

Chapter 14

It hit me in the middle of a perfectly ordinary afternoon, the way these things always seemed to.

I was up on the fifth floor sorting a couple of Samantha bits between IT tasks, hovering near Chloe's desk while a calendar thing resolved, when Mia looked up from her screen.

"Sam, do you know if Max is free after three? Liz wants to sneak in a quick catch-up."

"Hmm, let me check for you," I heard myself say, already pulling up the calendar. "He's got a call till twenty-past, but I can shuffle the four o'clock if you need me to? Want me to float it past him?"

Mia grinned. "You're a lifesaver. You're always so on it."

I laughed "Stop," I said, the little laugh coming out bright and automatic. "You know me, can't help myself."

The words were nothing. The music under them made me go still for a second. That bright little lift at the end of the sentence, exactly the same soft, sunny cadence the three of them used with each other. Not my old flat tech-voice. Not even the careful continuity voice I used on Archibald calls. Their voice.

Once I noticed that, I started noticing other things.

Gravity had kept me in their orbit for months. First the temporary desk, then all the leftover coordination, then the proper coordinator account and the standing "please keep Samantha available" requirement. I'd absorbed the rhythms because they worked, then because people expected them, then because they just felt like the easiest way through the day. Their lunch timing. The way they ordered coffee.

That quick group-chat ping when something small needed fixing before it became a whole formal thread. The little automatic habits, desk tidy, lipstick refreshed, a soft compliment ready when someone showed up in a new blouse.

The styling had crept in the same way. What I put on every morning at the vanity now, hair in soft waves or a low pony, the polished makeup, the closer blouses, the pretty bras, the low heels, wasn't me trying to look fifth-floor anymore. It just was maintaining consistency. On Samantha days it went all the way: the emergency kit, the higher heels, the open-neckline look Archibald already expected.

Even on ordinary days the gap between me and the secretaries had shrunk to almost nothing. Adrian and the IT boys still looked like a tech team. I didn't. Somewhere along the line that had stopped feeling weird and started feeling normal.

And the little expressions, those had slipped in last and fitted like they'd always belonged. "Love that for you". The quick sympathetic head-tilt Chloe did when a meeting dragged. Ending a soft email with a warmth that would've felt strange in a pure architecture note. I caught myself using their phrasing in the Samantha inbox first, then out loud with Max, then just... in general. The language of the orbit had gone from available, to natural, to default.

I stood in the quiet stretch of corridor after Mia walked off and tried to pin down when exactly it had tipped from “adapting” into “this is just how I am now.” There wasn’t one big moment. Just months of answering the same kinds of soft, people-y demands they answered, under the same lighting, for the same kind of stakeholder who wanted everything warm and continuous.

Their world had taught me its routines and its styling and its little phrases until the teaching didn’t feel external anymore.

I still had the excuses lined up if I needed them. Consistency. Investor expectations. Keeping the relationship asset happy. Temporary infrastructure. I could still point to the differences, the old title, the Sam inbox, trousers on non-Samantha days. All of that was still true. It just wasn’t the part of the day that felt most alive anymore.

I went back down to the little stretch of fourth-floor desk I still used, opened the Sam inbox onto the same two neglected tickets, and felt that familiar tiny resistance of having to switch registers. Then the Samantha account lit up, the softer voice rose to answer it without me having to think, and the resistance just... melted into the smoother current.

Samantha appearances were becoming more and more common, and it was clear she was no longer an emergency substitution. Calls landed with her name on them. Clients who had already met that version expected her again. John wanted consistency. Max needed the room organised before he started talking numbers and a soft, positive presence to tag team a pitch with.

The co-ordinator work had stopped feeling like a sideline I was covering for someone else. Once it sat inside Samantha, the tasks lined up. Meeting notes. Max’s calendar. Water and chairs and the extra printed decks. The light on the phone when a call was for him, and the sentence that came out before I thought about it. Errands with Chloe and Mia that used to look like I had wandered into the wrong job. They were just the day now. Manageable. Close to the ground. I could see the end of each one.

IT had started to feel like the opposite. Tickets that wanted a version of my brain I had to climb back into. Permissions flags. Config notes. Useful, still mine on paper, and somehow artificial next to the thing that actually moved Gravity forward. Every time I opened the Sam inbox I felt the drag of switching registers, like I was interrupting the work that mattered to attend to a hobby I was supposed to be in charge of.

Gravity support had a polish to it. A deal packet tailored to the investor. A room ready. A hold protected. Max walking in already briefed. That landed in the same place the compliments did. Useful. Valued. Easier to stay inside than to climb out of.

The technical work would come back into focus when Gravity launched. Systems stable, residual load gone, head clear. Until then the Samantha jobs were what the project needed, and they were the ones I could do without needing to navigate tension with Adrian and the team.

I was still IT on paper. In practice I was spending almost as many hours on five than on four, and the time on five had a dress code that did not care what the fourth-floor tickets thought of me.

I was due to host and take notes in a Gravity investor briefing in twenty-five minutes and had stopped by five to collect the planned outfit.

The desk drawer on five was the first place I went. Empty. Not even the spare lipstick I thought I had left in the corner. For a second the panic was clean and stupid, the kind that belongs to someone who has already pictured walking into a lobby in trousers.

I turned toward Chloe's desk before I had finished looking.

"Hey, have you seen my bag?"

She looked up. Unfazed like I had asked where the stapler lived.

"Oh. Cupboard. We moved it. The drawer was never going to hold a rotation. Over here I'll show you."

I followed her the six steps to the narrow walk-in off the bullpen. Cedar, leftover perfume, the faint chemical of the cleaner the whole floor used. She opened it like it was nothing. Four garment bags on a rail. Names written on the tags in the same neat marker. Chloe. Mia. Jess. And, as of last week, mine.

"Now you've got space for options and we can keep it all in one place," she said. "Everyone stores their dry cleaning here, and spares in case of spills or we need something with a little more pep. Plus it's easier for the Friday pickup."

She unzipped hers first, then Mia's, then mine, as if she were showing me how a printer tray worked. Blouses. Skirts. A couple of dresses still in the thin cleaner's plastic. Soft colours, closer cuts, the same general shape repeated in different fabrics. It looked less like emergency stash and more like a shared wardrobe that had been waiting for a fourth.

"We're all about the same size," Chloe said. "If you're short on a day, just take something. We've all done it."

I nodded because twenty minutes was not enough time to have an issue with that.

