

Chapter 19

The training centre was three blocks from the office. It was apparently where the various NewYou subsidiaries held their internal training and development courses, as well as offering programs for other firms and the general public. I hadn't been before and was a little taken aback by the size of the operation.

I arrived first thing in the morning wearing a simple white blouse and black skirt, polished makeup in place. I would be heading into the office after the first sessions finished at lunch, so I was dressed to fit the fifth floor dress code, but opted for something a little more formal than the pinks and pastels that I'd populated the wardrobe with on the chance I'd be rubbing shoulders with senior company leaders.

I still wasn't sure what 'Executive Foundations' entailed, but I was hoping it would cover things like strategic problem solving leadership/management skills. I was still imagining there might be a way to build on my old experience rather than leave it behind entirely.

As I navigated the halls I was a bit surprised to see that the other attendees didn't seem to share my approach to the outfit tone. I looked around to see huddles of young women, teens to late 20s at a guess, all in various colors and styles, but none really like they were dressed for the board room. I figured they might be attending different classes.



I found the Executive Foundations training room and took a seat near the side and smoothed the

skirt over my knees while the room filled with soft chatter and the smell of unfamiliar perfume.

The instructor, a polished-looking woman with brunette hair tied in a neat bun, clapped her hands once and smiled the professional smile of someone who delivered the same opening three times a week.

“Good morning girls. Welcome to Executive Foundations. My name’s Dianne Stirling, I’m a part of the team here at the NewYou Centre for Professional Development and I will be your instructor for these next few sessions. We’re going to spend the next few training sessions getting you confident, polished, and ready to make your executives’ lives easier. No question is too basic; we start from the ground up.”

Girls.

The word settled over the room like a soft net. I felt it land on me along with everyone else and kept my expression even. As I looked around, I saw that she wasn’t wrong (myself, excluded of course, technically), all the other attendees were woman. Not a single guy in the class.

Dianne moved to the next slide, where a simple heading appeared: The Role of the Executive Secretary.

“Before we get into the practical skills, I want us to establish what this job is really about. A secretary isn’t there to compete with her executive for the spotlight. She’s there to make sure he or she can do their best work. You are the person who keeps the day running smoothly, who anticipates what’s needed before it’s asked for, and who makes sure the little things never become big problems.”

I waited for her to make a mention of the strategic side of things. Surely this was just the introduction, the broad philosophy before we got into the more substantive material.

She smiled around the room, her tone warm and encouraging.

“Your executive may be responsible for a department, a major project, or millions of dollars in decisions. You help create the conditions in which he or she can concentrate on those responsibilities. You manage the details, protect their time, filter interruptions, and make people feel welcome when they need their attention. Sometimes that means being firm. More often, it means being tactful, patient, and discreet.”

Another click brought up a list: Organisation. Presentation. Anticipation. Diplomacy. Support.

“And remember, support is not passive. An outstanding secretary understands her executive’s priorities, knows how they like to work, and can spot a problem before it reaches their desk. You don’t need to be the loudest person in the room. You need to be the person who quietly makes the room work.”

I waited for the next slide. It didn’t come.

Dianne began explaining the details of the curriculum. Apparently we would be learning how to organise an executive’s calendar, how to screen calls, and how to greet visitors without making them feel they were being screened at all. She spoke about remembering coffee orders, keeping spare stockings in the office, and learning which interruptions were urgent and which could be made to wait. The examples were delivered with the patient seriousness of a driving instructor

explaining how to adjust a mirror.

Something inside me shifted. I looked around the room again, this time properly. The young woman beside me was writing “always confirm appointments” in careful purple ink. Across the table, another had drawn a little star beside professional appearance. They were listening intently, nodding at every point, absorbing the material as if it were new.

Because it was new. These weren’t junior managers being introduced to executive leadership. They were new secretaries being taught how to manage a diary.

A trainer’s assistant came around distributing a slim booklet to each of us: Executive Foundations – A Practical Guide to Professional Support. I opened mine and flicked through the pages, hoping to find something that might justify the title.

Instead, I found a series of tips written in a tone of painstaking encouragement.

Always keep a pen handy.

Smile when greeting visitors; it helps them feel welcome.

If your executive is speaking, avoid interrupting unless the matter is urgent.

There was even a little box reminding us to check that we had spelled the executive’s name correctly before sending an email.

