

Chapter 17

I awoke to the sudden blare of my alarm.

The champagne and cumulative exhaustion had caught up with me on the stairs up to the apartment after the launch the night before, the cab already gone by the time I fumbled the key into the lock.

I remembered the dress coming off in the dark, not folded, just left where it fell, and the bed arriving before I'd managed the rest. I awoke in the bra and the panties, the rose gold dress a pile on the floor, echoes of John's speech still turning over in my head.

His announcements had followed me to bed and come back out the other side unchanged.

My mouth was dry. My head was pounding. The light through the curtains was already the wrong colour.



I bolted upright. Shit. I was late.

As I ran to the shower I remembered John's words from the night before.

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

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

How did all that align with the “More responsibility”. “More visibility”. “A bridge between IT and the executive team” promises he made?

One version put me back at a desk with a better title and fewer people to chase for approvals. Another put me somewhere else entirely, still in the orbit of Max, as a team, still useful in the way I had been useful for months.

As I towed off, my hands went to my crotch and the prosthetic. Still attached. Still surprisingly benign and feeling somewhat comfortable even. I groggily reached for the instructions and walked through the steps for removing the adhesive with the provided solvent.

“Apply solvent to edge and allow to absorb into adhesive for 10 minutes before attempting removal.”

10 minutes? Ugh. I didn’t have time for this. Whatever, ok looks like it was staying on for another day at the office.

I still didn’t have any answers about what would be waiting for me, but in an effort to perhaps manifest the outcome I hoped for, I tried dressing for the best version of Sam I could currently muster.

Slacks. A soft ordinary shirt, nothing too tight or showy. Low heeled shoes. Light makeup, the minimum polished baseline rather than the Gravity client register. A casual tote style bag. I had to, of course, wear my bra and panties underneath, but everything else was a deliberate step back toward Sam.



As I arrived at the building I was thinking today, things could start returning to normal. Fourth floor. IT. The dual role wound down at last.

The first wrong note was the security gate.

My pass, the original one, Sam Chambers, IT Supervisor, photo from the first week, tapped red. I tried again. Red. The guard glanced at the screen, then at me, then offered a professional half-smile that did not reach his eyes.

“System’s updated overnight. It’s ok I’ll issue a temporary. You’ll want to speak to your floor admin.”

He printed a generic visitor-style temp pass with no title and waved me through.

Ok. That’s odd, I thought. Maybe HR is doing a rollout of new passes post launch. I’ll just speak to Liz.

I walked to the lifts and punched level four. As it rose I practiced what I’d say once the team started arriving.

To Adrian first, because he would be the one who needed the facts first: I’d spoken with John and Max. Gravity was done, I’m back with IT now, that the launch had closed and the emergency measures could stand down.

Tomas next, lighter. Something about the tickets I’d missed. Priya last, because she would already have covered half of them and would pretend she hadn’t.

I could imagine the relief on their faces before I reached the doors. The smiles. All the ordinary questions about the launch, how it went, what the plan was going to be moving forward. I was going to suggest a team lunch to reset the temperature. I had all the answers ready.

The doors opened.

For a moment, I wondered, had I pushed the wrong button? Was I in the wrong place?

The IT area on fourth floor was... empty.

Not quiet. Completely empty. The banks of desks where Adrian, Tomas, Priya and the others had worked were cleared. Monitors gone, personal items gone, the residual clutter of a technical team simply absent. My own desk space was a blank surface and an unplugged dock. No chair pushed back mid-task. No half-finished notes. The room had that particular hollow, eerie, abandoned feeling. It was a ghost town.

IT was gone, and I had no idea where.

I stood in the middle of it with the useless pass in my fingers and the first real edge of panic starting to cut through the morning’s fragile hope.



Why hadn't I heard anything? Why didn't they tell me?

Just as I reached for my phone to call Adrian, I heard a voice from behind me.

"Ah, Samantha. There you are."

Liz's voice, bright and matter of fact, coming from the direction of the lifts. She looked exactly as she always did. Composed, efficient, already mid-stream in the day's logistics. She took in the slacks and the ordinary shirt with a single quick glance that registered mild surprise and then filed it under temporary inconvenience.

"Liz. It's just Sa- what's happening?" I asked. The words came out thinner than I intended. "My pass doesn't work. The department's empty. Where is everyone?"

Liz's expression softened into the particular patience she used for people who had not yet caught up with a decision that had already been made.

"The new Gravity phase initiated a few operational and personnel changes," she said, as if explaining a revised meeting time. "The IT department footprint has been moved to third floor. IT and technical operations have been consolidated under Adrian. He's taking the expanded lead role John mentioned last night. And you've been formally redeployed and elevated. Come, I was just heading back up."

She turned toward the lifts without waiting for agreement. I followed because there was

nothing else to do. The doors closed. Liz pressed a button.

“I thought you were across all of this,” she added, glancing at my face. “John said he’d spoken with you. He sent the memo around yesterday afternoon, before the launch. Personnel changes, reporting lines, the desk moves. It went to the whole Gravity list.”

The lift rose in silence while I unlocked my phone with a thumb that almost didn’t feel entirely attached to me.

There it was.

Yesterday afternoon. John’s name. Subject line I would have opened on any ordinary day. Gravity phase two.