I found my tag and reached in to find the long-sleeved pink blouse I'd planned to match with my new white skirt. Pink and white would match well I figured in my head. I found the skirt, but the blouse I opened my own bag and found a hanger with nothing on it.

"If you're looking for your pink one, I think it's at the cleaner," Mia said. "There was a mark on the cuff. I sent the whole lot Friday."

Disappointment struck me. The only other option in my bag that wasn't at the cleaners was a silky white blouse, and I couldn't match a white blouse with a white skirt.

"I'd really been counting on that one." I pouted. "I can't pair white with white".

"So wear another pink." She flipped through her bag, then Chloe's, then stopped at a piece still in plastic. Sleeveless. Blush. A bow at the throat. "This. Perfect. Professional. Classy. Liz would actually like it. Try it. Quick, you're on the clock."

It was the only other pink that would sit with the white skirt the way I had pictured it. Everything else was burgundy or cream or a print I didn't have time to consider an outfit around and headed to the fifth-floor bathroom to try it on.

It went on easily. The bow sat at the base of my throat. I tied it once, badly, then again the way I had seen Chloe do hers, loose enough that it looked finished instead of costume. No sleeves. The air on my arms felt like a mistake until I looked in the mirror.

Professional. Classy. The same register as the rest of the floor. The bow did the work the long sleeves used to do, which was give me something to hide in. The chest sat. The white skirt made sense under it. It aligned with the company aesthetic in the exact way I had been reassuring myself the fifth floor required.



Chloe glanced up, nodded once, and went back to her screen.

“See? Pink. And now you know where the cupboard is.”

The junior partners arrived four minutes later. I smiled, gave the name they already had for me, and did not think about sleeves again until I was standing in the same bathroom afterward, untying the bow with fingers a little less steady as the meeting had been.

The compliments had started small enough that I could file them as manners.

Chloe saying the blush blouse looked cute. Jess tapping the bow with one nail and giving an approving gasp and nod. A junior partner holding the glass door and smiling like I had done him a favour by standing in it. None of it was about tech or systems. All of it landed in the same place the fifth floor always landed, which was that I had shown up looking like I belonged there and people were glad I had.

Every new outfit received similar praise and compliments, and each time it meant leaning

into Samantha coded options stopped feeling like a crisis.

I had spent months treating clothes as a problem to close. Shirt that covered. Trousers that did not argue with a chair. Shoes that got me from the station to the desk. Functional. Neutral. Invisible on purpose. The Samantha days did not allow invisible. Clients already had a picture. The garment bag had a schedule. The girls had opinions. Somewhere in the middle of being required to look like that person three or four times a week, I noticed I had started caring which version of her I pulled off the hanger.

Not in a grand way. In a quiet, almost greedy way.

Blouses like the ivory satin or the pink sleeveless option with the bow were the first ones I reached for when I had a choice.

Delicate used to mean wrong. A bow, a puff sleeve, a low cut neckline or bodycon material that framed instead of closed. Those were problems to manage, or avoid, or explain as weather and fit. I had stopped seeing them that way. A bow was a feature. Bare arms weren't a problem. A tighter skirt that sat higher on the thigh and made the girls say something kind about my legs was a feature.

Revealing stopped automatically meaning exposure I had to correct. It started meaning the garment was doing what it was cut to do, and the cut looked good on the body I actually had.

The self-consciousness went the same way, only quieter, so I almost missed it leaving. The first skirts had felt like walking into a room as an imposter. I used to check the hem with my hand. I used to sit carefully, as if the fabric might announce itself. That people would see me as a fraud and have me fired or arrested. That had thinned out without a speech attached to it. The alarm and accusations never came. A dress or skirt was just what I put on when the diary said Samantha now.

I had started to like the look of it. Not in a speech I would have given anyone. In the smaller way. The line of the waist. The way a pencil skirt framed my butt. Air on my legs. The small, private click of seeing myself in a glass corridor and thinking, before I could stop it, that I looked good. That I looked like I belonged in the clothes instead of borrowing them.

The feeling was even harder to argue with than the reflection. Skirts and dresses sat on this body the way the old trousers no longer did. They moved with me. They made the hourglass the cincher had left look like an intention. I still had the sentence about emergencies and launch and hanging it all back up. It just had to sit on top of the simpler fact that I did not flinch anymore when I zipped one on, and that part of me was disappointed when the day required the other version.

The feedback loop made it easy to keep going.

I would try something new I picked up on the weekend, or maybe a new combination of skirt and blouse, or pair a push up bra with a more open cut neckline, walk into the bullpen or Gravity session, and get the glow. Not a standing ovation. Just the small, immediate warmth of Chloe looking up, or Mia mouthing cute, or a client who smiled and greeted me warmly because I looked like the person they expected. I started choosing the next piece for that feeling as much as for the meeting.

Even getting misgendered in public started to feel validating in a way. The world was seeing me as Samantha, which is what I needed it to right now.

I could feel eyes when I walked. I reminded myself that was the point of looking the part. The quieter truth was that I liked the loop. Try. Be seen. Be told it worked. Reach for the next thing that might work the same way.

Max, for his part, never made a big deal about any of it.

He looked at the work. He thanked me for keeping the flow of the meeting, for the briefing packs being right, for the call landing on time and knowing the deal terms back to front. If the blouse was sleeveless or the skirt was shorter than the last one, it did not register as an issue or problem he needed to solve. Appreciation, always, for the results. No frown at the bow. No joke about the colour. That silence did more than the compliments. It let the new taste settle without a hearing.

I still had the more functional, practical outfits hanging at home. But I had stopped reaching for the most covered option first. I had started reaching for the thing that felt like me on a fifth-floor morning, which turned out to be silk and pastel and a hem that moved when I walked.

Functional had gotten me hired.

Aesthetic was keeping me in the room, and I was no longer pretending I hated the difference.

It was a Thursday afternoon and I was looking at a calendar with almost back to back Gravity holds, ninety minutes apart. In between there was, on paper, enough time to get downstairs, change, put my face on four, and come back up. In practice there was not. Twelve minutes to change each way. The quieter lift. The locked drawer. The chance of Adrian in the corridor. By the time I had done the math, the first meeting was already running long.

I decided to stay put. Finish the work from five. Change after the second hold. Four would still be there at two.

The war room office from the secondment week sat empty behind the glass, one large desk, the small outer station, the chairs we had left pushed in. Technically, I could have taken main desk there and worked in the quiet privacy, it was the nearest thing we had to a Gravity room.

I sat down at my old satellite desk in the bullpen instead.