I stared at that last one for a moment. I’d once been responsible for systems that handled millions of records, and now I was being gently reminded to spell Max Anderson correctly.

Further on, a section titled ‘Making a Positive First Impression’ advised us to keep our desks tidy, maintain good posture, and remember that our appearance reflected on the executive we supported. I glanced down at my skirt, then quickly back at the page. The booklet seemed determined to explain not only how to do the job, but how to be the sort of woman who did it.

The realisation arrived with such sudden force that heat climbed up my neck. I lowered my eyes to the booklet and felt an absurd urge to hide behind it. I had walked in expecting advanced training, expecting some bridge between my old technical authority and whatever Max had decided I was becoming. Instead, I was sitting in a classroom full of inexperienced girls while an instructor explained the foundations of secretary work as though I had never seen an office before.



The embarrassment was worse because I had been so confident on the way there. I had imagined myself listening for useful insights from peers, perhaps even contributing something from my own experience. Now I could practically hear the assumption behind the course: that I was a new hire who needed to be taught how to behave.

That was when the last of my hopes for executive strategy training began to fade. There was no mention of leadership frameworks, decision-making, or how to influence a department's direction. The emphasis was on understanding an executive's preferences and keeping his day running smoothly. Whatever connection this course might have to leadership, it was going to approach it from the other side of the desk.

A few months ago, my professional identity had been built around solving problems directly. I'd designed systems, written code, managed a team, and made the technical decisions that kept the business running. As IT supervisor, I'd been expected to take ownership, give instructions, and be the person others came to when something went wrong.

Now my job, as Dianne described it, was to protect someone else's time, anticipate his preferences, and ensure that nothing inconvenient reached him before I'd dealt with it myself.

She wasn't describing an unimportant role. I knew perfectly well how much skill it took to keep an

executive's world functioning smoothly. I'd been doing much of it for Max already.

It was the change in emphasis that stung. My old role had been about knowing how things worked and taking responsibility when they didn't. This one was about knowing what someone else needed and making sure he never had to think about it.

And the worst part was that the company hadn't even trusted me to learn it on the job. They had sent me to secretary school, sat me among girls barely out of school, and expected me to accept the lesson as though I were starting from nothing.

"Ultimately," Dianne continued, "the best executive assistants become indispensable because their executives can trust them completely. They know you'll handle the details, exercise good judgement, and represent them with warmth and professionalism. You're not simply managing a diary, taking notes or answering a phone. You're creating the space for someone else to succeed."

I had managed Archibald. I had managed the key Gravity stakeholders. I had lived inside Max's calendar and the Samantha inbox until the systems themselves only recognised that name not to mention I'd run a team of people and designed the the entire Gravity system architecture. And now I was in a beige training room being welcomed as one of the girls, about to be taught how to answer a phone and when to offer coffee, while the curriculum smiled and assumed the lowest common denominator so no one would be left behind.

The hot embarrassment crept up under the polished face. Not at the material itself, at the position. At being classed with the fresh-out-of-school cohort because the firm's paperwork now said new to executive support even though the work had already been my daily reality. At the way Dianne's gaze moved across the room and did not distinguish the person who had a nameplate outside Max Anderson's office from the person who had never set foot on an executive floor.

I opened the workbook to the first page, pen ready, and felt the long-game plan and the first-official-day competence all sit in the same quiet pile under the embarrassment. Maintain. Attend. Smile. Learn what the module required. Do not make a scene about already knowing how to do the job you had been demoted-and-renamed into.

Dianne brightened another slide and asked who had prior experience with multi-stakeholder calendar management. A few tentative hands went up among the younger ones. I left mine down. Explaining would only underline the mismatch between the badge on my lanyard and the chair I was sitting in.

I endured the session the way I had endured every other surprise of the last week: posture correct, pen moving, smile available when Dianne's gaze swept the room.

The first block was core responsibilities. Not the elevated continuity work I had been doing for Max and Archibald, the foundational layer underneath it. Anticipating needs before they were spoken. Protecting an executive's attention as a finite resource. The difference between being helpful and being indispensable. Gatekeeping without creating enemies. The soft politics of whose call got through and whose was gracefully redirected.

It all seemed condescendingly simple and obvious, and I made the mistake of volunteering a contribution early. Diane asked how we would handle a senior external contact who insisted on "just five minutes" when the calendar was locked for deep work. The answer felt obvious. I raised

my hand and gave the version I had been living: warm acknowledgement, firm protection of the block, offer of the next real window, a short written summary so the contact still felt heard.