Personnel changes.
Samantha Chambers - Gravity (ES).
Adrian - Manager (IT).

I had received it.

I had received it while I was in the women’s room with Chloe and the girls getting ready for the launch party. Half-listening, I’d seen the email ping while unpacking my makeup and then ignored it while holding still so Jess could finish my eyeliner, and then forgot about it while arguing lightly about nail polish colors, laughing at something Mia said about shoes. Hair. Makeup. Outfit. The memo had sat unopened under a stack of group-chat photos and a reminder to bring a lint roller.

Crestfallen was too small a word. I had not been excluded. The memo was there. I had simply not picked up the phone.

The speech from the night before replayed itself in fragments. Project leader Max. Samantha. Next phase. Together. Adrian’s new role. The hopeful story about untangling began to come apart in real time.

I looked over the memo again. Samantha Chambers - Gravity (ES). What did the ES mean?

The elevator doors answered.

We stepped out onto the executive floor. The bullpen was already live. Chloe, Mia, Jess at their stations, the soft morning rhythm of the support team.

Liz walked me past them with a light, guiding presence and stopped at the small desk that sat outside the glass office that had once been the war room.

Liz gestured to the satellite desk “Here you are”.

It was made up. Monitor. My pink mouse and keyboard. Flowers. A clean notepad.



I looked up at the war room. There on the wall by the door, a plaque.

Max Anderson
Gravity Vice President

ES. Executive?... Executive what? The only thing I could of was..Support?

“You should feel right at home.”

I was a... they wanted me to be... no, they couldn't.

I looked at the desk. There on the front, fixed in place, the new nameplate. There it was.

Samantha Chambers
Executive Assistant and Personal Secretary.



I felt the floor tilt. The room thinned. Liz's mouth kept moving, but the sound of it arrived from somewhere farther off, as if someone had turned the volume down on everything except the pulse in my ears.

They're making me a secretary.

"Access, calendar rights, and the external signature have all been updated to match. Max is in at nine. You'll want a few minutes to orient before the first calls. HR will send the formal paperwork through later today. Mostly confirmatory. Questions can go through me if anything's unclear but it's my understanding you and John went through everything before the launch. I'll let you settle in."

She said it the way she said everything. As settled fact, already in motion, no longer open to the version of events I had been carrying for months.

Inside I was boiling. All those years of learning coding systems, engineering servers and network architecture, all that experience I'd built up as a supervisor, and apparently they would trade all that for someone to screen Max's calls and look cute in a skirt?

I stood in front of the nameplate in the clothes I had chosen for a different future, my chest feeling the bite of the underwire bra beneath my shirt with every breath, and felt the last of the "I can still go back" framing collapse under the weight of brushed metal and a title that no longer contained the word supervisor at all.

John's memo had been there the whole time.

I had been getting ready with the girls.

As if summoned, Chloe saw me first. Her face lit up in the bright, unguarded way she reserved for genuine good news, and then Mia and Jess were there too, the whole soft morning energy of the bullpen suddenly focused on the desk that now had my new title on it.

"Oh my god, Samantha!"

Chloe crossed the space in three quick steps and pulled me into a short, fierce hug that smelled like her usual perfume and fresh coffee. "You're actually up here. Full time. We thought it might be coming but seeing the plate—"

"You're officially one of us now," Mia said, grinning, already reaching to squeeze my arm. "No more disappearing downstairs. No more half-and-half."

Jess leaned in to read the nameplate properly and gave a low, impressed whistle. "Executive Assistant and Personal Secretary to Max Anderson. That's a proper title. You worked so hard for this girl. Congratulations!"

You worked so hard for this.

Chloe followed up "Honestly, you've been so strong and brave through your whole transition, we're so proud of you."

Transition? My brain took a moment to process the word. Transition from Supervisor to Secretary? Was that what she meant? Wait.. no, oh god do they think I'm...

All the congratulations landed in the middle of the shock like a warm, well-intentioned blade. In their eyes the months of dual roles, the Gravity client management, the Archibald channel, the launch evening, the dress, the gold, the seamless performance. All of it read as effort toward this exact outcome. A promotion. A landing. The natural end of a trajectory they had watched and encouraged. Not a quiet erasure of the IT supervisor title. Not the fourth floor emptied overnight. Not the pass that no longer worked.

I felt the expected response rise on autopilot, the soft smile, the slight upward inflection, the orbit's easy social technology and put it on before the alternative (tears, protest, the raw confusion still turning in my chest) could reach my face.

"I know," I heard myself say, bright enough to pass. "It's... a lot. I'm still just taking it all in."

Chloe beamed. "We're going to make the rest of your transition so easy. Anything you need, drawer space, phone call scripts, makeup, the good staplers, outfits, we've got you. You're home now."

Mia was already eyeing the ordinary shirt and slacks with a little frown. "We're also going to need to talk wardrobe. You can't keep defaulting to the downstairs look up here. We'll sort you properly."

They moved around me in a warm, efficient cluster, pointing out which drawers were free, where the shared supplies lived, how the soft phone routing worked on this side of the floor while I stood in the middle of it nodding and making the right small sounds. The feigned excitement held. The smile held.