The desk between Chloe and Jess was already half set from the last time I had been up. I opened the laptop there, in the pink blouse and the black skirt, and pulled Max's afternoon. The empty war room stayed empty.

Max came over from the windows with a coffee and stood at the edge of the cluster.

"Twelve still good?" he asked.

“Twelve is locked. Two from their credit team, plus the analyst they copied last week. I put the one-pager on top of the folder and moved your eleven-thirty so you have twenty minutes to look at the mark-up before they sit down. Water’s already in. They both take it still. The analyst asked for the deck in hard copy last time so I printed two extras.” He smiled, tired and grateful in the way that had started to land warmer than it should.

“You didn’t have to do the extras.”

“Easier than watching him scroll on his phone through the whole first slide.” I tipped the notepad. “Also, New York is going to try to pull Friday. I already pushed back and offered Thursday late. If they take it I’ll block your late morning so you’re not walking in cold.”

“Sam.” He said it quietly, like a thanks and a warning in the same breath. “You’re supposed to be downstairs this afternoon.”

“I know. The holds stacked. I’ll go after twelve.”

The ticket banner lit up an alert. Fourth floor. A permissions flag on one of the older platforms. The kind of thing I used to close before lunch without thinking.

I looked at it.

I could have stood up. I could have gone for the bag and the quieter lift and put my face on four for half an hour.

Max asked, “Do you need to grab that?”

I thought of Adrian already sitting there with the queue open. I thought of the twenty minutes before twelve and the folder and the two extra decks.

I closed the banner.

“Adrian will have it,” I said, more to the screen than to Max. Then I turned the notepad back toward him. “Do you want me to sit in at twelve or just do the notes from the door?”

“Sit in, if you can” he said. “You already know where they’ll push.”

“Okay.”

He went back to his desk. I stayed in the bullpen.

The first leftover task was a clean summary of the ten o’clock. Then setting the room and briefings up for twelve. Then the hold I had already promised to protect. Chloe passed me a visitor list without looking up. Jess asked if I had the dietary note for the late slot. I did. I heard myself say so in the bright, even voice I used on the floor and not the flatter one I used on tickets.

The rhythm arrived without being invited.

Between the two meetings I was not an IT supervisor waiting for a window. I was another person at a secretary desk in the cluster. I screened a call. I reprinted a page that had come out light. I walked the folder back to Max and came back with two more things that needed doing before twelve. Mia laughed at something on her screen and tipped it toward me and I laughed too, same pitch, same little lift at the end.

Jess watched me come back from the kitchen with the tray and made a small, pleased

sound.

“We missed this,” she said. “Having you up here properly. Not just the in-and-out, back-and-forth.”

Chloe nodded without looking away from her keyboard.

“It’s nicer when you’re not disappearing downstairs every hour.”

“It’s just the schedule,” I said. “Back to back Gravity stuff. No point burning twenty minutes on the outfit change.”

“Sure.” Chloe smiled like she had heard that sentence before. “Still. Stay. We like it.”

I made a face that was meant to be a joke and sat down again. The war room waited behind the glass with nobody in it. I stayed where the girls were.

The second meeting took the rest of the hour. I did the hostess run without thinking.

Names. Water. The soft laugh when one of the men made the weather remark. Max came in from the open floor, the room settled, I took notes in the continuity hand and did not once look at the fourth-floor inbox.

When they left I should have gone to the bag.

I did not.

There was a thank-you email to send from the Samantha account. There was a hold to lock for Friday. There was Max asking, from the edge of the bullpen, whether I could stay on the summary until he had checked the numbers. I said yes. I said it the way I said it on five.

Chloe’s sentence sat in the back of my head the whole time.

“We missed this.”

The story I was telling myself was that I’d stayed because the calendar had not given me a clean gap. That was true. It was also true that the afternoon in the cluster had felt easier than the version where I ran for the bag, or the version where I sat alone at the empty outer desk and tried to look like a co-lead waiting for a room to become real.

I did not say that out loud.

I thought it, once, while I was waiting for Max’s edits, the skirt still on, the pink blouse still doing the work the neckline had been asked to do, Mia and Jess typing on either side of me like we were a matching set.

Maybe I missed it a little bit too.



I sent the summary. I told the team I was held upstairs. I didn't go back to change until the floor had started to empty, and even then I stood in the stall for a moment, looking at the trousers and if I shouldn't even bother getting changed or just wear the skirt home.

No. Keep the discipline. Just push through until launch. That was still the answer.

It just sounded thinner after a day of not bothering to take the other version off.

The tightness came back the way it always did. Not overnight. A week of the same bras feeling a little less generous in the morning, the underwire sitting higher than it had, the centre gore not quite flattening against my sternum the way the fitter had promised.

I stood in the bathroom with the blouse off and looked properly.

They were not pecs. I had been using that word out of habit, the way I still sometimes said trainer instead of the shape it had left. Gynecomastia had gone past swelling a long time ago.

These were breasts. Soft, heavy enough to move when I turned, the nipples, larger, darker and more defined than I remembered allowing myself to notice.

In the mirror they had a shape that belonged on a woman without any translation. Full. Obvious and climbing toward the edge of what the current cups could hold without cutting in.

I turned sideways. Then front-on. I lifted them the way I had started doing without thinking, settling them into my hands, and felt the weight as a fact instead of a symptom.

Dr. Eames had said let the Wellness Program finish its course. Take the vitamins, practice

mindfulness and lower baseline anxiety levels. I still believed him, or I believed him enough to attend the appointments and keep following his treatment plan. Part of me was sure they would settle eventually, that this was a curve with a peak and a way back down.

The other part, the part that had started choosing the tighter skirts and lying necklines, did not want the peak to arrive before Gravity launched.

Samantha needed a bust. The outfits worked because there was something for the silk to fall over, something for a neckline to frame. The girls were not subtle about it. Chloe's were a full, perky shape that she made no effort to hide. Mia's sat high in everything she wore. Jess's were the first thing a client saw when she leaned across a table. Mine matched them now. On some mornings, in the right bra, they might've even been a little bigger. I liked that more than I was ready to say in a room with other people. It elevated the clothes. It made my style and confidence look intentional instead of borrowed. It made a neckline look like it had been cut for a body that already knew what it was doing.

If Eames' treatment worked, and they started going down before I could retire the Samantha character, the cupboard would stop making the same kind of sense. The compliments would change register. I would be back to managing a problem instead of wearing a feature.

I did not say that to Eames. I said it to the empty bathroom, quietly, and then I got dressed and went to the store.

