do this," he said.

"Yes, you can. You've got this," Sophie said.

"I don't know how to walk like a girl," he said.

"Try walking like a human, start with that. Stand up straight with your shoulders back," Sophie told him. "Isn't that what Peterson always bangs on about?"

“Not so you can stick your tits out!”

“Just be confident. Walk tall.”

“In heels?” he asked.

She laughed. “You think you’re ready for heels?”

Sophie escorted him. Nobody paid attention to two young women on their walk to Angel Station. They took the towpath along the Regent’s Canal; a cyclist nearly ran them down, shouted ‘cunts!’ as he flew past, Sophie shouted ‘twat!’ in return and barely registered the exchange. Otherwise, no one took notice, not even when they passed close to other pedestrians. Make eye contact, Sophie instructed, but not for too long. If you keep staring at the ground, you’ll draw even more attention. Especially if you walk into someone. Finally, standing outside the station, she wished him luck. “I’ll meet you in town after the interview, at the All Bar One on Kingsway,” she said.

Knees knocking, stomach churning, he tapped his phone and passed through the gates on his own. He felt sick riding the escalator down at Angel, but by the end of the ninety-second descent, he felt better. This was London, after all. Two o’clock in the afternoon and a steady trickle of people heading down, heading up, and nobody spared him more than a passing glance. Nobody gave a shit.

On the Tube, his skin prickled and it felt as though everyone stared. Soon, he realised everyone was staring, just not at him: at their phones, or into the middle distance. Maybe one or two flashed a look his way, but were they the curious looks of someone catching out a secret cross-dresser? No; rather and perhaps worse, he suspected they were men, checking out the pretty young woman sat stiff-backed, legs together on the train.

He transfers at King’s Cross, gets off at Holborn, joining the crowds flowing up to the surface, and still no one cared, noticed, cried out or showed him anything greater than passing indifference. Gradually, he started to feel a little better. The sun overhead was bright, the air warm and the clothes he wore gradually felt less alien. Not comfortable; that wasn’t possible, with his dick shoved back between his legs, waist gripped tightly by shapewear. The earrings pinched his ears, and the makeup felt heavy and foreign on his face. He hated the watch and kept spinning it around his wrist. But—it was bearable. Better, Alex thought, than heading home.

Now, standing in a private toilet waiting for his interview to start, handbag perched on the sink, he touches up his lipstick, and thinks, you’ve got this, Alex. Or rather, Blake, his surname, an easy substitute for a female name he wouldn’t forget under stress.

He paints his lips matte coral. It takes a conscious effort to not immediately lick and ruin the effort. The interview is in ten minutes, and he’s already gone for a piss three times. Last time he pissed this often in ten minutes, it was before stepping out on stage for some performance at uni. A piss takes a lot more work than usual, he can’t just whip it out as usual and reminds himself to sit down when he goes. There’s the effort to tuck everything back and tug the girdle into place and make sure the padding sits right. It all feels very wrong, he looks at himself in the soft light of the mirror and think, Christ, I look like a fucking fairy, this is so fucking gay. But he knows that’s not true, because the girl in the mirror is shockingly convincing and in some ways that’s even worse.

His stomach twists and he breathes deeply to calm himself. Get yourself under control, he thinks. How did that quote go? ‘Men have to toughen up,’ something like that, get his shit under voluntary control, accept the terrible responsibility of life. That’s what men do: take control, take responsibility. Well, he’s trying. It feels fucking terrible. Looking in the mirror, he certainly doesn’t feel tough. Not dressed like this, with lips painted a light pink, a face heavy with foundation and eyelashes fluttering with mascara.

“A rose by any other name,” he intones, practicing his voice. “Would smell as sweet.”

You’ve got this, he repeats and leaves the safety of the loo.

Black hard-soled pumps announce his approach to the reception desk at Lockwood and Carmichael. The dark, wood-panelled room reminds him of his sixth form, a smell of wealth and old men. His handbag bounces at his hip, and in his hand a manila folder with his CV. A few quick edits made the necessary changes: Alexander to Blake, Blake to Morgan, M to F and now he’s Blake Morgan, twenty-two and female with a 2-1 from Bristol.

He walks with tunnel vision, struggles to keep calm. A blonde with long, very straight hair and a bright smile sits behind the heavy marbled desk. She looks up at him. He’d love to ask her out. There’s a bar around the corner. She’s very pretty and professionally dressed in a way that is both feminine and more than a little sexy. Her smile gives no indication of seeing the young man beneath the makeup.

“I’m here—” and it comes out like a croak, betrays his nervousness. He tries again, pitching it a little higher, a little breathier, as he practiced. “Sorry—for an interview?”

The blonde looks confused for a second, then her eyes fix on a yellow sticky note stuck to her monitor. She smiles. “Oh yes, Ms. St-Clair said there might be somebody coming by. Please, follow me.”

He forces himself not to stare as she leads him to the interview room. Her ass rolls enticingly beneath a tight pencil skirt, long platinum blonde hair swaying to her waist. She brings down a dimly lit hallway to a line of chairs by a nondescript door. “Just you this afternoon,” the girl says.

“Thanks.” He hesitates, then adds, “Um—any hints?”

The girl laughs. “Hey, you’ll do fine. Ms. St-Clair is great, her bark is definitely worse than her bite. Just keep smiling, she likes it when we smile.” She gives Alex a once over. “You look great. Love that lipstick, what is it?”

Alex scrambles to think of an answer. “Uh—” it suddenly comes to him, a name written across the pencil reflected in the mirror, “Nars. Powermatte? Coral pink.”

She leaves him there, after giving her name: Amber, and wishes him good luck. He sits for five minutes, fidgeting, fighting the urge to check his phone. People walk by, cast a curious eye his way. There’s a few appraising looks, and his skin crawls as one guy about his age openly leers; but otherwise, he’s ignored.

At first, he sits knees apart and then realising he’s manspreading, tries sitting legs crossed, knee to knee. This pinches painfully, so he sits knee to ankle and then thinks it looks unfeminine. Finally, he sits primly with back straight, breasts forward, thighs together, hands hidden between his knees. Then, flustered, he picks up the handbag and rests it on his lap. He

pulls out the photograph and takes another look at it. *Morgan '98*. He sweeps his fingertip across his dad's face. Missing you, Dad, he thinks, hope you don't mind I'm using your name.

"Come in!" A woman's voice calls from inside the room. Alex tucks the photo away, stands and brushes himself down. Suddenly, he misses his man's suit, even though he's always hated wearing it, even the necktie, which he hates even more. He keenly feels the unfamiliar texture of women's trousers, the clingy fabric of his top and the unnatural weight of artificial curves. His sister's bra feels too tight, the fake tits heavy and obvious. He's a man, wearing women's clothing, and a drag queen's underwear. Under his makeup, he flushes red and hot with embarrassment. What the fuck am I doing? he thinks. This is insane.

He can still run away. His fingers curl and uncurl into fists, his palms sweaty, and his nails gleam in the soft light.

I can't do this, he thinks.

His phone buzzes. He checks the text. Good luck! Sophie writes, followed by a bunch of emojis: happy face, trumpet and confetti, kissy face. You've got this.

I've got this, he tells himself, and heads into the interview.

Chapter Two: All Bar One

An hour later, he meets his sister at the All Bar One on Kingsway, just a little way down from the station.

“Can we just go home, please?” he asks, exhausted. “I want to get out of these clothes.”

But Sophie’s not having it. She wants to celebrate, wants to know how it’s gone. There’s a bottle of house white sitting in an ice bucket, South African and the second cheapest on the menu, and two massive glasses waiting. She pours the wine. It’s still bright outside, and their glasses flash like pale gold in the early evening light. It’s early enough that they get one of the choice seats by the large windows. They watch pedestrians marching past. Despite the early hour, the bar’s getting busy, mostly young women trickling in from nearby offices. He takes a drink and feels the sweet wine hit a mostly empty stomach. He knows he should stop, but it eases his anxiety and so he takes another deep drink and feels the stress melt from his shoulders.

In a way, this is precisely what he wanted and expected from London: after-work drinks in City bars, or down by the river. But not like—this, with a face full of fading makeup and a shiny black top pushed out by a padded bra and tapered trousers flaring over artificially wide hips. When sexy girls glance his way, what do they see, he wonders, what do they think? Not, he suspects, a prospective hookup.

“Why here?” Alex asks. “We could’ve done this closer to home. I mean, this place, it’s a bit shit, right? Nice enough, but still—”

“It’s female-friendly, that’s why.” Sophie cuts him off. “Thought you might appreciate that, dressed as you are.” The chain started as a female-friendly alternative in the 90s, a counter to the darkened windows and cramped spaces of the typical pub. And Alex kind of gets it. He’s always liked pubs, especially the ones back home in Somerset: dark, cozy nooks, real ales on tap, often a dog by the bar.

But this is okay, too: the broad windows, open space, bright airy interiors. It feels safe, or as safe as it can for a man dressed in women’s clothing. Even though sitting by the window leaves him feeling like he’s on display, and people passing by can see him, he also feels anonymous: just another girl in a well-lit pub on a Thursday afternoon. Sophie picks up on his nervousness and pats his hand. “Don’t worry,” she says, smiling wryly. “You fit in perfectly.” He suspects she’s winding him up but at the moment, fitting in, in this female-friendly bar, that feels kind of nice, too. He remembers some of the bars back home, some of the rougher lads there, the drunks, the fights that inevitably broke out at the ‘Spoon. He can’t imagine that happening here, he can do without that bullshit.

Sophie pulls her mobile from her handbag, places it to one side, face up. “So, little brother,” she begins. “You ready to go all Norah Vincent for me? Feeling like a self-made woman yet?”

“Makeup sucks.” He reaches for his glass of wine. “So do girdles.”

She snorts. “That’s it? I expected more.”

And he’s thinking, yeah, there’s more, sis, a hell of a lot more. He’s thinking of his dad, and the photo in his borrowed handbag. He’s thinking of Amber, the pretty receptionist at the

interview, and how he'd love to get to know her better. He's thinking it's a damn odd thing, that for all the stress and anxiety of dressing and passing as a woman he's carried with him all day, the constant paranoid feeling of eyes tracking and judging him, nobody seems to give a shit, and somehow that's galling, it's as much an insult as it is a relief. But also, he's had fun today, in a strange sort of way, not that he'd ever admit this to his sister.

He shrugs.

"And she didn't recognize you from before?" Sophie's watching him keenly and he bridles a little under her eye.

He shakes his head no. "Nope. But then, she barely looked at me this morning."

The interview went fine, he explains. Certainly, not at all what he expected. The contrast with his earlier meeting couldn't have been starker. This time, the woman behind the desk seemed relaxed, the hard, angry lines of before softened. He found her quite attractive; a little older than Sophie, maybe early- to mid-thirties and he'd always liked that, a slightly older woman. She took a long, searching look at him and then beamed a wide smile. "I'm Sarah St-Clair," she said, "it's nice to meet you, Miss...?"

"Morgan," he said, extending his fingers. "Blake Morgan."

Sarah asked about his degree, why he wanted the job. English Lit, he answered, a first, followed by a Master's, a two-one. And I want the job to gain experience, because you need experience to get a job, and a job to get experience. Very true, Sarah smiled, but why *this* job?

"Because I'm passionate about—" and then he faltered, and realized he wasn't passionate about anything, really, at least recently, other than getting out of his sister's flat and starting his own life. Also, having spent so much time prepping to pass as female, he hadn't prepped for the interview. He hardly knew anything about this job he'd apparently applied for. So, instead of trying to bullshit her, he grinned in what he hoped was a disarming way. "Because I'm passionate about paying the rent," he admitted. Sarah laughed, and he relaxed a little.

Ms. St-Clair commented on his degree, said they preferred candidates with a humanities background, too many STEM grads about these days and they wanted people with social and critical skills, especially in an entry-level job. She asked about his Master's thesis: '*Cracked in a Hundred Shivers*': *The Formation of Subjective Identity on the Early Modern Stage*, he said. Sarah raised an eyebrow. How very esoteric, she commented dryly.

"Then she asked me about—"

Sophie glances up from her phone. "About?"

He blushes. "It was weird. She asked if I was married, if there was a guy in the picture, pretty girl like me, she said, bet they're queuing up. I mean, that's not normal, right?"

"No, Alex." Her lips purse in a thin, angry line. "That's not normal. That's red flag bullshit right there. Forget diversity discrimination, your sexuality, marital status, that's not an employer's business." Then she shrugs, sips her wine. "She ought to have known better. But it's not surprising. L&C are pretty old-school. They see a twenty-two-year-old girl, right? Total pregnancy risk, you know, start of the danger zone where you might sign on, then pop one in the oven, squeeze it out nine months later and fuck off on maternity leave for half the year."

He feels sick to his stomach. "I'm not a girl," he says.

“But you look like one,” Sophie says. She looks him over. “Though your makeup’s fading, the boy’s peeking through the cracks.”

He groans, wants to hold his face in his hands, but doesn’t dare touch the mask he wears. Slumping in the chair, he glares balefully at his sister. “Today was awful.”

“Oh, get over yourself.” Gesturing around the bar, she takes in the other patrons. “I mean, look at these people, all these other women. You don’t see them complaining.”

And they’ve had a lifetime to get used to this shit, he wants to say, but he’s too tired to argue the point. Christ, though, the effort—to do this every day—he shivers. He sees the lithe limbs, smooth legs beneath short skirts and imagines shaving his legs every day. He sees the perfectly sculpted eyebrows and manicured hands, the crisp blouses and straight hair—God—the cost in time and money to maintain this appearance. How do they put up with it?

Not all the girls, obviously—his sister’s a great example of a woman who doesn’t give a shit, except for when she does—but still. That receptionist, Amber: she looked amazing, perfect makeup, hair, a sculpted appearance that spoke—not so much of professionalism—but rather of a recognition of being on display and a recipient of the gaze of others.

“And be honest, Alex,” Sophie continues. “Was it really *that* bad?”

For the first time, a smile cracks through, a very small one. The wine helps. “I mean, yes,” he insists, then grins ruefully. “This girdle’s horrible, Soph. And I hate the feeling of makeup, I can see why you don’t bother most days. And the panic attack leaving the flat—” He winces. “But honestly? No—maybe not *that* bad, at least once I realized no one made me as a guy, or if they did, they didn’t care.” He draws a finger through beads of condensation on the table surface, sketches idle circles. “I wouldn’t want to do it again. But I guess it sure as hell beat spending another day cooped up indoors.” He did enough of that to last a lifetime, he thinks, a year of undergraduate study trapped in a tiny university dorm room.

Her phone buzzes, she glances at it and begins to tap a response. “How’d the rest of the interview go?” she asks.

Fine, he tells her, up until she asked the last question: “where do you see yourself in five years?” Ms. St-Clair read the question off the sheet of paper where she’d been taking interview notes, and he panicked.

Alex pauses to drink. These glasses are huge, 250ml. Sophie topped it up when he arrived, and he’s surprised to see his already half-empty. A pattern of coral lip-prints glosses the rim. “And I swear, Soph, I didn’t know what to say. I—never really thought that far ahead.”

Absently rotating his glass, he watches how the wine sparkles in the daylight, and his nails, too, with their clear sheen. But he had to say something, so he fell back on some crap about progressing his career. Making a difference. Someday, moving into a leadership position. The woman’s eyes instantly glazed over with boredom. He changed tack: Actually, he said, I see myself where you are. The woman perked up, smiled, brushed her hair back. Really? she asked. Grinning, he licked his lips, tucked back a bang. Well, yeah. I mean, if I was looking for a female role model, I’d pick you. The way you dress, your confidence, if I was on the other side of that desk in five years, looking as good as you do, I’d be doing well, don’t you think?

He remembers thinking at the time, what the hell am I saying, don’t say that! Not that Sarah St-Clair wasn’t hot: she was, stern and sexy, dressed for business in glossy black heels,

dark tights, slim black skirt suit, and very red lips. The frames of her glasses were thick, square-framed and her every movement seemed sharp and controlled. But mostly, he remembers the sudden and surprising feeling of hollowness in his belly, because the idea of being in that woman's position in five years terrified him. And whether it was the idea of wearing a skirt suit and high heels and playing the female part five years down the road—or the thought of carrying that much professional responsibility on his shoulders—he couldn't tell, and the rest of the interview passed in a blur.

Sophie's fingers hover over her phone. "Alex, were you *flirting* with her?"

"Maybe? Christ, I don't know, Soph, I barely knew what I was saying, alright?"

"It's a basic fucking question, Alex. They always ask that. Everybody knows where they'll be in five years."

"Well, I didn't, okay?" Now he's sullen. It's the alcohol, tiredness, frustration, maybe all three. "Or I mean, I don't. Like, I used to know, or at least I think I used to know. Everything seemed really clear to me a year ago. But not anymore. Finish my degree, come to London. I just kind of expected everything to fall into place." He mimes layering bricks, one atop the other. "Get a job. Get a flat. Get a girl. But instead...." He folds his hand in over each other and slides them off the table, out of view.

"Yeah, well, that's probably our dear father's fault," Sophie says, pushing her phone to one side.

Alex frowns. "What's Dad got to do with it?"

She eyes him levelly for a moment. There's a look in her eyes he's never seen there before. He feels her gaze pass over him like a physical presence, like ants crawling across his skin. "You really have no idea, do you?" she says.

Just then, his phone rings. He picks it up, checks the screen. "It's them," he says softly. He answers the phone, presses the other hand over the other ear to block out rising hubbub of the pub. The conversation lasts for several minutes. Yes, yes, um yes, this is Blake, uh, Blake Morgan, yes; yes; no, no I wasn't aware of that; oh wow, yes, that is—yes. A longer pause and then, um—yeah. I'll get back to you. And then finally: thank you.

He hangs up, puts his phone down on the table. A moment later it vibrates a few times, pinging with incoming notifications.

He closes his eyes, sinks back in his chair.

Sophie waits a moment. "Well?"

His smile is thin, more grimace than joy, and he touches his fingertips lightly to his lips. They come away flecked coral. He studies the colour for a moment. He hates this stuff, the tackiness of it, the weight of it on his lips. Around him, he hears the chatter of women. Their lips shimmer in peach, rose, deep crimson, light strawberry. Most are dressed directly from work, pencil skirts and blouses, mostly flats, a few heels. A sparkly top or a colourful long dress, here and there. And it's late August, so lots of thin straps, shorter skirts, bare legs, light fabrics.

"You're loving this, aren't you?" He speaks to Sophie, but his gaze continues to travel across the bar. He picks out the women sitting opposite guys, men in grey and navy suits with wide lapels and relaxed fits. They loosen their ties, drape their blazer over the back of their seat.