Underneath, the nameplate and Liz's casual explanation and the empty fourth floor and John's speech kept turning over and over, the old story about untangling and going back colliding with the new one the organisation and the girls had already accepted as fact.

You worked so hard for this.

I had. Just not, in my own head, for this.

Max's office door was still closed. The first calls of the day had not yet started. I sat down in the chair that now belonged to Samantha Chambers, Executive Assistant and Personal Secretary, and let the girls' excitement wash over the surface while the deeper confusion kept grinding underneath, searching for a version of the morning that still contained a path back.

Max arrived at nine with a coffee in one hand and looking a little worse for wear. No doubt he'd been held late at the launch party.

He was met by a chorus of congratulations from the floor. He smiled, playfully waved to dismiss the attention. This was a big day for him. Promoted to VP.

He saw me, smiled with a quick nod. All I could manage was to stand up from the chair but

the expression on my face must've quickly communicated something was wrong as his smile darkened.

He stopped at the nameplate, read it, then looked at me. I was still in my ordinary shirt and slacks, still carrying the polite residue of the girls' congratulations from earlier that morning. His expression shifted.

"Let's chat," he said quietly. "Please."

I followed him into the glass office that had once been the war room. He closed the door. For a moment, we stood in the quiet on the other side of the glass, the bullpen moving softly behind us, the new nameplate sitting outside like a third person.

"How are you settling in?" he asked.

I looked at him. "Settling in?"

"The new arrangement." He set his coffee down. "I know it's a bit of a change, but after everything we discussed yesterday, I thought—"

"I thought we'd discussed what happened after Gravity."

"We did."

"Yes. After Gravity." I glanced towards the door, then back at him. "I thought things would go back to something a little more familiar. I'd be back with IT full time, but with a bit more executive strategy involvement up here. Not... your secretary."

Max stared at me for a moment.

"Oh," he said.

It was a small word, but something in his face changed with it. The easy confidence he'd brought into the room disappeared.

"Sam, I genuinely thought you were happy with the plan. When you said it sounded ideal, I took that to mean—"

"I know what I said." I felt heat rising into my face. "I thought we were talking about having more input. Staying involved with Gravity, perhaps, but not..." I gestured helplessly towards "my" desk. "This."

He glanced at the door. When he looked back, the confusion had given way to something more careful.

"You thought you were going back to IT."

"I thought that was what we'd agreed." I tried to keep my voice level. "John talked about a reset. More responsibility, more visibility, spending time on the fifth floor. I thought he meant I'd have a more strategic role. I didn't realise everyone had understood it quite differently."

Max sat down slowly, as though the conversation had taken more out of him than he'd

expected.

“I see.”

I couldn't tell whether he was embarrassed or simply trying to work out how badly he'd misread things. Perhaps both.

“I'm sorry,” he said at last. “I should have been clearer. I thought you understood what John was proposing, and when we spoke at the launch, I thought we were confirming it. I never meant for you to walk in this morning and feel blindsided.”

“I wasn't expecting to walk into a new job.”

“No.” He looked down at his coffee, untouched now. “I can understand that.”

For a few seconds, neither of us spoke. I'd spent the better part of a month imagining how I'd explain that I was ready to return to my old desk, my old routine, my old life. I hadn't imagined having to explain that I'd never agreed to give them up in the first place.

Max leaned forward.

“Listen. The work you've been doing is real, and the need for someone with your skillset on Gravity is real. They told me the title is just the best fit HR could come up with for the work you've been doing over the last few months. Apparently, ‘Secretary’ was the closest match in their role classifications to the combination of executive support, project coordination, stakeholder management and operational oversight you've been providing.”

He gave a small, apologetic shrug.

“I know it sounds ridiculous. They have a whole framework for this sort of thing. Position descriptions, salary bands, functional classifications. If a role doesn't fit neatly into an existing category, they map the responsibilities against the closest recognised position and work from there. I gather creating a new classification would have meant a much longer process, and they wanted everything formalised before the launch.”

He paused, watching my face.

“But it isn't meant to reflect a demotion, Sam. Not in terms of the work, and certainly not in terms of how I see you. You've been doing this alongside your technical responsibilities for months, and you've become integral to the project. I think we make a great team, and I'd like to keep building on that.”

“There would of course be a salary bump. And all the bonuses are still on the table. This isn't supposed to be a step down. If anything, the idea is to recognise the level you've been operating at and make sure the position reflects the value you're bringing to Gravity. They saw how much you had volunteered for the logistics work, they thought you would be excited even.”

“But that doesn't mean you should have to accept a role you didn't agree to. If this isn't what you want, I'll go to John. We can challenge it today. If you want the technical path back or a proper dual structure with your name and title intact, I will push. Hard. You should not have found out from a dead pass and an empty floor. I'm sorry again.”

“And what about the name change?” I asked.

Max looked at me, puzzled. “What about it?”

“You know. Samantha, why is that the name on the desk?”

“Oh.” He paused, as though he wasn’t sure what I was getting at. “I thought that was your preferred name now that you have...”, he gave a quick gesture with his hand, up and down to my body. “That’s what we all understood.”

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say.

“We all”.

The words landed with a quiet finality. Max wasn’t making an assumption about a name on a form. He was telling me what the firm had come to believe about me.

And, uncomfortably, I could understand how they’d arrived there.