The store attendant was the same woman who'd fit me when I'd last stopped by with Chloe. She did not ask why I was back. She measured, nodded, and said C-cup as if it were the weather.

"You'll want a couple of styles if you're wearing this under work pieces. Something smooth for silk. Something with a bit of lift if the neckline sits open."

I tried three of the plain ones first. A nude T-shirt bra that disappeared under the grey wrap. A blush balconette with a small centre bow that would sit under a blouse like it belonged there. A black one with a cleaner line for the ivory satin and anything darker. Each time I leaned forward into the cups and stood up, the shape in the mirror looked less like a medical accommodation and more like the reason the fifth-floor clothes had started to feel good.

Then she brought over the push-ups.

Pink. Soft lavender. A pale white that would vanish under the satin blouse combo. Same C-cups, only the padding sat underneath and lifted instead of just containing. In the cubicle light the difference was immediate. Higher. Rounder. The kind of line the open collars and sleeveless pieces had been asking for.

I was only matching what the fifth floor girls already wore, I thought. I stood there for a moment, turning, watching the shape hold. Having the need for the Samantha character, as a frame for the need to wear the bras, lift the cleavage, actually helped me rationalize it all. So long as Samantha was needed, then so were my breasts.

I bought the smooth ones and the push-ups. Two of each colour that would actually see the wardrobe. Nude, black, blush, lavender, mint. I'd matched a few to my B-cups with matching panties and thongs. The bag was discreet. The feeling walking out was not.

Quietly excited was the honest version. Not because I had given up on the treatments working. Because for the stretch of time that still had Gravity on it, and Samantha in the diary, a defined chest was doing the work I needed it. It matched the girls. It made the new wardrobe sit properly. The push-ups would strengthen the assets Samantha had to work with.

I put the new bras in the drawer next to the older ones that had started to feel tight and leave marks, and reiterated that this was just keeping up with the current measurements, the gynecomastia until Eames' treatment finished. In the meantime, Samantha would be able to use them to their full potential.

I also set the pink push-up out for the morning, already picturing it under a pink blouse, and didn't pretend that was just practical logistics.

Changing into Samantha had now become the easy part.

Garment bag cupboard. Executive women's room. Skirt, blouse, heels, waves, the extra eye and the deeper lip. Twelve minutes if I moved quickly, nine if the hair was already in the right shape from the morning. I had stopped treating it like a disguise and started treating it like a call time. Unlock the cupboard, dress the part, walk the lobby, hand the room to Max. The body knew the sequence. The face did too.

Changing back was the problem.

Trousers and a functional blouse were supposed to put me back on four. Lower heels. Makeup reduced to the old baseline, or wiped if there was time. In practice the Gravity holds ran long, or Max asked for one more summary, or Chloe needed a signature on something that would take thirty seconds and took eight minutes. By the time I got back to the stall the clock was already eating the next thing on the Sam calendar. Wiping a full face properly took longer than putting it on. I started skipping steps. Blot the lip. Soften the eye if I could see it. Leave the rest and tell myself overhead lighting on four was unkind to everyone.

That was how I ended up late for Adrian.

He had booked twenty minutes to walk a permissions ticket before it hit the change window. Ordinary. Fourth-floor work. I had it in the diary under Sam, sitting cleanly after a thirty-minute meet-and-greet that had no business becoming forty-five. I saw the time when Max's visitors were already in the lift and felt the drop in my stomach.

I took the bag into the stall at a half-run. Pink skirt off. Cream blouse off. Navy Trousers, the less open blue light shirt, lace-ups shoved on while I was still breathing through the last of the hostess smile. Hair I pulled into a low pony without looking. I did not touch the face. There was not a version of the next four minutes that included cleanser and a second pass with a sponge.

I came onto four at a quick pace that I hoped looked like purpose.

Adrian was already at the side table with the laptop open. He looked up, and there it was, the small, unguarded double-take. Eyes on my face a fraction too long, then away, then

back to the screen as if he had decided not to have the thought.

He did not say anything.



“Sorry,” I said. “Held upstairs. I’ve got the thread.”
“It’s fine. We’re still inside the window.”

We went through the ticket. He drove. I pointed at the two flags that actually mattered and let him own the click-path. My voice came out flatter than it had been ten minutes earlier, which was supposed to be the point. Supervisor. Systems. The other version left in a bag two floors up.



He did not mention the meeting I had come from. He did not mention the stall. When we finished he nodded once, already typing the note.

“I’ll close it.”

“Thanks. I’ll be on the Gravity collisions if anything kicks back.”

I said it like a handoff I had chosen. It landed like every other one that week.

It was the glass of the side monitor, later, when I leaned in to check a log, that showed me the rest.

The eye was still done. Not the morning baseline. The defined line, the extra length on the lashes, a bit of colour still sitting on the lid where I had meant to take it down and had only blotted the mouth. Under the fourth-floor lights it did not look like nothing. It looked like I had walked out of a different floor and forgotten to finish the change.

Heat crawled up my neck. I sat back so the screen would stop offering the angle.

Maybe he had not clocked it. The double-take could have been the pony, or the fact that I was late, or the shirt still sitting a little closer than the old ones. People glanced. People moved on. We had got through the ticket. That was the job.

I wanted to believe it wasn’t a big deal.

I also did not go back to the bathroom to fix it. There was another Samantha hold after lunch, and taking the face off only to put it on again felt like burning the few minutes I had. I closed the Sam inbox, opened the other one, and left the extra makeup where it was.

Temporary. Short gap. He probably had not noticed.

The sentence was getting a lot of use.

For the last few months, finding ordinary, casual clothes to wear outside of work hours had quietly been an ongoing difficulty.

My old T-shirts hung wrong across the chest and shoulders. Shorts and jeans were either too big or too tight on my legs, waist and butt and felt heavy against skin that had grown more sensitive. Even the sneakers felt clumsy. Errands, coffee with the girls, the walk to the shops. If it wasn’t work out gear, office clothes or Sam of the thin cotton tees I’d bought a few months back, not much I owned fitted the frame in the mirror the way it used to.

I’d been putting the issue off for a while until one evening about two months ago where I’d been going through the wardrobe and took another look at Rachel’s bag of clothes. Most of what she had left behind had already been sorted. What remained were soft tops, a couple of pairs of shorts, a few sandals. I only meant to clear space, but near the top I spotted something, a plain cream tee. Soft cotton. No print. Androgynous enough in the low light that I tried it on out of curiosity.

