

Chapter 13

Following the Archibald pitch, it didn't take long for the first follow up to arrive.

An email from Archibald's office to Max, addressed with clean formality, asking if Samantha could arrange a short call to confirm next steps with the Gravity term sheet. I stared at the name, lost in thought until the message arrived from Max: John wants ten minutes with both of us before we answer.

The debrief happened in John's office with the door closed.

John had already spoken to Max. He had the term sheet summary, the condition language, and the shape of the evening. He listened to my compressed account. Chloe down with food poisoning, no viable alternative at short notice, substitution executed, signature secured, without interruption. When I finished he nodded once, the same calculation I had seen him apply to every other Gravity constraint.

"You closed it," he said. "That's the material outcome. Archibald's investment and the signal it sends to the remaining holders are now in motion. Admittedly, the condition is not immaterial. He wants Max for structure and" he paused, looking at me, "Samantha for logistic support, ongoing. Not a one-time courtesy. Continuity and consistency is the asset he's buying alongside the equity."

Max shifted in his chair. "We can manage a lot of it through written updates and scheduled calls. Keep the live contact bounded."



John shook his head slightly. "Men like Archibald will need the personal touch. If Samantha is only available for the signature dinner and then vanishes into a different name and a different presentation, he will register the break. He'll start asking questions or cooling on the relationships that made him comfortable enough to sign in a single evening. We do not need that friction while the launch sequence is still locking."

He looked at me directly.

"I'm not asking you to live in the role. I am asking if the... character, can be available, as

needed. Calls, the occasional in-person touchpoint, the soft layer he already associates with the relationship. Same visual register, same name, same temperature. Enough to keep the expectation intact until the capital is fully deployed and the governance cadence is routine. After that we can review.”

The words settled with the weight of a structural decision rather than a suggestion.

John continues “And it goes without saying that this contribution on your part would be recognised in the yearly bonuses and preserve your critical value to the Gravity project.”

Critical value. I felt a blush in my cheeks.

I had told myself the previous night that the performance was exceptional and closed. An emergency. One evening. Getting Archibald across the line then hanging up the skirt. The offer opened the door to this continuing. Samantha would no longer be a costume I could put back on a hanger in Chloe’s wardrobe. She was a standing requirement of the investor relationship I had secured by becoming her without a visible seam. Regular basis. Same role. Same name.

“How regular?” I asked.

“We’ll keep it proportionate,” John said. “You’re not being reassigned. You’re protecting a relationship asset you created. Max remains primary on substance. You maintain the comms and relationship with Archibald and his team. We’ll calendar it, bound it, and reassess at Gravity launch. But we have to maintain his expectations. That’s the cost of the deal we accepted at the table.”

I weighed it up. The promise of bonuses of course had an appeal, but as much as I’d told myself that I couldn’t wait to get back to IT full time, part of me wanted to get Gravity to the finish line, with Max.

I nodded. The justifications tried to assemble themselves again, temporary ongoing performance, project-critical, financially rewarded, time-bounded until governance stabilised, but the floor under it had shifted. Samantha’s appearance had not been a one-off successful gamble. It had been the opening of a standing obligation written in the name critical investors, and John, now came to recognise.

We left John’s office with the first call to Archibald’s office already on the calendar for the following afternoon, listed under Samantha.

Max walked with me as far as the lifts.

“I’m sorry it landed like this,” he said quietly. “You saved the deal. You shouldn’t have to keep paying for it this way”

“Gravity needed it, we needed it” I answered. The sentence was true and no longer sufficient. “We’ll manage it.”

He didn’t argue. He also didn’t look as if he believed the bounds would hold exactly as described.

I returned to the fourth floor in ordinary trousers and a softer blouse, the polished baseline still in place, and sat at my desk with the new reality turning slowly in the background. The

dual role had acquired a deeper, named layer. Samantha would have to return. Regularly. On purpose. I just had to make sure she didn't replace Sam entirely.

HR had pinged before I even returned to my desk.

The message was short and administrative. A secondary email account had been set up at John's request to support external continuity on Project Gravity. Display name: Samantha Chambers. The account was already routed to my existing device. Please confirm access and set a signature. Standard security policies applied.

I sat at the fourth-floor desk and stared at the new line in the mail client.

Two inboxes.

The original, Samuel Chambers, IT Supervisor, still received the IT tickets, the monitoring alerts, the internal technical threads. The new one, Samantha Chambers, already held a short welcome note from the system and a calendar invitation for the first Archibald follow-up call.

The directory entry sat in the global address list, no photo, next to my Samuel entry that still carried the professional head shot from my ID card.

The email signature had already been setup required: Samantha Chambers | Project Gravity Coordinator.

Within a few hours managing both became an immediate, concrete practice. IT tickets stayed in the Sam inbox and were handled in the technical voice I still owned. Gravity coordination, investor scheduling, soft-layer updates, and the growing volume of residual admin landed in the Samantha inbox and needed the lighter, more continuous tone the investor relationship had locked in. Switching between them was only a click. The mental switch was larger.

One window was the role I had been hired into. The other was the role I had performed for two hours to save a signature and was now required to maintain on a regular basis, complete with official address and directory title.

I told myself the structure was helpful. Bounded. Visible. A clean separation rather than an informal blur. When the Samantha account was no longer needed, HR could simply turn it off. Until then it was just infrastructure for a relationship that mattered, the same category as a project code or a shared drive.

The rationalisation sat cleanly enough while I answered the first Samantha-addressed calendar confirmation and then flipped back to a permissions review under my own name. It sat less cleanly when I noticed that the two inboxes already reflected two different centres of gravity: one full of systems problems that still felt slightly effortful, the other already accumulating the small, continuous coordination tasks that produced the familiar hit of usefulness and control.