These past few months, my wardrobe had changed almost by degrees, each adjustment easy enough to explain away on its own. Shirts that no longer fitted properly around my chest. Tops chosen to accommodate a figure that was becoming increasingly difficult to disguise. The gynecomastia, the softer shape of my body, the waist and posture training, the hair, makeup and clothes I’d started wearing to Gravity’s client meetings, all of it had become part of the picture.

The Samantha outfits, in particular, must have seemed like more than a practical solution to a dress-code problem. I’d worn them confidently enough, I’d helped close Archibald with them, stood in front of clients beside Max in a skirt or dress, and carried on as though this was simply how things were now. I’d even been wearing Rachel’s clothes on the weekends and just

I hadn’t realized just how far I’d let things drift. Inside, each change was just “practical” or necessary to accommodate my changing figure. From the outside though, oh god, of course it had looked like I was actually transitioning. That all this was intentional.

I could have corrected him. I could have explained that the name had been part of an arrangement I’d never intended to make permanent, that the clothes and the role were supposed to be temporary, that none of it meant what he thought it meant.

But that would have meant explaining everything else, too. Why I’d gone along with it for so long. Why I hadn’t objected when “Samantha” started getting requested to attend meetings instead of Sam. Why I’d let people get comfortable with an understanding I apparently hadn’t done much to discourage.

It was an entire can of worms, and I wasn’t ready to open it in Max’s office.

“I see,” I said, keeping my voice level. “Ok well um, putting that aside, for now.”

Max watched me for a moment, perhaps sensing there was more to it, but he didn’t press.

“Look, I appreciate you being willing to help with this,” I said after a moment. “Thank you. I just... I just need a moment to think all of this through.”

“Of course, the offer to take it to John’s still on the table. I want you to be ok with all of this”.

He meant it. I could hear that he meant it. The offer sat in the room, concrete and available: a path back, or at least a fight for one, with Max willing to spend political capital on my behalf.

And I could not simply take it.

The conflict rose in a messy, overlapping wave. Loyalty to the version of me that still wanted the fourth floor, the architecture, the old competence, the name Samuel Chambers, IT Supervisor on a pass that worked. Loyalty to Max, who had been the one constant through the dual-role months, who had trusted me with the soft client management and the hard technical structures, who was now offering to burn something to get me out.

The girls’ voices from twenty minutes earlier: “You’re officially one of us”, “you worked so hard for this”. The launch speech. Victor’s gift still at home in its box. The way the Samantha work had stopped feeling like a burden and started feeling like the part of the day that produced ease and usefulness while the technical side produced friction and distance. The empty fourth floor that already belonged to Adrian’s new role.

The private knowledge that “going back” was no longer a simple reversal of clothes and more time on the fourth floor. It would mean undoing a body and a set of habits and a public identity that the firm, the clients, and half the people I liked had already accepted as fact.

I stood there in the wrong clothes for the desk outside, and felt the offer and the resistance to the offer occupying the same space in my chest.

“Let me think about it,” I heard myself say. The words came out quieter than the feigned excitement of the bullpen, but steady enough. “Can I...can you, give me a little time. I don’t want to answer this from the middle of the shock.”

Max studied my face for a long second, then nodded once.

“Take it. When you know what you want, really know, tell me. I’ll move on your word, not on John’s timeline.”

He didn’t push further. He didn’t ask me to be grateful or decisive or clear. He just opened the door again, the soft noise of the bullpen rushing back in, and let me walk out past the nameplate that still said Samantha Chambers, Executive Assistant and Personal Secretary.

I sat down at the desk. The first calendar reminder of the day was already waiting. The Samantha inbox had overnight messages. Somewhere downstairs the technical team I used to lead was starting its first full day under a different name and a different lead.

I opened the calendar, smoothed the ordinary shirt that no longer matched the plate in front of me, and held Max’s offer carefully in the back of my mind while the morning began whether I was ready or not.



I left the building on my lunch break without telling anyone where I was going.

The city moved around me in its ordinary midday rhythm. Within two blocks the first one came, a man holding a door, eyes doing the automatic once-over, polite smile already forming.

“After you, miss.”

I went through without correcting him. A few streets later a courier stepped aside with a murmured “ma’am.” At the crossing a gym bro glanced at my chest and the line of my waist and then past me, already categorising. The mistakes no longer surprised me. They were simply the weather of moving through the world in this body. I let them pass and kept walking, Max’s offer turning over and over in my head like a stone I could not put down.

“If you don’t want this, I will fight it.”

Every small compromise had come with the same sentence. Just until launch. Just this one meeting. Just the dual role for a few more weeks. I had said it to Adrian when I handed him another piece of the outage response. I had said it to Tomas when I delayed a migration review. I had said it to myself when I chose the fifth floor over the fourth for the third day running. Whatever it takes.

Could I even go back to IT now?

The fourth floor was already empty. Adrian had the expanded lead role, publicly announced, already in motion. He had earned it, genuinely. While I had been screening Max's calls, managing calendars, walking rooms in a skirt, laughing at Victor's stories, Adrian had been the one actually running the technical work. The outage, the migrations, the day-to-day architecture decisions I had kept deferring. Going back would not be a simple reinstatement.