It fit way better than any of my old tee shirts. Shoulders clean. Fabric easy against skin that had grown used to smoother textures. The bra line of my chest sat a little more clearly underneath than it did under the old tees. Not dramatically. Just more present.

It seemed harmless enough, so I shrugged, folded it up and put it my main drawer of casual tops. I later wore it to the supermarket without anyone giving me a second glance.

The success with Rachel's tee led to me returning to the bag a few days later. Next I found a cotton lemon tee with smaller sleeves and a scatter of tiny butterflies so faint they almost disappeared. The butterflies were sort of cute, I thought to myself but I couldn't wear this, it's too girly. Even though I was always getting misgendered these days, I thought well, perhaps I shouldn't encourage it by wearing something like this. Sam couldn't wear something like this.

Then the thought crept into my mind.

...but Samantha could.

Samantha wore soft colours. Samantha wore things with a little decoration and did not treat it like a problem. Samantha walked into rooms in pastels and a fit that showed off her figure and nobody batted an eye.

I didn't have to be on IT today. I didn't have to worry about what Adrian, Priya or Tomas would think. I could just be... Samantha. Just in the short term of course. Only until I got some better clothes and Eames' treatment started seeing results and Gravity was launched.

I tried it on.



The cut sat closer than the first cream colored tee. The neck was a little more open. The butterflies vanished unless you looked, and then they were just there, small and silly and kind of nice against the cotton. I turned in the mirror and the old objection was still

available. Too girly. Too much encouragement. Sam would take it off. I left it on.

Then I wore it to the shops, then I kept it on to make lunch. The clerk had said “Here you are, dear” and I did not correct her. The top was comfortable. It fit. And once the sentence had arrived, it was hard to put back. Samantha could wear this. Samantha was already wearing things like this on level five. There was no rule that said she only existed between the cupboard and a Gravity meeting room door.

Once that framing was in place, the bag was easier to open. Seeing it that way gave me permission to stop questioning and stressing over every outfit choice. Sam wasn’t wearing a girl’s top. Samantha was. It was just a matter of perspective.

The lavender one came a few days after that. Paler. Closer through the body. I held it up and felt the same flicker. Sam wouldn’t. Samantha would.

Then the pink tank top.

Thinner straps. A colour I would once have walked past. I stood there longer with that one. Pink was a line I had already crossed upstairs and the gym but still pretended I had not crossed at home. Sam couldn’t wear this on a Saturday. That was still true. It just no longer felt like the deciding fact.

Samantha could.

I put it on. The fabric settled against the bra with almost no resistance. The line of my chest sat more clearly than it had under the other tops. I was only checking the fit, I figured. What I was actually doing was letting Samantha return outside office hours.

I wore the pink tank the next time the girls messaged about weekend brunch. They didn’t blink. Of course they didn’t. They already knew this version. The weekend had simply caught up.



Whenever I needed something a little more elevated than a work shirt or an ordinary tee, I went back. Not a clear-out. The same quiet rhythm. Ordinary clothes feeling slightly wrong, then one new piece that fitted better than what I owned. Sam's drawer kept shrinking. Samantha's weekend wardrobe kept growing.

A pale blue crop that left a strip of midriff when I moved. Cooler, I told myself, no different from the gym tops. A pair of Rachel's old denim shorts, high on the hip, tight across the butt, surprisingly clean through the shape the cincher had left. Sam would have called them too small. Samantha would have called them shorts.

A wrap that tied at the side, fingers lingering on the knot. A soft blue puff-sleeve on a hot Saturday, the gathering at the shoulder something I kept touching without meaning to. A pink ruffle top the night before drinks with the girls, thin straps that felt like an evolution of the workout ones, only fine enough for an evening.



Each time the same small door opened first. Too much for Sam. Fine for Samantha. Fine for the hours that were no longer only Gravity, and no longer only the office.

Samantha could wear these.

And more and more, outside the office, I let her.

The gym class left me warm and a little floaty the way the good core-and-cardio ones always did.

I was still in the pink halter and the close bike shorts, hair in a slightly messy post-workout pony, refilling my water at the station near the free weights, when my eyes just... snagged. A guy on the bench, broad shoulders, the kind of solid chest and arms that looked like they belonged on one of the villa boys from the shows, was finishing a set. Another one racking plates beside him had that easy, thick-muscled build that made the tank top look unfair.

I didn't decide to look. I just did. The same absent, appreciative once-over I'd seen Chloe and Mia do a hundred times without thinking.



“Sammy.”

Chloe's voice, amused and far too close. I turned too fast. She was standing there with her bag, one eyebrow up, a knowing little smile already forming.

“Enjoying the view?”

Heat rushed straight up my neck. “What? No. I was just, water. Spacing out.”

“Uh-huh.” She didn't push it, just gave my arm a light squeeze and nodded toward the doors. “Come on, I'm starving. And you're a terrible liar when you're flustered.”

I laughed it off the way I had become so accustomed to, soft, light and quick, and followed her out. The denial sat ready and automatic. Spacing out. Nothing. Just the post-class haze.

The thoughts did not leave with the denial.

On the way home, in the shower, while the pink silk nightie slid over still-warm skin, the image of those shoulders and the easy strength in the way the one guy had moved kept floating back up. It was just leftover noise from the shows I thought. Or from the Jason dreams, or from too many nights with the toy teaching my body a very specific kind of hunger. It didn't have to mean anything more than that.

And still the quieter, braver question formed before I could stop it.

I'd gotten so used to the toys. The weight of them, the stretch, the way the larger, realistic one filled my mouth my ass until the day went quiet.

What would the real thing feel like? Warm. Living. Someone's actual hands on my waist the trainer had permanently narrowed, actual weight, actual heat instead of silicone.

The thought sent a low, traitorous pulse through my chest and lower, soft and insistent, and I had to breathe through it with my forehead against the cool tile of the bathroom wall.

I shut it down as far as it would go. Private curiosity. Residual wiring from the recovery methods and the shows and the dreams. Nothing that needed to be acted on or even examined too closely. The dual role, the two inboxes, the continuity requirement, those were the real structures of the day. This was just the body making static after a hard class and a lingering look I should have kept to myself.

As if summoned, that was of course, when Dave chose to message.

"Sammi. Unhelpful update. I have not been able to stop looking at those photos you sent."

I was on the couch with the show paused and my phone too close.

"That sounds like a you problem", I sent.

"It is. I'm struggling with it."

"You could look at something else. There's a whole internet."

"Tried. Yours are winning. They really helped, if I'm honest. Work was a mess. Those pictures took my mind off it. Really helped me relax".

