Chapter 16

That evening, I convinced myself I was only checking the fit one more time before the launch, making sure nothing had shifted, that the emergency outfit that the girls had remembered and practically ordered me to wear to the launch night.

The rose wrap dress.

Polished. Elegant. Sensible. Exactly what people would expect Samantha to wear. I pulled it from the closet, stripped down to lace bra and thong, stepped into the dress, and tied it together.

The satin rose fabric followed every line the protocol and the months of incremental change had produced: the lifted chest, the permanent narrow waist, the fuller hips and butt. The neckline framed the soft curves of my chest without any of the the old self-consciousness. The skirt fell in a close fitting but, admittedly flattering drape that moved when I turned.

That was when I noticed the problem.




My penis had come loose from the tuck. It had been soft and neglected for so long that tucking it back and forgetting it had become automatic, another small piece of the daily management, like the waistline or the chest. But this new thong Chloe had insisted on for

VPL was simply too small. There was nowhere for it to go that wouldn't eventually shift, come loose, press, and potentially create a bulge under the tight skirt.

I stood up, pushed it back smoothed the fabric, adjusted, sat again.

The bulge returned within minutes.

Anxiety arrived sharp and specific.

Launch night. The rose bodycon dress was tighter than th the pencil skirts. Hours of moving, sitting, standing, greeting, possibly dancing. Higher heels. The full polished presentation under event lighting and the eyes of every client who mattered, including Victor.

If anything shifted, if the soft, neglected reality between my legs made itself known against that tight fabric, the whole thing could crack in a single glance.

All this time carrying myself as "Samantha", I had been letting people carry the assumption that I was a woman, and I had stopped resisting it. The flawless pass with Archibald, the countless follow up Gravity meetings, every uncorrected "ma'am", "miss" "she/her". Not once, not in a meeting, not in the lift, not when a client said Samantha like it had always been true. I had used that. Embraced it, even, because Gravity, the firm, my career, needed me to be the person they already thought they were dealing with.

Coming untucked during the launch wouldn't just be embarrassing. It would undo all of that. Catastrophic. People would see the truth of my condition, that I was really a guy, and I wasn't ready for them to know. Not yet. Not until Gravity's launched, I can get these medical issues worked out. The thought made me sick to my stomach.
I stood in the quiet apartment and ruminated through my options.

I could just… not go. Pull out, say I was sick. It would be embarrassing, but probably less embarrassing than showing up and spending the entire evening wondering whether everyone was looking at me.

But then again, I couldn't abandon Chloe, Mia and Jess. They were counting on me to help with the hosting, and I wasn't about to leave them in the lurch because I'd had a last-minute crisis of confidence.

And Max.

He had his presentation to deliver, the investors to greet, a hundred little details to keep track of. What if he needed something? What if I'd missed a crucial detail in the deck, or the slideshow decided to fall apart in front of half the firm and the Gravity clients? He'd have enough to worry about without having to chase someone down for help. Besides, I was the only one who knew it all back to front.

Not to mention, we'd put so much work into getting Gravity to this point. I wanted to see it through. I wanted to be there when it all came together, to see the look on his face when the presentation landed and he could finally relax.

Not that I was particularly concerned about his face. I was concerned about the launch. The success of the fund. The fact that I'd spent months helping him get here and deserved to see the result.

Still, I found myself wondering what he'd think when he saw me. Whether he'd notice the effort I'd gone to, or whether he'd be too busy being the most important person in the room to notice anything at all.

I pushed the thought aside. Honestly, I had better things to worry about than what Max might think of my outfit.

Like the outfit itself, for starters.

Maybe I could just wear something else. The suit, or a skirt, blouse combo. No, the girls were expecting me in the rose gold. We'd planned coordinated, complimentary outfits, I'd be throwing off the whole group's plan. Plus, Archibald would expect to see me wearing and appreciating his necklace and earrings and I didn't have anything else that would coordinate with them. The dress was a lock.

Ok. Heavier compression. Different underwear. Tape. Strategic layering. None of them felt reliable enough for a bodycon dress and a long evening. The old casual tucking habits were built for trousers and looser outfit days, not for this. I needed something that would hold, completely and without ongoing management, for as long as the event required.

Perhaps I was being irrational. After all, I'd been wearing skirts since the Archibald meeting and the tucking had always been manageable. It was always in the back of my mind, but manageable. But then I again returned to the fear that the bodycon fit and thin material of the launch night dress didn't leave any room for chance. The night was too important.

I could only think of one potential solution.

The tucking problem was not going to wait. The dress was already hanging on the door. Everything else about the silhouette was contained. The last remaining line was the one I could not tuck for long enough to trust.

I opened the Wellness app and typed and retyped a message three more times. I kept the language careful. Neutral. Something Eames would recognise as another support request.

"Hi Dr. Eames. Wondering if you could suggest any compression garments for male genitals to give them a low profile under close fitting clothing for longer wear. Need it for an event this week."

The reply came in under ten minutes.

"Good evening Samuel, Yes I believe I understand what you're looking for. I'll have something express-delivered. Follow the enclosed instructions exactly."