He wishes he was one of them. A pang of—jealousy? grips him around the middle. Maybe it's just the girdle, worn for too long. But he also sees these young women, and he envies them, too: the table talk, friendly drinks, the after-work experience he's never known.

"Well, yeah," Sophie answers. She watches him curiously. "Aren't you?"

"Are you fucking joking? No!" It comes out louder than expected, his own voice, male and outraged. "No," he repeats, quieter, softer. "I nearly shat myself, Soph. Went for a piss three times before the interview."

"Normal jitters," she says.

"It wasn't normal fucking jitters, Soph. What if somebody saw I was a guy?"

"What if?"

He squeezes his eyes shut. His mouth opens and closes with disbelief, he digs deep to find the words. "God, Soph, sometimes, you can be such a—"

"Go on," she says.

Alex grimaces. "It's humiliating, okay? This,"—he waves his hand to take in his clothes, the underclothes, makeup—"all of it, it's—unmanly, okay? I'm a guy, and dressing like this, in girl clothes, it's embarrassing." What really gets to him isn't the clothes, which are odd and uncomfortable but bearable; or even the makeup, which he hates; but that fact that he nobody seems to have noticed. What kind of man passes so convincingly as a girl?

"I see," Sophie says. She takes a deep drink of her wine, looks at him over the rim and there's a dangerous glint to her eyes. "So, it's embarrassing being a girl, is that it? Being female, that's shameful, somehow?"

He groans. The last thing he wants right now is for her to launch into some feminist tirade. Too tired to think straight, he can't be bothered to argue. Besides, they've been over this shit too many times these past months, and in the years before that. No, it's not humiliating to be female. Equally, men are different and that's a fact. Gender might be a construct, but sex is biology and you ignore this reality at your peril. Men are simply stronger, bigger, tougher: evolved to stand up straight with their shoulders back, ready to carry the responsibilities of the world. Men lead and bring order and that means controlling the chaos both within themselves and within their world. Women—girls—being weaker and more accommodating, are less well suited to this. Yes, women can lead, obviously. But not naturally. His sister certainly isn't accommodating or weak; running her own business, she knows a thing or two about leadership and control. But still. Women are inclined to please. Of course they are, it emerges organically from their mothering role, out of a desire for social cohesion. After all, being physically weaker women are more likely to lose in conflict; with more to lose, they're biologically inclined to avoid conflict, to negotiate.

All this, Alex knows to be true. Absently spinning the thin women's watch at his wrist, he scans across the bar and finds ample evidence. The way these girls present themselves: the clothes and makeup, earrings and accessories, all manifestations of an inner need to please. This externalisation of the female instinct for negotiation signals their willing but mostly unconscious participation in a social contract and beauty myth written in vivid colours, soft fabrics and prescribed hemlines. What is feminine fashion but another medium for communicating a willingness to concede—comfort, time, money—in exchange for—what?

Security and safety, and any of the other advantages that derive from feminine beauty, purchased with overt sensuality and passive sexuality. He sees it, in that pretty girl's glossy smile and the way she tucks her hair, the sparkle of earrings as she mirrors the movements of the man sat opposite her. He leads, and she follows: from the man she derives order.

But for a man to wear these things is to subvert his natural inclination and fail in his responsibilities. He should be taming his shadow and cultivating the inherent threat of his masculinity: dangerous, yet in control of that danger. Not smothering his threat, constraining it in a bra, disguising it with makeup. To tie down his masculinity and bind it in silk and satin and straps of lingerie, soften it in a skirt or stockings—to hide behind a veil of femininity—it was a surrender to some residual female biologic impulse, a dormant instinct inherited from the womb. Relinquishing control is fine and appropriate in a woman but in a man shows him weak, submissive, and unmanly.

Alex passes his hand across his eyes and speaks with forced patience. "Christ, just for once, can you let it go? You know it's not the same, these clothes, lipstick on a guy, it means something. Today's been—hard. I'm tired." He looks at his near-empty glass. "And I think I'm drunk."

"Fine." She stares into her own glass. "Want to know why I'm enjoying this so much?"

"I'm getting major sadistic evil sister vibes."

"Hardly." She chuckles. "Okay, maybe just a little. But it's more than that, Alex. Try and see if from my perspective, okay? Three months, you've been lounging around my flat. This past month, I've seen you more in your pants than in trousers. You've put on weight—"

He scoffs. "And you haven't?"

"—you're always online and frankly, I'm worried, Alex, some of the shit you say and these past two weeks, especially, you've just been so—"

"Frustrated." He grinds the word out between clenched teeth.

"Angry," she says. "And frankly, more than a little mean. Like, a right proper douche, sometimes."

He speaks into his wine glass. "I don't think that's fair. You've been a bitch, too."

"Sure, whatever. But it's my fucking flat, Alex. My home. Not yours." She shakes her head. "And these videos you're watching, the stuff I overhear. I'm worried, Alex. Like, you're a week away from becoming a proper little incel cunt, on the cusp of ordering me to make you a fucking sandwich or something. Last week, Peterson; next week, maybe it's Andrew Tate?"

He winces. "C'mon, sis, he's an utter pillock. That's not fair."

"Yeah? Maybe, maybe not." She shrugs, drinks some wine. "But considering some of the sexist bullshit I've heard, I'll be honest—watching you all dressed up like this, makeup on your face and that breathy little voice of yours?" She grins. "Yeah, it's been fun." Then she reaches across the table, for his hand. "It's also been... reassuring. Because I don't think a real misogynistic asshole could've done it."

"Thanks," he says. "I think."

“So, then—” she indicates his phone. “What’d they say?”

Alex pauses for dramatic effect—or exhaustion—and smiles wanly. “They offered me the job,” he says. “Or rather, they offered ‘Blake Morgan’ the job. They liked her, they said. Ms. St-Clair was really impressed.”

“Alright!” Sarah raises her hand in a high five. He leaves her hanging and doesn’t reciprocate. Instead, he squeezes his eyes shut, and between the tiredness and the exhaustion and the shame, he fights back a desire to cry. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, I can’t fucking well take the job, can I?” he says.

“Why not?”

He looks up at his sister, eyes wide with disbelief. “Are you fucking kidding me? Because it’s for a fucking *girl*,” he hisses. “And I’m not a girl, or have you forgotten that?”

“Keep your voice down,” she snaps. In a softer tone, she continues, “But— isn’t this what you wanted? They offer you the job, you accept it, challenge their discriminatory policy—”

“It’s what *you* wanted!” he says. “And no—I can’t—there’s no fucking discrimination, okay? I—you—we were wrong, okay? We should’ve looked at the job listing closer.” He grabs his phone, unlocks it, flicks through a few messages and opens a file. He slides the phone over to his sister and watches as she reads.

Lockwood and Carmichael were a prestigious wealth management firm. Big clients, old money; if he’d known before the interview, there’s no way he would’ve dared this farce. After the interview, he did the minimal research that should’ve taken place before meeting St. Clair. That he hadn’t done it before applying struck him as odd, but then again, he’d sent out so many of these applications, that first hectic month in London. Probably, he’d been up against an application deadline.

The job really was entry-level, a receptionist and administrative internship. Not the kind of job he wanted at all, and he was surprised he’d bothered applying for it. Still, it was a foot in the door and could lead to better things. Even just a few months with a firm with L&C’s reputation could make a big difference for his work prospects. So, fine. And there’s no reason a receptionist has to be female, so maybe—just *maybe*—he could get them on that, although being more than a little old-fashioned, Lockwood and Carmichael clearly preferred someone pretty and polished behind the desk, like Amber.

After all, it’s a bad look in 2025, even with the White House deleting “identity” and “woman” from government websites. But the fact the entire leadership team was entirely male, stale and pale Oxbridge types left the firm looking dated, the wrong kind of traditional, maybe. Clients wanted innovation and bold forward-thinkers when it came to placing their money, and L&C were starting to look staid. Some of their clients preferred the old ways—the Russian oligarchs, Japanese tech entrepreneurs, middle Eastern aristocrats—but they were at risk of losing new clients if they didn’t present at least an illusion of changing with the times.

And therefore, the internship role and its linked DEI “Diversity in Leadership” mentorship program intended to ease young women—and other minority groups—into management.

“Fuck me, we’re a minority now?” Sophie scowls, glances up at Alex. “Christ, these old fuckers. How much more tokenistic can you get? Bet they scribbled this shit down on a napkin over lunchtime martinis at the Garrick, pissing themselves laughing.”

But Alex can’t see the humour. “Maybe it’s a joke, but if so it’s on me, Soph. I can’t go after them for discrimination when it’s a DEI job, can I?”

“Yeah.” She scratches her head. “Yeah, I didn’t know about any mentorship program.”

“It’s not fucking fair,” he says. “First job offer I get, and it’s offered to Blake. Like, I don’t want to be a... a fucking girl receptionist; but working in the City? Hell yeah, and the pay’s good, and it’s a fast track to management to boot?” He picks up his glass, knocks back the rest and eyes what’s left in the bottle. “It’s not fair,” he repeats, grabbing the wine out of the ice bucket, splashing the remainder into his glass. He waves the empty at his sister. “Another?”

“I thought you wanted to go home and change?”

“Yeah.” He plucks at his top. “But what I really want now is to get shitfaced.”

Sophie laughs, orders another bottle and a plate of nachos. Outside, the autumn sun dips behind the old building of Holborn, long shadows cast across narrow streets. Alex thinks of centuries-old medieval roads, the steady flow of trade and commerce through these streets, and a steady march of days leading back to Londinium and the Romans, those brave legions of sturdy men marching out of the light into the unknown, carrying with stoic manliness the heavy responsibility of civilizing the darkness.

Suddenly uncomfortable, he shifts in his seat. He needs to take a piss but doesn’t dare head to the toilet on his own. After so many hours, the girdle’s hurting, and he wants out of this fucking bra. At the same time—he’s enjoying himself, despite the ridiculous outfit. Sophie’s smiling, and that makes him happy. It’s the best night out he’s had with her in years. He licks his lips and realises they’re nearly bare. Now he’s almost giddy with the thought that he should reapply his lipstick. God, how the fuck has he ended up here? Just like that night with Beth, five years ago. He wore lipstick then as well. She did his makeup. He kissed her. Felt a girl’s breasts for the first time. And more. Fuck.

“Earth to Alex, you okay there? You’re looking a bit flushed.”

He grins. It makes him happy to think of Beth. According to Luca, she’s living in Bristol now, has a job, is in a steady relationship with some guy called Dave. There’s been talk of marriage. That makes Alex less happy. Then he looks to his sister. As far as he knows, she’s single, too. At least, she hasn’t had anyone around since he’s moved in. Now, he feels unhappy, for being single, and guilty for dragging his sister down. He wants to apologize, takes a deep breath and tries to find the words. He feels the bra tighten across his chest. This annoys him and he remembers: yeah, but this is all her fault. When he opens his mouth, he’s not sure what to say.

“Sorry,” is what pops out. “For what I said this morning. About you being jealous. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She shrugs. “Whatever. But hey, look at you. One day as a girl and you’re going all soft.”

He laughs. “How’s my makeup looking?”

“Honestly, a bit worse for wear. I’d say to freshen up in the loo, but—you’d fuck it up worse.”

He flicks his phone over to camera mode, checks himself out. Sophie’s efforts of earlier today have faded somewhat, and whatever she did to soften his features and smoothen his skin is giving way to hints of the man beneath. He sees himself, though that’s not necessarily a good thing. Not that anyone’s noticed, or if they have, they don’t care. He pulls out the lipstick pencil, brings it to his lips. He can feel his sister watching him. He glances over the phone’s edge and catches her eye. “What?”

“Nothing.” A moment later, she adds, “It’s just a bit weird for me, seeing you do that.”

“Weird, for you?” Taking great care, he pencils in his lips, feels the slick stuff spread its colour. He watches himself in his phone but sees over its edge that he’s caught the eye of a man a few seats over. For a moment, he feels the power of feminine performance, the ability to draw attention through the simplest of acts. This guy is already sat with a girl; she’s pretty, peach-coloured lips and gauzy white top: but his eyes are fixed on Alex. When Alex catches him out, the guy grins, shrugs and returns his attention to the girl in front of him.

Alex purses his lips together. “You’re joking, right?”

Sophie swirls her drink as she thinks. She takes a sip, and shrugs. “Obviously, it’s weirder for you. I get that. But for a moment there, I don’t know, watching you? You did good work; you had a good teacher. It felt like I had a sister, okay? And that felt good.”

“Is that what this is? You always wanted a sister?”

She laughs. “God, no. Can you imagine? Fuck, Dad would’ve been even more impossible.”

Silence, then. Alex feels his father’s absence like a physical hole inside of him, and it hurts, and when she says stuff like that, it fills that absence with pain. They haven’t really spoken about their father since the funeral, only passing comments, generally negative on her part. It annoys him—no, makes him angry—that she seems, if not actually happy, then at least relieved by his passing.

“Alex—” she begins, but he cuts her off.

“What were you going to say, earlier?” he asks, his voice quiet. “About Dad? ‘You have no idea,’ you said. Then the phone rang.”

“No,” she says. “I don’t want to talk about that now, not anymore.”

He reaches into the handbag and retrieves the photograph. He slides it across the table until it lies halfway between them. “I miss him, Sophie.” Alex looks up to his sister. “Why don’t you?”

Her features harden. “I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to. It’s pretty obvious how you feel. You’ve never hid it. You resented him. You thought he played favourites, hated him for it. Paid for me to go that private school for sixth form. Paid my university tuition. Everything I ever wanted, I got, right?” He shakes his head. “I’m not stupid, Sophie. And it’s not like other people never said anything. You can admit it, you know. You were jealous.”

She shakes her head slowly, and he thinks it's in denial but then realises it's with disbelief. "Jealous?" Her shoulders shake with silent, angry laughter. "Jesus Christ, Alex, you are such a knob sometimes. Jealous? Fuck no. I never wanted to go to some uptight posh school full of aristo twats. And university was never on the cards for me. Chrissake, Alex, I barely scraped fours at GCSE, I wasn't ever going to uni. Was I jealous? No, Alex, I wasn't jealous. But I was angry. You have no fucking idea, Alex, what living under a roof with that man was like, as a girl. I loved him, he was our father, but Christ, he was a proper old chauvinist twat, our dad, and you never saw it. How could you when you benefited from it, hell, enjoyed it, even?"

"From the day you were old enough to sit on your own at the table, he shoved Mum to the side and after that, it was always the two 'men' at either end of the table, wasn't it? Every fucking Sunday he was home, it was Mum in the kitchen serving up the roast and Dad and his 'little man' ruling the fucking roost. Let me tell you, the patriarchy was alive and well in the Blake household! I couldn't even get a word in edgewise most days. He'd shush me, literally tell me to shut up because, oh look, Alex has something to say, let him finish! What golden wisdom might drop from the boy's honeyed lips this time? And didn't you just love it, and you never fucking shut up after that. I just gave up. Sometimes, I wondered if I just stopped talking completely, never said a word again, how long it'd take before somebody noticed. Believe me, I couldn't get out of that place fast enough after I finished school.

"And the thing is, Dad wasn't even around half the time! Always traveling for work, yet somehow he fostered this oppressive atmosphere around the house. God, just talking about it, I can feel it again, like the room's closing in. It sucked, Alex, being a girl in our household, let me tell you. So, was I jealous? No, Alex, I wasn't jealous. But I resented him, and you, and the fact that he so clearly loved you more than he loved me, simply for being a boy."

Alex listens to the whole tirade, his stomach slowly twisting in knots with every word. He doesn't try to interrupt. When she's done, he waits to see if she has anything else to add. She doesn't. Sophie takes a long drink and then brushes herself down, as though flicking away the dust of the past. "You asked," she says, but for the first time that night, she doesn't meet his eyes. "And to be honest, I don't even *blame* him, that's the crazy thing. I blame *her*. Not once, not fucking *once* did Mum stand up for me, say anything, or voice an opinion contrary to his. Pathetic, weak woman."

"You're wrong," he says quietly, but with conviction. "And don't fucking talk that way about Mum."

She leans closer. Her index fingers rest over the polaroid photograph, covering their father's face. "Oh, please, do tell."

"He always preferred you," Alex says. "You were always his favourite." Saying this hurts; he resists the urge to snatch the photograph back from her, and so he hugs himself around the stomach. He feels the firm grip of the girdle there, pulling in his waist, and feels bizarrely reassured by it.

"Couldn't you see that? You were the responsible one. 'Why can't you be more like your sister,' 'Pull yourself up by the bootstraps,' he'd say, 'like your sister did.' You have any idea how often he said that to me? You followed in his footsteps, after all. Left home at nineteen, got a job. You should've heard him talking to his mates, how proud he was of you, using the inheritance from Grandad's death to find your feet in the big city, then working three jobs in London, barely scraping by but by God, you were doing it. Meanwhile, he paid for me to go to that fancy school

and resented me for it. Made me soft, he said. Talked down to me for it. What was the good of all that education, what the hell was I going to do with that? Especially with me doing fucking Drama at A-level, English, History, you can just imagine what he thought of that. Forget the fact that I got three As, could've gone to Oxford—no, it wasn't good enough, sixth form, uni, staying on for a Master's, it was all just—deferring my manly responsibility. I was—that time he saw me—” and then he cuts off, hears his father's voice once again, clear as day: faggot.

Alex takes a shaky breath and forces a smile. “You were the son he always wanted,” he says. “Not me. I'm a failure.”

It's loud in the bar now, and busy. Most of the table are full. It's nearly eight and the setting sun paints the station opposite in crimson flares as it grows darker outside. The first rush of post-work drinkers has moved on, and the next wave's arriving. It's Thursday night, and now the women's outfits sparkle, skin shimmers as Alex looks at them. Suddenly, he wants nothing more than to be home and to crawl beneath the duvet and sleep for the next week.

“I didn't know that,” Sophie says. “Dad really said those things about me?”

He nods.

“You're not a failure, Alex.” Sophie says. “You're just... finding yourself.”

“Yeah? Look at me!” He plucks at the shiny black blouse he's wearing, pulls it from where it clings between his fake tits. “Look at what I've found. Some man I've proven to be.”

They sit in silence for a bit after that, as the bar grows steadily busier. A waitress passes by and clears their empty glasses and the plate of nachos. He barely remembers eating them. The second bottle of wine's nearly empty, too. He sighs; so does Sophie; they look at each other and a ghost of a smile flickers across both their faces.

“So—what are you going to do, little brother?”

He shrugs. “I don't know. It depends on you. I went for the interview, like you said. Are you still going to kick me out?”