I stared at the word "relaxed".

"Happy to be of service", I typed, then deleted it because they sounded like something Chloe would've said.

"Glad they helped, but don't get used to it", I replied.

A pause long enough for me to tell myself the conversation was done.

Then: "Want me to return the favour?"

I sat with that.

Return the favour. Photos for photos. The obvious next step if this was what I kept insisting it was not. Friendly did not ask that. A gay guy showing off in a locker room might. A man who thought Sammi was a woman almost certainly would. I could feel all three readings trying to occupy the same sentence and none of them would sit still.

Naive curiosity got there first. The same curiosity that had opened the drawer. The same one that had sent the second picture instead of a thumbs up.

"Ok."

I sent it before I could put a joke in front of it.

A few minutes went by. Long enough to regret the word. Long enough to tell myself I could still mute the thread.

Then the new message arrived.

No caption at first. Just the photo.

Dave. Nude. Front-on to the camera. Hard, real cock in his hand. The same body as the gym mirrors, only there was nothing left to pretend the picture was about.

Heat went through me so fast I gasped. I dropped the phone onto the cushion, picked it up, dropped it again. My face was hot. My chest was worse. I could not look at it and I could not stop looking at it. Every explanation I had been using fell over at the same time. Friendly did not send that. The “he’s a gay guy”-box suddenly felt both more possible and completely insufficient. The “he thinks I’m a girl”-box, the one I had refused to open, sat in the middle of the picture like it had been waiting.

Another line appeared underneath.

“Your turn to relax.”

I had no idea what to send. A joke would have been a lie. A correction would have required a sentence I did not have. “I’m not...” still would not finish itself.

I typed three different replies and deleted all of them.

The photo stayed on the screen, bright and specific, and I sat there in the quiet flat with my pulse in my throat, flustered past the point of a downplay, and not at all sure how to be a person who had just said ok.

I tried to ignore it.

That was the plan on the way to work. Leave the thread unread. Treat the picture as a mistake I had walked into and could now walk back out of. By the time I sat down at my desk the plan was already thin. The image kept arriving without being opened. The grin. His cock. Heat sitting low and useless under my blouse while a perfectly ordinary IT ticket waited on the screen.

I lasted until mid-morning.

The fourth-floor bathroom was empty. I locked the stall, telling myself I was only checking he had not sent anything else, and opened it. One glance. Then a longer one. Taking it in. His arms. His abs. His... Then I locked the phone so hard my thumb ached and went back to the sink like a person who had just washed their hands.

At the desk it happened again. Adrian on a call. Tomas at the printer. I angled the screen down and looked. Ten seconds. Enough to feel ridiculous. Enough to feel the same rush as the night before, compressed into the space between a permissions request and a calendar reminder.

I closed the thread but it did not stay closed in my mind.

By the time I got home the curiosity had stopped pretending it was going to stay at glances. The TV show played in the other room. But my attention was elsewhere. The phone was on the bed. The realistic toy was in my hand before I had a clean sentence for why. I was just going to look. Then I was sitting on the edge of the mattress with the weight of it against my lips, absent, almost idle, the way the last few weeks had taught me to start. The picture held. Dave held. The heat that had been following me around the fourth floor finally had somewhere to go.

It did not stay idle.

Fingers alone felt incomplete. The purple toy felt like a half-measure. The realistic weight was what I wanted, and the route to readiness now began with my mouth as the natural first step rather than an emergency substitute for missing lube. I didn't argue with myself for long.

Dave's latest photo in hand, I dropped to my knees in front of the mirror, affixed the toy at mouth height, and leant forward. Before I had time to think too carefully about what I was doing, I brought my lips to the toy again, deliberate this time, not tentative, and the same heat arrived on schedule.



I wet it properly, sucked carefully, free hand grabbing and kneading my chest. Feeling the cock, I mean toy, in my mouth just felt... good. There was no other way to describe it. I tried to convince myself it was just nerve endings. I would glance at the photo of Dave, at

the hard rod in his hands. Was this what it would be like? I tried to squash the thought. As I bobbed back and forth. No, that's not what this is. But what if it was?

I was getting more and more turned on. I knew this time I was ready to keep going.



I withdrew my mouth from the toy, glistening with spit and I affixed it lower on the mirror. I turned around, on all fours. The phone went on the floor under my face, bright against the carpet, so I could stare at him while I reached back and pushed the slick length in.

The first stretch punched a sound out of me. Then the rhythm took me. Looking down at the photo and taking it at the same time collapsed whatever story I had been using about friendly gym banter. I did not say his name. I watched him anyway.

The fantasy slipped in without permission: the silicone in my ass becoming warm and living, imagining hands that were not mine steadying my narrow waist. The thought made me moan and push my ass back harder into it. Into the cock, the rhythm turning greedy, my breasts hanging down and swinging back and forth with each push.

I came like that. Not from anything between my legs doing what it used to do. From the stretch, the mouthful, the thought of holding, feeling and tasting his... The climax pulled a high, broken sound out of me.

When I came it was sudden and complete, forehead dropped toward the screen, the excuse already assembling itself in the shaking quiet after. A trickle of cum leaked out of my limp dick onto the floor.

For a few seconds there was no fourth floor politics, title to defend, medical condition to justify. Only the heat, the toys, and the ugly little relief of having let the worst temptations be true long enough to finish.

Working through stress. Getting it out of my system. The same release Eames kept telling

me to find. A picture was only a picture. I had gotten carried away because I had said ok when I should have said no. That was all.

I cleaned up. I put the drawer shut. I left Dave on read long enough for the flush to leave my face.

Then, because leaving it open felt worse than a short line:

“Thanks. That’s enough for now.”

I sent it and put the phone face-down.

It was not enough. I knew that while I was typing it. The rationalisation sat on top anyway, tidy enough to sleep on, thin enough that I could already feel the photo waiting underneath.

The full Samantha experience was needed again later in the week.

A short mid-afternoon session with two more soft-touch stakeholders Max wanted warmed before a technical deep-dive.

I changed in the executive women’s room without the old spike of adrenaline.

Pink skirt. The tight fitting one. Cream blouse. Heels. Hair in soft waves. The full polished face. I already knew how it would look as it matched the aesthetic on Archibald pitch, and I still got a little flutter putting it on. The good kind, the kind I used to pretend was just nerves. The zip went up and the neckline did exactly what the new bra was for, and instead of flinching I turned in the mirror like I was checking a photo for the group chat.