Dianne nodded, then tipped her head.

“Good instinct on the warmth. But there’s a little more to it. Who else is affected if you give that person even a soft landing? Does your executive see the deflection as protection or as you making decisions above your pay grade? How do you document the ask so it doesn’t reappear tomorrow as a complaint that you were obstructive? The obvious answer is the first layer. The craft is in the second and third.”

A few of the younger women wrote that down with the serious focus of people meeting the idea for the first time. I felt heat under the polished face and wrote it down too.

It kept happening.

I offered what I thought was a clean approach to travel preferences. Dianne expanded it into stakeholder mapping and the quiet insurance of always having a backup itinerary the executive had never asked for. I described inbox triage the way I had been doing it for months. She reframed it as relationship temperature management, not message processing. Each time the first answer was not wrong. It was simply incomplete.

Each correction was delivered without unkindness and still landed like a small, precise humbling. The work I had been proud of, the work that had felt like competence when the technical side was slipping, had been real. It had also been only the visible surface of a profession the training was now insisting had depth I had not bothered to study because I had been too busy insisting I was only borrowing it.

By the mid-morning break I was keeping my hand down.

I sat with the workbook and the soft embarrassment of someone who had walked into a room full of new recruits certain they was overqualified and discovered that experience without craft still left gaps. The long-game plan wanted this role to be temporary. The session kept presenting it as a discipline that rewarded people who took it seriously. The two ideas did not sit comfortably together in the same chest.

The next session was worse in a completely different way.

Dianne brightened the screen and announced, with the same warm professional neutrality, that we would be covering Computer 101: navigating the inbox, folders and flags, writing a clear formal email, attachments and etiquette, and the basics of shared calendars from the user side. A few of the younger women looked openly relieved. One asked whether we would also go over how to tell if something was a phishing attempt. Dianne said yes, of course. Better safe than sorry.

“I should also mention that we’ve borrowed someone from the NewYou Capital office to help run this session,” she added. “He’s very experienced with the systems you’ll be using, so you’ll be in good hands. Please make Tomas welcome.”

My pen stopped moving.

For a moment, I wondered if I'd misheard. Then the door opened, and there he was: my former subordinate, carrying a laptop and a small stack of notes, looking entirely at home at the front of the room.

Heat rushed up my neck so quickly I thought it might be visible. Tomas had worked under me on the IT team. I'd reviewed his work, assigned his tickets, helped him troubleshoot problems, and signed off on his recommendations. Now he was here to teach me how to use a computer.

I was sitting in a training room full of young women, wearing a short skirt and a blouse I'd chosen to look professional, with my name badge identifying me as Samantha Chambers, Personal Secretary. And the company had arranged for someone who used to report to me to explain the basics of office computing.

I wanted the floor to open up.

Tomas set his laptop down and connected it to the projector. I lowered my eyes to my workbook, hoping that if I made myself small enough, I might escape his notice. Perhaps he'd look at the room, see a collection of unfamiliar faces, and begin without recognising me. I could sit quietly at the back, endure the lesson, and leave without having to acknowledge the absurdity of any of it.

"Morning, everyone," Tomas began, turning towards us. "I'm Tomas, from IT at NewYou Capital around the corner. I've been asked to take you through some of the basic—"

His eyes found me.

He faltered for half a second. It was tiny, barely more than a catch in his voice, but I saw the moment recognition landed. His expression shifted as he registered who was sitting among his students: his old supervisor, the person who had once been responsible for making sure he knew how to do his job, now attending a beginners' computer class.

Then he recovered.

"—the basic tools you'll be using every day," he continued smoothly.

He gave me a small, gentle smile. Not a smirk, not a look of disbelief. Just a quiet acknowledgement that he knew exactly how strange this was.

I managed a defeated smile in return.

There was nothing else to do. I couldn't explain myself in front of the room, and I couldn't pretend he hadn't recognised me. So I sat back, folded my hands beside the untouched workbook, and prepared to be taught by someone who, not so long ago, had come to me for help.

Tomas handled the session professionally. He showed the group how to navigate Outlook, create folders, flag messages for follow-up, printing, saving files. He explained how to write a clear subject line, when to use CC or BCC, and why an attachment should be checked before an email was sent. He even went through a few common phishing examples, patiently pointing out the suspicious links and implausible requests.