Sophie looks pained. “I—have to, Alex. I'm sorry, I am, but—I need that room back, I need the income from the room. Money's tight. Business has been slow.”

There's a look of panic in his eyes, and it tremors his voice. “I can—pay, I've got some money, the inheritance—”

But she's shaking her head. “I can't take that money, Alex, you know that. Besides, it wouldn't last long. A room in a canal-side flat in Islington, ten minute walk from the station, you have any idea what I charge for that?”

Pale-faced beneath fading makeup, he stares at her. He feels a terrible anxiety bubbling up inside of him. In a moment, she's going to tell him to go home. He can't go home. He needs to stay; to stay, he needs an income; and that means a job.

“What if I took the job?” he blurts out.

She nearly laughs. “You can't take that job. Haven't we been over this? It's for a girl.”

“I got through one day. I can survive another.”

“And the day after that? And the week after that?”

“Three months,” he said. “I just need to get through the probationary period, right? I can turn down the mentorship program, and with three months’ experience on the CV, my chances of finding the next job goes up, right?”

“Alex—”

“I can do this, Soph.” He’s leaning forward now, across the table, face hot and flushed with alcohol, with shame but also with excitement and passion. “I don’t want to—I mean, I *do*, I want to work, right? Yeah, it’s not ideal, it’s not what I *wanted* but the pay’s good, and it’s experience, and if I’ve got to—dress—a certain way, well—I might hate it, but isn’t that what being an adult is all about, doing stuff you hate in exchange for stuff you need? I... need this, Soph, but I can’t do it without you. I need a place to stay and with an income, I can pay rent and... I’ll need your help.”

Shaking slightly, he pours out the last of the wine, topping up his glass, and hers too, watching his sister’s reaction. He can see she’s mulling it over. Finally, she seems to come to a decision.

“One month,” she says. “We give it one month. And if this works, if you don’t fuck it up, once you’ve got that first month’s pay under your belt, you find your own place to live, a flat share of your own.”

He nods.

But she’s not done. “You’ve got to go into this with eyes open, Alex. This isn’t a one-day thing. You got through today, great, but you’ll have to do a hell of a lot better if it’s going to be daily. These people will get to know you. They’ll see you every day. And they’ll have expectations, a place like L&C, they’ve got a very specific kind of girl in mind when they hire a receptionist. You think you can manage that? One day, and you’re already cracking, Alex. Now think, every day for a month, for three months. Makeup, every single morning and throughout the day, you’ll have to keep yourself looking fresh. And shaving! Your face—chest too, I imagine, and legs, armpits too. And you won’t get away with trousers, either. What was the receptionist wearing today? Let me guess: pencil skirt, fitted top? Now imagine yourself wearing the same thing. You okay with that? Skirts and tights, stockings and high heels, accessories, too—earrings, you’ll have to get your ears pierced. Hair and nails as well. And you’ll have to do something about up top, ‘cause those rice-titties aren’t going to cut it, they won’t pass constant inspection, and I hate to say it, but you’ll be inspected, people are going to check you out, Alex.

“Or rather, Blake. Because for eight hours a day you’ll be her, Alex: Blake Morgan. Eight hours if you’re lucky! If you’re thinking you can just take her off after work, you’re in for a shock. Job like this, there’ll be late nights. Early starts. Don’t forget commute time. And going out, or are you going to spend the next three months running straight home after work? Of course not, you’ll want—maybe have to—join colleagues after work for a drink, isn’t that the whole point? You’ll have to stay in character, and have you even thought about who that character might be? What kind of girl is she, Alex, what’s Blake like? Because the girl I see in front of me right now, she seems pretty miserable. I don’t think she’s got what it takes, she won’t get through her probationary period. Nobody wants a miserable receptionist. Blake needs to smile! And she needs to look good, too. New clothes, new makeup, shoes—and voice; think you can do that, Alex? Because I’ll be honest, little brother: I don’t think you can. I’m not trying to be mean here,

just honest. I don't think you've got it in you, I don't think most men have it in them to do what a woman does, every single day. I give you a week, before you're on the next coach home."

He swallows nervously, and nods, once and jerkily. "I can do it," he says.

"Sleep on it," she says.

They finish their wine, order another bottle. They talk. Alex can't remember ever talking to his sister this easily. The wine helps. She asks about Luca, how his family took the news. Fine, Alex answers, they were cool with him coming out. He already knew, of course. Luca was his best friend and told him first, years earlier, when they did *Romeo and Juliet* together. After all, there were all those kisses, tender first kiss at the Capulet party, then those fleeting teenage balcony farewells, and finally the two lovers' final passion before Romeo's exile. Luca said he didn't feel right kissing him without letting him know first, which confused Alex at the time; what difference did it make, they were acting, right?

What about you, Alex asks: anyone in your life? Sophie smiles, shrugs, moves the conversation on to different topics. They talk about school, their shared experiences at the local comprehensive before he moved on to St Oswald's. They talk about back home. They talk about London. They talk about their father, but only briefly; the topic remains raw and uncomfortable.

Sophie pays the bill. By this time, it's late and neither fancies catching a night bus, not back to Islington, not dressed as he is, even though she drags him to the women's toilets, stands guard as he takes a piss and then, rather drunken and giggling, fixes his makeup before they leave. She calls an Uber. The ride home passes in a blur. Smears of lights stain the glass as he rests his forehead against the cool window. He dozes; next thing he knows, his sister's pulling him from the car. Arm-in-arm, they stagger back to her flat. The moment he's through the door, he's tearing at his blouse, at his trousers, yanks the hairclip from his hair and tosses it to one side. Then, he's in the loo and puking his guts up.

When he wakes up, he's face down on his bed, pillow stained with streaks of makeup. He aches, realises he's still wearing his sister's bra and the girdle. Alex groans, staggers to his feet and from his room into the bathroom. He struggles out of the undergarments, takes a piss, drinks some water, avoids looking at himself in the mirror. He pulls on a bathrobe and moves into the kitchen to find his sister at the breakfast table, again in her colourful kimono. Sunlight beams in through the windows and he winces. Sophie seems fine, she grins at him over coffee. He ignores her. He finds the women's jacket he wore yesterday. In the inside pocket, his phone.

He makes the call. He only speaks for a minute, using Blake's voice. "Yes," he says, and soon after, "I'd love to accept your offer, I'd be thrilled to work for Lockwood and Carmichael. I'll send the paperwork through today. Thank you."

He hangs up and without another word or glance at his sister, returns to his room. He closes the door behind him. His head throbs. He feels like throwing up again. Alex sits at the edge of his bed and holds himself. And then he cries, like a child given a gift they never wanted.

Chapter Three: One in Three

5:30 a.m. and Aqua informs him life's fantastic, Sophie's idea of a joke.

Alex fumbles for his phone and kills the alarm. He hides for several long minutes under the duvet. Eventually, he groans, summons the willpower to leave the comfort of his bed. It's still dark, and the flat is quiet. Clutching his phone in one hand, scratching his balls with the other, he stumbles to the bathroom. Lights flicker to life overhead. He leans heavily on the sink and stares blearily into the mirror. Thursday, he tells himself.

He sighs, reaches for the cheap, wide-toothed plastic comb. His hair curls in beneath his chin, styled in a bob cut that frames his face. Fifty quid it cost him, then more for the dye job that turned mousy brown to deep black. His roots are already starting to show. Sharp strokes clear overnight tangles. Then, he steps into the shower. He twists the dial over to hot. Hanging his head, the hot water courses over his lean frame. He relaxes, takes a piss. Wrinkles his nose at the smell of last night's food returning on him, the asparagus velouté at Margot in Covent Garden. Mid-week hump, Amber said last night, let's treat ourselves, we deserve it, girl. Her smile sparkled, beautiful and impossible to refuse. His cock twitches, thinking of her. He's not really in the mood but jerks off anyway. Most mornings, he has a wank in the shower. Normally, it doesn't take very long, he wakes with morning wood and his spank-bank's pretty full, he doesn't have to reach far for inspiration. This morning, it takes a bit more effort than usual. He's tired, got home too late, went to bed even later by the time he cleaned his face and brushed out his hair. He's close to giving up when he glances down, and the sight of his cock between glossy pink nails makes him think of Amber's hand and her slender fingers, and that sees him through to a shuddering release.

Afterward, he reaches for the shampoo bottle, pink with a promise of thicker hair wrapped in grapefruit scent, followed by conditioner, then a moisturizing body wash, shea butter and vanilla. There's a mirror in the shower, which he uses to shave his face. He used to shave maybe once a week. Now, it's another daily task. Then he checks his legs, armpits, and chest, grimaces, lathers, switches razors, and shaves those, too.

Out of the shower, he pats himself dry, then another bottle, this one peach-coloured, a scented body lotion he rubs into damp skin. He pays special attention to dry patches on his chest. His legs gleam afterwards, long and slender. It still takes him aback, his denuded body, the difference it makes. Now at the sink, he wipes the mirror clear of fog and stares into himself. He takes a deep breath. You've got this, he tells himself. You got through yesterday. You'll get through today. And you'll get through tomorrow. And the tomorrow after that. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

He checks the time. He's doing okay, despite the longer-than-usual shower. First, he checks his armpits. He did fine, no nicks this time, missed hairs, nothing ingrown. He rolls on antiperspirant. Then he washes his face again, an unscented cleanser this time and follows with a splash of cold water. Tweezers make quick work of a few unruly eyebrow hairs. He flares his nostrils, plucks a few of those too, wincing. He gives his damp hair a quick, vigorous brushing, then pats his face dry, wraps himself in a towel, and quietly pads back to his room.

It's still dark and quiet, just gone six, the sky outside the window bruised in shades of mauve and indigo. Sophie won't stir for at least another hour, probably two. He'll be long gone by then. He shuts the door to his room and crosses to the vanity in the corner. These days, his room's a study in contrasts. Faded jeans, an oversized hoodie, and a pale blue work shirt wait

alongside shiny blouses, pencil skirts, and a single dress, crammed into a closet whose doors won't quite close anymore. Dresser drawers overflow with plain boxers and cotton socks, next to a tangle of tights, M&S multipack knickers, and a jumble of colourful bras: plain turquoise, lacy black, demi-cup peach with a satin sheen. Last night's low-heeled pumps sit alongside mud-stained trainers.

Sweeping a pair of laddered tights from a stool, he sits at the table and starts. He props his 'Alex' phone by the mirror. His 'Blake' phone is there already, and he queues up a TikTok video he bookmarked last week. The young woman's chatter on repeat cheerfully guides him. There's also a sheet of A5 he's affixed to the mirror with Blu Tack, a step-by-step makeup sequence Alex wrote out after a few hours' online research. He half-wonders if any real girl goes through this much effort in the morning. Then again, he's not a girl. He's got each stage mostly memorized by this point, but still.

He dabs a little cream beneath the eyes, then primes. Dark brown pencil to fill in sparse eyebrows, spoolie to brush them out. Now, he glances over at the video. Soft beige base, switch brush, brown in the crease, blend. He's been doing this daily for weeks now but still hesitates. A darker brown now, applied to the outer corner. Yes. He considers a little gold shimmer over the lid. Last time he tried, he messed it up, had to start over. Fuck it, he's still running a little ahead this morning, he decides to go for it. He gets it right. Alex grins. He likes how it brightens his eyes. He's tempted to try the purple and berry tones in his palette. The tutorials say they'll bring out the green in his eyes, make the hazel pop. But he's not brave enough, worries it won't look professional. Save the colour for a night out. Eyeliner next. This part he hates. Every time, he's convinced he'll poke his eye out. With nervous short strokes, he draws in the upper lash. Then, he gives it a little flick at the corners. He's not brave enough to attempt a full wing yet. But still, not bad. Mascara next. That's easy. He crimps his eyelashes with a curler, then two coats in black: done. Amber keeps pushing him to try false lashes, but he's resisted so far. Somehow, that feels a step too far. He tilts his head, checks his work in the mirror. The pretty eyes of a girl peer out from the face of a young man.

He doesn't stop; he can't stop, or he might give up. He swipes a little peach colour corrector over his beard area—Sophie laughed at him the first time, what beard? she said—blends it in and lets it set before reaching for foundation. He pumps a bit onto the back of his hand, dabs dots across his face, spreads it with a sponge, with care over the previous layer. Discolorations disappear: a small patch of rosacea, the pale scar near his temple. There's a new pimple blossoming at the corner of his mouth. He's tired, and it shows. Imperfections like these, he never used to notice. Or maybe he did, but didn't care. Whatever; now, flaws demand erasure. And so, concealer next, a little under the eyes, gently tapping, a bit more along his jaw. He'd found these stages the hardest when he first started practicing in that hectic week before starting the new job. At first, far too much, a heavy, greasy-feeling mask. Wrong shade, too: he looked orange, then pale, or his neck and face didn't match. He didn't blend properly. Creases and cracks appeared. He forgot to set. Sophie helped. But mostly, he taught himself.

Now, he sees the unblemished canvas of his face and already, the boy's fading, the girl rising to the surface. A little bronzer brings her into sharper definition as he sweeps the brush across high cheekbones, his jawline, a touch at the temple. It makes him think of an archaeologist sweeping away detritus to uncover hidden treasure. Next, he unscrews a little pot, taps his finger in, smiles, applies a little blush, blending it upwards towards his temples. He used to put on way too much. Now, it looks far more natural. His fingers alight on a little plastic box of highlighter—he pulls them back. Last time he tried, his cheeks ended up way too shiny,

like he was sweating. Not a great look. St. Clair hadn't been impressed, commenting archly on appropriate times and places.

He turns first right, then left in the mirror, checks the results of his labour. Not bad. Good even. He fancies he can still see the boy beneath the makeup, but only because he *wants* to see him. It's a lot of work but at the same time, he thinks: is that all it takes? No: there's clothes, still, and underwear, shoes, hair and accessories, his nails, a whole routine to bring out Blake. But he sees her already in the mirror, soft-skinned and pretty. He spritzes himself with a setting spray and gives it a moment. He'll do his lips later, after breakfast. But he can't deny, he's come a long way from that first week, when Sophie surprised him with a makeup kit from Boots. Get practicing, she said; and he did. Most girls start wearing makeup around thirteen; he read that on Reddit, so it must be true. Maybe he hadn't quite caught up on a decade's practice in a single short month, but he'd done alright.

To which he thinks, great. Well, they say London changes a man, and it certainly changed him. Anyways, next step: clothes. He usually tries to have the day's outfit sorted the night before, to ease the morning's cognitive load, but he got in too late last night. Now it's Thursday, and everybody knows Thursday's the new Friday, and that means grabbing a few drinks after work, and Amber's already extracted a promise from him, don't leave me hanging, she said, she can't bear the thought of being the only woman—the only *girl*, rather—out tonight, not with those neeks from IT tagging along, a few junior associates, probably a lady or two from HR, even though he knows she'll probably disappear with Jacob after the first round and Alex will be left to fend for himself, as those asshole associates circle, eyes on the new girl, chum in the water. Probably Amber's plan, even, she's been pushing him to go on a date. Christ, that's the last thing he needs. In any case, he needs something he can wear all day, night too, fine for the office that he can tweak to wear out afterwards.

No fucking skirts, no fucking dresses, he insisted before the interview. That edict didn't last for long. He spends more time in skirts than trousers these days. He digs the brown check miniskirt from John Lewis out of the closet. It's the one Sophie wanted him to wear that first day. As with so many things, she gets her way. But she was right, he looks great in it. He digs through a drawer and pulls out a pair of black tights, pauses, digs deeper and pulls another pair, stored in a soft linen bag. This pair's his favourite—not that he'd admit that to Sophie—a pair of Welford tights, a gift from his sister. He'll swap into them tonight, when they go out. But not for the trip into work. He did that once, laddered them and just like that, out thirty quid, a fact that still baffles him, that something so ephemeral can cost so much. From the closet, he grabs a fitted button-back blouse with mesh sleeves and a high-necked top. It's silky and shiny and black, with a row of frills down the front. There's a mesh sweetheart panel that'll hint at the bra beneath. So: the padded bra, then—the red one, full coverage with the floral lace—also his favourite, though he can't quite say why. For some reason, this one just sits more comfortably, the straps dig less into his shoulders; maybe that's it.

Met Office says it's going to be another hot, bright day, another record-breaking summer, just like last year and the year before that. He envies the fact his female colleagues—Amber, the few female associates, the ladies in HR, even Ms. St-Clair—can get away with something a little lighter, a plunging neckline or bared shoulders. Anything to cool down in this weather. But he can't, he needs the shapewear, and he's got to draw attention away from his shoulders. He's getting used to guys staring at his illusion of tits, but they remain just that, fake: no cleavage baring tops for him. Why can't it be winter, Alex thinks. It'd be so much easier.

He lays the clothes out on his bed. Strip off his boxers and considers the final and most important step. The girdle would do the job, but he's not strapping himself into that fucking thing all day. The waist-cincher might work, nip in the waist rather than pad out the hips. Still bloody uncomfortable, but at least he can take a piss without rearranging everything. But the skirt's short, only falls to mid-thigh, and tight-fitting, too. Pop a boner, game over. He's gotten away with tights over knickers in looser clothing before, but that's not going to cut it today. It's tempting to swap to a floating dress, something A-line that might conceal his lack of curves, but he doesn't really have anything suitable for a night out. Besides, his legs are his best feature, even Amber said that.

So he eyes the spool of surgical tape sitting on his dresser, groans, decides against it. Gaff, then, another 'gift' from Sophie. He lies back on the bed and pulls the garment halfway up his legs. Then, he gently pushes his testicles up into the inguinal canal, taking care with his longer nails not to hurt himself. God, he hates this. So uncomfortable it makes his stomach squirm. It took several tries and a lot of online research to get it right. He's done it often enough now to do it without hesitation, but still. He hates it. And he knows it'll be a real pain tonight, after a few drinks, when he needs to take a piss every fifteen minutes and he'll have to go through the same faff in the claustrophobic confines of a fucking stall in the woman's loo at some glitzy City bar. But the alternative isn't worth considering, not after he's gotten this far. He's had a few near-calls already, when the taping slipped, or the gaff's compression wasn't enough on its own, or he risked something more comfortable and paid the price. He feels himself grow hot beneath his makeup just thinking of it. Christ, if someone caught him—if St-Clair or Amber caught him—or worse, one of the guys in the office—he'd just die.

The garment's black, with a little lace along the edges and a high-waisted lace panel for his tummy. It's also a thong. He'd never worn a thong before all this started. He remembers Sophie's smirk, when she first gave him the underwear. It'll give you a little wiggle when you walk, remind you of what you're doing. Like he needs a reminder, he grumbles, tugging the gaff into position. He feels the compression as he stands, passes the palm of his hand over his smooth front. Shit, perfectly girl-like, and already he feels the first twinge in his balls which he knows will grow to a dull throb, and eventually pain, before he lets his bits loose later today and resets.