I put the phone down. What a relief. Of course he understood. He had been solving the chest, the waist, the posture. This was just the next containment problem. A firmer brief. A better strap. Something that would sit under the dress and stop being something to stress about.

The package arrived the next afternoon, plain outer wrapping. It was branded with the logo of NewYou Cosmetics and Pharmaceuticals, a sister company of the firm and part of global NewYou corporate umbrella.

I took it to the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed in a skirt not unlike the one that identified the problem, and opened it expecting something like black fabric. Compression underwear. A gaff. The sort of thing with a pouch and a wide waistband and a diagram of how to pull it on.

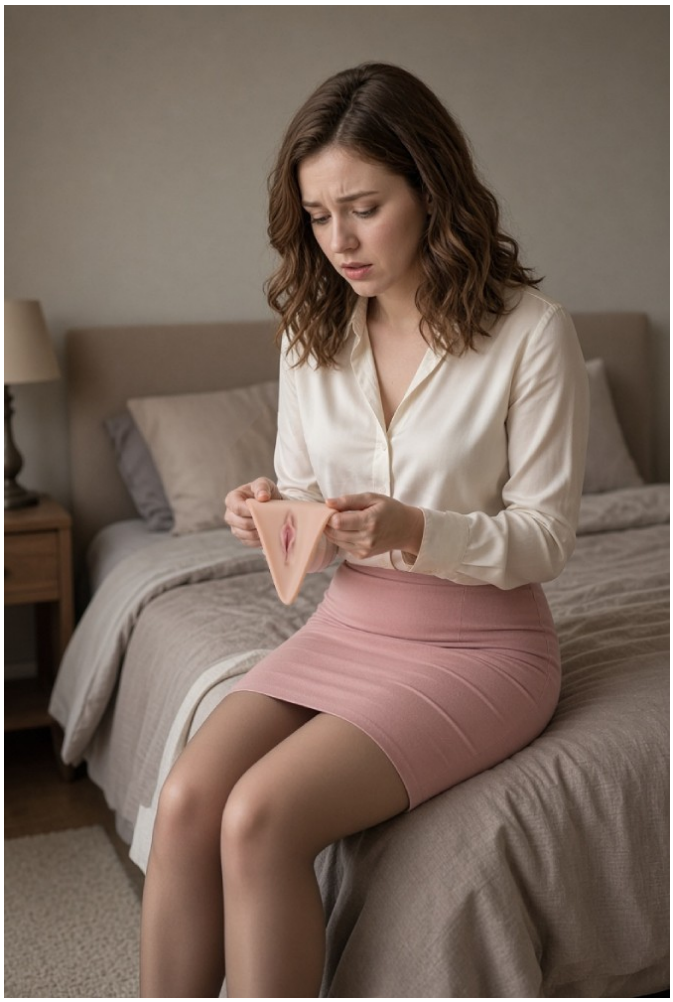
There was no fabric.

Just a pale, soft fold of rubber like silicone nested in the tray, weighted, warm-looking even before I touched it. For a stupid second I thought it was packing material. Padding. Some kind of liner you slipped inside ordinary underwear.

Then I lifted it, and the shape resolved in my hands, and the floor of my stomach dropped.

It was not a garment.

It was a prosthetic. A prosthetic… vagina.
I read the instruction pamphlet. “Designed to affix, fully tuck and contain male genitalia, and present a smooth natural, female presenting front under the tightest clothing”. I found medical-grade adhesive in a separate sleeve.



I felt a flush in my cheeks. Surely this is a mistake.
This was not what I had thought I’d asked for. This was not a firmer brief or gaff. This was way too extreme.

I picked up the phone, thumb already on the thread, ready to ask Eames what was going on. Then I looked at the dress on the door and at the time and at the fact that express post had already been used on this. The launch was tomorrow night. There was no second delivery that would arrive before it. There was no store I could walk into tonight and ask for the other thing, the ordinary thing, without making the evening worse.

I set it down, realizing I did not have time for another alternative.

I took a deep brief and set to task of figuring out what to do with this thing.

The instructions were clear and clinical. Prep, position, secure.

Following the directions, after fully shaving, I first pushed my (admittedly diminished) testicles up into my body cavity where they found a place to sit comfortably, allowing me to smooth and sp my read the scrotum down flat. With that out of the way, I was then able to guide my tiny penis down into a sheath within the prosthetic that led to the faux urethra opening. The vaginal canal itself was sealed and closed, but it had a modest groove and lips along the front that I figured might create a plausible form factor behind panties.

I added the provided glue to the edges and pressed everything smooth. I let it rest for a few minutes to set in place, then reached for the matching lingerie set I had laid out and planned to wear to the launch. A pink underwire push-up bra and a small thong in the same soft fabric, both finished with cute little bows and a touch of lace. Elegant, sophisticated.

The prosthetic would keep the thong sitting smooth and flat with no VPL. The bra was simply necessary support (it didn't hurt that it made "the girls", to borrow a fifth floor descriptor, look great too).

The prosthetic settled more cleanly than I expected, my soft, small penis fully contained and tucked. I was surprised by how well the silicone matched my skin tone. I stepped into the thong and drew it up. The back string disappeared between my butt cheeks and the front smoothed over the new surface with no gap, no ridge, no suggestion of what was underneath. I stood in front of the mirror and looked down.