I locked the terminal at the end of the day with both accounts active, both signatures set, and the walls still in place. Separate outfits. Separate calendar labels. Separate inbox. Bounded obligations.

Chloe framed it as just logistics.

“John’s already signed off on a company-card run for Samantha’s wardrobe,” she said, catching me between inboxes on Thursday. “You’re not borrowing my pink skirt every time Archibald wants a face-to-face. You need your own rotation. Three skirts minimum, at least one dress so you’re covered for anything that isn’t a straight office lunch. Mia and Jess are coming. We’re doing this properly.”

I started to reach for the usual excuses. It’s not going to be full time. It’s just til the launch. Then I stopped. The calendar already held two more Samantha meetings in the next fortnight. The secondary inbox was not shrinking. The argument for new outfits was stronger than the argument against it. That did not mean I liked it.

Skirts. Dresses. Things I would have to own. Hang up. Put on. Embrace the mistaken identity. Walk into a room wearing, on purpose, because an old-school investor had decided that was who I was. The thought sat in my stomach the whole afternoon.

We went after work.

The store was the same broad, well-lit place where Chloe had once steered me toward the new bras.

This time the destination was clearer. Mia and Jess flanked the process with the same cheerful efficiency they brought to group-chat styling decisions. Chloe held the company card and kept the brief tight: polished, investor-facing, consistent with the register Archibald had already accepted.

I drifted first toward the longer racks. Long dresses. Maxi skirts. Soft fabrics that fell to the ankle. If I had to do this, I told myself, at least I could keep my legs out of it. Cover the line. Cover the stockings. Cover the fact that the body underneath had started answering to a different set of clothes than it used to. I pulled two in navy and a quiet charcoal and held them up like a compromise.

Chloe looked at them the way she looked at a bad draft.

“No.”

“It’s modest.”

“That’s the problem.” She took them out of my hands and put them back without asking. “Archibald did not sign because Samantha wore a tent. He signed because she looked like the girl who walks into a private dining room and he listens. These will not pass muster. And it would be a crime to keep hiding your legs.”

Mia nodded and Jess was already moving.

Chloe came back with a short stack over her arm and pushed it at me before I had finished assembling a better objection.

Pencil skirts. Mini, pencil skirts. Soft grey. Black. A deeper burgundy. Blue. And of course

another pink, to match hers.

All cut to sit high on the waist and end just above the knee.

“Start with the black,” she said. “You’ll see.”

I took them into the fitting room with the familiar low resistance that accompanied every expansion of the Samantha side, except this time the resistance had a sharper edge. A skirt was not a blouse I could button over a sports bra and call polished. A skirt was a decision you could see from across a lobby.

I stepped into the black one.

The zip went up without a fight. The waistband settled on the narrow line the cincher had left behind and stayed there. The fabric closed over the seat as if it had been waiting for that exact shape. I turned sideways to the mirror and then front-on and felt something close to alarm.

It fit.



Not approximately. Not in the generous way men’s trousers had started to sit wrong and then get replaced by ones that were a little more accommodating of my figure. This was the same clean, confusing click I had felt the night I put on Chloe’s pink skirt in the executive women’s room. The hem hit mid-thigh. The hips made the heart shape. My butt looked toned. The waist looked like it belonged to the garment instead of the other way around. I

stood there longer than I meant to, staring at a body that had no business making a pencil skirt look this straightforward.

I hated how little argument the reflection offered.

“Well?” Chloe called through the door.

“It... fits.”

She made a pleased sound. “Of course it does. You’ve been built for that cut for months. Come out.”

I did, still in the black skirt, and watched the three of them take it in the way they took in a successful outfit test. No surprise. No second glance at the fact of me in it. Only the small, satisfied adjustment of someone whose plan had been confirmed.

“See?” Chloe said. “Crime, like I told you. Those maxis would have swallowed the whole point.”

I went back in and tried the others. Grey. Burgundy. The pink. Each one closed the same way. Each one made the same shape. The shock did not get smaller with repetition. It just got quieter, which was worse. I told myself it was only fabric doing what fabric does when the measurements happen to match. I did not believe the sentence as much as I wanted to.

Then the dresses.

Chloe came back from the rack with something grey folded over her arm and held it out like it was nothing.

“This one. Pinafore. Over the white blouse you’ve already got on. You’ll see.”

I took it because she was already looking at me the way she looked when the decision had been made. The fabric was heavier than the black skirt. A sleeveless panel, a low square that would sit under the chest, a skirt attached to it. Not a skirt you put on and called trousers-adjacent. A dress.

The first one that had ever been put in my hands, with the expectation I would zip it up and walk out of the cubicle in it.

“I’ve never-” I started, and then I did not finish it, because the end of that sentence ‘was worn a dress’ and I could hear how small it would sound against the three of them and the company card and the pile already waiting by the till.

“It’s just a pinafore,” Chloe said. “Blouse underneath. Same as a skirt with extra structure. Go on, give it a try.”

I went back in and shut the curtain.

The blouse stayed. The grey dropped over my head and settled on the narrow waist as if it had been cut for the line the cincher had left. The neckline of the dress sat below the bust, which meant the white shirt and the shape in the bra were suddenly the whole top half of the picture. I reached back for a zip I did not need. There was nothing to argue with. It was on.

I stood in the cubicle and looked at the first dress I had ever worn and tried to find the sentence that made it office equipment and not what it really was.

“Well?” Chloe called.

I opened the curtain before I could talk myself into taking it off..

“Come out properly,” Mia said. “We can’t see it from the curtain.”

I stepped the rest of the way out. The grey skirt of the pinafore moved when I did, a single piece instead of a separate waistband, and I had to put a hand to it out of habit, the way I still did with trousers that were about to slip. It did not slip. It sat. Jess made a small approving sound. Chloe circled once.