Shaking his head, he pulls on the tights, cool against recently denuded legs, then he steps into the skirt and slides it up over his hips. With a little snick, he tugs the hidden zipper at the side up his slender frame and feels the skirt draw tight across his bum and thighs. He pauses to check his silhouette in the mirror, twisting a little, sweeping one hand over his crotch. Nothing there and his legs look fantastic, sleek and smooth in black. Then he smooths the skirt down over his bum. The way the inner lining slides against bum cheeks left bare—other than the tights—by the thong feels uniquely feminine, whatever that means. It sends a shiver down his spine, nonetheless. But he can't deny his ass looks great in this skirt.

Feeling a twinge in his balls, he buries the thought. Now the bra, and it's much easier now, he doesn't have to do it up front and twist it around anymore. The only difficulty comes from fiddling with the catch with long nails. From the top of the wardrobe, he takes a pair of silicone breasts. Chicken cutlets, Sophia called them when she gifted them to him. A pair of breasts, high-quality gaff, a makeup kit and overpriced tights: his girl-life starter pack, she called it. Now he picks up the cool silicone teats, applies adhesive to the back of both, and slips them into the bra. He shivers at their touch, but they warm quickly. For the few minutes it takes the adhesive to set, he holds them firmly in place. His image in the mirror mocks him, his hands on

some girl's tits. God, he hates these things, too. Most days, he doesn't bother and the padded bra's enough on its own, and he's still got those rice-filled stockings. But he's going out tonight. An inadvertent touch, attentive male eyes, a visit to the loo in company of girls; safer to make sure he fills those cups properly.

Finally, he shrugs into the button-back blouse, struggling with the row of tiny faux-pearl buttons at his neck. If Sophie was awake, he'd ask for her help. Probably she'd laugh, make some snide remark as she helped. Maybe it's best she's still in bed. The shirt is tight and leaves his back bare between bra line and collar. It's a paradox of feminine fashion, he's found, that he can be fully dressed and yet still feel exposed.

Fully dressed, he takes a moment to assess himself in the mirror. He sees a young woman there, professional, a bit prim and proper, maybe, but also more than a little sexy. Her shiny black top cuts close to her slim frame, pushed out enticingly by full tits, and loose mesh sleeves veil slender arms beneath. A tight miniskirt hugs her hips, ending at mid-thigh and from there, sleek legs sheathed in black. She's got great legs. Her eyes are—beautiful, wide and expressive—framed by black bangs, and her face, soft and meticulously made up; this girl clearly takes care in her appearance. Only her lips want for a little colour.

Alex sighs. Nearly done. He brushes out his hair with swift confident strokes. It's a simple enough style, he thinks, thank fuck, though it's more than he's ever dealt with. A few minutes with the hair dryer, then a little product, and a few minutes more in the mirror, poking a few stray hairs into place. He considers a brown hairband, gnaws on his lower lip, decides against it. There's a little jewellery box on the vanity, washed out grey reclaimed wood, with tiny drawers and a lid. He digs through it and settles on a pair of mid-sized hoops. Even he accepted he wasn't going to get away with clip-ons, and the same day he accepted the job, Sophie booked him in for a salon visit, and now his ears are pierced, he's got two holes in each lobe, glittery stud in the upper, whatever he wears for the day in the lower. It's one of those things he worries about, especially on weekends when he's back to presenting as a man. Does anyone notice the piercing holes? Then again, who would? It's not like he's got any friends in London, 'Blake' has more friends than he does.

He tilts his head, threads the hoop through the lower piercing, and again the other ear, feels their weight as a still-unfamiliar tug, and in some ways, this simple action feels the most feminine of everything he does. Finally, he slips a bracelet over his right wrist, a silver ring on his left hand, the slim woman's watch too, and adds a necklace. A small, blue glass ball trapped in silver filigree nestles between the curve of his breasts. It once belonged to his mum.

By this time the first ruby rays of sunrise slice the far walls of the flat, lancing between slits in the vertical blinds. It's nearly seven. Alex makes himself a cup of breakfast tea, strong with a splash of oatmilk. In the fridge, there's a tall protein shake waiting for him, courtesy of his sister, made the night before, as usual. Sophie started him on a diet the day after he accepted the job. Hypocritical bitch, he thinks, she seems to take special pleasure in stuffing her gob with fatty food in front of him. Yet he can't deny he packed on weight over those first three months in London, too much beer, crisps and junk food scoffed down whilst endlessly scrolling angry Youtube videos justifying his failures. But the proof's in the pudding—or lack thereof—a glance at his narrowed waist and slimming belly evidence enough the liquid breakfasts are working. Shoulders and arms, too. It's only been a month, and he feels lighter—which is good—but also weaker, which isn't.

And yet, he has to stay slim. Officially, his workplace couldn't comment on his weight; unofficially, St. Clair made it clear he wouldn't make his probationary period without maintaining a certain appropriate, client-facing appearance. Besides, keeping slim made sense, financially: he fits into Sophie's old clothes. They certainly don't fit her anymore. But he hates it, the calorie counting, the constant watching-what-he-eats. And he's not convinced he's actually taking in that much fewer calories. Less solid food, certainly. But his new social life involves a hell of a lot more drinking.

He carries his breakfast and tea over to the little table by the balcony doors looking out over the canal. The light outside has softened to turquoise hues, and the first yellows glimmers across the placid surface of the canal. A few runners are already out. Alex drinks his tea. These are his favourite five minutes of the day. The world is quiet, and he can believe that this is the life he yearned for, that of the young professional enjoying a cup of tea in their central London flat before heading into the city for the day. Breakfast goes down thickly: oatmilk and banana, yogurt and flaxseed, some kind of protein powder his sister mixes in. The taste's not too bad, but he hates the texture.

He looks out over narrowboats and early pedestrians caught in the first light of the new day and clings to the transient calm the tea brings. But all too soon, the tea's done. Breakfast too, and he sighs and stands, the illusion of a perfect life broken. His skirt draws tightly across his thighs, silicone breasts sit heavily in their cups, hair tickles cheek and neck, and there's a dance of earrings with every move; an ever-present cling of floral scent; and the flash of pink nails against white porcelain mug. He's reminded: no, this isn't the dream; and femininity is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

Alex is still hungry. He's always hungry these days, used to it now and there's a Graze bar waiting for him in his desk at work. He checks his handbag. Office ID badge and lanyard. His Blake-phone, pink which he tucks into an inner pocket. Keys to Sophie's flat. Slim wallet, black with pink trim, though there's not much in there, a loyalty card for Waterstones, punch card for the sandwich shop around the corner, his driver's license with his name Alexander Blake tucked beneath it. Fake driver's license with *her* name, Blake Morgan's name; Sophie got it for him somehow, he has no idea how. Small moleskin notebook, pale pink. Two Muji gel pens, one black, one red. Dog-eared copy of *Intermezzo* in paperback, he's about halfway done reading it. Bluetooth headphones. Rollon deodorant. Makeup bag, the same one Sophie gave him that first day and in it, an array of vials, tubes, brushes, pencils and pens, powder. Small, square compact mirror. Collapsible hairbrush. Bottle of Nivea hand cream, and another bottle of hand sanitizer. A few Compeed plasters. Rumpled ball of a thin black cardigan. There's an emergency pair of cheap M&S tights in there already, to which he adds the small linen bag with the Welford pair for later tonight. In a separate, smaller bag, a little surgical tape and skin-sensitive adhesive, just in case. Nail file, and a little matchbook of safety pins, with some thread. In another inner pocket, a few tampons he'll never need, alongside a box of Ibuprofen he'll definitely need, and two condoms, which he'll can't imagine needing, not dressed like this. Spare pair of crumpled panties. Beneath it all, his old phone, his Alex-phone, set to silent and buried at the bottom of the bag.

His water bottle's waiting on the drying rack by the sink. He fills it with water from the Brita, wipes it dry. He checks the fridge. Every morning, he wishes he'd had the time or energy to prepare lunch the night before, save some cash, and today like most other days he'll have to grab a takeaway lunch from somewhere. But there's an apple, so he grabs that and closes the fridge. He adds the water bottle and apple to the bag, hefts it with one arm. Christ. It's a heavy

burden, this bag, but he can't think of anything he'd leave out and lighten the load. He misses the days he'd head out with a knapsack over one shoulder with nothing more in it than a novel, a notebook and pen, and a water bottle.

Leaving the handbag by the front door, he heads to the bathroom. The two minutes it takes to brush his teeth is an invitation to hunt for flaws in the mirror. Alex finds himself torn between morbid curiosity and horrified denial in the examination of his own face. There's a girl in the mirror—a little overly made-up for his tastes, maybe—but she's pretty with beautiful eyes, and that girl is him. He spits and, shaking his head, returns to his room. Final touches. He settles at the vanity and does his lips. A swipe of lip balm, then a neutral lipstick, and he follows with a bit of plumping gloss. Alex feels the tingle, purses his lips, pouts, forces a smile for the mirror. He still can't get over the difference a bit of colour to his lips can make. Without the lipstick and gloss, he imagines he can still glimpse a bit of his old self, embodied by colourless, dry male lips. But like this, plump and shiny and pink, the illusion feels complete. Briefly, he loses himself in a study of his own lips. Even to his own eyes, they appear very kissable, full and soft. Maybe instead of his legs, these are his best feature? He glances down at his legs, sleek in tights, knees pressed together in his miniskirt and skewed to one side as he sits on the stool. It's a tough call; both lips and legs look undeniable, attractively feminine. Hairs on the back of his neck rise, like goosebumps, as he studies himself in the mirror.

It's the click of his nails against the tabletop surface that snaps him out of it. He checks his nails. This was a step he resisted, vehemently, but of course Sophie got her way. A passing comment by Ms. St-Clair convinced him, too. The next day, high quality falsies, pale ovals that still sort of freak him out and he's not sure he'll ever get used to them. Sophie and the internet taught him how to apply them—it took some practice before he got it right—and now it's part of his Sunday night ritual: wiping his natural nails clean with alcohol, filing them smooth, scoring the surface before applying the glue and then the patient press of the false nail at the tip of each finger. They last the week if he's careful. He's learned to paint them, too, make sure they coordinate with whatever he's wearing. Which they don't; he sighs, searches amongst the countertop and finds a colour to match his lips. He'll take care of it at work.

Friday night they come off. Usually, and it's a fucking relief when they do. That first week wearing them, he snagged and ruined three pairs of tights—fortunately, cheaper ones—swearing loudly each time before learning to take greater care. Of all the overt manifestations of his enforced femininity, he perhaps hates his nails most of all. He hates the way longer nails force him to flutter his fingers, the awkward grip of a pen, the challenge of typing, the care they insist he takes with every motion. He's constantly aware of the flash of colour at the edge of his vision, or the risk of a chip in the varnish, or worse, catching and tearing one off. Every time he sees his flared fingers and those pearly, pink ovals, he feels himself a right fairy.

Finally done, he stands, looks at himself in the full-length mirror, brushes himself down, gives his makeup a final check, pauses. Alex slides his hand down the front of his skirt and feels only smoothness. His fingers pluck at the hem, gives a hopeless little tug. He then pokes at his hair, brushes a bang to one side. He's staring at his reflection, looking for something. Whatever it is, it's not there. Then he leaves his room. A moment later he returns and grabs the chocolate brown hairband, slips it on. Muttering under his breath, he leaves his room again. He returns a second later, cursing. He snatches a photograph from the vanity, the Polaroid of his father.

From the living room, he grabs the slender shoulder bag with his laptop in it. To this, he adds the handbag's familiar weight. He slides the photo into the inside pocket. Then he slips on

a pair of ballet flats and leaves home before he changes his mind, turns around, and climbs back into bed.

Every day, he forgets something. Yesterday, it was his lip balm. The day before that, breast adhesive, and when those bastards slipped halfway through the day, he nearly shat himself with anxiety. Another day, it was his entire makeup bag. Amber nearly pissed herself laughing at his panic, covering for him as he dashed to Superdrug for some emergency slap. Today, it's his sunnies, and he curses as the sun lifts over the edge of buildings and blinds him.

But it's otherwise a pleasant enough walk up the canal towpath, past the drooping willow branches, watching the coots as they dip and dive along the water. He passes several long narrow boats. There's a bright green and blue one, the *Happy Days*. Every morning, smoke puffs from its stained metal chimney and there's a smell of freshly brewed coffee. An older man in a bathrobe sits at the prow, sipping from a dinged metal mug, and nods as Alex walks past. Alex inclines his head in return with a smile. Light sparks on the water.

It's good the sun's up. He's walked the path a few times at night, coming home late. As a girl, that is; he did it plenty of times as a guy without thinking anything of it. First time he walked at night in a skirt, he was a little drunk and didn't think anything of it, either. But not the second. That night, a few lads, pissed after a few at the pub, coming down from the Earl or one of the other pubs or bars up top, they saw him as some pretty young thing walking on her own and called out, rude comments to which Alex had no idea how to respond. They approached, a trio of dark silhouettes against the purple of the evening, and—he ran, flats slapping against the path, then the stone stairs leading up from the canal, the laughter of the men following him, heart pounding, chest straining against shapewear, legs trapped in the confines of a long skirt. He hasn't walked the canal path in the dark since.

But it's not dark now, and though there's the promise of heat in the air, for now it's cool in the shade of the canal, the air refreshing against his back. Alex enjoys the walk, to a degree. But he can't help but experience it in a feminine mode, not with the breeze whispering against his legs, and the thong riding up his ass with every step, and the feel and taste of still-fresh makeup on his face. Every sensory impression is a reminder of this role he's chosen. The skirt especially annoys him. It restricts his stride. He wishes it had a little more give, or a vent that allowed for faster walking. He feels it with each step. Still, he grudgingly accepts it effectively reinforces the illusion of girlishness.

And yet, he enjoys this stretch of the canal, and perhaps being forced to walk it slowly has its benefits. It's quiet down here, especially at this time of the day, nearby sounds of the city a muted roar beyond the upper lip of old stone wall. Alex imagines the past, sturdy workhorses towing long, low-hulled boats burdened with coal along the water. He imagines the strong men who dug these channels out by hand, the bricklayers who built the walls, the engineers who designed the locks, the builders who put them in place; all men, strong men carving order through the chaos of a growing city. They're the ones who built London, not—

A jogger passes from behind, surprising him, phone strapped to her wrist, AirPods, tight grey athletic wear and bared toned midriff, ponytail jouncing with each step. He admires her firm ass as she retreats in the distance. Soon after, another runner comes his way, this time from the front, male, bearded, bright shorts, hairy legs, loose t-shirt dark with sweat in a V, and this man openly enjoys his view of Alex: his gaze dances hair-eyes-tits-legs, and he grins as he passes, closer than necessary, nearly pushing him to the wall.

Wanker, Alex thinks, but refrains from calling out, as his sister would have. At the tunnel, he climbs the cycle ramp up to street level emerging, blinking, from the relative cool of the water's edge into Islington. He cuts through the Gardens, checking out the row of terraced homes, each one worth millions. Stepping onto the main road, the quiet of his walk falls away and he's back in it now, even this early in the morning, another London day.

At Angel Tube station, he retrieves his phone from his handbag as he approaches the turnstile, taps with the unconscious ease of a daily commuter, and passes through and onto the longest escalator on the Underground. During the minute-and-a-half-descent, he digs out his earphones, starts up an audiobook. Given the choice, he'd listen to music: Portishead, Massive Attack, Tricky; Radiohead feels appropriate to his mood. Instead, he listens to *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* Sophie's filled his phone with a selection of Audiobooks she thinks will help. This one's soothing, at least, the woman's voice an antidote to the grinding noise of the Northern Line. And he can't deny he needs the help with keeping motivated, breaking free of unhealthy rumination, and keeping positive.

The station isn't very busy, not this early in the morning, though there's a steady flow of people into the station. It's why he heads into work this early; or at least, it's one of the reasons. He could leave later. He'd love an extra thirty minutes of sleep. But the difference between a 7:30am and 8am commute is stark. This way, he's all but guaranteed a seat on the train. He won't be pressed up against anyone.

There have been late night trips home on crowded Tube trains. Those were bad enough as a guy, when lairy men stinking of booze swore and shouted, or someone puked by the exit. It was worse as a girl: an unwanted hand at a thigh, or on your ass; the awful feeling of someone pressed up against you from behind and breathing deeply, nose buried in your hair. There was one morning, early on, when he left late and the train was so busy, he found himself sandwiched in the press of people. Most passengers had the middle-distance stare of true Londoners. But there'd been one older man in a fine suit who simply stared hungrily into his face the whole time and licked his lips in a way that made Alex's stomach churn. At the next stop, in the swell of passengers disembarking and crowding on, he suddenly found the edge of a briefcase slipped up beneath his skirt. It pressed into his crotch, a sharp corner rubbing him through compression fabric. He tried to dismiss it as an accident. The next morning, the same crowds and crush of people. No briefcase, this time. He stared stony-faced into the middle-distance. Gradually, he noticed the smirks, wide-eyed glances, and frowns—all directed at him. The train jerked and screeched around a corner. He stumbled, held upright by the press of people and then felt the hand surreptitiously grope the padding of an unfeeling tit. He froze, red-faced, and didn't know what to do. Another rough squeeze—the anonymous pervert disappeared at the next stop. Feeling hot and sick, he stumbled from the train and had to sit down at a platform bench as the uncaring crowds flowed by, clutching his stomach, until the trembling eased. He told Sophie that evening; she looked sympathetic but raised three fingers. One in three, she said. That's how many women experience sexual harassment on the Tube. Welcome to the other side, little brother.

Now he makes it a point of getting up earlier and avoiding the crowds. The platform's busy, Northern Line smell, but the wait short. Small, steel-grey mice scurry along the tracks. They've adapted to the dark tunnels of the Underground, bristly fur the colour of soot and metal dust. Life, he thinks every time he sees the little critters, infinitely adaptable given enough incentives. Then the train arrives with a grind of wheels and a rush of wind that pulls at his skirt, fluttering the ruffles of his top, and he sees himself reflected in the passing flash of slowing

windows, like a stuttering image captured in a Victorian zoetrope, a pretty young woman tucking hair behind her ear.