It would mean asking John to reverse a promotion that made operational sense, re-open a footprint that had already been reallocated, and reinstall a version of me the organisation had already rewritten in its systems. Even with Max fighting, the friction would be enormous. And the team, Tomas, Priya, the others had already adjusted to looking at Adrian first. I had felt that shift in the room the day I arrived in a skirt and could not type.

Perhaps I could just quit.

The thought arrived clean and sharp and then immediately complicated itself. Quit and go where? Do what?

I stopped at a corner and caught my own reflection in the wide glass of a lingerie shop displays of lace and soft colour behind me, the street reflected around me and the question answered itself in the wrong direction.

The window showed the hourglass figure the trainer had locked in and the classes had reinforced. The bust that sat full and high under my shirts, the kind of shape most women would have been quietly envious of. The soft waves to the shoulders, the little gold earrings, the face that had been polished into something continuous with the body.



Even in the “baseline” clothes I had chosen for a day of returning to normal, the silhouette read as female before it read as anything else. Strangers on the street had already confirmed it three times in ten minutes.

How could I put myself out onto the job market as Samuel now? With this body?

A CV with an IT supervisor title and a gap, a body that no longer matched the name, a face and voice and posture that had spent months learning a different register. Interviews. Handshakes. ID checks. The first glance across a desk. Even if Eames’ protocol eventually reversed the soft tissue and the waist and the rest. Even if I could somehow force the timeline there would still be the interim.

I could quit. Walk away from all of this. Gravity, Dr. Eames, forget about it all and work it out on my own. But how could I apply for another job as Samuel Chambers, when these days I looked almost nothing like him. If I applied as Samantha instead, how would I explain the gender designation on my drivers licence?

Months of existing in a body that the world had already decided how to address. I’d been job searching for months before NewYou. I couldn’t face unemployment again. Besides,

quitting would not restore Samuel overnight. It only removed the structure that currently gave Samantha a desk, a title, a salary, and a set of people who already knew how to speak to her.

Plus there was the whole medical side. Who knows how many more treatments or procedures I might need to correct these changes to my body. The only insurance I had was through NewYou. How could I get a new job then a week later “by the way I need thousands of dollars in gender affirming surgery”.

I sighed.

Perhaps... perhaps the only workable path was the one that felt least like a path: maintain all of this. Stay. Wear the title on the nameplate. Do the work. Keep the consistency. And underneath it, privately, treat the whole structure as a holding pattern until the body could be brought back under control until the chest receded, the waist relaxed, the face and hair and presentation could be made to read as Samuel again without constant management.

Then, and only then, attempt the exit or the reversal from a body that would not immediately betray the name on the CV.

I stood in front of the lingerie shop window and looked at the reflection that strangers already called miss, and felt the old hope of untangling redraw itself into something narrower and more patient and more frightening.

Not quit.

Maintain.

Wait for the body.

The framing was fragile and full of holes and still, in that moment, the only one that did not collapse on contact with the glass.

I turned away from the window, walked back toward the office in the ordinary clothes that no longer convinced anyone, and carried Max’s offer with me like a door I was no longer sure I could walk through even if he held it open.

Liz was waiting at the desk when I got back.

A neat folder. A pen placed precisely on top. The particular calm of someone ticking off a checklist item before lunch.

“Transfer paperwork,” she said. “Read through, sign where indicated, and we can close the loop.”

I sat and opened the folder.

The top sheet was a standard internal transfer summary. Role. Cost centre. Reporting line. And then the personal details, already populated:

Name: Ms. Samantha Chambers

Title: Executive Assistant and Personal Secretary to Max Anderson

Samantha sat on the page without emphasis or apology. Just a data field, updated to match the body the building already recognised, the name on the secondary account, the person strangers held doors for.

I stared at it.

The walk back had given me a plan, of sorts. Stay for now. Keep the salary and the desk. Let Max's offer stand while I worked out what, exactly, I wanted him to fight for. Keep pursuing treatment. Wait for the body to change, and decide again when I had something closer to my old life to return to.

But here, with a pen waiting beside my name, the plan seemed to require rather more surrender than it had on the pavement.

I could correct it. Tell Liz that I was still Samuel Chambers, that Samantha was a consequence of the hormonal imbalance and gynecomastia I was having treated. That none of this was supposed to be permanent.

The explanation assembled itself in my head, sensible and straightforward. I could almost hear myself saying it.

Instead, I glanced at the office around me. The new desk. The nameplate. Max's door a few steps away. My old pass no longer worked, and the fourth floor had already been reorganised around Adrian. Even if I could make Liz change a field on a form, I couldn't make the rest of the building unlearn what it had decided I was.

That didn't mean it was right. It didn't mean I agreed.

Hold the line. Wait for the body.

Signing was not an agreement that this was permanent. It was a way to keep the salary, the structure, and the foothold in Gravity that made the holding pattern possible. Refusing would force a confrontation I wasn't ready for, before I'd even decided what outcome I wanted from it.

The logic was narrow and cold and, for the moment, sufficient.

I signed.

Liz took the folder back with a small, pleased nod. She checked the signature, apparently satisfied, and slipped the paperwork into her bag.