Smooth. Natural. The kind of continuous line the grey pencil skirt and the bodycon dress would need. Nothing for a lingering glance to catch. No chance of an unexpected, unflattering bulge.

Relief moved through me at the sight. I never thought I would be so relieved to not see my penis. To look down and see nothing but a soft, smooth front.

I fastened the underwire push-up bra, placed my breasts into the cups and adjusted the straps, and let my eyes travel over the set together, the lace edges, the matching fabric. The little bows are a nice touch. Very pretty, I thought, before I could redirect the sentence into something more technical.

I turned to check the back and, almost absent-mindedly, noticed the rest of the picture. The thong sat high and neat, the thin straps framing the curve of my hips and the fuller shape of my butt in a way that made the whole silhouette look intentional. Lifted. Rounded. Toned. Perky. Perfect for the dress. The observation arrived without effort, the same way the words had started arriving for other things.



I breathed a sigh of relief. Another risk successfully managed and mitigated.

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I kept the prosthetic on for the rest of the night.

The absence was stranger than the presence had been. To cross my legs and feel nothing in between.
Walking through the flat, sitting on the sofa, the ordinary friction and soft weight between my legs simply not there. In its place a smooth, continuous front that matched the rest of the figure I had been making the best of this last year.

The story I repeated to myself that it was a technical solution doing technical work, with a matching set that happened to sit well and look finished. A trial. I would peel it off in the morning, confirm the risk was managed, and save it for the launch.

Then I needed the bathroom.

I stood in front of the toilet out of pure residual habit, the way I had for years, and only then registered the obvious. There was nothing to hold. Nothing to aim. The prosthetic presented a closed, feminine anatomy. Standing seemed no longer an option.

A small, sharp spike of something, embarrassment, disbelief, a quiet jolt of finality, went through me. I sat down on the closed lid for a moment, then reached for the instruction leaflet still sitting on the bathroom counter. The relevant section was calm and reassuring. The design permitted full urination while worn. Sit. Relax. The internal channel would function normally. No need to remove the device for ordinary use.

Having heard enough, I stood, lifted the nightie, sat properly on the seat, and tried.

It worked. Different angle, different sound, different posture. The same basic relief, only delivered from a sitting position with the smooth prosthetic making the old stance impossible. I finished, cleaned up the way the instructions suggested, and stayed seated for a moment, hands on my bare thighs, the reality of the evening settling into a clearer shape.

I could wear it. It held. It solved the risk of becoming untucked. The trade-off was that it required me to sit down to pee. I could live with that. I could take it off in the morning anyway.

I washed my hands, avoided the mirror for a moment, then looked anyway. Hair framing my face, earrings, pink silk, and underneath it all a smooth front that no longer offered the old options. Temporary event infrastructure. Risk management for a single high-visibility night.

I took my vitamins and went to bed still wearing it, the nightie cool against my skin, already building plans to reassess after the launch.

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Morning came and I went to the bathroom and once again caught myself standing to pee. Old habits. Almost the oldest of habits, really. No matter. I would just take the prosthetic off. I wouldn't be needing it until the launch tonight anyway.

I reached for the silicone seams and went to pull it off. Ouch. OUCH. The glue was stuck firm, and trying to remove it felt like ripping off a superglue band-aid. The edges didn't lift. I tried a corner, then another, and a sharp pull of skin answered before the silicone did. It was properly stuck. Not sticky. Bonded.

I could feel my cheeks going red as the panic began to set in. I fumbled through the trash for the instructions I had skipped.

ADHESIVE GLUE FOR LONG-TERM WEAR. Formulated to remain in place for 5 - 7 days at a time. Do not peel. Use only the enclosed solvent to remove. Warning: solvent may cause skin irritation. Wait 72 hours after removal before reapplication.




This was a lot to take in.

I kicked myself for not reading the fine print first. I found the solvent bottle at the bottom of the box. I could use it to remove the prosthetic, sure, but then I would have to wait three days before I could glue it back on again. The Gravity launch was tonight. If I waited, it would defeat the whole purpose of getting it.

I looked at the little solvent bottle, then at the smooth front that had survived the night. If I took it off now I would be back to the thong problem by evening, no time to reseal, no second chance before the dress. If I left it, the line stayed clean.

I sighed. I guess it would just… have to stay on. I put the solvent back in the box, slumped down onto the toilet, and peed in quiet resignation.

The plan had been simple: trial the prosthetic, confirm the risk was managed, take it off and save it for the launch. Instead I stood in front of the vanity in the pink nightie, felt the smooth uninterrupted line under the fabric, and reached for a Samantha outfit, a closer blouse and the grey skirt. Higher heels. I brushed and styled my hair. Put on my makeup at the vanity.

It wasn’t comfortable, exactly, knowing it was staying. Then again, wearing it wasn’t really

physically uncomfortable either. This was the unit available option that didn't put a risk of a bulge back under the dress I was supposed to wear in front of half the firm. I can deal with it properly after the event, I thought. After Gravity was over. After I didn't need the insurance anymore.

I showered around it, dressed around it, and felt the glue hold with every step to the station. Tonight first. The rest could wait.