It's a short trip, one stop to King's Cross, change to the Piccadilly Line, two stops to Holborn. Too quick, really, he wishes for a bit more time to sit and zone out to the soothing sounds of his audiobook. It's during the morning commute that he misses the more relaxed pace of back home most. London feels relentless at times. There's an energy to that, it's exciting but still—he's been up for two hours already, yet the day has barely started. Alex wishes he could close his eyes and power nap his way to work. But no, he shuffles onto the train and finds a seat near the middle of the carriage. But he's barely sat down before he's up and back out, joining the flow of people in their trudging walk to the Piccadilly Line.

It's busier now. The platform's nearly full in the narrow place between wall and track. As always, idiots refuse to move down the platform. He sidles past, for all appearances just another young woman jostling for space among larger men with legs spread wide around their briefcases, claiming their territory. Alex stands, arms cradled around his handbag, between a lean man in his thirties in a suit, and a younger man in paint-spattered denim overalls, large duffle bag distended by tools at his feet. It's the man in the suit that smiles, eyes lingering over Alex's breasts. Alex rolls his eyes, shifts away. The train pulls in, the doors opening directly in front of him. The man in the suit pushes forward, shoving him out of the way. Twat, Alex thinks. The other man, the one with the tools, shrugs apologetically, stands to one side and allows Alex to board first. Alex smiles appreciatively, but today he's not getting a seat. Instead, he hovers by the door, glaring daggers at the asshole who shoved his way onto the train. The man sits, legs spread wide, briefcase between his knees, eyes fixed on his phone.

But it's only two stops. Alex's eyes slide across the other passengers, picking out the young women—like him—makeup already shining with heat. The train's hot. The air conditioning's not working, again. Not for the first time, he wishes he'd forgone tights and waited until he reached the office. He sees blonde hair, light summer dresses in powdery pink, buttery yellow, mint green. Bare arms and shoulders, short skirts, light fabrics. Apparently, nature-inspired tones like teal and chocolate brown are 'in'. Amber leaves him fashion magazines to read during downtimes at the reception desk at L&C. His face feels hot, his top beginning to stick beneath his breasts, and he feels the first beads of sweat gather at the high-waisted band of the gaff.

Russell Square, and a few passengers disembark, though not many. Enough for him to nab a seat, even if only for a single stop. He sits with his hands beneath his thighs, self-conscious of their size and he tries to keep them as hidden as possible. The four-colour Piccadilly moquette makes a vivid contrast with his beige skirt, a pattern of blue-green, yellow-orange squares, emergent complexity from abstract simplicity. Across from him sits a young woman. He's seen her a few times, every other day maybe, she follows a routine that bisects his. Today, she's wearing vivid red trousers and a white top with a plunging neckline. He looks at her, and she looks back, raising an eyebrow, smiling very slightly with vague recognition. She's very pretty. Her lips are thin and very red, above a small, pointed chin. A stud glints at her nostril, her left eye half-hidden behind a curl of strawberry blonde hair.

Alex wishes he could get to know her better. He'd ask her to join him for coffee. There's a little coffee shop on the walk to work, nestled at the end of an alley behind Holborn station. Two attractive girls sat on high stools over cappuccino, nails flashing against porcelain white, white-teeth flashing between crimson glossed lips; and then—what?

But his stop isn't her stop, and he knows he's unlikely to ever speak to this woman. For some reason, this morning, this upsets him. The audiobook burbles in his ear, something about identifying feelings, expanding his vocabulary of emotions. And he realises he's not upset, but rather frustrated, which he feels as a prickle at the nape of his neck; and ashamed, a twist in his belly; but also turned-on, a throb in his groin.

Holborn. He stands. The girl smiles at him, makes a silent little half-handed wave glimpsed between a teenage boy in ripped jeans and hoodie, and a large, older woman with hair greying at the temples. On the platform, he watches the young woman through the window. Oblivious to his gaze, she reaches into her handbag and retrieves a novel and thumbs it open as the train accelerates. He wonders what she's reading. Then she's gone.

The sun's higher in the sky when he emerges blinking at street level. It's warmer than when he went underground at Angel, but the air still feels cool and refreshing after the stifling heat of the Tube. He stands with the crowd, he's part of it, feeling open and exposed.

Rumble of traffic, murmur of the busy London day as the crowd congregates at the junction. And then, like blood cells from a fresh wound, they flow freely at the change of light: into the big Sainsbury's at the corner, finding readymade breakfast and lunch; quick stops into Superdrug for makeup or sedatives to self-soothe the day, and down the side-roads and winding alleys, A40 capillaries threading through the capital. This is when it hits him, the uncanny sense of living a life not quite his own. Alex watches the ebb and flow of people as they emerge from underground, gather, cross and repeat. He waits for someone to see through the illusion of heavy makeup under the bright glare of day and call him out, to cry, look, look, that girl's really a boy! But nobody does, nobody ever notices, or cares. The warming air stirs and breathes against his thighs, the back of his knee. He stands with his back to Costa Pronto, holding his handbag by the handle with both hands, and shivers. This is what I wanted. Maybe not like this, not *exactly* like this, but this is what I wanted: to step into the light of day and feel the living pulse of the city pass through me. He feels proud to stand there, knowing he's making it. Yet he is also unhappy.

No. The audiobook has moved on to the subject of grief and how to manage it, but with his eyes on the busy streets, the press of people, the muted din of traffic and the dappled dance of morning light through the canopy of trees lining the road, he doesn't hear it. Instead, he thinks about the audiobook's earlier lesson on precision of language, the specificity of emotions. So no, he's not unhappy. There's an element of the anger and depression he felt in the month before his sister convinced him to begin this insane charade; and those emotions themselves were an echo of a year earlier.

He removes his earbuds; the sounds of the city return. As he walks, he mulls it over. Often, some swell of emotions overwhelms him during the day. This morning, it's hit him earlier than usual. Shaking it off, he begins the short walk to the offices of Lockwood & Carmichael.

Checking the thin watch at his wrist, he decides he's running early enough to indulge in a coffee. He stops at a little café he likes. He orders an Americano with milk. There's a seat at the window and he grabs it. After staring out the window for a minute, he digs out his Alex phone. He starts with Reddit, flicks through for a bit, then spends a few minutes reading r/NoStupidQuestions, some girl wondering whether she should question her sexuality after TikTok told her she was bisexual. He reads an article in the Guardian about the ongoing trade wars. He reads a review of the *System Shock 2* remaster. Then he checks in on Luca, finds a

picture of him standing on a beach in Cornwall, arms around the waist of some guy. They're both ripped, skin gilded by the sun and sand. His friend looks happy. Good, Alex thinks.

Dropping his phone back in his bag, he hesitates, then retrieves the photo of his dad. He stares at it for some time, revisiting details he's examined a hundred times before. Silently sipping his coffee, he hears his father's voice: Alex, it's not what you think. Alex, it's time you bloody well grow up. Be a man, Alex. You're too soft. Bloody hell, Alex, why can't you be more like your sister?

Alex slips the photograph back into his bag.

He resumes staring out the window, across the narrow lane and wooden boxes planted with sturdy greenery. A few pedestrians walk swiftly past: teenaged boy in baggy jeans, middle-aged woman in a vest with tattooed arms, a few guys his age in suits, a girl with short hair and a short skirt, legs bare and bright in the sun. The earlier fantasy, the one in which he sits with the woman from the train, returns to him. This is the café he imagines taking her. An irresistible little smile tugs at his lips. His fantasy is one half soft-lesbian porn to heterosexual desire; he wants her as a man but imagines the soft touches and shining lips of two women sitting closely together over coffee on a sunny Thursday morning. Sleek thighs, side-by-side. The swell of full breasts, nearly touching as they lean in close. The feel of her fingers against his arm, and whispered words. He wants to hear her accent, watch her speak and see the dart of a pink tongue across bright teeth. She'll smell faintly of gorse and share with him an intimate secret she's kept close to her heart her whole life.

His crotch throbs. Fucking gaff, but the compression does its job, nothing disturbs the smooth front of his skirt as he sips at his coffee and squirms in discomfort. Focusing on those earlier sensations again, he tries to identify the precise emotions that seized him stepping out of the station. Overwhelmed, he decides, but also excited, the first felt as a tension across his shoulders, the other a prickling of sweat at the nape of his neck. Vulnerable, a shiver down his spine, but also eager: a flutter in his belly. He shakes his head, staring into his drink.

He finishes the coffee and knows he'll regret it in an hour, when he'll need a piss and goes through the faff of re-tucking, this time in the confines of the too-small ladies' bathroom at work. Hopping down from the tall stool, he pays and returns to the busy street. It's just gone eight o'clock, and even if his job doesn't officially start until nine, unofficially it's a good idea to arrive early. Amber pokes fun at him for it, but she got a proper work contract and everything, and Alex is only one month into a three-month probation. He's going to beat this job, but Christ, he didn't expect it to be such hard work. The job on its own's enough, without the daily challenge of passing as 'Blake'.

The main office of Lockwood and Carmichael lies down a narrow side street in Holborn, quiet in that surprising city way considering how close they sit to the main road. The tall narrow buildings here are limestone yellow stone, pre-Victorian and speak of old money, ancient trade and Empire, stained brown with age and centuries of chimney smokes. Walking these alleys, Alex imagines Gothic fog curling sickly wet fingers along ancient brick, the cane-tap of shadowy figures walking wreathed in fog, the cry of orphan thieves.

A small bronze plaque with engraved lettering, mounted to one side of a heavy wooden door, reads Lockwood and Carmichael. There's a blue plaque mounted on the building opposite, the home to some politician over a century ago. He stands there and breathes in deeply. One more day. I've got this, he tells himself. Back straight, shoulders back.

Alex taps his lanyard and steps through. The heavy wooden door closes behind him.

Chapter Four: Just Another Day

It's only just gone eight, but Alex isn't the first to arrive.

Moving with the familiarity of routine, he drops his laptop and handbag by the reception desk and heads straight to the tiny kitchenette. Fluorescent lights flicker to life as he fills and puts the kettle on, measures out coffee grounds into the coffee maker. He grabs three mugs and lines them up on the counter, opens the fridge, pulls out the milk, nudges the door shut with his bum, spoons sugar into one of the mugs. Leaving the kettle to boil, the coffee maker to brew, he returns to the reception desk. He sits, stifling a groan as the gaff pinches. The work laptop boots up with a low whirl. He logs in, nails flashing across the keyboard. First week with these nails, his typing speed dropped dramatically. Now, he's almost back to full speed. It's not like they're *that* long. But still. An adjustment.

He removes his flats and tucks them to one side. Reaching beneath the desk, he retrieves a pair of shoes. They're black, patent leather Kurt Geiger pumps with a pointed toe and detailed eagle head. Little ebony crystals sparkle in the eyes. He was totally against wearing heels, or at least anything over an inch and blocky. But Ms. St- Clair dropped a few disapproving comments and Amber urged him, too: you've got such sexy legs, she told him, shame not to show them off. He mentioned it after work, and Sophie took him shopping that same night. The shoes were one-fifty, discounted to forty, and fit—a find like that, his sister insisted with a grin, you were *destined* to wear these shoes.

But Christ, the three-and-a-half-inch stiletto heel sits very firmly at the limit of what he can handle, even after weeks of practice. He wiggles his toes, feels a twinge of anticipatory discomfort. He slips his feet into one, then the other and stands, feeling the immediate shift in his posture, the pinch in the toes and pressure at the balls of his feet. A few steps, and he finds his stride. He can survive them for the working day, just. After all, he spends most of it sitting down.

There's a tall, narrow mirror between two leather sofas in the reception area, and just as he does every morning, he examines his appearance in it, twisting to see himself in profile, smoothing down a few wrinkles, tucking a stray hair back into place. A diffuse nausea settles in his belly, a sense of guilt. It's not an unfamiliar sensation. Shoes are just another part of the costume. Besides, he looks good in them. The shoes are undeniably hot. Alex just wishes he wasn't the one wearing them.

This early, the office air conditioner hasn't kicked in yet. He notes the humid sheen across his upper lip and where his foundation's started to slip. Blot, powder, lipstick refresh and then the short walk down the dark-panelled corridor, out the rear door. It leads to a tiny courtyard. The courtyard is formed by the back-ends of the surrounding buildings, with grimy windows looking out over the small space, a few holding circular vents lazily turning. A pair of plastic chairs for smokers and a potted plant, scraggly weeds poking through uneven paving stones, and a drain capturing runoff. The door opposite leads into the rear entrance of a narrow 1960s office block where most of the real work happens. Lockwood and Carmichael present old-London style out front, aged men holding court in offices heavy with wood wax and age. But most of the young staff, including the junior associates, work out back.

The air here barely stirs. Out of direct sunlight, the shaded space feels cool against his thighs and arms. The sky above cuts a silhouette of brilliant blue. Alex stands there, blinking into the bright sky. He feels as though he could stand there forever.

Instead, he forces himself forward and soon stands outside the junior offices. Oluwatobi's there, dark face glowing with soft monitor blue, and Mo. And Harry, too. Alex's stomach twists itself in a knot.

These three are always in early. Oluwatobi's working on an energy merger in Dubai for a client offloading his third-generation company before retirement. Mo's poring over fund performance metrics, tweaking a client's quarterly report to make a tariff-induced flatline look like a gentle incline. And Harry has his nose buried in a cap table. He knows what they're working on because he's helped all three these past few weeks. Alex's proofed Tobi's deck, and it's his Orwellian spin on Mo's quarterly losses report creating opportunity events.

Tobi flashes a smile at Alex, and Mo waves without looking away from his screen. Harry grunts, glances up from his computer, then double takes. He licks his lips, smiles in a way that makes Alex's skin crawl, the way those eyes track over him, sliding slowly down his body, lingering over his thighs, then calves, heels. Alex suppresses a shudder, forces a bright smile and greets the boys: coffee, tea? They ask for the usual. He feels their eyes follow him out the room.

On paper, they're not that different: junior associates recently harvested from LSE or Oxbridge, no older than Alex. But he's the one wearing the check mini. He heads back to the kitchenette, pours out coffee for Harry, tea for the other two, slips the three drinks onto a tray. Strictly speaking, this isn't his responsibility, it's not in the job description. He walks slowly and carefully, drinks balanced on the tray. Curles of steam rise from the tea as he crosses the courtyard. He's spilled a drink before, heel wobble in a distracted moment. Harry shouted at him, patting down the stain on his suit, called him names. Alex nearly cried, nearly hit him.

But no problem this morning, he's had lots of practice. At the door, he pauses for a moment, watching these three guys at work. Harry's blue suit, Mo's tangle of dark hair, Tobi's heavy watch. A heavy feeling pulls at him, and he wants nothing more than to follow it down, through the floor, to simply thaw and melt away, and disappear. Alex gnaws on his lip, and the tray grows heavy.

Tobi glances up, grins and calls him a godsend. Mo breaks away from the screen long enough to smile gratefully. Alex brings the men their drinks. Mo's looking more stressed than usual this morning, eyes red as though he's already been at it for a couple of hours, skin pale, beard unkempt as though he's slept here. Most likely, he did, there's a cot in the back room. Harry holds eye contact this time, watches as Alex approaches and places the coffee in front of him, says thanks sweetheart and when Alex turns away, he knows what's coming, it's not the first time. He barely suppresses the flinch as the other man pats his bum but stiffens nonetheless and freezes involuntarily. Harry's touch lengthens into a lingering fondle. Alex finally unlocks, limbs moving again. Ignoring the unwanted touch but still feeling that masculine pressure against his backside, he walks away, hearing the rapid tap of heels against hardwood floor.

He avoids conflict. The risk is too great: his voice might slip, he'd draw attention he can't deflect and pounding that fucking cunt into his desk wouldn't look good on his monthly progress review later today.

Besides, it's just Harry being Harry, as Amber once said, he's a twat, everybody knows that. Of course, when Harry tried it on with Amber, that night out in Shoreditch, her boyfriend Jacob was there to put him in his place. But still. Every time it happens—and it's happened more

than once—Alex wonders if the other guys see it. C'mon, hashtag be an ally, MeToo this bullshit, he thinks. *Do something, call Harry on his bullshit.* But nothing ever happens, and Alex's face flames red as he walks away, trembling.

Once he returns to his desk and sits, the trembling amplifies into shakes that only slowly work themselves out. It isn't just anger, and it's more than disgust. Alex focuses on how he feels, tries to articulate with precision: humiliated and disrespected; inferior. With no one else about, he squeezes his eyes shut. Tears gather at the corner of his eyes, and he forces his fists into his stomach, hard, to distract from the hollowness left by Harry's touch. He doesn't want to cry. It'll ruin all that effort he put into his makeup this morning. Besides, crying's unmanly. Back straight, shoulders back. He bloody well needs to toughen up.

I'm okay, he tells himself, I've got this.

He opens the top drawer a little too quickly, grabs his Graze bar, bangs the drawer shut and tears open that packet and stuffs his mouth with it, swallows it down. It helps, a little. Then he turns to his computer. Pulls up the day's schedule. There's an important client coming in, a French hedge-fund princeling with a yacht in Antibes, a family home in Kensington: so, meeting room to be set up accordingly, food ordered in, the correct flowers on display, drinks ready, Courvoisier, Scottish Highlands distilled water.

But there's also a half-dozen requests for room bookings to coordinate. Mr. Wilson's flying back from Tokyo tomorrow, so a pickup at Heathrow to arrange. Dry cleaning to collect for Ms. St-Clair. She's also put him down to sit in on a meeting; the mentorship program won't start until after the probation period, but she wants him involved. Previously, she's has him sit there, taking notes and looking pretty. At least, that's how it feels. There's a stack of handwritten notes that need transcribing, some comms work, too, nudging a few colleagues who avoid talking to each other. Then there's that research Sarah wants him to take on, mostly ctrl-C, ctrl-Ving anything he finds online related to some West African oligarch; she's prepping a briefing doc and has him doing the grunt work. And of course, the one-to-one with her this afternoon, his one-month progress review. He feels hot, a little sweat gathering in his armpits. He rolls his neck, scratches at his bra line.

Right. Best get into it, then, especially as he's doing this against a backdrop of normal reception duties, assisting clients and the steady trickle of visitors to L&C, deliveries, greeting staff as they arrive, smiling, always smiling. Factor in all the little, unnoticed tasks, clearing up after people, turning the decorative vase *this* way, watering the flowers and facing them *that* way, keeping carafes topped up, fetching, delivering drinks, taking the occasional call, answering or redirecting emails, sorting the post, scheduling, tidying—and just being there, sat behind his heavy desk, looking pretty, professional, the first thing visitors see, the immaculately made-up face of the firm.