“Turn.”

“I’m not-”

“Sammy. Twirl.”

I did a tight, stupid half-turn that was not a twirl so much as an attempt to get it over with. The hem lifted a fraction and settled. The three of them looked at me the way they had looked at the black skirt, only warmer.

“Oh, that’s the one,” Mia said. “That’s actually perfect.”

“You look great,” Chloe said, already nodding. “The blouse under it keeps it office. The dress does the rest. Grey is safe. You can wear that on five tomorrow and nobody will blink.”

Jess tipped her head. “Better than the pencil, even. You look finished.”

I stood there in my first dress I had ever worn and tried to name the difference.

A skirt still felt like something you put on over the fact of yourself. A waistband. A hem. An argument you could take off at the end of the day and hang next to the trousers. Pants, even the close ones, still had the ghost of the old job in them. This did not. The pinafore started at my shoulders and went all the way down as one decision. There was no separate top half to hide in. Walking in it was walking in a dress. The air on my legs was the same as the black skirt. The rest of it was not. It felt closer. More complete. Like the outfit had an opinion about what I was and had already finished having it.

I hated that I kind of liked the way it sat.

“It’s a lot,” I said.

“It’s a classic,” Chloe said. “It’s going in the pile. Unless you hate it.”

I looked at the three of them. At the grey in the mirror behind Chloe’s shoulder. At the company card already waiting.

“I don’t hate it.”

“That’s a yes.”

She took it off the conversation and onto the pile before I could build a longer sentence.

I told myself it was for emergencies. The same as the skirts. The same as everything else that had started as a one-off and then refused to stay in that box.

Jess was already at the next rack.

“One more. Not for a lunch. But just in case.”

She came back with a length of muted rose, thin and slippery, and put it in my hands before I could ask what that meant. A wrap. No buttons. A tie at the waist. The fabric caught the shop light and did not look like anything I had worn to sit at a table and take notes.

“I have the black skirt. I have the grey.”

“Those are office. This is the other column. We have events all the time where we have to step it up a level. Try it. You’re not leaving without knowing it works.”

The cubicle felt smaller with the rose in it. I took the blouse off. There was nothing to wear underneath except the bra and panties. I put my arms through, crossed the front, and tied it. The material was cooler than the pinafore, closer to skin, a single piece from the open neck to the hem. No shirt to argue with. No second layer to make it a costume over something else.

I looked at the mirror.

It gave the same answer as the grey. Continuous. Unbroken. The waist the cincher had left. The chest the bra was lifting. The hips that made the hour glass. The soft rose reflected the light. I thought back to all the other pink items of clothing that had slowly worked their way into my wardrobe. It was...pretty. It was the first and last word that came to mind. It did not look like a man in a dress he had been talked into. It looked like the woman Archibald had paid for, standing in a shop lighting that was too honest about it.

I stood there longer than I had with the pinafore. The thinner fabric moved when I breathed. There was no blouse to hide in. Just once piece of material that didn’t end in pant legs. It was a statement on its own.

I opened the curtain.

The three of them went quiet in the good way. Mia put a hand to her mouth. Jess nodded once, slow.

I turned once because they were going to ask anyway. The wrap held. The tie stayed. The reflection did not offer an argument I could use.

“That’s the one.” Mia said.

“Are you... sure?” I asked, and heard how small that was next to what the glass was actually

showing.

“Sweetie, you look gorgeous”, Mia squeezed my arm and reassured.

“We’re not leaving without it.” Chloe said. “You look expensive.”

I went back in and untied it with fingers that were not quite steady. I told myself I was only checking it fit. That was true. It was also true that the mirror had already decided what the dress was for, and I had stood there long enough to let it.

I couldn’t argue with them. “Pretty”. “Gorgeous”. A quite voice whispered.

Emergency options, I told myself. Ready for anything the continuity requirement produced. The words were thinner than they had been in the cab home from the dinner.

As I emerged, Chloe had something else for me.

“You’ll need matching lingerie sets,” she said, already pulling pastel options. “Thongs to manage VPL.

“VPL?” I asked.

“Visible panty line. Ordinary briefs show under a tight skirt or dress the second you sit or turn. These don’t. And the bras should match so nothing flashes an odd colour at the neckline if a blouse shifts.”

For a moment I wondered if I’d been showing “VPL” with my gym yoga shorts for months.

She held up the first set: pastel pink with a small floral pattern, soft moulded cups, matching thong. Lingerie. Two more in similar pastel registers followed. I looked at the delicate fabric and the specific cut of the thong and felt the framing work harder than usual. Chloe did not treat it as loaded. She treated it as finishing the ensemble so the outer clothes performed correctly under investor scrutiny.

“It’s not complicated,” Jess added. “You already know the bra part of it. This just makes the outer line clean. Plus they’re cute”

I nodded once, short, and let Chloe add the sets to the pile.

We left with the skirts, the dresses, the pastel matching lingerie sets, and a quiet company-card receipt that would sit in the Gravity cost centre under “Uniform Expenses”. On the way back to the station Chloe was already talking about a second pair of heels in a neutral shade. I listened, the shopping bags light in my hands, and kept trying to hold the same sentence I had walked in with.

Bounded. Professional. Outfits required to maintain an expectation I had created by passing too well.

At home I hung the new pieces separately from the ordinary rotation. The black pencil skirt went on the hanger first. Even empty, it kept the shape. I looked at it for a second longer than the others and then took the grey one back off the hanger, along with the first pastel

set.

I tried on the first lingerie set so I'd know what I was in for come tomorrow morning.

The thong was the part I had been putting off. I of course was familiar with them. Rachel would wear them on occasion if she was wearing a tight fitting outfit or wanted to dress up. I had of course, never worn one before. The fabric was a narrow triangle and two thin straps. Holding it, it did not look like enough garment to count as underwear. I stepped into it anyway, pulled it up, and felt the straps settle high on my hips and the small panel sit flush against the front.