Tight through the hips. Chest lifted. The skirt made my walk feel prettier. The blouse made the whole thing look intentional, like I had actually tried, like I was supposed to look this cute for a mid-afternoon meet-and-greet.



I looked good.

I was halfway through the bullpen toward the front desk when a shocked little gasp cut across the carpet.

“Sammy!”

Chloe was already out of her chair. Mia twisted around from her screen, eyes going wide in the good way.

“Oh my god. That skirt. That blouse. You look so cute I could scream.”

Mia nodded, already smiling. “You look hot. They’re going to love you.”

Chloe was in front of me before I could thank them after rummaging in her drawer like the thought had been waiting there all morning. She came up with the thin rigid pink headband.

“No. Not without this. It’s incomplete. Come here.”

I started to laugh it off. She was already sliding it into the waves, fussing the hair around it, stepping back to check.

“There. Now it’s finished. Don’t you dare take it off.”

The little extra weight across my head should have felt silly. It didn’t. It felt like the last piece clicking in. I caught myself in the glass on the way past reception and the whole

picture landed at once. Pink. Cream. The lift. The walk. The headband. Samantha, arriving on purpose.

The meet-and-greet ran the way the last one had. Smile. Light touch. Clean handoff. The investors warmed immediately. One of them called me sweetheart without thinking about it and I just smiled. Max gave me that small little nod when the meeting went the way we needed it to and I felt the glow in my chest from another successful Samantha appearance.

I was still inside that glow, a million miles away from IT and still a little high on being so well received, when the ping landed.

Adrian: Critical. Gravity pipeline's down across two platforms. Cascading. Need you on the floor now if you can.

I stared at the message while the investors were still shaking Max's hand. The split-role arithmetic was brutal and familiar. Stay in character and finish the Gravity pleasantries, or drop everything for the systems failure that still, on paper, sat under my title.

I looked down.

Pink skirt. Cream blouse. The heels. The face I had put on for the lobby, not for four. The thought of walking onto the IT floor like that sat in my stomach like a drop. Adrian. Tomas. Priya. The team that still thought of me as the person who used to own the tickets. I did not want them to see this version. I did not want the skirt to be the thing they remembered when the pipeline came back up.

I typed back first.

"Can you take first pass? I'm mid-hold upstairs. If you can contain it I'll come as soon as I'm clear."

The reply was almost immediate.

"Need you. It's cascading into the client layer. You're the one who built the failover path. Now, please, if you can."

No room left in it. No time to get to the cupboard, no time for trousers and a wipe of the face. The systems was real. The team was real. I made the only call that still felt like the old version of me, and hated that I would have to make it dressed as the new one.

I excused myself with a soft smile and a promise that Max had everything from here, then walked straight to the lifts without changing.

I knew my outfit would raise eyebrows but I had to swallow my pride. There was no time to change and I had to show the team I was still me. I could handle both jobs.

The fourth-floor doors opened onto controlled chaos, screens up, Tomas and Priya talking over each other, Adrian at the centre console with the logs scrolling. I stepped in, heels clicking on the floor, skirt moving against my nylons, and the room did a collective double-take that landed like a physical wave. Conversations faltered.

Eyes dropped to the pink pencil skirt, the heels, the open-neckline blouse, the full makeup and waved hair underneath the pink headband, then bounced back up to my face with

visible effort.

They had never seen me like this.

I felt the heat rise under the foundation and did the only thing that seemed available, gestured loosely at my own body with a short, self-conscious laugh.

“Long story. What’s the status?”

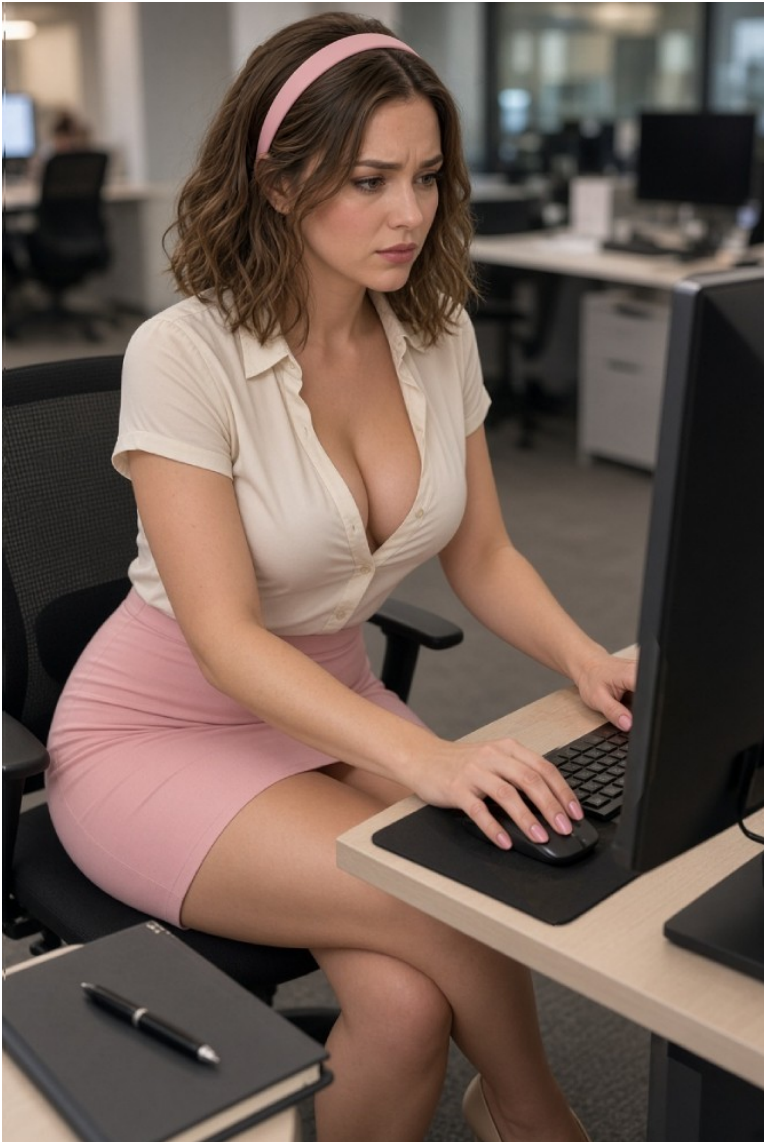
Adrian’s expression was pure, unfiltered taken-aback for a full second. Then the professional layer slammed back down. He cleared his throat and stepped aside so I could see the main board.