"Excellent. Now, we'll make an exception for today while you settle in. What you're wearing is fine for the remainder of the afternoon." Her eyes flicked briefly over my shirt and slacks. "Moving forward, we'd ask you to align with the Executive Support dress code. Skirts or dresses as standard. I'm sure you'll manage. The team can help you close any gaps in your rotation this week."

Dress code? The thought had never even occurred to me til now, but now that I thought about it, I couldn't recall a time that Chloe, Mia and Jess had worn pants to the office. Everyday was another dress or skirt combo.

A faint warmth stirred at the idea, an unwelcome memory of the clothes I'd been wearing as Samantha to Gravity engagements, the compliments I'd received, the small, private satisfaction of getting an outfit right. I pushed it aside before it could become an argument for anything.

Liz continued without pausing, as if reading from a list only she could see.

"You've also been enrolled in the Executive Support training pathway. Orientation modules, calendar and travel protocols, the soft-skills block. You'll receive the schedule and venue details shortly. Treat it as a priority alongside Max's immediate needs."

There it was: the shape of the future, laid out in modules and dress codes, already proceeding as though the decision had been mine.

Then Liz held out her hand.

"ID badge?"

I passed her my old one, the plastic rectangle that still said Samuel Chambers, IT Supervisor, handed over on my first day, a version of my face that already looked like someone else. Liz took it, and in one clean, unceremonious motion brought a pair of office scissors down through the middle. The card split with a sharp snip. Two halves.



She handed them toward me as a mild afterthought and, from the same folder, produced the replacement.



The new badge was warm from being printed. My name in the system's new configuration: Samantha Chambers. Title underneath in smaller type. And the photograph, taken at the Gravity launch, the one the girls had insisted on for the chat, smiling, shoulder-length waves, Victor's gold at my ears and neck, perfect makeup, the rose bodycon dress framing clear cleavage under event lighting. The face the firm would now show security, reception, and every door reader in the building.



Liz set the new badge on the desk beside the two severed halves of the old one, gathered her folder, and checked the time.

“Max has a call at two you’ll want to be ready for. Any process questions can come to me or Chloe.”

She left.

I sat very still in the chair. On the desk: the new badge with the launch photograph, cleavage and smile and gold; the two clean halves of Sam Chambers, IT Supervisor; the nameplate that had already announced the title before the paperwork existed. The ordinary shirt and slacks I was wearing felt suddenly, precisely against policy, an exception with an expiry measured in hours.

I picked up the new badge, felt the weight of it, and did not yet put the lanyard over my head. The halves of the old card stayed where Liz had left them, two pieces of a name and a role the firm had already apparently finished with.

I got through the rest of the afternoon in the ordinary clothes Liz had allowed, and tried to treat it like any other stretch of work.

Max needed notes on the two o'clock call. I took them. A few external messages wanted the warm continuity voice; I answered them. Chloe showed me which drawers were mine now.

Admittedly, I'd spent so much time here over the last few months I practically knew it all anyway. I smiled, thanked her, adjusted the settings. When Max asked for a quiet block the next morning I moved the calendar around the way I always did. From the outside it probably looked seamless.

Inside I kept bumping into the nameplate and the two plastic halves of the old ID still sitting in the desk drawer.

The first real test came just after three.

The phone rang while I was checking a revised meeting order against Max's calendar. I reached for it automatically, already half-formed thoughts about who might be calling and what they'd need. I'd screened calls for Max plenty of times over the past few months, of course. When we were deep in Gravity, it had been part of the job: work out who was calling, decide whether it could wait, spare him an interruption if he was in the middle of something important. I'd done it without thinking, because I knew the project and knew Max.

This was different.

A small light on the console illuminated beside Max's line. His call. His office. My responsibility.

I glanced at the little reference card Chloe had tucked beside the phone that morning. It listed the extension numbers, the transfer procedure, and, in a neat line at the bottom, the recommended greeting.

Max Anderson's office, this is Samantha.

I'd read it twice already. It was hardly a complicated sentence. Four ordinary words, then my name. I could have said it in my sleep.

I picked up the receiver.

"Max's —" I stopped, suddenly aware that I'd started too quickly. "Max Anderson's office, this is—"

There was a tiny pause on the other end, the caller waiting patiently while I caught up with myself.

"Samantha," I finished. "How can I help you?"

The voice that answered was male, unfamiliar, and briskly professional. He introduced himself and asked to speak to Max about a document circulated that morning. I took his name, checked Max's calendar out of habit, and asked if he could hold for a moment.

"Yes, of course."

I pressed the hold button and let out a breath through my nose.

It had taken me perhaps three seconds to get through the greeting. Nobody had shouted. Nobody had laughed. The caller had probably barely noticed. Still, I could feel the awkwardness of it in my shoulders, the way I might after stumbling over a presentation introduction I'd rehearsed too many times.

The information I needed was already in front of me. I checked Max's status, saw that he was between meetings, and reached for the transfer button. Another glance at Chloe's card confirmed the sequence. I pressed the right line, waited for the connection, and gave Max the caller's name and the reason for the call.

"Thanks, Samantha," he said, and took it from there.

The exchange lasted less than ten seconds.

I replaced the receiver carefully and looked at the phone as if it had done something to me.