The smooth front sat underneath it all like it had always been part of the baseline rather than a device I had affixed the night before.

The day was ordinary by the new standard for the week. I wore a nice blouse, skirt, hose, heels with the usual makeup. I went straight to five in the morning, setup with Max at his hot desk. A quick eyeball of IT tickets and any outstanding issues, delegated to the team as needed, if Adrian hadn't already. Then reviewing Max's day, making sure he had, I mean, Gravity had, everything it needed. Some investor calls, some catch up time with the girls and discussing any last minute details and logistics for the launch party.

What was new was the absence of any management between my legs. No adjusting. No discreet tucking when I sat or crossed my ankles. No low-level vigilance about lines under the skirt. Just smooth, consistent and unified.

The bathroom was the clearest teacher. I'd already been using the women's room for a while to avoid the fuss of being told I was in the wrong room. A few times during the day I excused myself, entered a stall, sat, and handled the ordinary need the way the prosthetic required. The first time still carried a faint internal double-take. The second time the double-take was smaller. By the afternoon the sitting posture had already begun to feel like the obvious one.

Another small adaptation in a long sequence of adaptations, no more dramatic than the crossed legs the skirts had taught me or the shorter stride the higher heels demanded. I washed my hands, checked my makeup and the soft waves in the mirror, and returned to the floor without the old spike of self-consciousness.

What settled over the hours was quieter than anxiety and more persistent than novelty. The smooth front did not feel like a problem I was managing. It felt like the last visible mismatch had been removed. Chest, waist, hips, face, hair, clothes, and now the final silhouette under the clothes, all of it consistent with the Samantha aesthetic. When I moved, sat, stood, or caught my reflection in a lift door, there was nothing left that required active correction.

At some point I stopped noticing the prosthetic entirely. It was just there, but I didn't notice anything at all.

Launch infrastructure. Risk management. It was temporary. The words and excuses were still available if I reached for them. They no longer matched the feeling as cleanly as they matched the original intention.

There was no going home to take it off. The afternoon ran out, and the night of the event arrived with the particular bright, nervous energy of a plan finally becoming real.

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I'd been working up the nerve to speak to John. Every decision made to this point had been grounded on the compromise that all this was temporary until Gravity launches, so I had to speak to him about the timeline. Every time I passed his office, I found something else that needed doing. By three o'clock, I was running out of excuses, and with the launch only hours away, it was now or never.

I knocked on his office door.

"John, have you got a minute? I was hoping to have a quick chat with you about next steps and what happens after tonight."

John looked up from some papers.

"Of course, come in, take a seat. I've been thinking the same thing."

He gestured for me to step inside. I smoothed my skirt and sat down at his desk opposite him.




"Gravity's proven a huge success, and I think we need to look at how we position you going forward. Max has been glowing about your contribution to the project, and I've seen it as well with my own eyes."

I nodded. I was thankful it had been noticed.

"I'm glad to hear it, thank you."

"And the rest of it," John said, a little more carefully. "The way you've handled the… personal side. Growing into the Samantha role in the way you have. That can't have been

easy, and you've done it with a grace and confidence I don't think any of us expected. The clients see it. Max sees it. I want you to know the firm sees it too, and that we're behind you."

I felt the flush before I could stop it. He meant the extra work. The skirts, push up bras, the two inboxes, client meetings, the way I'd made the character stick so Gravity could close.

"It was all a learning curve, but I really appreciate the firm's help and support while I… worked through my situation and I was happy to do what was needed," I said. "It's been a lot, but it worked."

"It more than worked." He smiled, the kind of smile people give when they think they're being discreet. "And I imagine this week feels like a bit of a milestone for you. You look settled. That's really something to be proud of."

I looked down for a second, "The girls have taught me a thing or two", I smoothed the front of the skirt without thinking. "I'm just excited to get Gravity to the finish line tonight".

"Understood. Well, since you started on Gravity, you've become something of a bridge between IT and the executive team. You've got the technical knowledge, but you've also shown you can work directly with the people making the decisions. Particularly in managing our more… delicate clients."

He paused.

"I think there's an opportunity here to build on that. I'm a good read of people and I can tell where your heart really lies. Rest assured, we'll be doing an organizational reset after tonight to manage Gravity moving forward. You've earned a little more responsibility, which should be acknowledged. More visibility, too."

Reset. Yes. That's exactly what I wanted to hear. Resetting to the original status quo with my IT team. But it sounded like he might be giving me a promotion too. More responsibility on the technical side, it sounded like. The emergency wardrobe doing its last night of service tonight before I could go back to IT with the win in hand.

As I was nodding along he looked pleased, the way a man looks when a difficult conversation has gone better than he planned. We were, I thought, finally on the same page, much to my relief.

I nodded. "Yes, a reset was what I had been planning for, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to have IT's point of view represented a bit more in executive decision making moving forward."

"Exactly." John smiled. "And with you spending this time on the fifth floor, I think you'll find it easier to keep things moving. You know the systems better than anyone now and you'll be close at hand when we need you."

That sounded promising, back to IT but with some more strategic input. The fifth floor was where the senior executives had their offices, along with the meeting rooms and the main conference facilities. I'd spent so much time up there lately that Chloe, Mia and Jess had practically adopted me. Between the three of them, they'd taught me more about the firm's internal politics than I'd ever learned from the IT department's org chart.