He was good at it. I'd always known he was good at explaining technical things, which made the whole experience worse. He moved through the material with the confidence of someone who

understood the systems well enough to make them accessible to beginners.

I knew all of it, of course. Not just the material he was covering, but the machinery beneath it. I could have explained the architecture behind the applications, the permissions governing the shared calendars, the security controls that made phishing such a concern. I'd spent years solving problems that sat several layers below the little buttons Tomas was pointing out on the screen.

Instead, I kept my eyes on the workbook and tried to look like a conscientious student.

I didn't volunteer answers. I didn't correct anything. When Tomas asked whether anyone had questions about organising their inbox, I stared at the table as though I were considering the matter seriously.

I was... had been, his supervisor. I had owned architecture decisions, managed servers, permission models, incident response, the quiet terrible poetry of legacy systems. I had built and broken and restored environments. And I was now in a training room being shown, slowly, with screenshots, how to create a folder in an inbox and why it was better not to write an entire email in capital letters by someone I'd trained myself.

The worst part was that Tomas never made it awkward. He didn't single me out or address me differently from anyone else. He treated me with the same calm courtesy he showed the rest of the room, and I was grateful for it. I was also painfully aware that he was having to make an effort to do so.

A girl two seats over took careful notes on the difference between Reply and Reply All. I opened my own workbook to the same page and wrote nothing. There was nothing to write that would not underline the mismatch. Volunteering the fact that I could have taught the module would only make the room stare, and would not change the enrolment or the name on the badge or that IT now reported to someone else.

When the session finally ended, the other attendees began packing their bags and comparing notes. I took my time putting my pen away, hoping Tomas would be occupied long enough for me to slip out unnoticed.

"Sam?"

I looked up. Tomas had approached while the others were filing into the corridor.

"Hey," I said, with a small, strained laugh. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Yeah." He glanced towards the door to make sure we had a little privacy. "I didn't know you'd be in this group. Dianne just asked me to come over and run the computer session."

"I gathered."

He gave a brief, sympathetic smile. "I've done a few of these and there's always a few familiar faces. I think anyone that's part of the Exec Support gets auto-enrolled"

I nodded, "Well I hope that's the case and it's not because Liz thinks I need to be shown how to use a keyboard".

Tomas laughed, "Yeah for what it's worth, this is pretty silly."

The candidness caught me off guard. I'd spent the whole session trying not to let anyone see how humiliating it was. Hearing Tomas acknowledge it so plainly relaxed something in my chest.

"Computer 101," I said. "I particularly enjoyed the bit about Reply All."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure you'll find a way to put that knowledge to use." His smile widened a fraction, gently teasing rather than unkind. Then his expression softened. "Seriously, though. You know all this stuff. We all know you do"

I looked down at my workbook. "Apparently the HR system doesn't."

"No, apparently not." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "I'm not going to pretend I understand what's happened, but you shouldn't stress. It's just what they've put you down for."



I nodded, grateful that he hadn't asked me to explain why I was there. I didn't have an answer I could give him, not one that would make sense of the name badge, the skirt, or the fact that I'd been sitting in his class pretending to learn how to manage an inbox.

"Thanks, Tomas."

"Any time." He gathered his notes. "And if you need anything IT-related, you know where to find us."

There was no malice in it. He was offering the same help I'd once offered him, only now the direction of the relationship had changed. He probably meant it as reassurance. I felt the sting anyway.

"Right," I said. "I'll keep that in mind." He gave me another small smile and headed back towards the front of the room to collect his laptop.

I watched him go, then closed my workbook. His kindness had made the session easier to endure, but it had also made the situation harder to dismiss. Tomas knew who I was. He remembered the person I'd been at NewYou Capital, and he'd seen me sitting there while he taught a room of beginners how to use the tools I'd once been responsible for supporting.

I slipped the workbook into my bag and followed the others into the corridor, carrying the uncomfortable knowledge that at least one person from my old life had witnessed just how far I'd fallen from it.

I got back to the fifth floor just after lunch, still carrying the scraped-out feeling of Computer 101 in my chest.

Chloe spotted me first, took one look at my face, and winced in sympathy.

"That bad?"

"Computer 101," I said. "How to make a folder. How to write a subject line. How not to shout in capital letters."

Mia put a hand over her heart. "Oh no. The digital literacy block."