There was almost nothing there.

I had to be careful with the rest. The panel was too small to hide my penis if I left it as it was. I tucked myself down and back until the front was smooth, then checked in the mirror before I trusted it. No ridge. No outline. Just the flat triangle of pastel fabric. Only then did I turn further and look back over my shoulder.

The straps framed my butt instead of covering it. Lifted. Rounded. The curved, toned heart shape the gym classes and the cincher hadn't been helping sat in the open with only those two lines crossing it. I had expected to feel ridiculous. What I felt first was how little fabric there was against skin that had gotten used to smoother, closer things, and then, unhelpfully, that the view from behind looked finished. Intentional. The sort of line the tight skirt was designed to sit over. Something inside me felt... good about how it looked.

I put the blue skirt on over it.

The thong disappeared. No ridge. No bunch. When I sat on the edge of the bed and stood again, nothing announced itself under the fabric. The floral pastel bra sat under a soft test blouse without announcing itself either. The absence of a visible line when I turned sideways was, objectively, the correct outcome for the garments we had just selected.



I stood there a moment taking in the image, looking at the back of myself in the skirt and knowing what was underneath it. Then I took it all off, hung the skirt with the others, and shut the door on the emergency Samantha wardrobe.

Separate. Controlled. Ready for the next time the calendar required her.

The wardrobe had simply become more complete, and more specifically hers. The part I could not quite file was how little the black skirt had needed me to become anyone. It had just fitted. The thong had done the same.

The note came through on Tuesday, six days after Victor had signed.

I was on four, halfway through a ticket Adrian could have closed faster, when the calendar update landed on both inboxes at once. John. Max. External: HHM Partners. And then, under Support, the name that still looked like a temporary label even when I had already worn it for an evening.

Samantha.

I opened the thread.

John's message was short. HHM wanted a look at the vehicle before they committed a sleeve. Archibald sat on their board. There would be overlap at some point. Best if the same face that had hosted Victor was in the room so nobody had to do extra mapping. Samantha should attend.

I sat with that for a second, cursor blinking in the wrong window. Then I typed back from the Samantha account because that was the one the thread was already addressed to.

"Understood". I responded.

No argument. No request to keep it to trousers. The game plan had been built the night of the dinner, whether I had admitted that or not. Garment bag on five. Change upstairs. Arrive as the version they were expecting. Be the host. Let Max do the numbers.

Chloe had the bag in the cupboard behind her desk. I took the lift at twenty to, told Adrian I had a Gravity hold, and did not linger for the look that sometimes followed that sentence.

"You're on," Chloe said, already sliding the hanger across. "Blouse is pressed. Shoes in the bottom. Do you want me to do your mouth or have you got it?"

"I've got it."

"Good. They're ten minutes out. I'll stall at reception if the lift is slow."

The executive women's room was empty. I locked the outer door and hung the bag on the hook.

Slacks off. Ordinary shirt off. The skirt first, the black one, the one that sat high on the thigh and made the walk to reception a different walk. It closed over the smooth front without a fight. Then the blouse. Short puff sleeves. White. The buttons that framed rather than hid. I arranged myself in the cups the way Chloe had shown me that first night, a little lift, a little evenness, and watched the line appear in the glass over the sinks.

Heels. The higher pair. I stood and took a few practice steps to make sure I wasn't going to wobble.

Makeup last. Foundation over the baseline I had worn to four. Defined eye. Blush. The rose lip taken a step past base office. I did the waves with my fingers and the small iron Chloe kept in the drawer for "emergencies," which this officially was.

When I was done I stood and took in my reflection.

The person looking at me was the one Victor had called Samantha without being corrected. Soft waves to the shoulders. The mouth finished. The blouse doing the work the dinner research had asked it to do. The waist and the hips and the way the skirt sat on them. I turned sideways. I turned back. There was a version of this moment, a week ago, where I had been waiting for the glass to argue. It didn't. The argument had gone quiet. What looked back was close enough to natural that saying this is a costume out loud would have sounded like the strange part.

I practised my smile, quickly checked the blouse was tucked in smooth in the skirt at the back. I put the fourth-floor clothes into the bag, zipped it, and left it with Chloe. She looked

me over, gave me a wink, and tipped her head toward the lifts.

I walked to reception.

The switch happened in the last stretch of corridor, the same way it had before Victor.

Shoulders softer. Voice ready to lift. The brightness coming on because the room was about to need it.

The HHM group came through in a cluster. Three men in dark suits. A woman in navy with a leather folder. I stepped forward before anyone from the firm had to.

“Hi, welcome, I’m Samantha. Gravity Coordinator” The smile was already there. “Max is just wrapping a call. You’re right on time. Can I take jackets? We’ve got coffee and water in the boardroom, or I can do a proper order if anyone’s particular.”

The man in front, I had the brief; Greg Ellison, firm partner, gave me a quick glance from face to legs.

“Samantha. Victor’s told us about you.”

“Only good things, I hope.” I laughed when he did, light, easy. “He’s on your board, I know. We’ll take good care of you. This way. Watch the little step at the glass.”

I led them down. The heels made the small even sound they made on five. I pointed out the coats, the glasses, the seats with the view, asked the one of the woman whether she wanted the window or the screen, and heard myself doing the hostess run without a hitch. Names. Preferences. The joke about the weather that was not really a joke so much as a way to keep the tone light and moving until Max arrived.



Max appeared in the doorway a minute later. His eyes went to the skirt, then to my face, then to the guests, and the professional version of him slotted in beside me.

“Greg. Helen. You’ve met Samantha.”

“We have,” Helen Saunders said, already smiling. “She’s quite the hostess.”