“I can see the benefits of that,” I said. “It would be good to be in the conversation and have a chance to have a bit more input before things get signed off.”

“Precisely. We need people in the room who can anticipate what the firm needs, rather than simply react when something goes wrong.”

“That’s always been my preference.”

“And Max will of course need the same level of support close at hand. Gravity might be launching tonight, but the work doesn’t stop tomorrow. If anything, it’s going to get busier.”

I’d accounted for this with my handover notes. Max was going to be flat out without me on hand, there was no doubt he’d need someone, probably an assistant to help with his workload. I’d planned to brief Liz in the morning so she could set Max up with someone else moving forward once I was back on fourth full time.

“Of course. He’s going to be swamped when the market opens. I’ll make sure the transition goes smoothly with IT and the team and we’ll take it from there.”

“Good. We need to make sure the handover is properly managed, so Max and Gravity are covered, IT is in safe hands and everyone knows where they stand going forward.”

“Absolutely. I’ll make sure whoever takes over from me has everything they need.”

John nodded, looking satisfied.

“Excellent. I wanted to make sure we were aligned before the announcement this evening. I think you’ll find the changes reflect the work you’ve put in.”

I felt a small surge of satisfaction. It wasn’t every day that senior management acknowledged your contribution, let alone talked about giving you more authority.

“Thanks, John. I appreciate you recognising it.”

He gave my shoulder a friendly squeeze.

“Not at all. You’ve earned it, Samantha. See you tonight.”

“See you tonight.”

I headed back over to the bullpen with a bounce in my step. It was almost time to start getting dressed and prepped. I was already thinking about what a more senior IT role might look like. Better access to the decision-makers, less time chasing people for approvals, perhaps even a say in the firm’s technology budget.

“Hi girls,” I said, gliding into the cluster of chairs. “We getting ready soon?”

Chloe looked up from her compact and smiled. “There you are. Come on, then. Jess’ already claimed the good mirror.”

“About time,” Mia said, not looking up from the dress bag she was unzipping. “We were

about to send a search party."

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We'd claimed the executive women's bathroom and the adjoining quiet lounge as our staging ground, Chloe, Mia, Jess, and me. Garment bags opened. Makeup kits spread across the counters. The air filled with the soft chaos of four wom— , I mean, three women and one… me, getting ready at once: the hiss of hairspray, the click of compact mirrors, the low running commentary of straps adjusted and lipstick compared. No clients. No Max. Just the fifth floor girls (and me) putting on the version of ourselves the evening expected.

My phone pinged with an email alert, but I was half way through unpacking my makeup bag and gave myself permission to forget about Gravity for a moment.

"Need to get that?" Chloe asked, eyes glued to the mirror as she finished her eyeliner.

"It can wait", I replied. The conversation with John earlier had gone so well I felt like I could give myself some breathing room.

I stepped into the rose bodycon dress and felt it settle like a conclusion rather than a costume. The fabric held every line the months had built, chest, waist, hips smooth and uninterrupted underneath thanks to the prosthetic that had already become ordinary. Chloe moved behind me to check the zip and the fall of the skirt, then made a soft, satisfied sound.

"Perfect. I told you this was the one."

Mia claimed my hair, running the curling iron through the shoulder-length waves until they sat soft and deliberate around my face. Jess took the makeup, elevating the daytime corporate polish into something richer for evening light, deeper eye, a stronger flush, the rose lip refined. When they finished, Chloe opened the jewellery box with a little ceremonial flourish and helped me fasten Victor's necklace. The open neckline of the dress was the perfect canvas for it.

The matching earrings went in carefully; the holes were settled enough, the gold fine and bright against the waves.

I turned to the mirror.

Shoulder-length hair. Elevated makeup. The delicate gold at my ears and neckline. The rose bodycon dress holding the continuous silhouette. Higher heels. The smooth front no one would ever see and everyone would read as simply part of the woman standing there. Samantha, complete. The person who had been assembling herself across inboxes and planning meetings and quiet private escalations was, for this evening, no longer partially present.



Around me the others were reaching the same finished state. All in figure hugging dresses to match.

Chloe wore a fitted satin navy cocktail dress with a soft wrap neckline that ended just above the knee ; Mia chose a jewel-green satin slip dress with thin straps and a soft V-neck that fell in a fluid column to mid-thigh; and Jess arrived in a clean, striking black column dress with a bateau neckline and a high slit, unadorned and perfectly tailored.

We did the inevitable group pose, the inevitable chorus of gushing and approval, the inevitable phone photos “just for the ‘gram.” Someone, Mia, said I looked incredible. Chloe said Victor was going to lose his mind in the most useful possible way. I laughed, soft and involuntary, and felt a glow in my cheeks. A feeling somewhere between relief and pride. I’d pulled it off.



Liz put her head around the door, already in her own polished evening register.

“Five minutes ladies. Lifts are clear. Let’s go make them feel welcome.”