There was nothing new about the work itself. I knew how to screen a call. I knew how to judge what needed Max's attention and what could be dealt with later. I'd been doing that for weeks, sometimes without either of us acknowledging it as anything more than the natural rhythm of working together.

But before, I'd been Sam, the IT supervisor and Gravity co-lead, answering on the basis of what I knew and how I could help. Now I was Samantha, answering from Max Anderson's office, with a prescribed greeting and a title that had been printed on a nameplate before I'd properly understood what I was agreeing to.

The difference was absurdly small. A few words. A different introduction. A call transferred to the same man in the same office.

Yet the words had caught in my throat as though they belonged to someone else.

I glanced at the reference card again. Max Anderson's office, this is Samantha. There was nothing difficult about it. By the end of the week, I'd probably say it without thinking. That was how these things worked. Repetition made the unfamiliar ordinary, and the ordinary eventually stopped feeling like a choice.

I turned back to the calendar and continued working.

At some point I tried to open the old IT supervisor inbox out of pure habit.

Nothing. Login rejected. Account deactivated. The only profile that still opened, the only one with mail and calendar and a living presence in the system, was Samantha's. Whatever residual technical access I thought I still had was already gone. There was one name left that the building would answer to, and it was the one on the new badge.

Between the little tasks I started making a quiet, private game plan in the back of a notepad.

Stay. Keep the desk and the pay. Wait. Push whoever I had to push, Eames, another doctor, keep trying until the chest and the waist and the rest started moving back the other way. Endure the skirts and the title and the smiling launch photo on the badge for as long as it took.

Then, when Samuel could look in the mirror and not immediately be contradicted by what he saw, start applying for a new job.

It was a messy little plan, half logical and half wishful. But it gave the shock somewhere to sit other than pure panic. It also meant cooperating. Outwardly. Every day. With a version of my life I had not chosen and had just, an hour earlier, signed my name under.

At five I logged out of the only account I had left. The new badge went in my hand bag while the two clean halves of my old badge that read Sam Chambers, IT Supervisor stayed in the desk drawer. The ordinary shirt and slacks had survived the exception. Tomorrow they would not.

I walked out of the building with the list turning quietly in my head and Max's offer still unanswered behind it. The container I was planning to wait inside had already taken the old inbox, the old login, the old pass, and the old floor. What it would take next was written on the notepad in my bag in my own handwriting.

I took the whole emergency outfit rotation home.

There was no point leaving it in the cupboard on the fifth floor anymore. Skirts, the rose bodycon, the softer blouses, the higher heels, the pastel sets, the spare hosiery, everything that had once been reserved for key Gravity clients was now, according to Liz, ordinary workwear.

I packed it into the garment bag and a second tote without ceremony and carried it on the train like any other set of clothes that needed to be in the wardrobe instead of the office.

At the apartment I hung the pieces properly for the first time. Not in the far corner. Not in a bag. In the main section, where I would actually reach for them in the morning. The ordinary shirts and trousers looked suddenly fewer, and a little bit like guests who had overstayed.

I made dinner and tried to hold onto the plan I had written that afternoon.

Eames had been clear enough, once, in the careful language of the protocol: stress and anxiety could exacerbate the changes. Lower the baseline. Let the process run without additional load if reversion was the goal. Relax. I had been using that instruction as a kind of quiet permission for months. Silk instead of rough cotton, the smoother routines, the softer evenings while still telling myself the direction of travel was eventually backward.

Tonight the instruction felt harder to aim.

I stood in front of the mirror and stopped performing the old linguistic dodge. They were not pecs. They were breasts. Softer, fuller, still seeming to gain a little weight and presence week by week no matter how carefully I managed the bras. My skin as a whole was softer than it had ever been. Forearms, thighs, the line of my stomach, the places where the silk caught and slid.

The waist the trainer had locked in was holding as if the months of lacing had simply rewritten the default. Nothing in the reflection suggested an imminent reversal. Everything

in the reflection suggested a body that had arrived somewhere and was, if anything, still settling deeper into the shape.



And the conflict sat right there in the gap between the plan and the feeling.

Because I also felt leaner. Healthier. The residual fitness from the classes, the cleaner eating that had arrived with the eating lunch with the girls, the absence of the old low-grade physical awkwardness. The current figure moved well, sat well, carried the clothes well. People responded to it. Clients, strangers, the girls, even Max in the careful way he had looked at me in the new office.

I felt more valued in this shape than I could remember feeling in the one that had worn the IT supervisor badge. The long-game plan said: endure this until it can be undone. The body and the days kept offering a quieter, more treacherous counter-argument: this version is not only surviving. It is, in a number of measurable ways, better.

I turned away from the mirror, finished dinner, and laid out tomorrow's skirt and blouse to match the dress code and the first full day under the new title. The list was still in the notepad. The body plan was still the objective. Eames's instruction to relax was still the closest thing I had to a medical lever.

I just no longer knew whether relaxing would move anything backward or whether it would simply make the present, and the figure that belonged to it, easier to keep.

The stress and anxiety sat in my chest like a held breath that would not release.

Dressed in just my nightie and the prosthetic still in place I took both toys to the bed: the purple one and the larger realistic one that had become the real preference, the one that felt closest to the question I still did not like to name out loud.