He draws a mental pathway through the workload, and in this way leaves behind the memory of Harry's unwanted touch. This, he's good at, he's methodical and practiced. He owes this to his father. When he was younger, his studies drove him to distraction. Sleepless nights, nail-chewing, and worse. It wasn't that he couldn't do the work. Academically, he did well, he understood Maths, English, the rest of it. But wanting to do his work perfectly, he often did nothing at all. GCSEs nearly undid him, especially those final two weeks of Easter revision in which he barely ate, didn't sleep and nearly drove himself mad.

His father saved him. It's one of the most vivid memories he has of his dad. It's a painfully mundane memory. Sitting at the kitchen table. Triple science textbook open, fingers digging into his thighs and staring in despair at something he knows he knows, but it's too much, he's got twelve GCSEs, nearly twice as many exams coming and doesn't know where to start. Every time he grabs onto a formula, it wiggles and slips away. But that night, rather unusually, his father was home from one of his work trips and rather than exhausted or in a bad mood, seemed cheerful, relaxed. His father sat with him, flicked through a few pages of the revision guide, and his fingertip rested over a formula, the refractive index.

What's this then, son? his father asked, what's this all about?

Alex tried explaining it, and Morgan shook his head, smiling ruefully. It's too much, son. Way beyond me. Break it down, so a man like me can understand. What's this 'c'? The speed of light? Ah, just a number. And 'v', that's just another number? Pop the one on top of the other, it gives you—ah; okay then, that's 'n', is it? How light changes as it passes through different spaces? Well, that's obvious enough, isn't it, everything changes according to where it's at. Even I get that, he said, and tapped his chest with one finger. This here, this is constant, too. But this—and he waved his hand to take in the kitchen, the house—it changes this—and he indicated the rest of himself. Here, I'm me, I'm your father: and his hand rested heavily on Alex's shoulder. Out there—he jerked a thumb towards the window, where it was growing dark and wet outside—I'm someone else, I move differently.

That week, it was his dad who taught him the trick of breaking everything down to manageable chunks. At first, Alex drew out elaborate plans that had more to do with procrastination than work. His first study plan was meticulous, rigorous and impossible. The next one, with Morgan's help, comprehensive but actually doable. Every hour, he switched to a different subject, and within each subject, a different topic. Taken granularly, nearly every subject became less daunting.

When May rolled around, he aced his GCSE, 8s and 9s across the board. A-levels felt almost easy after that, especially at that posh private school, two more years and three top grades. He had offers from Oxford, Imperial. But Bristol was closer to home. Undergrad was a lot of work, but the same methodical approach earned him to a first, not any special brilliance. He'd be the first to admit that. But his Master's was a different story.

Still. Even Sophie was taken aback at how he's thrown himself into his most recent studies. Having left home at nineteen, she'd never seen the intensity of his focus. Makeup, movement, voice and fashion; broad categories broken down to atomic specifics he could practice, one by one. Lips-nails-hair; gaff-eyes-shoes; voice-walk-earrings. Femininity as fragmentation: that's how Alex experiences his enforced womanhood. At times, he feels himself as such: an amalgamation barely held together by lip gloss and tights.

Alex loses himself in his work. Occasionally, he's dragged back to reality. He crosses smooth legs at the thigh and the whisper of tights distracts. A typo, caused by a slip of the nail. Bangs, falling across his eyes, and the sway of earrings when he sweeps the hair back with a delicate pass of the fingers. But otherwise, he stays focused and even enjoys the work. A sort of dull contentment settles over him, and he's happy. By the time Amber and Ms. St-Clair arrive together on the dot of nine, he's arranged the pickup from Heathrow, sorted a half-dozen scheduling nightmares, and emailed the caterer.

The two women glow from their swift walk from Charing Cross. They don't usually arrive together, chatting like this. Both women look good: St-Clair, stern and a little sexy in a slim skirt suit, patent leather heels, short hair styled back; Amber's look is a step closer to his own, a hint of schoolgirl, all grown up. The pain in his gaff's a pointed reminder to focus on something else. He stands to greet them, smoothing down his skirt. He exchanges air kisses with Amber; St. Clair looks him over and nods her approval.

After that, it's back to work and the morning flashes by. First week on the job, he shadowed Amber's receptionist duties. By the end of the week, he 'manned' the desk—the irony not lost on him—on his own. Week two, St-Clair started layering in the administrative duties. A full month into the job, he almost yearns for the simplicity of that first week, where the main task was to sit at Amber's side and smile for arriving clients, take their coat, lead them to one of the meeting rooms, or the partners' offices upstairs. But he likes grappling with the administrative tasks, especially when it involves writing, twisting words to suit both the client's and the firm's desires.

Ten o'clock, his stomach growls. Amber takes the reception desk, and he takes his break. First, he heads to the loo. The building had originally served as a rich merchant's home, then some legal offices, and finally the offices of Lockwood and Carmichael, acquired in the early 1800s. He knows this because he's read the slim 'History of Lockwood and Carmichael' book sitting on the reception mantelpiece. Amber laughed at him. Nobody, anywhere, has ever read that book, she told him.

When plumbing moved indoors, there were no women working at L&C. Consequently, the only female toilet was installed quite late, post-War and in a reluctant, dusty corner of the building. Three floors up, the room had originally been the gentleman's smoking room. Later, it found new purpose as archival storage filled with yellowed ledgers and faded contracts. A thin plywood wall now separated the old from the new, the smell of mouldering documents lingering just beyond the cramped space that now served as the women's loo.

He could just cross the courtyard over to the office block; it has proper modern toilets. But he rarely does. Instead, he clicks up the steps, walking through the winding, creaky upper hallways of the old building, and locks himself into the cramped toilet. It's got a good view, at least, smudged round window peering out over the winding lanes of Holborn. Sitting on the shitter, he can see the back of old buildings, and the green space of gardens.

With the door locked, he lifts his skirt, drops his tights and gaff, and breathes a sigh of relief that borders on a groan of pain as he releases his cock and balls. Elbows on knees, he holds his head between his hands and takes a long overdue piss. Afterwards, he just sits there, giving his bollocks breathing time.

Eventually, he reaches into his handbag. It's kind of gross doing it in the loo, but whatever. He finds his apple, biting into it as he scrolls through his Alex phone. He checks in on friends back home, mainly Luca, and a few guys from St. Oswald's. He sees summer holiday pics, sweaty nights out, gap year adventures. One guy he knows, Tyrone, a right plonker, stands awkwardly in an ill-fitting suit out front of a pebble-dashed office block in Slough. New job. Tyrone grins, happy against a backdrop of grey skies and traffic. Next, Alex checks in on Beth, sees her standing with her fiancé, Dave, on some beach in France. She looks good. Really good. After that, a few other girls he knows: Jenny, he dated her in sixth form; Darcie, from year 10, he

kissed her at a house party at Luca's house. Then back to Luca. He scrolls through his friend's timeline for a bit. Then he checks LinkedIn. But there's not much happening there.

Ever since Blake came along, his phone's a mess, and social media has no idea who he is anymore. Instagram feeds him exotic locations, lipstick reviews, gaming updates and glow-up tutorials. TikTok seems to think he's a closeted bisexual with Daddy issues, but with a thing for tutorials on walking in heels. Adverts pop up for Monsoon dresses, the Hay-on-Wye literary festival, and pastel nail kits. But it's the BookTok feed he finds especially offensive, all mushy romantasy bullshit he'd never touch with a bargepole despite Amber forcing *Thorn Season* on him.

Still. He's gradually dragging his socials back in line with—his real self, he supposes, but what does the algorithm know? He quickly recognized the need for a separate online life. Sophie sorted him out with a second phone, his Blake phone, cheaper, pink and running pay-as-you-go. He turns off the Alex phone, buries it back at the bottom of his bag, and digs out Blake's phone and taps into her digital self.

She's only been around for a couple of weeks, but she's been pretty damned active in that time. He posts at least once a day. Still sitting on the bog, he takes the opportunity to post a picture of last night's meal at *Margot*, a Negroni from the bar afterwards, and a blurry background closeup of his painted nails curled around his half-eaten apple, adding to the curated gallery of images defining a life that doesn't really exist. Though in some ways, online at least, Blake's more real than he is, now.

After that, he can't postpone reality any further. He tugs the gaff back into place, then the tights and finally the skirt. Washes his hands, checks himself in the mirror, fixes his makeup. Stares into himself, tucks back his hair. Takes a deep breath. Tells himself, you've got this. He stands straight, shoulders back. Sees himself in the tiny bathroom mirror and grins. And tits out.

He heads downstairs, joins Amber. The client is due to arrive any minute. Amber pronounces his name with a mock French accent. *Je suis Julien Bellême*, she jokes, drops the accent and laughs. Sounds like 'bell end,' she says. Alex giggles behind his fingers. A moment later he arrives, Julien de Bellême. He exudes wealth—but then, they all do—but he's younger than Alex expected, only a year or two older than he is, really, short dark hair, fashionably unshaven, slim and handsome in a pale suit that probably costs more than Alex's university education. His walk is ridiculously confident, and his eyes sparkle with amusement as Alex and Amber rise to meet him. They take his jacket, offer him tea, coffee, water, something stronger?

And in that initial meeting, though his instinct is to hate the rich bastard, Alex grudgingly admits the guy seems alright. Julien has an easy, self-deprecating laugh and affable charm. Amber takes the lead, the perfect balance of coquettish professionalism, sycophantic flattery balanced against British exceptionalism. She normally tones it down, but with these younger male foreign clients she cranks it to 11, the posh cut-glass received pronunciation, as if to remind the client: yes, you're stupidly wealthy and I'm just a receptionist, but you're *French*, and no matter how hard you try, you'll never be *English*, you poor boy.

Julien loves it, but Alex is thrown off by how often the young man's eyes drift his way, the curiously knowing half-smile. Does he suspect? Or is he just checking out the new girl behind the front desk? His stomach twists for fear of being caught out until Amber sweeps the man away, her tinkling laugh leading him to the room set up to the exacting standards the client expects, and Alex breathes a sigh of relief.

It does mean he alone, however, when Harry swings by. Nominally, the junior analyst's bringing a stack of work, which he drops on the desk with a 'babe' and a 'sweetheart'. But it's obvious he's there to chat up Blake. Alex swallows the urge to tell him to fuck off. Harry's American, both in temperament and smile: too bold, too bright, unnaturally white. Alex forces a smile, tries to get on with his work. With Harry hovering over him, rambling on about some new movie he's seen, *Him*, it's not easy. Alex hesitates over a formula in the spreadsheet. It'd be a lot easier without some pillock discoursing in his ear. He curses softly under his breath, but Harry hears it, he steps in closer, leans over his shoulder and offers to help. The man's hand suddenly rests at his waist, entirely too confidently. Alex tenses, tries to shift out from beneath the other man, murmuring diffidently. Harry's hand follows. His touch slides along Alex's flank. Alex feels his fingers curl into his skin, just beneath the bra line, holding him.

Ms. St-Clair sweeps into the room. Harry steps back. She raises an eyebrow. He grins. Her expression hardens, lips pursing in a disapproving, dark red line. He tugs at his blazer, turns and saunters off back to the junior offices. They both watch him leave. St-Clair frowns. Alex remains silent.

After a short pause, she asks about the dry cleaning. He doesn't offer an excuse, because she's not interested in excuses. Instead, he tells her he'll collect it immediately, as soon as Amber can take the desk. When she returns, having left Julien with one of the senior partners, Alex hurries out the door. He'd planned on doing this at lunch, but he's happy to take the opportunity to step outside and clear his head. He needs to walk, and fresh air.

It's only after he's left the building that he realises he forgot to swap his shoes back over. He maps out the route to the dry cleaners and back. Ten minutes, in normal shoes. How long in stilettos? He leans against the wall, feels the tingle in his toes and at the back of his ankles that he knows will grow to first a burn, then a sharp itch, then a dull throb punctuated by spikes of pain—a new blister, maybe, another to add to the collection. Alex squeezes his eyes shut against the daylight, blinking back tears. The day's heat curls around him and sweat clings his shiny blouse to his frame almost instantly. It's too hot for tights. And the light's painfully bright, and he forgot his sunglasses. He can see them, sitting on the shelf by the entrance. And his comfortable shoes, left beneath the desk. Fucking Harry. That twat has him flustered. He wills himself to walk. But instead, he remains standing, gripping the wall next to him, just breathing. And just like that, the morning's docile contentment is shattered, and it suddenly feels as though the ground is giving way beneath him, a great gaping dark hole ready to swallow him.

And he thinks, I can't do this, it's just too much. The job's fine. I like the job. But the rest of it is just too much. And it would be so easy to just—walk away despite the heels, back to Sophie's apartment, and collapse on the sofa and admit to his sister, yes, you were right, no, I couldn't hack it. So easy to just pack up, catch the coach to Bristol and—go home.

But he feels the rough brick beneath his palm, sharp edges digging into his skin. He grinds his palms deeper into the sharp edge of the building, nearly drawing blood. The pain focuses him, and he considers yesterday; he got through yesterday. And the day before that. Today's just another day. He can survive another day. And if not the whole day—after all, a whole day lasts fucking *forever*—then maybe just the next hour? It'd be a shame to waste all the effort he's put into the day already. Just one more hour. Then it's lunch. More or less. And he's been looking forward to lunch at Kastner's all week, on Thursday's menu they do this amazing broccoli and butterbean croustade. Though truth be told, he'd rather have the Cajun pulled

pork, and thinking of food, he takes his first step, and the next, dreaming of homemade sausage rolls, and the next, spinach & feta quiche, and another, bang bang chicken.

Then he's there, at the dry cleaners. He collects St-Clair's clothes, a gorgeous navy-blue dress sparkling with Swarovski crystals, and on the way back imagines what she looks like in it, dreams of her perched on the side of her desk, dress slit up to her thigh, watching him through those heavy-framed glasses. It looks good on me, she says in his fantasy, but I bet it'd look even better on you. What? and the daydream's broken, replaced by one in which he's wearing it, wondering how he'd look like in that slinky blue dress, and he suspects: good. Now his groin throbs with pain, his feet too and he's walking funny, short, awkward clopping steps in that way of girls who can't quite handle their footwear, and then he's back at his offices and breathes a sigh of relief.

On his return, he finds St-Clair and Amber in the reception room, talking with Julien de Bellême. Alex sidles past them silently, mouths a silent 'thank you' to Amber. He sits behind his desk, logs back into work. When he glances up, Julien is leaning nonchalantly against the wall, hands in his pockets, as the two women speak to him. He winks at Alex over St-Clair's shoulder. Alex blushes, and the other man grins. The women walk him out of the office.

Then he finds an envelope on his desk. It's addressed to '*Chère Blake*'. He opens it. It's an invitation to a party in a week's time. The invite promises 'elegance and decadence'. The address is in Putney, by the river. It's signed, Julien. Beneath his name, he's scrawled: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." Beneath that, a deftly drawn face with a winking eye.

Alex's face feels hot, he takes the letter and slides it into his handbag, into the inner pocket so it sits alongside the photograph of his father. Amber and Ms. St-Clair return, pleased with how the meeting with the client went. Then, they leave him alone at the desk, though with a reminder by his boss of the meeting in the afternoon, and then the performance afterwards. He barely hears her. He's staring at the door. His hand is still inside his handbag, fingers resting against the envelope. Eventually, he gives his head a shake and returns to work.

The rest of the morning flies by. Though he's desperate for the loo—and a little weak from hunger—he ignores both urges and focuses on his work. He flags a few revisions for Tobin's deck, makes a start on Ms. St-Clair's research. This he really enjoys, it reminds him of being at school. He makes an initial pass with AI assistance to track down relevant articles before dismissing the obvious junk, then scans for details relevant to the firm interests. Forty-five minutes of skimming English language foreign newspapers, and he's got something he can start condensing for Ms. St-Clair. He's so into it, he hardly notices it's gone twelve until Amber passes by his desk, taps him on the shoulder. He blinks, smiles up at her. Her hand on his shoulder slides down his side and sits easily at his hip as she leans in close, checking his work. Sexy *and* smart, Amber smiles, and her voice and smell and presence send a little thrill down his spine.

Then it's lunch, past lunch really and remembering to swap shoes this time, he heads out into the heat and the light. The streets are busy. He cuts across the Kingsway, walks up Drury Lane, heads towards Seven Dials and then he's there, and hardly the first, there's always a queue at Kastner's. Alex waits patiently, breathing in the scent of cumin and hot oil. There's a girl his age standing in front of him, cute, hair in a ponytail, simple white dress with decorative lace on the sleeves, bare legs, flicking her screen with one finger. Two lads behind, chatting shit about the football, Liverpool's chances of another win, van Dijk's the man—nah, it's Arsenal's

year—Arsenal? You mad?—the girl in front’s phone rings, she sounds worried as she answers, yes, yes, what is it?—and the man behind the counter: what you after, love? boss?—and the city speaks with a susurrations of steps, burst of passing laughter, a shout from the kitchen, delivery bike roar, the murmur of distant crowds. A man walks past, filming, narrating his walk. Music blares from a passing rickshaw. A black cab. Tourists, talking animatedly. Two teenage girls, shopping bags and short skirts. Alex tugs at his check mini. The queue shuffles forward. He tilts his head up into the sun, closing his eyes against the light, and smiles.

He takes his lunch and returns to the office. He finds an empty room, turns on his personal laptop and does a little writing as he eats. In between bursts of typing, he takes a little time to redo his nails, digging out the bottle of varnish he nabbed this morning. Soon, his nails match his lips. Then he resumes his early work for Ms. St-Clair. He works through the rest of his lunch break. He enjoys the research. When he’s got enough done, he takes a short break to head upstairs, another five minutes in which he lets his balls breathe. Then back to the reception desk. He’s barely sat down before Ms St-Clair sweeps through and leads him to one of the conference rooms.

She sits him in the corner with a laptop. Two partners arrive first from upstairs: Mr. Bertrand Sandford, white-haired and heavy set, as well as Quentin Langham, also white-haired, but rail-thin and long-limbed, a Victorian coatrack brought to life. A handful of junior and middle assistants soon fill out the rest of the table. Ms. St-Clair is the only woman in the room – and Alex, of course, and the air feels hot and stifling as he feels the men’s eyes graze on his appearance. St-Clair dims the lights and begins, and Alex takes notes. He’s helped her with this deck: *Changing World, Changing Markets: Investing in the New Economy*.

At a brisk pace, she guides the gathered men through the ongoing concerns facing the firm. Diversifying investments, tariff-induced losses, instability. Climate impacts and risk assessments. Navigating DEI tensions between European and American expectations, potential contract and opportunity losses. St-Clair succinctly lays out the challenges ahead. This isn’t the first time Alex watches her work. But it’s the first time he’s observed her out front of a room full of her peers and superiors. At first, he feels nervous for her. But she speaks firmly and with utter conviction, even when referencing a sequence of slides he knows were dropped in last minute. In talking to the two senior partners, her tone subtly shifts. They ask several questions, one or two striking Alex as penetratingly perceptive, and St-Clair concedes the point, admits it may be an area worth exploring more.