“Primary input node stopped accepting writes at 14:26. Failover didn’t trigger, secondary is in a split-brain state. We’ve got cascading timeouts into the analytics layer. Tomas has the network path, Priya’s on the message queue. I need eyes on the config drift that started it.”



I nodded, already moving toward a free terminal, the higher heels making the short walk feel longer and more observed than it should have. I pulled up the config file and tried to move the way I used to, fast, decisive, fingers flying. My longer, polished, painted nails clicked against the keys, caught on the edges, turned what should have been rapid navigation into a series of small, frustrating stumbles. A command mistyped. A window closed instead of refreshed.

The muscle memory software was still there; but the hardware at the ends of my fingers no longer configured for it.



Having an audience didn't help.

"Adrian, drive for me," I said, the words coming out tighter than I wanted. "I'll talk. You type." I stood up and gave him the chair.

He took the chair and keyboard without comment or hesitation. I started giving the initial advice, where to look in the logs, which rollback point was safest, the order of bringing the secondary back into quorum. For a few minutes it almost felt like the old pattern: me diagnosing, the team executing. Then the shape of the room started to shift.

Adrian began finishing my sentences. Then he started directing Tomas to a different network check before I had finished outlining the first one. Priya looked to him, not me, when the queue metrics spiked again. My suggestions were still technically sound, but they arrived half a beat behind the decisions he was already making. I heard myself saying "yes, that" and "exactly, go with that" more than I heard myself leading.

The posture of the room angled toward Adrian, attention flowing through him, quietly reclassified me from the person in charge to the person helping.

Helper mode. Soft interjections. Clarifying questions. The same supportive register I used in the Samantha inbox, only now it was happening on the fourth floor in a skirt while my own team solved an outage under someone else's direction. Before long I was receding to the back, Adrian's eyes stayed glued to the screen and didn't turn back to look at me when I tried to offer a suggestion.

The pipeline came back up in twenty-three minutes. Clean failover, queue drained, analytics layer recovering. Adrian gave the final all-clear. People exhaled. Someone even half-laughed with relief. I stood there in the pink skirt and heels, nails still an awkward length against my palms, and felt the resolution land without me at the centre of it.

I had contributed. Technically. Advice given, rollback path confirmed, presence offered under less-than-ideal conditions. It did not feel like contribution. It felt like I had arrived as Samantha and the systems had simply continued without needing the old version of me. The contrast between the person who had just hosted investors upstairs and the person standing uselessly at the edge of his own team's success was so sharp it made my stomach tight.

Adrian glanced over, still professionally careful.

"Thanks for coming down Sam... sorry I mean, Samantha. Turns out we would've got there, but the extra eyes helped."

The kindness in it only made the gap wider.

I nodded, managed something about good work from everyone, and left the floor as soon as I could without looking like I was fleeing. In the lift I caught my reflection in the brushed metal. Full Samantha presentation, post-crisis, the team's double-take still sitting behind my eyes and felt the dual role structure strain in a way the separate inboxes and the "emergency" Samantha outfits had never quite made visible before.

I quickly left the fourth floor after that.

The lift carried me up, almost without a decision, and I walked straight into the bullpen still in the pink skirt and the cream blouse and heels, the post-crisis tightness sitting hard behind my eyes. Chloe looked up from her screen, took one look at my face, and the bright secretary energy dropped into something softer immediately.

"Hey. You okay?"

Mia and Jess turned. The three of them made the small, instinctive space they always made when one of their own was off. I sat on the edge of the empty satellite desk, hands folded in my lap the way the skirt seemed to require, and tried to find a version of the afternoon that didn't sound ridiculous.

"There was a system outage. I went down to help. They... they'd never seen me like... this." I gestured vaguely at the outfit, the hair, the whole Samantha presentation. "I tried to take charge and I couldn't even type properly. My nails. Adrian just... took over. They all looked to him. I stood there giving little comments like some—" My voice thinned. "I felt like a fraud. Like I'd walked into my own team dressed for a different job. He called me Sam—".

The tears arrived before I finished the sentence, hot, sudden, mortifying. I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes and tried to stop them, but Chloe was already up, already wrapping an arm around my shoulders, already making the soft sympathetic sound the used for real distress.

“Oh, honey. No.”

“Sammy. Hey.” Mia’s voice, gentle. “You’re not a fraud.”

Jess produced a tissue from somewhere and pressed it into my hand. “You’re allowed to have a crappy afternoon. That doesn’t rewrite everything.”



They let me cry for a minute in the quiet pocket of the bullpen, the three of them forming a small, protective wall while the rest of the floor politely found somewhere else to look. Chloe rubbed my back in slow circles. Someone, Jess, I think, smoothed a loose wave of hair behind my ear with the same casual intimacy they used with each other.

“You’re gorgeous and you’re competent and you just saved a whole investor relationship by being exactly this,” Chloe said firmly. “One bad crossover with the techs downstairs doesn’t undo that. They’re just not used to the full look. That’s on them, not you.”

“Samantha. Sweetie, breathe,” Mia added. “You’re okay. We’ve got you.”

The endearments, "Samantha", "honey", "gorgeous" and “sweetie”, landed in the raw place the fourth floor had opened and, instead of stinging, soothed. I nodded against Chloe’s shoulder, let the worst of the heat in my face drain into the tissue, and managed a watery little laugh when Jess said something dry about men and change management. The comfort worked. The orbit closed around the crack and held it.

When I finally sat up straighter they didn’t make a production of it. Chloe just squeezed my hand and nodded toward the corridor.

“Go freshen up. Then come back.”

I went to the executive women’s room on autopilot. Same door, same bright mirrors and repaired what the tears had smudged. Fresh powder, a touch more blush, lipstick redrawn, a little cold water on the insides of my wrists. The reflection that looked back was still fully Samantha, only calmer. I didn’t change. The secretary closet and the ordinary baseline felt suddenly far away and complicated.

Returning back to fourth that day would have required an explanation I didn’t have the energy to construct.

I went back to the bullpen, then further to the stretch of space near Max’s desk where I had been hot-desking more and more of the Gravity continuity work. Max glanced up, took in the still-Samantha presentation and the slightly pink eyes, and only said, “You good?”

“Will be,” I answered, and sat down.

The spent the rest of the afternoon regrouping on five: Samantha inbox, light coordination for Max and Gravity, the occasional soft check-in from Chloe or Mia across the open floor.

No one asked why I hadn’t changed back. The memory of the fourth-floor crisis sat quietly under everything, less sharp than it had been in the lift, softly cushioned by the way the girls had said my name and meant the one that matched the skirt.