“I try.” I tipped my head, pleasant, notepad already open. “I’ll be just here if you need anything at all. Please, sit. I’ll grab that coffee order and we’ll get you started.”

I took the order. I fetched the coffees. I took notes, smiled when a joke was made, found an email when we needed a specific number, chipped in a thought to back up Max, summarised action points and booked in the next follow up.

Full Samantha mode. Sam just wasn’t needed.

The two-inbox structure did not stay balanced for long.

Within a week the Samantha account was the one that lit up first each morning. Archibald’s office treated it as the default channel, scheduling, soft questions, requests for “a quick human update before the numbers.” Soon other Gravity stakeholders followed the path of least resistance. If Samantha had answered once, Samantha became the address

they used again. Liz began copying the account on coordination threads that had previously sat in my personal mail.

External counsel used it. A junior analyst from one of the smaller holders asked for “Samantha’s view” on timing without ever referencing the IT title.

The volume was not dramatic. It was simply steadier, warmer, and more continuous than the Sam/IT inbox. Tickets and architecture questions still arrived under my original name, but they arrived in clusters and often felt like interruptions in a day already organised around the other stream.

The Samantha work had the same clean shape I had started to prefer months earlier: clear requests, visible usefulness, the small hit of control that came from smoothing a path for Max or for the programme. The IT work retained its old texture, technical, sometimes resistant, occasionally frustrating in the way the inheritance-script problem had been frustrating. One inbox produced a low, reliable sense of competence.

The other increasingly required deliberate effort to re-enter.

I worked hard to the discipline and structure.

The separate Samantha outfits stayed in the garment bag at the office, that I would change into when needed. Calendar blocks for Archibald contact were labelled neutrally.

On the fourth floor the dual-role baseline continued: trousers, ordinary blouses, IT focus in the gaps between Gravity support. Controlled. Proportionate. Time-bounded until things stabilised.

Sam’s signature on technical replies. Samantha’s signature on everything that touched Archibald and his group of investors. The walls remained visible. What shifted was the weighting behind them. By the second week I noticed myself clearing the Samantha queue before opening the IT one.

It wasn’t long before I noticed that a quiet stretch on the fourth floor no longer felt like recovered time for supervisor work, it felt like downtime between Gravity tasks. The emotional centre of gravity, so to speak had quietly moved, and the inboxes simply recorded the movement in daily counts.

Max noticed the pattern without commenting on it directly. He would ping the Samantha account for a calendar broker or some notes formatting and the Sam account for a genuine systems question, the split already naturalised in his own behaviour.

Once, after a short Archibald call conducted entirely as Samantha, he said only, “He stays warmer with you on the line. Whatever you’re doing, it’s working.”

The compliment landed in the same place the group-chat praise used to land, validation of a performance that was no longer occasional.

I told myself the imbalance was still temporary. Launch sequence still locking. Governance cadence still forming. Once the capital was fully deployed and the relationship matured into routine reporting, the Samantha volume would drop and the IT baseline would reassert. The ease I felt in that inbox was simply the ease of work I had become extremely practised at. The relative friction of the original role was residual fatigue from months of

split attention.

The explanations remained available.

They had to work against the daily evidence that one of the two names was carrying more of the living weight of the job, and that the organisation, and Max, and Archibald, and the calendar, had already begun to treat that name as the default point of contact for everything that was not purely technical.

I closed both inboxes at the end of another uneven day, the Samantha one cleared to zero, the Sam one still holding two tickets I had not yet touched, and felt the quiet, accumulating sense that the bounded obligation was doing what successful structures do: reshaping the terrain around itself.

Most days still began on the fourth floor. I would arrive in the quieter trousers and blouse combination, light makeup, hair in soft waves or a low ponytail, and settle into the residual IT work that still needed an eye. Tickets, permissions, the occasional platform question. It felt thinner than it used to, but it was still the job I had been hired for.

Then a message would land. Max, Liz, or one of the client offices. The other track would activate. An important Gravity contact was coming in. Someone who expected the polished version of me. Someone who had already met “Samantha.”

I would close the IT ticket, log out, and take the back stairs or the quieter lift to the fifth-floor bathrooms. The emergency Samantha outfits stayed in a garment bag in a locked drawer now. The closer blouse, one of the skirts, the higher heels, the spare makeup. Changing took twelve minutes if I moved cleanly. Hair restyled, eyes sharpened, lip colour deepened a fraction, the push-up bra settled so the neckline sat the way the clients seemed to prefer.

I would check the mirror once, then step out into the bullpen.

Chloe and the others never made a production of it. They simply shifted to make space, passed me the visitor list or the coffee order, and treated the transition as ordinary. Once the heels were on and the skirt was zipped, the fifth-floor version felt less like a costume and more like the default that had been waiting underneath.

The performance itself was becoming startlingly easy.

When the lift doors opened and the client stepped out, I was already smiling, the warmer, slightly brighter smile that seemed to put older men at ease. I would greet them by name, take their coat if they had one, and keep a light, continuous stream of friendly chatter as I walked them toward the meeting room. A little soft laugh at their comments. A quick, attentive tilt of the head when they spoke.

The kind of bubbly, polished warmth that made them relax before Max even entered the room. I fetched water, remembered how they took their coffee, smoothed over any small delays with an easy “He’s just finishing a call, won’t be a moment.” None of it felt forced anymore. The gestures, the tone, the small continuous performance of being pleasant and capable and softly feminine. It sat closer to the surface each time.

By the third or fourth client visit I no longer had to think about the cues. They simply happened.

I blended in so easily that new people on the floor rarely clocked that I had only just arrived from downstairs. The posture, the voice register, the small continuous movements of keeping Max's day moving, all of it felt continuous with the secretaries around me. Once or twice I caught myself laughing at something Chloe said in the exact same register I used with the clients, and the realisation landed quietly. The performance was no longer something I put on.