But when any other men in the room pushes her, she ruthlessly exposes their ignorance or refers them back to a previously made point. One particularly obtuse question, she simply refuses to answer, an awkward silence stretching out between her and the man. The man balks first, mutters an apology. The presentation continues as though he hadn’t spoken. The meeting ends, Alex turns up the lights, and there’s a round of gentle applause. There’s a tedious fifteen minutes of round-table discussion, in which St-Clair subtly directs the conversation in the direction she wants. He watches her control the narrative, namely, the need for the firm to change and adapt.

There’s some pushback. Nobody argues the need to shift assets out of the US, or to divest clients’ fossil fuel holdings – even their petrochemical oligarchs want out, funding lobby groups and disinformation campaigns to maintain shareholder value even as they dump stock. But Christ, enough of the identity politics, enough of the DEI crap. Who gives a shit what some Gen-Z influencers think or say?

St-Clair smiles, and her smile is dangerous. She turns to Alex. His heart seizes in his chest. All eyes in the room are now on him. He feels sweat break out on his brow and is suddenly very painfully aware of the fact that he's a man in makeup, wearing a skirt and heels. Identity? We have an expert on the subject, she tells the table, Blake here wrote her Master's thesis on it. Blake?

He gapes at her—for a moment, but only a moment. You bitch, he thinks. Springing something like this on him. For a moment, he thinks she's making a fool of him: look at the silly receptionist, she's got nothing to say. But—no; he does have something to say. Over the past month, she's built him up to this, surreptitious conversations touching on his thesis, on branding, on the importance of inclusion, St-Clair's personal mission to diversify not only the firm's image, but the firm's boards. It's the reason he's there, after all; it's the reason Blake exists. He licks his lips nervously as he stands, brushes down his skirt. All eyes are on him, and in those watching male faces he sees expressed: boredom, annoyance, amusement, curiosity, lasciviousness, disdain and contempt—yes, especially the last two. Heat crawls down his neck and chest but it's no longer with embarrassment.

Mirrors, he begins, facing the full table, in early modern drama were used to signal vanity or vice. Alex knows he's got about thirty seconds to make a point before the respect St-Clair's authority compels in the audience runs thin. He speaks quickly, tries to mimic her tone and conviction. In *Richard II*, he explains, this changes. At the climax of the play, the king calls for a mirror: Give me that glass, and therein will I read. Alex quotes from memory. He shifts his focus towards the senior partners, performs the line to these two old men. He is trying to summarise the final year of higher education and a month of feminine performance and a limited understanding of Lockwood and Carmichael into an impromptu presentation. Dimly conceived ideas swirl through him, and he feels on the cusp of grasping something he failed to understand in the writing of his dissertation, something important.

For the first time on stage, he continues, identity was conceived as both socially defined externality, and emergent interiority. Richard is both King and Man. Both are performance. Alex mimes throwing a mirror to the floor. The king throws the mirror to the floor to shatter “in a hundred shivers.” The rejected identity reveals a multiplicity of lost possibilities. In the play, the medieval concept of social definition is abandoned in favour of self-conception; the early modern self is the performed self. Hamlet's antic disposition. Macbeth's borrowed robes. Iago—and Viola, he adds with a smile, especially Viola.

There's some restless movement. Nobody came for a lecture on Shakespeare. Alex licks his lips, swallows against a dry throat, and forges on. What 'self' is L&C performing? he asks. He's rushing it and knows it doesn't quite make sense and elides all kinds of subtleties, but now he sees a sparkle of amusement in the old men's eyes and that's something. He feels sweat trickle down his back, and his cheeks glow beneath his makeup, but he flashes a glossy smile and continues. L&C is at a strategic crossroads. Richard's abdication mirrors L&C's own existential moment. The world is changing, and old robes of fossil fuel wealth and white-male power no longer command the same respect. This is not a reflection on the firm, Alex is keen to point out, the old ways were systemic, they worked, they worked for centuries. But just as the king believed in divine right, L&C believes in their immutable market dominance through command of old power structures. But times change. The old king couldn't adapt, identity wrapped up in an inflexible conception of himself as King. Consequently, that identity shattered and he lost his throne. But the firm's identity remains malleable. Shatter the mirror; rebrand: if

the firm's reflection doesn't work, break it. Even the performance of breaking the old identity makes for good optics, it's a marketable narrative.

There's a heavy silence when he stops. He's trembling slightly. A chair creaks as Mr. Sandford leans forward. He speaks over interlaced fingers and his voice is ponderous but unexpectedly kind. He asks whether she'd use L&C to manage her money. The question is unexpected. Alex laughs, a little too loudly. On my wages? Mr. Sandford laughs as well. If you had the money? Alex shrugs. No.

He's shaking after he leaves the room but also giddy. He needs to talk to someone about what just happened. But when he relieves Amber at the front desk, she mouths an apology and rushes off on her break, girl problems, she says, talk later. For a moment, he's tempted to call his sister. But he doesn't. Instead, left alone, he recalls his short lecture. He shakes his head in disbelief. What the fuck was he on about? Now dread creeps into his belly, and he feels sick. The giddiness disappears and, in its wake, painful emptiness. He's got his one-month review coming up in about fifteen minutes. An hour ago, he wasn't worried. Now, he feels he fucked it up. Why did St-Clair put him in that position? Shit. She wants to get rid of him, that's why. It's not fair. He's worked so hard, literally re-invented himself for a job he never wanted.

Alex stands, steps over to the mirror. Blake in reflection looks back at him. He studies himself in detail. If St-Clair dismisses him, that's a good thing, right? He can tell his sister he did his best. She'll give him another chance to find a job. She has to. He tugs at the hem of his skirt, smooths down his top. Meanwhile, no more of this shit: no more makeup, no more tights; that's a good thing.

But he doesn't want another job. He *likes* this job, he's *good* at this job. Yeah, sure, some parts of it suck. Getting up at 5.30am, for one. Shaving his legs. And dressing like a woman. Christ, the effort. But even that's getting easier, he's getting better at it—no, he's *good* at some of it, now, he looks in the mirror and sees the skill with which he presents himself and feels, for the first time, a flutter of not just pride, but actual pleasure at what he's achieved in such a short time. Yeah, he complains—with good reason, the whole situation is insane—but some of it's not that bad, really, what's another two months?

And—he enjoys the work, some parts more than others. He'd rather be writing decks than delivering tea to the guys, but fuck, even that, it's not so bad, really. Other than Harry. But Harry's a twat, everybody knows that. And in that meeting room, there was a moment when he felt—excited? and on the cusp of teasing out something real and concrete from the academic abstraction of literary studies, as though all those years of interpreting other peoples' narratives might coalesce under pressure into an understanding of his own story.

He sighs. Desperate sadness settles over his shoulders. After that performance in the meeting room, it doesn't matter what he wants. Sarah's going to sack him. He just knows it, and the past month will have been an utter waste. There won't be a second chance. By next week, he'll be on a coach heading home. In some imagined future family get-together, he can imagine sitting at the dinner table with his sister—the successful one—mocking his attempts at holding down a job in London. By dressing as woman! What a fucking farce.

He returns to his desk and sits. He retrieves his little makeup bag. His face needs fixing in anticipation of the meeting with Sarah. The stress and sweat of his short talk did a right job on his makeup. He blots the shine of sweat from his brow, the bridge of his nose. Dusts his face. Dabs a little concealer beneath the eyes. His lips are dry; only now he realised how he's gnawed

his lower lip, licked colour away with anxiety. He reapplies lipstick, then gloss. He's procrastinating, escaping into the ritual of self-care to avoid thinking about what's coming. A half-dozen different points he could've made comes to him as he brushes his brows into shape. Christ. What was he thinking, a receptionist with a month's experience lecturing a room of experts?

When Amber returns, she smiles and compliments him on how good he looks. Alex forces a smile as he surrenders the desk. She smooths down her pleated skirt and sits with effortless grace. He realizes then how ludicrous his efforts have been: no matter how hard he tries, he'll never move like that, never present that degree of natural femininity. Not that he wants to. But still. There's only two more months to go. This is a blessing in disguise, crashing out like this. He can bow out with some dignity, and leave without the humiliation of being caught. Yet he feels tears sting the corners of his eyes. He grips the side of the desk, unwilling to let go. He stares at the ceiling, blinks and tells himself to man up. He's not going to cry, for fuck's sake. Stand straight, shoulders—

Amber's hand on his arm brings him back. She's concerned, asks what's wrong. He forces a watery smile, shrugs. She nods sympathetically, without knowing the cause of his distress. But she's there for him, draws him into a light hug. It nearly pushes him over the edge. But when she lets go, he feels better. We've all been there, Amber explains, and he realised that 'we' means 'women' and this does something funny to his stomach.

Then Sarah St-Clair arrives and asks him to join her in her office for his monthly review.

It's late by the time he returns home, gone ten-thirty. The door closes loudly behind him. He kicks off his shoes and half-sighs with relief, half-winces in pain. His sister welcomes him home. He finds her lounging on the sofa, white wine and *Britain's Got Talent* on the telly. Normally, first thing he does coming through the door is yank off the bra and free himself from shapewear. Most nights, he can't get out of his women's clothes fast enough. Tonight, more than a little drunk, he instead joins his sister on the sofa.

His sister eyes him speculatively, a hint of a smile playing across her lips.

"How was your day, little brother?"

And he wants to tell her: great. And he wants to tell her: awful. The fullness of a single day sits at the tip of his tongue, and he yearns to share the complexity of every experience. How he woke up, did his makeup and dressed. The walk along the canal and the ride on the Tube, the woman and the coffee enjoyed afterwards. His enjoyment of the work, the daily challenges, his colleagues. A meeting with a French aristocrat and an invitation sitting in his handbag.

And he wants to explain how he had to work late, and tell her about the celebratory drinks, afterwards. The way Amber did his makeup in the bathroom before they went out and his painful arousal at her proximity, the smell of her hair and the confident stroke of the pencil as she did his eyes. Against his better judgment, and at her urging, wearing his heels out to the bar. And the fun he had there. How he promised to be sensible with the drinking: only two, he insisted, arriving at the narrow little pub at Borough Market, but two became four, though he only bought the one, various men the others.

Mostly, he wants to share with his sister how his meeting with Ms. St-Clair went.

But it's too much, how can anyone possibly share so much with their sister?

“How was your day, little brother?”

He shrugs. “Fine,” he says. “Just another day.”

Chapter Five: Such a Cliché

“You’re coming out tonight,” Amber says.

Five pm Friday, one week after his one-month performance review. He’d been busily tweaking a PowerPoint, sizing and resizing text boxes and on-brand bits of imagery, when Amber pulled up a chair next to him. Then, Amber poked him in the shoulder. Hey, she said, and he ignored her and she poked him again, hey, and again, hey, and again, until finally he couldn’t hold it back, and giggled. Smiling, Alex faced his tormentor.

“My treat,” she continues, “a proper celebration. You crushed it last week. You’re amazing, I knew you were amazing the first time we met.” She takes his hand—Blake’s hand—in hers and smiles. “Remember, when you came for your interview? You were so cute, so nervous.” God, her smile, so disarming, eyes beautiful as she sweeps blonde bangs back from her face. “And I’m not taking no for an answer. It’s Friday,” and the way she says it, it’s like the pronouncement of an inviolable rule, a sacred ritual of weekend worship.

Alex tells himself to defer again, with deep and meaningful plans to shove Blake back into the closet for the weekend, to peel off fake nails and scrub his face clean, quite literally wipe her away and become one with the sofa for the evening. He wants nothing more than to escape who he is and who he pretends to be all week long, to enjoy his two short days of respite. Better yet, to throw on jeans and a t-shirt and leave the fake tits behind and head to the pub and sit anonymously amongst the chatter of men, of *other* men who see him as one of their own—or who don’t, who never even noticed him, because why would they? and that was good, too—and maybe, just maybe, try his luck with a girl, if he met one, and buy her a drink, as men have bought him all too recently, and enjoy a chat, in the way that men too often now speak to him.

“I’ve honestly got nothing to wear,” he says.

“Don’t you worry about that.” Amber was literally impossible to refuse, a powerhouse of persuasion with the mock-serious look, the arched brow and what was it that Peterson said, make friends with people who want the best for you? Amber always seems to want the best for him, for reasons that entirely escape him. Besides, wasn’t this what he wanted, Friday night after work drinks, that London weekend lifestyle? Not like this, maybe, pints down the pub rather than white wine spritzers, suit and tie instead of skirt and heels. And yet. He was young. He’d be in the company of a beautiful girl, at the centre of one the greatest cities on Earth, and wasn’t that the dream, the fucking point of it all? Even if she already had a serious boyfriend. And was more likely to swap lipstick tips than kisses with him. But still. She was sexy and clever and fun and he enjoyed being in her company, painful as it could be.

He saves his work, shuts the office down for the weekend. Then, he pokes his head into Ms. St-Clair’s office down the hall, where she sits behind a heavy wooden desk, peering through thick-framed glasses at her screen, lips curled into something like a sneer of contempt. She glances up, and the harder lines of her face soften very slightly at the sight of Blake.

“Have a good weekend, Ms. St-Clair,” Alex says. “Amber and I are heading off.”

Ms. St-Clair removes her glasses, pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs. “This is shit,” she says, waving one hand at her laptop. “I knew it would be shit, and I hoped it wouldn’t be shit, but it’s shit.”

Alex hesitates at the doorway, takes a step into her office. “Harry’s deck?”

“Harry’s deck,” St-Clair says.

“You want me to have a look at it?” He says this with a sinking feeling and the knowledge that it would be hours out of his weekend; but also, a warm sense of pride in the knowledge that she will say yes, that she trusts him with this kind of work.

Ms. St-Clair smiles, thin-lipped but genuinely pleased, and says, “yes, please, Blake, I would appreciate that very much,” and that makes him feel warm, too. And when Alex turns to leave, she calls out to him, “Blake,” and there’s a firmness to her voice that freezes him in his spot.

Standing at the threshold, he turns back. She steps out from behind her desk and crosses over to him, each step precise, the click of heel against hardwood flooring. Ms. St-Clair looks him over as she approaches and some of the sternness returns though the pleasure remains in her eyes, and her gaze sweeps over him with all the heat of a searching spotlight, moving slowly from head to toe. With the spin of a single raised finger, she indicates that Alex should turn a slow circle. It is not the first time she has inspected his outfit, though the first since his performance review.

A tingle races down his spine. The back of his neck suddenly feels hot, sweat beading beneath the soft silk collar of his blouse. Yet, he does as he is told; how could he not? With light-footed steps he turns a careful circle in his Kurt Geiger’s and feels the very slight flare of his skirt, the breath of air against his tights. Just once and then he stands straight and shoulders back, hands clasped behind his back as she’s taught him and he feels acutely aware of how turned on he is, performing this little dance for her, the strain against his tuck and the tightness in his chest as she scrutinises his look, his performance.

Emily St-Clair’s face was naturally very pale and today her lips a contrast in rich, deep reds. She wears a silk-satin burgundy blouse with the top two buttons undone, and matching trousers, wide-legged with sharp creases. Though they both wore heels, she is taller, and now stands close and over him. A flash of white teeth, a tight-lipped smile and a slight nod, yes.

“As I said last week,” she says. “You continue to impress, Blake. You’ve come such a long way since your first week here. So much more confident and well put together.”

“Thank you,” Alex murmurs diffidently. Then, he bites back a gasp, or a flinch, as she reaches up, finely manicured fingernails painted to match her lips, and he thinks she’s about to touch him, nearly leans into that touch, realises that he’s hoped she would, in fact, touch him, inappropriate as that would be, and has wished this since the day he first met her.

But no. At least, not directly. She touches the silk scarf wrapped around his neck, and nods, finger resting against the embroidered Hermes logo. She seems pleased, then her attention focuses on his earrings. The back of her hand brushes his cheek as she gently taps his simple gold studs. He feels the back of her hand against his skin as a shiver down his spine.

“These, however,” Mr. St-Clair says, and makes a small tscking sound, “are no good,” and her voice is gentler now, reproachful yet patient. “Disappointing, a poor match for the rest. I think you can do better than this, Blake.”

Not trusting himself to speak, he simply nods.

“Good,” she says, then returning to her desk, leans against it without ever taking her eyes off him. The way she looks at him feels predatory, makes him nervous, and in her gaze he

can see himself and he sees himself as poised and feminine, and in imagining himself as such feels the blush spread across his chest and flow upwards, the rising heat hidden beneath the light silk scarf. Now, he isn't sure whether he should leave or stay, or whether he *wants* to leave or stay. There is a lengthy pause in which she seems to consider whether there is more to say.

"The scarf," she says. "A gift?"

Biting his bottom lip, he nods.

"Then there is one more matter to discuss," she says.

Not long after, he returns to reception where Amber has waited patiently. She raises an inquiring eyebrow. He forces a grin—later, he insists, I'll tell you later. They swap into flats and carry their shoes with them and walk to Holborn station. They catch the Central Line six stops to Mile End. In the crush of people and the heat of the Tube and noise of the Underground, there is little opportunity to talk. But it is a relief to have her there with him. In her company in public, it feels easier to maintain the illusion that he is, like her, just another girl. Other women ignore them; and men look at Amber, not him.

Amber's place is a tall, Victorian terrace on a leafy garden square a few streets up from the station. Over the tall buildings, a deeper shade of blue, and between them, the sun slices bright swaths of ruby red. Alex can't help but peer through the windows of wealthy homes as they pass, glimpses an expansive kitchen in gleaming stainless steel, a downstairs living room dominated by a complex arrangement of cat towers; a woman sits a suspended wicker chair, reading a book. Then, they're trotting up the stairs to Amber's home and it's his first visit to her home and the nervousness he's carried with him from work has him feeling nauseous. Part of him wishes he'd refused and just got home tonight. Another part of him wishes he was visiting under very different circumstances.

"Oh, I can't wait," Amber says. "For you to meet the girls, they're going to love you!" And his stomach lurches, as it does whenever Blake meets a girl for the first time. This time, surely, he thinks, they'll see through me, of course they will. One look and they'll know Blake's a farce, they'll scream or laugh and Amber will look at me with those beautiful brown eyes, they'll be full of betrayal and hurt, and for a moment he can't breathe, he imagines it so vividly.

"You okay?" Amber says, eyes full of concern.

"Yeah. Yes, I think so. Just a bit winded, I guess."