I let the "ladies" line flow past me. We gathered clutches, checked each other one last time, and moved together toward the corridor in a small, bright cluster of heels and perfume and finished presentation. I walked with them, the bodycon dress moving with me, the gold catching the light, I felt like I’d reached the finish line and could finally celebrate. One last hurrah for Samantha, then back to Sam.

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I started where the plan put me: name tags, with the girls.

The long welcome table near the entrance was already a soft machine of smiles and efficient charm. Chloe, Mia, Jess and I worked the line as guests arrived: warm greeting, correct name badge, a light redirect toward the main space, the first glass if someone looked like they needed it. The rose bodycon dress and the gold jewellery did exactly the work the planning had intended. People smiled back without questions, concern or complication.

A few of the older clients held my hand a fraction longer than strictly necessary, or appropriate. I kept the temperature light, the way fifth floor had taught me. A small laugh, the name badge turned so they had to look at it, a question about their table before the pause could become anything. One of them said the firm was lucky to have me. I said the firm was lucky to have Gravity, and nodded him toward Chloe, who already had his glass. Another asked if I would be free later to talk properly. I said the speech was about to start, and that Max would want him near the front. It came out easy. Warm, a little apologetic, already moving on. None of them seemed to notice they had been handled. By the time the line thinned I had done it three times and only afterwards felt the small, strange pride of it.

Charm, if that was the word. Useful. A little frightening, how little effort it took.

Max arrived a little after the first wave, sharp in a dark suit, the presentation notes already locked. He found me at the edge of the name-tag station, took in the full evening register, dress, hair, gold, the silhouette, and his expression did a quick, private thing before settling into something warmer.

“You look…” He exhaled a short half-laugh. “You look the part. The dress is perfect.”

I blushed and felt the familiar small lift and answered with the soft smile the role I’d become so practiced with.

“Thanks, that’s a relief. I wasn’t sure if…”, I looked down and pushed my hair back. “The girls insisted I lean into Samantha tonight and sort of made me a group project”.

He flashed me that quick, disarming smile and gave a nod of understanding, before his eyes darkened.
He pulled me aside from the table.

“John mentioned you’d spoken earlier,” Max said. “About the arrangements after tonight.”

“Briefly, yes.”

“He pitched it to me earlier. I said I’m open to it, but only if you’re on board.”

My mind turned to the new dynamic John had floated. Running IT but with more executive input, more pressure but more possibilities and forward career progression. It would mean taking my hands off the Gravity wheel but I’d make sure there was a good handover in place.

“It sounds like it’ll be more responsibility, but that’s not a bad thing. I think we’ve got things in a good place now and we’ll make sure Gravity’s in good hands.”

“Of course, agreed.” He gave me a small, reassuring smile. “Still, I want you to know how much I’ve appreciated having, I mean, working with you to this point. You’ve made an enormous difference.”

“We made a good team.”

“We do. And I think you’ll find the new arrangement works well. You’ll still be close to everything, without having to stretch yourself quite so thin.”

“That sounds ideal.”

“And of course, remember if you want to stay in-“

“It’s tempting”. I’d cut him off as I knew what he was going to say. If I wanted to stay on Gravity. With him. I did feel that pang in my chest. That feeling of missing out, not being at the coal face together, after all these months. Not seeing him practically everyday. Plus I wouldn’t get to spend as much time with the girls as much being back on fourth.

But I had to stick with the plan, and besides, the new role John had floated sounded like I would have plenty of time to get back to fifth and way in on executive strategy anyway.

“All good things. You know. I’ll admit, it’s very tempting,” I said. “There’s a lot waiting for me. But this new role John’s talking about should mean I won’t have to disappear entirely. This could be the best of both worlds.”

His shoulders relaxed.

“Good. I wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

“Absolutely.”

Someone called Max’s name from across the room. He glanced over, then turned back to me.

“Right. Shall we?”

“Lead the way.”




Relieved that we’d had the conversation, we walked forward side by side, elbows close enough to occasionally brush. It seemed John had been right: everyone was agreed on what came next.

It was supposed to be simple logistics, Max circulating, me feeding him the soft data so the conversations stayed smooth. In practice it became something more fluid. As we approached each small cluster I would lean in just enough, close enough that the gold necklace and the edge of the dress entered the same frame as his shoulder, and give him the quiet primer in a low voice.

“Left is Helen from HHM, two kids starting at Harvard, recently promoted and looking to make a splash. Right is Tom from Deutsche Bank, already friendly but could use some

timeline reassurance, or just ask him about how the Red Sox are going."

Max would nod, almost imperceptible, then open with exactly the right note. I stayed at his side, angled slightly toward him, smiling when the conversation needed warmth, laughing softly when a joke landed, letting the room read us as a continuous pair: the substance and the polished continuity channel beside him. The physical proximity was professional and still unmistakably close. My hand rested lightly near his elbow once.

Another time my shoulder brushed his when I leaned in with a name. No one in the room appeared to find the picture of us anything other than natural.

What surprised me was how easy it all felt.

There was no internal scramble to remember the cues Chloe had once given me for Victor. No sense of performing a costume beside a colleague. The role of the soft, informed presence at Max's side, arm candy in the most useful, program-literate sense, simply fitted the dress, the evening, and the months of work that had led here. I fed him names. I laughed at the jokes, smiled and buoyed the mood. I performed the role I was here to play.