I started on my back, knees up, the purple toy first. Slow, familiar stretch, free hand on my chest, thumbs finding the nipples on my soft, full breasts. The circuit lit the way it always did now. When the heat built I brought the realistic one to my mouth the way the empty-lube night had taught me, wetting it thoroughly while the purple stayed buried, rocking back onto it.

The sensations; mouth full, ass full, pulled the day tighter and then looser in the same breath. I moved through the positions I'd already become practiced with: on my side with one leg drawn high; face down with my hips raised and the dildo in my hand, pushing it into myself in long strokes while my free hand stayed on my breasts or the toy in my mouth; kneeling again, bouncing, the soft weight of my chest swaying under me.

Each shift took me further from the nameplate and the halved ID and the plan in the notepad. The only thing left was the need for the rush that had become the reliable exit from every kind of stress and static. Why did this turn me on so much? Each second with the hard, juicy... toys in my mouth and ass just got me more and more turned on.

Near the edge I tried something new.

I rolled onto my back, braced, and curved my pelvis up. Legs folding up and back over my head, hips lifted up and pointed at the ceiling until I was looking up the line of my own body. From that angle the prosthetic's smooth front and my asshole above it was open and ready. I pulled the realistic toy from my mouth, shining, coated in saliva, then guided it to my asshole, straight down, aligning, and pushed.

The angle was deeper. More direct. Gravity and the position helped me take it in a single continuous slide until the base met the prosthetic and there was nowhere further to go. The fullness knocked the air out of me. I held there, stuffed to the hilt, pelvis curled above my head, and began to pump. In and out, up and down. It wasn't long before the orgasm that had been building tore through in a long, shaking wave.

I moaned, open, broken, the sound bouncing off the quiet apartment and felt the internal clench around the shaft as the release took me.

Then the new thing happened.

With my hips elevated above my face, the release of semen had nowhere to stay. It found the channel of the prosthetic, followed the only path gravity allowed, and began to drip down. Warm. Thick. Onto my lips first, then into my open mouth as another moan left me before I could realize what was happening. The taste hit, salt and something intimate and unmistakably mine and the overwhelming was total. OH no stop -wait, keep going don't

stop. The sensation of being filled from above while my own cum spilled down into my mouth lit a spark I had not known was waiting.



I knew this was wrong, gross, but as if on autopilot I instinctively started swallowing the fluid filling my mouth as a second orgasm rolled straight through the first, harder, brighter, my thighs trembling on either side of my head, the realistic toy still buried to the base, soft broken sounds leaving me around the taste on my tongue.

I stayed like that until the shaking slowed, the last drops falling, the toy still deep, the taste still flooding my mouth and taste buds, the stress of the day finally, completely gone.

I remained on the bed longer than I meant to, the realistic toy slipping free as my hips finally lowered, the last of the shaking leaving my thighs. When I could stand I walked to the bathroom on unsteady legs and only then caught the full picture in the mirror.



Cum on my face. On my tongue. Down my throat. A thin, unmistakable trail from lower lip to chin, more on my cheeks and the corner of my mouth where a moan had left me open. My hair looking slightly dishevelled. My chest rising and falling. The smooth prosthetic still in place. The whole continuous, feminine figure that had just cum twice with its own release dripping into its own mouth.

A tingle went straight down my spine.

I could not deny it. There was a part of me, quiet, specific, already awake, that had enjoyed that. Hips above my head. Filled to the base. The submissive vulnerability of it. The way the orgasm had arrived harder because of the angle and the helplessness of the posture. The part of me that had once only reached for these toys as stress relief was no longer only interested in relief. It was interested in that.

I turned on the tap and cleaned my face with apparent disgust. Quick, firm strokes of a washcloth, eyes averted from my own reflection as if the evidence were purely unwelcome.

Stupid. Yuck. Why did I do that. The performance of rejection was easy. Necessary, even, if the long-game list and the body plan were going to survive the evening. I washed until the skin was clean, until the mirror showed only the ordinary post-session flush and the soft weight of my breasts.

I kept scrubbing my face until I felt like I'd cleaned off all evidence, then rinsed my mouth twice for good measure.

That had been disgusting. Completely out of line. I was never doing that again. Never again. I even said it under my breath once, just to hear how firm it sounded. Not unless... -No. Never again.

I dried my face, avoided the mirror for a few more seconds, then looked anyway. The holding-pattern logic and the private sexual reality stared back from the same set of eyes. Maintain the structure. Wait for the body. Pretend the newest escalation was only stress. And underneath, quieter than the performance: the tingle, the submissive curve, the taste that had not been unbearable.

I put the pink silk nightie back on, took my vitamins, left the prosthetic in place, I was too tired to deal with it, and went to the kitchen for water. The plan from the afternoon already felt thinner than it had on the train home. I told myself again, firmly, that what had just happened was a one-off. Then I took a long drink and tried not to notice how little the word "never" seemed to stick.

My thoughts were quieter now, though the day's events remained exactly where I'd left them.

Samantha Chambers. Executive Assistant and Personal Secretary to Max Anderson.

The title seemed no less real for having spent the evening trying not to think about it.

Tomorrow, I would return to the fifth floor. I would sit at the desk with my name on it, answer Max's calls, and carry on as though I'd chosen this.

I told myself I was buying time. That was all.