She gives him a light swat to the bum. "Girl, we've got to get you to the gym."

With a heady mix of trepidation and hope, he follows her through to a large common area with tiled flooring and chintzy wallpaper, once a dining room and now lined with sofas, rugs, a long table and dominated at one end by a large, mounted screen. *Manchild* plays on a Bluetooth speaker in one corner, *Le Chat Noir*, framed hangs over an ornate wooden mantelpiece. Large windows and a pair of patio doors make up the far wall, and through them a small back garden, lush with flowers and greenery, with solar lamps beginning to glimmer in the early evening light.

"Pretty cool, right?" Amber says, "we got so lucky finding this place." Taking Alex by the hand, she leads him over to two women sitting on the sofa. "This is Natsuki and Olivia," she says. Both are playing Super Smash Bros on the big screen. Alex feels a moment of intense panic. This was a proper house full of girls and the stuff of fucking dreams, but also nightmares.

In the instant, these two girls and Amber all strike him as incredibly confident and attractive and cool, intimidating even, and Alex barely stammered out a greeting. He hides his hands behind his back, his chin feels huge, his shoulders too wide and he thanks God the lights in the room are turned down low.

“Girls, say hi,” Amber says.

“Hi,” Olivia says, and “hello,” Lily adds, both without peeling eyes from the screen, and Amber says, “this is Blake!” and Olivia grunts. “One sec, let me pound this bitch into the ground,” and Natsuki shakes her head as if, no, I don’t think so.

She’s Japanese and tall and slender, with long black hair in a high ponytail, woven through with colourful ribbons. She wears a light floral print dress and cork sandal heels and is very prettily made up, glossy lips pursed with concentration as fingers fly across controller buttons. Meanwhile, Olivia is short, maybe five-two at most, and curvy, with spiky brown hair, shaved around the sides and back and dyed vivid pink. A half-dozen piercing across ears, nose and lip, denim overalls and a worn, black shirt for a band Alex doesn’t recognize.

A half-dozen brightly coloured bottles of WKD in blue and red lie scattered across the table, along with open polystyrene containers of vivid red chicken and rice, a pair of chopsticks lying lengthwise across the rice. On the big screen, Link hacks at Peach in a flurry of flashes. A dozen CPU players bounce erratically around the two human players. Alex feels an intense urge to join the game and show them how it’s done. His fingers twitch, but after a moment Amber gives a little huff of annoyance. “Dorks,” she mutters. She takes his hand, leads him across the room where another woman sits on the floor, cross-legged at a low table.

“Hey, this is—” Amber begins, and the way she said it, there’s something new in her voice, he’s never heard that tone from her before. This other girl wears loose jeans spattered with paint, and a plaid button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbow. She’s got tattoos coiling along her forearms, shirt unbuttoned to just above her bra line. Standing over her, he enjoys a peek of large breasts in purple lacy cups, where a small tattoo of yellow bird nestles in her cleavage.

“Freya.” The girl glances up, dark eyes and razor-sharp brows, winks at his open stare down her shirt. Alex blushes furiously. Amber doesn’t notice. He looks away, looks back. She’s still watching him, smiling. There’s a dusting of tobacco across the table, open dime bag and curls of green buds. Deft fingers crumble, mix and roll, and in her unwavering gaze he imagines something akin to recognition that sends a sharp thrill like fear stabbing through his gut. “You must be Blake.” Freya smiles, tip of tongue trailing an edge of Rizzler. “Yeah. Amber’s told me *all* about you.”

With a sensation of heat prickling his chest, fingers twisting into his skirt, Alex looks to his colleague. “There can’t be much to say?”

“See?” Amber boops Alex on the tip of the nose and grins. “Pretty *and* modest.”

“I’m not *that* modest”

“So, you *are* pretty, then?”

“No, I’m—” flustered, Alex cuts off, looks to Freya. “She’s not like this at work.”

“You have no idea. She’s only said good shit.” Freya tucks the finished spliff in her shirt pocket, starts on the next. “Which is totally fucking boring and disappointing and boring.”

“There’s nothing bad to say,” Amber insists.

“You’re saying I’m boring?” Alex pouts, hands on hips.

“So boring,” Amber says. “And perfect and clever and pretty.”

“Get a room,” Freya says, rolling her eyes.

Amber sticks her tongue out, a little flash of pink between perfect lips. “That’s the plan,” she says and smiles at Alex, and the flash of her lips, the glint in her eyes, he suddenly painfully aware of his tuck again. “This way.” Olivia and Natsuki call out goodbye, eyes still locked to the screen. “I was hoping you’d meet Alisha and Amelia,” Amber says. The other two girls, she explains, were a couple. They liked to do their own thing. “But I think you’ll see them tonight. Maybe. They’re so cute.”

And with the three he’d just met and the two he hadn’t and then with Amber, that made six, and just before leaving the room, he hesitates, looks back and imagines what it must be like for them, all six of them together sitting around this room on a Saturday night, TV and video games, takeaway and drinks from the off-license and—and—and whatever it was that a group of girls sharing a house together do, he has no idea but was suddenly gripped by a pang of jealousy so intense it nearly brings tears to his eyes. This—exactly *this*—is what he’d wanted and expected and totally failed to achieve, instead trapped at his sister’s under the constant threat of eviction, living in a space that was not and could never be his own. He loves his sister. But he doesn’t want to live with her. Some kind of flat share, that’s what he’d expected. He’s even started looking, needs to find a place. It’s complicated, of course. There’s bound to be some overlap between Alex moving into a new place and Blake still working her job. He’s not sure how he’ll manage. But he will, he’ll find a way to make it work. But Christ, London prices were *insane*! And yet, here was Amber in this amazing old house dripping with character, with these super cool girls, and it just wasn’t fucking *fair* that it’d all gone so wrong for him.

Amber leads Alex away, first through the kitchen to grab a pair of cans from the fridge, and some glasses from a cupboard. Then upstairs, to her room at the top of the house, up the mains stairs and then a second narrow staircase. “It’s tiny,” she says, “fucking *sweltering* in the summer and too cold in the winter and—” she pauses, trying to think of something good to say, one glossy nail held to her lips: “well, it’s private, at least, everyone’s downstairs so it’s great when Jacob spends the night, I’ve even got my own toilet up here. No shower though, you should see the fight in the morning, like fucking gladiators if you believe it.”

Her room *is* small, with barely room for a wardrobe, dresser, and small writing desk, and her bed tucked under the slanting ceiling. Yet her room is also enviable and cute, and standing there Alex feels as though he’s been invited into some portion of herself and feels momentarily overwhelmed by the trust. This was her own space, decorated with string lights and photos of friends and family pinned to the wall, with an oculus window by the bed in coloured glass that glows with the light of early evening across her bed, and looks over the garden below. To Alex, this seems like the kind of garret in which sickly writers sat in a glow wavering moonlight and crafted great poetry or their life-defining novel, and he can imagine himself, sat at that small writing desk, with his laptop open and a tall drink beading with perspiration as he hunches over the keyboard, typing, and a strange, fluttery feeling fills his tummy.

Meanwhile, Amber digs through her wardrobe, tugs out tops and skirt, holds them up to Blake. “Nope,” she says, and “nope,” and then, “oh, yes. This is totally you,” she decides, “see, no excuse not to come out tonight,” and shoves a bundle of fabric into his unresisting arms. “Try it on,” Amber insists, “loo’s down the hall,” and how can he refuse?

The narrow passage outside her room runs beneath the eaves, slanted ceiling on one side, a long, low bookshelf embedded into the wall on the other, crammed full of old paperback novels. He yearns to stop and see what’s there but there’s not enough light to see, and Amber is waiting.

In the cramped toilet, Alex strips out of his work clothes. First, he locks the door and then takes a piss and adjusts his tuck and checks his shapewear. He hadn’t planned on going out tonight but now realises that he dressed this morning for precisely that eventuality, with tape and a proper tuck and the adhesive breasts instead of half-assing it, he’s even worn the girdle with the padded hip inserts. Fucking uncomfortable all day but wasn’t he happy now that he’d gone through the trouble of it all? And with his stomach churning with the knowledge of the wrongness of wearing these women’s clothes, he lifts the dress over his head and slips his arms through the long, clinging sleeves and wiggles it down over his breast forms and then with a few tugs and tweaks, he’s wearing Amber’s dress, and it hangs off him perfectly. Fuck.

The minidress is a midnight black thing sparkling with sequins. The neckline is high and the sleeves are long and fall halfway down the back of his hands. The stretchy skirt grips his upper thigh. Fuck me, he thinks, good thing I shaved this morning, exfoliated, moisturized: his bare skin gleams and his legs look long and entirely too sexy. Thin straps criss-cross his upper back, leaving it mostly bare. Can he wear it with a bra? Alex doesn’t think so, he’s never dared wear anything backless before, why would he? He turns this way and that in the tiny toilet, looks over his shoulder and sees how the dress accentuates his shoulder blades, the line down his back, the contrast of pale skin with sparkling black fabric. He bites his lower lip. Christ, it really does look good. And he thinks, yeah, I can pull this off. The adhesive’s strong, maybe a bit of tape, and his boobs won’t slip, and yeah, it’s got a high collar, too. Amber couldn’t have picked a more perfect dress for him. He poses with one hand on his hip and tries a smile and it comes out funny and he tries again and this time it looks right. Yes, he grudgingly admits, she has a great eye for clothes and sizing.

“You bitch,” Amber laughs when he gets back, “fuck you, you look better in it than I do,” which was an obvious lie but still brings a warm glow to his neck and cheeks. While he’d been changing, Amber put on some music, an endless streaming mix that rolls into something he recognizes, Goldfrapp, wouldn’t have taken her as a fan but there it is. She’s also poured out two cans of M&S mojitos over ice. “Cheers,” she says, passing him a glass.

Alex nearly drains it in one gulp to calm his nerves. Then he perches on the side of the bed, cradling the glass between both hands. Okay, yeah, he thinks. This is fun. Come to think of it, he’d never really been up to a girl’s room like this before. Maybe Sophie’s, but sisters didn’t count. There’s something very cozy about Amber’s room, though he can’t pinpoint precisely what it is. They clink glasses, take another pensive drink.

“Okay, my turn,” she says and starts digging through her wardrobe again. “What do you think?” Out comes a flashy red halter-top minidress, and a lacy red bra to go with it, and she holds them up, and Alex blushes and shrugs awkwardly. Amber laughs, “yeah, you’re right, it’s a

bit much. Let's save that for clubbing." Then she proceeds to try it on anyways, and then two more outfits after that.

Alex sits there feeling acutely aware of the short dress that feels tight around his thighs and chest and he squirms a little, fearful that his tuck might slip, knowing the dress would reveal the slightest of bulges. Just pick something, he thinks, Jesus Christ, just... anything, but he also knows it's not that easy, he'd had mornings like this, when he just couldn't decide. And he knows it's wrong to watch and that he should look away but also that he can't, that'd be weird, right, they all girls here, in theory at least, and fucking hell but isn't she drop-dead gorgeous?

After the red minidress, a pleated plaid miniskirt and midriff-bearing, off-the-shoulder halter top that ends just below her bust line, with a sweetheart neckline and peplum ruffle. She looks amazing, he tells her she looks amazing, but after a brief contemplation in the mirror Amber shakes her head firmly, no, and settles on a pair of tight ripped jeans that were more rip than jeans, with sheer black tights and a sleeveless mesh body over a white-and-lavender bra, printed with flowers. She pairs it with an abbreviated bolero jacket and poses in the mirror and smiles, nods, yes.

And she has an incredible body, Alex can't help but feel the slightest twinge of jealousy at how good she looks. There's something enviable in the comfort and ease with which she wears these clothes. There's no way he could wear what she's wearing, he'd never look that good, or confident. Rather, he feels constantly aware of everything Blake wears and experiences it with a persistent sense of—well, discomfort, though after six weeks the sense of wrongness had diminished, leaving only the pinch, poke of underwear, the frustrating restrictiveness of tight clothing. Rather, it's the dishonesty that gets to him, an ambient awareness of his own performance and the clothes that make it possible, haunting him throughout his days.

Meanwhile, Amber wears her clothes with a lifetime's ease of belonging. And when she stands between outfits in just her knickers, her ass, Christ, to be in this room with her is torture and he wishes he was her boyfriend rather than—whatever the hell he is right now—and the guilt and desire wars inside of him and leaves him almost dizzy with confusion and nebulous desire.

Now, Amber sits at her tiny vanity peering into the mirror. She's wiped the day's makeup clean and then started again. At first, he watches expectantly. Of course, he's seen her touch up at work throughout the day. But this was the first he's sat and watched a girl do her makeup from the start without it being edited through a TikTok video. He feels a wholly unexpected intimacy, watching as she first cleanses and then begins. She works quickly and with confidence but in this he doesn't envy her as to his surprise she wasn't doing anything he didn't already know. In fact, at times he has to bite back an urge to offer suggestions. Until she starts on her eyes; he still struggles with doing his eyes. He watches, until she pauses, pencil poised at her brow. Her smile, in reflection: curious, expectant.

"You've got such beautiful eyes," he blurts, blushes with the realization that she's caught him staring. His blush intensifies when he mentally rolls back to what he'd just said. "I mean—" he stops, takes a breath, shrugs and smiles ruefully. "I mean, you've got beautiful eyes."

She returns to her brow. "Aw, thank you."

"You always do them so well. I can't do my eyes like that. I wish I had half your skill."

Amber puts the pencil down, facing him with a mild frown. "Are you being serious here right now? You've got *gorgeous* eyes, Blake. Like, for real."

He forces a wan smile. "Not like you."

"Get your ass over here," she says, and shifts over a bit by the mirror.

What follows was twenty minutes of jostling for space at Amber's tiny mirror, escalating giggles and the back and forth of cleanser and wipes, lipstick and mascara. Alex felt momentary panic as Amber first reached for micellar water, cotton swabs. He can't let her do his face, he knows this, to allow her to wipe away his makeup is to efface his Blake-face and so reveal the boy beneath, his Alex-face. He imagines her reaction to discovering it's a man sitting next to her, albeit not much of one, and his stomach curdles. He's just seen her mostly naked and watched her change and has sat opposite her several nights over the past month and listened, attentively, eyes wide, to her stories about her new boyfriend, Jacob and his funny circumcised cock, the story of their first kiss and the first time she went down on him, and who knew girls were so explicit in talking about this stuff?

He starts back, palms raised to ward her off as she approaches with a moist cosmetic pad. "No, it's fine, really," and when she seems undeterred, "I don't want to redo my whole face," and she soothes his nerves, saying, "good, 'cus I just want to do your eyes."

He relents, closes his eyes when she tells him to, and feels the cool, damp cotton disc across his lids. "You can do that?"

"How can you be so good at this?" she says, indicating his full face of makeup with a circular wave of a hand. "And not know *that*?"

He shrugs, sits patiently as she first wipes his face, dampens a cotton swap, clears the eye makeup along the crease, then uses a damp spoolie for the day's mascara.

"You really don't like people seeing you without your face on, do you?"

Alex bits his lip, shakes his head.

"Why?"

He doesn't answer.

"Blake?"

"I don't know," he says, though he knows, knows very well that adhesive tits and fake hips were only one small part of what made him Blake, that makeup was an essential part of it, the most visible expression of his feminine performance. "I guess I don't want people to see the real me."

She nods, deposits cotton discs heavy with bronze and copper into a waiting wastebasket, then quietly asks, "why?"

"I guess—thanks," he says, taking the eyelash crimper she passes him. He leans in closer to the mirror, clamps his lashes into dramatic curls. Once this thing terrified him, it looks like some kind of medieval torture device. Now, he's a pro and handles it with ease. "I worry that people won't like what's underneath all the makeup."

Amber doesn't answer.

"And I worry I'm not pretty enough, maybe."

"You're very pretty, Blake," Amber says.

He glances sideways at her. "Not like you," he says. "Not naturally," he says. Then, he smiles ruefully. "And definitely not in the way St-Clair wants."

"Oh, she *likes* you," she says. "You poor bastard."

Then Amber starts on his eyelids with a gentle application of primer, a delicate touch of damp fingertip against his eyelids. Then, eyeshadow, a tickling sweep of the little brush. A short silence, and then Alex admits, in a soft voice, "You know, I've never done this before."

"Done what?"

"This. You, the makeup." He holds up his empty glass, ice cubes clinking, rim stained with lip prints. "Um, drinks and—um, girly. You know." Alex shrugs. "This."

"Not even with your sister?" She speaks quietly as she feathers and blends, switches to liquid eyeliner. He'd told her about Sophie before, in a sort of abstract, vague references devoid of anything that might gender his past.

"We don't have that kind of relationship."

"At uni?"

"Not really." He pauses. "I mostly kept to myself," which is true, especially post-grad. "I didn't really know many girls." Which is also true, painfully so. "Other girls, I mean."

"Poor you," Amber murmurs. Now, short, confident strokes of the pencil along his lower eyelid, nimble switch to the next tube, then an enviably easy flick of winged liner. "Try lighter colours," she says. "You've got such pretty eyes, you really should highlight them, open them up a little."

"I really don't," Alex says.

"You really do," Amber says.

And Christ, he thinks, of all the ways to be a girl, I've chosen to be such a cliché. Next thing you know, I'll be complaining about my nose or the size of my boobs, does my ass look big in this?

(His nose *is* big for his face, he's always thought that, even before Blake came along. And he'd rather not think about his boobs. And his ass looks *great*, just like his legs, not as sexy as Amber's but a close second, he thinks, which is a weird thing to think and take pride in but it's true, he knows it to be true.)

What next, are they going to watch *Mean Girls* together, braid each other's hair? But then, why not? A cliché's just an accepted way to do or be something, so part of ordinary life that people feel the need to mock it, like unironically being a fan of Taylor Swift. But at the end of the day, isn't that what he, what most people want: acceptance? Why can't he simply 'be' Blake and be accepted as her, at least for now, until he no longer had need of her? And yet to accept her, or accept her as part of who he is, it's just too much, a surrender, a giving in to weakness. Better to enjoy the moment buffered by ironic distance, a hidden sense of his own mockery of the absurdity of the situation.

But when Amber is done—“blink,” she orders, and he blinks into the mascara wand, and sits for a final impatient moment as she touches up his eyebrows with the pencil—he looks into the mirror and his little gasp of shock is entirely real, to see himself with eyes done in such subtle shades of colour, layered and the pale sparkle in the corners, and “wow,” he says, and means it.

Eyes wide open, he stares and sees reflected with luminous expressiveness a look he never would have thought possible, captured in the golden glow of the setting sun filtered through the round window over her bed.

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