It was something I stepped into.

The difficult part was the return. And the part I worked hardest at was not being seen doing it.

I timed the client meetings so I could change back before anyone from four came upstairs. I used the back corridor. I kept the garment bag zipped. I would rather be five minutes late to a ticket than walk the open floor in a skirt while Adrian or Tomas or Priya was in the lift lobby. It was not vanity. It was the title. I was still their supervisor on paper. Authority did not survive being spotted in a miniskirt and heels between meetings. I knew that. I had sat on the other side of that table. I did not want the picture of Samantha to be the one they carried back down to the raised floor.

Most days the timing held.

One afternoon it did not.

I had just walked the last HHM contact to the lifts after a Gravity wrap. Pink blouse, the neckline doing what the dinner research had asked it to do, black pencil miniskirt, heels still on because I had told myself I would change in two minutes. I turned toward the bathrooms with the notepad still against my chest and saw Adrian at the far end of the hallway, coming the other way, mid-conversation with someone from facilities.

There was no time to look like I belonged there. There was also no time to disappear. Mia, Jess and Chloe were in a little cluster by the bullpen, the usual after-meeting huddle, heads already tipped together. I hustled straight into it. Notepad up. Shoulder in. Back to the hallway. I laughed at something I had not heard and let the three of them close around the pink blouse and the black skirt until I was just another hemline in the group.

"Hide me," I muttered, too quick, into Chloe's ear.



She did not ask why. She shifted half a step so I was fully inside the circle and kept talking about the coffee order as if I had been there the whole time.

I stayed that way until Adrian's voice passed the junction and faded toward the other bank of lifts. I did not turn around to check. I told myself the camouflage had held. Four girls by the desks. Nothing for him to pick out of the shape of it.

I waited another ten seconds. Then I peeled off to the women's room, locked the stall, and changed back with my hands not quite steady. Trousers. The ordinary blouse. The makeup I could not fully undo, only mute. When I came out, the hallway was empty.

I never mentioned it. Neither did he. I do not know if he saw the pink at the edge of the huddle or only the secretaries doing what secretaries did. I told myself it was the second one.

I kept doing the work to make sure it stayed that way. Camera off if I had to take a fourth-floor call from fifth. Taking a different hallway if I saw anyone from IT while the skirt was still on. Avoidance was easier than the alternative, and the alternative was standing in front of my own team in a pencil skirt trying to talk about servers like the person who should be taking notes.

Juggling the two versions left a constant low-level tension. The fourth-floor work required one kind of attention. Systems, logic, the older competence. The fifth-floor work required another. Timing, presentation, the soft continuous management of other people's needs. Switching between them mid-day was starting to feel less like efficiency and more like

holding two separate operating systems in the same head.

And the longer I spent in the second one, the more natural it felt to stay there.

I told myself it was temporary. Launch was close. Once Gravity was live the client-facing demand would drop and the dual track could collapse back into one. Until then I simply managed the transitions as cleanly as I could, kept the garment bag stocked, watched both ends of the hallway before I stepped out, and tried not to think too hard about how little resistance the fifth-floor version met when I stepped into it, or how easily the bubbly, polished Samantha mode arrived when needed.

Some days refused to resolve themselves easily.

I arrived on the fourth floor with the ordinary baseline in place. Trousers, a softer blouse, bra, polished but not over the top and opened both inboxes before the coffee had cooled. The IT Sam account held a cluster of overnight alerts, a permissions regression that had reappeared under a new group policy, and a request from Adrian for a design review on a storage migration that should have been straightforward.

The Samantha account held three new messages from Archibald's office, a calendar conflict Max needed brokered before ten, a soft-language review of an external update, and a note from Liz asking for a cleaned one-pager on residual workstream ownership.

I started with the IT side out of deliberate discipline.

The permissions regression ate forty minutes and still was not sorted. Adrian's migration review required context I had not held in the front of my mind for weeks; I had to rebuild it from documentation while the Samantha calendar reminder pulsed at the edge of the screen. By the time I had a coherent response drafted, Max had messaged twice, once on the Sam account and again on the Samantha one, about an Archibald preference that needed a same-morning answer.

I flipped, answered in the lighter Samantha voice, brokered the calendar, and returned to the migration notes to find the thread of my own thinking had gone cold.

The pattern repeated through the morning.

Every time I sank into a technical problem long enough for the old competence to engage, a Gravity demand surfaced with a tighter deadline and a clearer emotional payoff. Screening a call for Max. Confirming a detail for a Gravity meeting under the Samantha signature. Tidying a summary so the programme narrative stayed clean. Each of those tasks completed in minutes and left the familiar hit of usefulness.

The IT tasks stretched, resisted, and left a low residue of frustration when they were interrupted. By lunch the Samantha inbox was clear and the Sam inbox still carried two open tickets and the half-finished migration response.

Adrian stopped by the desk in the early afternoon.

"You still good to walk the storage design before end of day? Tomas is blocked on the volume mapping until we sign off."

“Yes,” I said. “Give me an hour.”

I got thirty-five minutes. An Archibald follow-up question arrived, phrased for Samantha, and the tone made clear he expected a same-day human reply rather than a formal holding line. I wrote it, kept it light, reinforced Max’s last structural note, and sent it. When I turned back to the storage design, Adrian and Tomas had already started without me. They were polite about it. They also did not wait.

Late afternoon became a continuous switch. IT ticket, Samantha calendar, residual Gravity admin, a quick fourth-floor question I answered too shortly, another soft-layer request I handled with the practised continuity voice. The two roles no longer felt like parallel tracks I was managing. They felt like two currents of different strengths, and the stronger one kept pulling the day sideways.