And the looking, and the closeness, and the quiet competence of it all sat in my chest as something warmer and more settled than pure professional execution.

Between clusters Max glanced down at me once, a private check-in.

"You good?"

"I'm good," I said, and meant it in more ways than one.

Max checked the time on his phone, then the side of the stage, and gave me the small nod we had agreed on.

"That's me."

"Deck's up. Clicker's on the lectern. You're only doing the quick one remember."

"I know." He straightened his jacket with a smile. "Don't let Victor wander off while I'm up there."

"I won't."

He went. I stayed at the edge of the room with the spare notes and watched him take the steps like he had done it a hundred times, which he nearly had. The room settled. John said his name. Max smiled that effortless smile, the one that meant he was about to make something complicated sound simple, and started.

I knew the speech well enough to recite it myself from memory. What Gravity was. Why the funding structure held. The technical backend. The thanks, kept short. His voice over the glasses and the low music someone had turned down. For a minute it was easy to just listen.

He didn't rush it. One hand on the edge of the lectern, the other loose at his side, like the room had already decided to agree with him and he was only confirming the fact. The light caught the line of his jaw when he turned toward the investors. Someone laughed at a line

I'd heard him try three ways in the car, and he let the laugh land before he went on, not milking it, just using it. Confident. Strong.

I caught myself tracking the way he tipped his head when a question came from the back, and had to look down at my glass. Silly. I'd written half the answers he was giving. Still, standing there in the dress with the necklace warm at my neck, it was difficult not to feel a little disarmed by it. By him. His voice. The way the room leaned in when he spoke. I pressed my thumb to the stem of the glass and—

"Samantha."

I turned.

Adrian was a half-step back from me, tie loosened, a drink he had not started. He looked at the stage, then at me, and did the small once-over people had been doing all night without quite calling it that.

"Didn't want to interrupt," he said. "You look beaut—…um, I mean you seem…", he tripped on his words as he looked me over. He then gestured up to Max.

"He's good up there."

"He is." I said.

"Congratulations." He continued, "On all of it. Launch, the room, the whole thing. You pulled it together."

"We did," I said. The "we" felt automatic. "Max did the hard part."

Adrian's mouth tilted. He watched Max for another line, then lowered his voice so it sat under the speech.

"You're quite the team together. I hadn't really seen the full picture til tonight."

"We found a rhythm", I said, with a quick glance and a smile to the stage. "I'm sorry again that it came at the expense of my attention to the team on four".

He shrugged. "It'll all be for the best, I was confused at first but you've truly… come into your own now. Anyway, congrats again" and he offered his glass for a quiet toast. "To fresh starts".

On stage, Max clicked to the next slide.

"Fresh starts"

I smiled, and returned Adrian's toast with a quick clink of a champagne glass.

"Enjoy the evening and good luck with the launch. Tomorrow's a big day"

With that he quietly stepped back into the crowd. My eyes were back on Max.

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Victor found me near the edge of the main space just as Max was wrapping up, when the room had loosened into proper drinks and conversation.

He looked exactly as I remembered him, older, carefully kept, the residual confidence of a man who expected rooms to arrange themselves around his comfort. His eyes moved over the rose bodycon dress, his gifted gold at my ears and throat, the soft waves of my hair, and the temperature in his expression warmed on schedule.

“Samantha. Even more stunning than the last time I saw you”

I gave him the smile the fifth floor had trained into me, warm, slightly tilted, the one that invited without promising. “Mr Archibald. I’m glad you could be here. The evening wouldn’t feel complete without you.”

We stepped into a quieter pocket near the tall windows. I angled toward him the way Chloe had taught me months ago and the body now did without instruction. When he offered a dry, self-aggrandizing story about a competitor’s clumsy pitch I laughed at the right beat, light and genuine-sounding, and let my fingers rest briefly on his forearm in agreement. Light, gentle voice. Eye contact held just long enough.

The whole practised register of being the person who made the important man feel interesting and looked-after.

“And thank you,” I added, touching the necklace once with a fingertip, “for these. They’re beautiful. You really shouldn’t have, but I’m very glad you did.”

Victor’s smile deepened, satisfied. “A small thing. Your efforts should be properly recognized. You and Max have been the only parts of this process that didn’t waste my time. I make it my business to acknowledge the value of long term investments.”

His choice of words “long term investment” sat with me, but I kept the charm steady, asked about his flight, let him talk, gave him the soft reflective responses that kept the conversation effortless and centred on him. He laughed, really laughed once when I offered a gently teasing observation about the number of people suddenly eager to rediscover old friendships now that the capital was committed. The sound of it registered as a clean tactical success. Temperature maintained. Relationship asset protected.

The evening’s most important external stakeholder acknowledged and, for now at least, satisfied.

Under the performance, the private arithmetic ran in its old familiar loop.

Just get through tonight. Gravity’s launching. The capital is in, the market is primed, the systems are all online, the fund becomes real and self-sustaining. After that, the expectations on me would be wound down, the secondary inbox can go quiet, the emergency kit can go back in the bag, the name can stop being required on calendars. I can go back. Back to Sam. Back to normality. The fourth floor. The IT team.