By the time I closed both inboxes the Samantha side was current and the Sam side was a list of partials and deferrals.

I left the building with the emergency garment bag still hanging behind the door of the small storage cupboard I had started using for it, the dual structure intact on paper, and the lived experience of the day sitting heavier than the paper. Juggling had not failed completely. It had simply made visible which set of tasks now produced momentum and which set produced drag.

The next day was when Dave decided to catch me by surprise. I was sitting at my desk trying to multitask a software update rollout with a Gravity meeting summary note when I get a ping on my phone.

No preamble this time. Just the photo, then a line underneath.

Dave: “Recovery day. Allegedly.”

Shirtless. Gym mirror again. He had the shot angled it so the point was obvious. Stomach tight, shoulders back, the same grin as if this were a joke he was generously including me in.

The rush hit in the same place as the night before. Quick, unhelpful, entirely out of proportion to a Wednesday morning on the fourth floor. I locked the phone, opened it, locked it again.

Adrian was on a call two desks over. My screen was full of work that did not care about anyone’s abs.

I typed put a shirt on and deleted it. Too much. I typed impressive and deleted that faster.

“Showing off”, I sent.

“Little bit. But you started it.”

I had not started it. I had sent a complaint about leg day. That was the version I was sticking to.

The other version, the one from the drawer, was still too close to the surface. I could feel the temptation sitting right behind the downplay: answer in kind. Keep the current going. See what he sent next.

I did not do it at the desk. I lasted through the morning, through lunch, through the pull upstairs for a Gravity note I could have sent from four. The photo sat in the thread like an open tab I was pretending not to see.

Class was the excuse I needed.

Same studio. Same leftover heat. Same locker-room mirror. I told myself it would be the same as the other day. Same tired face. A joke to close the loop.

What I actually did was put on one of the new pink sets. Sports bra and shorts, matching, tighter than the old black. I told myself it was only good to mix things up, that wearing the same kit every session was starting to look like I owned one outfit. The quieter reason sat underneath that and did not need saying. I wondered, just for a second, whether Dave would notice.

I leaned my right hand on the speckled counter, hip cocked toward the glass, and held the phone up in the other. Not a full turn this time. A three-quarter. Enough that the frame took the open neck of the bra, the bare midriff, the tight line of the shorts. Neutral expression. Like I had not thought about it.



I looked at it once, felt my stomach dip, and sent it before the sensible sentence finished forming.

Fine. Recovery day here too. New kit. Nothing else.

His reply was immediate.

“Sammi.”

Then: “You cannot send that and pretend you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Then he sends another photo. Closer. Still no shirt. Less joke in the grin.

My cheeks blushed and I instinctively bit my lower lip.

I sat on the bench with my towel still in my hand and the rush sitting hot in my chest, still trying to call it banter, still not asking what he thought Sammi was.

I know exactly what I’m doing, I almost wrote.

What I sent was:

“You’re the one who keeps sending pictures.”

“And you’re the one who keeps sending better ones back.”

I put the phone in my bag, pulled a shirt on over the class outfit, and pretended like it never happened.

The message thread would be there to prove it had to me later.

The ticket should have been ordinary.

Ted Harrington, fifth floor, screen dying. I was still IT Supervisor. I still sat on four. I still closed tickets. So when Adrian’s huddle looked locked in and Tomas was already mid-alert, I stood up in the silvery-white blouse and the light blue pants and told them I would take it.

The lift doors opened on five and the outfit did the introducing before I did. Heels on thick carpet. Soft pink nails. Makeup I had stopped thinking of as optional. Ted saw me and his whole face arranged itself around a version of me that lived next to Max’s office, not next to a server rack.

“Sammy. Legend. Can you get one of the IT boys up? This thing’s had it.”

I smiled on reflex, then had to rewind the sentence.

“I am IT, Tom. That’s why I came.”

He laughed, easy, as if I had made a cute correction.

“Yeah, I know you’re around doing Gravity stuff for Max. I meant actual IT. The guys who crawl under desks and swap the boxes. You’re not going to want to break a nail on this.”

He said it looking at my hands. Not unkind. Worse than unkind. Casual. Certain. The same tone he used when he asked Chloe to chase a lunch reservation.

I felt the first real heat of the morning then. Not embarrassment exactly. The slow, sour recognition that he had looked at me, known my name, known I worked with Max, and still placed me on the other side of the work. Secretary-adjacent. Support. The person who arranged the fix, not the person who made it.

“I run the team downstairs,” I said, and heard how careful I sounded, how much I wanted him to take it seriously. “I can replace a screen.”

“Course you can.” He held up both hands, grinning.

“No offence, yeah? Sorry you just don’t look like the cavalry these days.”

I checked the screen because looking at him was making it worse. Static. Dead panel. Easy diagnosis. I messaged Tomas for a spare and stood there in the fitted pants feeling every inch of how the blouse sat over my chest, how the heels changed my stance, how little of the old supervisor silhouette was left to argue with.

Tomas arrived looking like the job I still claimed. Box under one arm. No makeup. No heels. Tom’s posture changed the second he appeared, that slight lift of attention men gave other men when a physical task entered the room.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ve got the swap.”

I believed it until I lifted the new monitor.

It should not have been heavy. I had moved screens for years. This one dragged at my shoulders as if the strength had been quietly siphoned off somewhere between the waist trainer and the lighter dumbbells. The blouse pulled tight across my chest. The cincher made it harder to bend my waist. The pants locked around my hips and butt and refused to give me a stable crouch. My heels skated half an inch on the carpet.

The whole thing tipped, and a small helpless sound came out of me before I could swallow it.

Tomas took the weight as if I had been holding a handbag.

“I’ve got it.”

He set it on the arm in one motion. Ted actually applauded once, lazy and delighted.