The version of me that existed before the war room and the bullpen desk and the dresses and skirts and the gold and the prosthetic underneath it all. Untangle it all. Leave this behind.

The thought was tidy and urgent and almost convincing while I stood there in the rose

dress making Victor Archibald smile.

I held the smile, held the angle of my body, held the soft attentive posture, and let the hope sit underneath it like a deadline I still believed I could meet. We were coming to the moment I'd been looking forward to for months. John was going to announce Gravity was live. I'd done my part and now things would go back to normal.

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John took the small raised platform near the end of the evening, glass in hand, and the room quieted for him the way rooms did.

"I'll keep this short," he said. "When they ring the bell to open trading tomorrow morning, Gravity will be live. The team's done the work. To our valued partners, thank you for your trust, confidence and conviction. Gravity has enormous potential to revolutionize the world, along with your portfolios of course". The last line drew a chuckle from the crowd.

He continued "Now I want to thank a few people properly before we all get back to drinking."

He turned first toward Max.

"Max, our project leader. You've done an outstanding job steering the ship and keeping the critical path intact when it would have been easy to let it slip. The firm is better for it."

Project leader.

The phrase landed with a small, precise wrongness. We were supposed to be co-leads weren't we? John had said it himself in the early briefings, Max on the financial architecture, me on the operational and technical continuity, a shared centre. Somewhere in the months of dual roles and secondary inboxes and Samantha support, the language had been quietly rewritten. Max alone at the front. I felt the shift register even as I kept the polished smile in place.

John's gaze found me next.

"And Samantha." A warm pause.

"Exceptional work. Your charm, skill, consistency, the way you've supported Max and the wider team through every vital touchpoint. Stakeholder relationships don't stay warm and strong by accident. We wouldn't be here tonight without you."

Turning back to the room, "I look forward to seeing everything this team, Max and Samantha, together, will accomplish together as Gravity moves into this next phase."

The room made the approving sound rooms make. Someone near the front clapped once before the general applause followed. I stood in the dress with Victor's gold around my throat and smiled on schedule while the words rearranged the future under my feet. Next phase. Team. Together. What did that mean? Not a temporary channel to be wound down after launch. Did he mean that as an ongoing pairing?

That wasn't what we'd talked about this afternoon. He'd said I'd be getting more executive responsibility. Back to IT but with ongoing input on strategy. A promotion.



“And finally.” John wasn’t finished.

“Adrian. Congratulations on your new position. Well earned. The technical side is in excellent hands.”

New position? Where was he going? I didn’t know what new position meant. No one had told me.

The applause for Adrian rose and fell while the last of my confidence and certainty about what happens next collapsed around me.

If Adrian had a new role on the technical side, and Max was project leader, and Samantha was publicly written into the next phase beside him, then the path back to the fourth floor as IT supervisor was not simply difficult. It was being paved over in real time, under event lighting, with drinks in people’s hands and applause.

We’d talked about a reset. Going back to how things were before Gravity. This was… this was something else.

John wrapped up, “Thank you again and I hope you enjoy the evening”.

The formal part of the evening ended. The room loosened again into conversations and last glasses and the early movements of people toward coats and cars. I moved through it with the smile still attached, looking for John, for Liz, for anyone who could translate the speech

into something less permanent. John was already with a cluster of investors being bundled towards a private car, he never stayed long at these things. Liz was nowhere to be seen.

Adrian was across the room accepting handshakes with the easy posture of someone whose position had just been clarified in public. Max caught my eye once, something complicated in his expression, but a client stepped between us before either of us could speak.

Chloe found me before I could decide whether to wait it out. She had a hand at Mia's elbow and the look she used when a problem needed solving without an audience.

"She's had one glass past sensible," she said, low. "Keeps saying she'll get a cab but she'll be on the floor any second. Can you stay with her a minute while I find her bag?"

I was about to protest. I had to find Max, find out what was happening. Mia smiled at me but I could see the room spinning behind her eyes. Her clutch was open. One heel had already slipped.

People were dispersing into cars for destinations unknown. I ran the addresses without meaning to. Jess the other way. Chloe further in. Max, if he was even leaving yet, nowhere near. Mia's place sat on the same run out as mine, two stops before the turn.

Chloe returned with Mia's clutch.

"I'll share with her," I said. "It's on the way. I'll see her in."

Chloe gave me an appreciative smile. "We've gotta look out for each other don't we." Then nodded. "Text me when she's through the door."

By the time I had collected my clutch and stepped out into the cool night air, Mia on my arm and the questions with no one left to land on, the speech was already replaying itself in pieces. The cab door shut.

"Where to girls?" The driver asked. I gave him the directions without bothering with clarifications.

The city moved past. Mia tipped her head against my shoulder and promptly fell asleep.




Project leader, Max.

Exceptional work, Samantha.

Next phase, together.

The plan had been to just get through the night, Gravity would launch and I could begin the work of becoming Sam again. I'd talked it through with John and Max, who seemed to have been on board with the plan.

Now the night was ending. Gravity had launched. And the official language of the firm had just described a future in which Samantha remained, standing beside Max, while the technical centre I still thought of as mine was being handed, publicly, to someone else.

If all that was true, what was going to be left of Sam?