“There we are. That’s what I meant. No shame in it, Sammy. Different skill set upstairs.”

I wanted to tell him I had built half of the firm’s server infrastructure and coded the market reporting platform he was to eager to get a new screen to use. The sentence stayed behind my teeth.

I dropped to feed the cables instead, and that was worse. The pink nails made it clumsier. They clicked, slipped, refused the tiny clip on the adaptor. I missed the port twice.

What's more, I could feel the light blue pants stretch across every curve of my ass the moment I bent. In the glass of the next partition I saw it the way Ted could see it: the heart-shape of my hips, the lift of my seat, the neckline of my blouse opening as I reached. Not exactly the vibe of a supervisor getting their hands dirty.

The blouse pulled free at the back as I crawled under. I felt air on an inch of skin and kept going. I had started wearing thongs most days, even with trousers. The closer pants showed every line of ordinary briefs. After the lesson buying the skirts it had become a quiet rule. No VPL. The black one today sat high and thin. I regrettably did not clock that the waistband had slipped enough for the top of it to show.



A quiet snicker landed behind me. Ted. Then Tomas, closer.

“Ahh, umm Sam. Why don’t I help with that.”

I froze on my hands and knees, fingers still on the adaptor, and only then felt the draught properly. I sat back, twisted, and saw it in the same glass. Untucked blouse. A strip of black above the light blue. The little V of the thong where it disappeared under the pants.

I stood up too fast and yanked the blouse down like that would unsay it.

“It’s fine,” I said. “The angle’s just awkward. Can you finish the last two? I need to get back upstairs.”

Tomas was already kneeling where I had been. Kind enough not to look at my face for too long. Ted was not that kind.

“Hazard of looking the part, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart.

I laughed because the alternative was snapping, and snapping would have confirmed every assumption in his face.

“I’m still IT, you know.”

“Whatever you say.” He was already watching Tomas take the clip. “Looks great. Tell Max I said hi.”

I invented the rest on the way to the lift. Notes for Max. A call I did not have. Anything that got me out of the room before I had to explain a piece of underwear I had told myself was only about lines under fabric.

I was almost at the corner when Tom’s voice followed, not even lowered.

“She’s got a great ass, huh.”

Tomas made some noncommittal sound. I kept walking.

On four I sat down and closed the ticket.

Replaced failed panel. Unit operational.

I did not write that the blouse had come untucked.

I did not write that Ted and Tomas had seen the thong.

I did not write that he had called me sweetheart, or that I had heard what he said after, or that for one ugly second I had been more mortified about the view than about the fact that I completely failed in accomplishing the task and needed a junior to complete it for me.

The long day left a tight, static residue that ordinary methods no longer cleared.

I locked the door, stripped, and reached for the larger realistic toy without the intermediate step of considering the purple one. It had become the preference even without the mirror and the suction cup. Heavier, more present, the surface and the slight give under pressure closer to what the craving now aimed for.

I lay back on the bed in the pink silk nightie pushed up, the soft weight of my chest already sensitive under my hands, and started there the way the circuit usually required. Thumbs circling, light pinches, the bright sparks running lower until the rest of the body was ready.

When I reached for the lube the tube was empty. The months of regular use had finally used the last of it up.

I stared at the tube for a second, the session already past the point where stopping felt like an option. The toy waited in my hand. The usual method was blocked. The alternative arrived with a low, specific flutter that was equal parts hesitation and want.

Saliva might be enough. Enough to get the surface wet, enough to finish what the day had

made necessary. What was the harm? Private. Casual. Just a one off. The same recovery logic that had covered every previous escalation.

I brought the head of the toy to my mouth and stopped short of contact, the realistic shape and colour suddenly more insistent up close. The question sat there, can I actually do this? Then the justification repeated itself, thinner and more effective for the repetition. What's the harm.

A tentative lick. The taste of clean silicone and nothing else. Another. Then a closed-mouth kiss against the tip that felt stranger and more deliberate than the lick. The third movement finished the decision. I opened and took the head in, lips sealing, tongue working to wet it properly.

I closed my eyes, feeling the weight of it on my tongue, the stretch at the corners of my mouth, the immediate and surprising heat that ran straight down through my chest and lower, landed harder than I had expected.



Something about having it there, filling my mouth with this shape while my free hand returned to a nipple and rolled it, closed the circuit in a way fingers and the earlier toys hadn't yet.

I sucked carefully, wetting the length, the realistic surface sliding against my tongue, and kept the nipple play going in time with the motion. I felt every vein and fold with my tongue. The dual sensation, mouth full, chest sparking, was turning me on. Something about this felt so good. Flashes of Dave, of Max entered my head. Soft sounds left me around the shaft. My hips shifted against nothing. I heard Ted's comment's in the back of

my mind. "Sweetheart." The burn of the embarrassment with the thong was being redirected to experiencing every inch of this toy. How deep could I take it? Part of me wanted to find out.



I felt the orgasm building. I was too turned on to question it forming just from this mouth experience and nipple play. It grew in a sharp, concentrated wave that left my thighs tight and my breath broken around the toy still held between my lips, the release rolling through without any involvement from the soft, limp penis between my legs or my ass.

Afterwards I stayed still for a long minute, the toy resting against my lower lip, the nipple still pinched lightly between two fingers, the static of the day finally gone. When I set the toy aside and cleaned up, the residual openness in my mouth and the fading sparks across my chest felt like a new layer of the same preference that had already moved from fingers to purple silicone to the realistic weight.

I told myself it was a reasonable improvisation under empty-lube conditions. The turn-on had simply been the novelty plus the accumulated stress seeking a complete exit. Temporary route for a temporary spike.

The justification held well enough to let me sleep.

It did not fully cover the fact that I already knew the tube would be replaced, and that the new option would still be available when it was.