"We all had to endure it," Jess said, not unkindly. "Even the ones who'd been temping for years. It's not personal. It's just how the outsourced modules are built, assume zero and go from there. You sit through it, you tick the box, you never speak of it again."

Chloe nodded. "Survive the foundations. The later sessions get less insulting. Promise."

Their reassurance landed softer than the training had. Not quite enough to erase the humiliation of being taught email hygiene after years of owning systems, but enough to put a little air back into the afternoon. I made the appropriate grateful noises, set my bag down at the desk with the nameplate, and tried to let the bullpen's ordinary rhythm close over the morning.

Max appeared in his doorway a few minutes later, coffee in hand, and raised an eyebrow at whatever was still visible in my expression.

"Training?"

"They taught me how to hold a pen," I said. "Very carefully. With examples."

His mouth twitched. "Did you pass?"

"Provisional. I'm not allowed near Reply All without supervision yet."

That pulled a real, short laugh out of him. The sound eased something in my shoulders I had not noticed was tight. I didn't mention Tomas and he didn't push into the embarrassment underneath the joke. He just nodded toward the calendar.

"When you're settled, there's a few threads that could use your attention and a clean summary of tomorrow's investor note before four would be great. No capital letters required."

"I think I can manage that," I said, and the smile I gave him was less performed than the ones in the training room.

I spent the rest of the afternoon catching up. Samantha inbox first, the only one that existed now. Soft, sweet, replies. Calendar adjustments. The summary Max wanted, written in the continuity register that no longer felt like a costume so much as the default keyboard language. The girls drifted past with coffee and small comments. No one asked me to demonstrate folder creation.

The fifth floor simply took me back as Samantha, competent enough at the actual job, and let the outsourced module stay where it belonged: in a beige room three stops away, already behind me for the day.

At five I logged out, put the new badge in my bag, and took the train home. The scraped feeling from Computer 101 had faded to a dull residual bruise. The girls' reassurance and Max's laugh had done more work than the workbook. I unlocked the flat, hung the new rotation pieces properly, and stood for a moment in the quiet with the boxed Samuel clothes on the high shelf and the long-game list still somewhere in the notepad.

The residual bruise of Computer 101 and the relief of Max's laugh and the girls' soft reassurance did not stay neatly in their boxes once the apartment door closed.

I locked it, stripped out of the skirt and heels, left the prosthetic on, and reached for the toys with the same automatic need that had followed every sharp day since the dual role began. The realistic one first, into my mouth until it shone, then lower, the familiar push and stretch and the bright circuit through my chest. On my back, then on my knees, the soft weight of my breasts moving with the rhythm.

At some point, restless, I pulled the laptop closer and opened the sites I used to watch without thinking.

The old bookmarks still worked. The thumbnails still loaded. Familiar categories, familiar bodies. I put something on with the sound low and tried to use it the way I always had, background heat, a visual to push the session further. For a few minutes it almost worked. Then my eyes drifted.

Not to the woman on the screen. To the man.

The line of his back. The way his hands held her hips. The simple, unthinking force of him moving into her. And the identification that had always, without question, placed me in his position... slipped. In my mind I was not the one doing the fucking. I was the one underneath. The one being held. The one taking it.

The girl in the scene, soft and open, with a body that matched the body on my bed, chest, waist, the

smooth prosthetic front, the mouth that had learned to wet a toy until it could slide deep.

The fantasy locked in with a clarity that made my breath catch. When I closed my eyes and pictured the scene, I wasn't the man thrusting into the woman - I WAS the woman. I couldn't resist the thought. I pushed the dildo in, imaging it to be the guy's hard, juicy cock, deeper, hips lifting. When the girl began high pitched moans, I found the same noises escaping my mouth. The fantasy built in my head stronger, stronger,. "YES". YES".

When the orgasm hit, it arrived from that inverted place: not the old male climax of taking someone, but the full-body, submissive rush of being completely taken myself.



I came with a broken sound, thighs shaking, and felt the warm leak of cum find the prosthetic's channel and spill out onto the sheet the way it had when my hips had been above my head, only this time I was flat on my back, watching it, the porn still moving on the screen, the man still fucking the girl I had just been in my head.

I lay there breathing hard, the toy still half inside me, the sweat cooling on my skin. I see the girl in the video has just flipped around to blow the guy until he cums into her eager, waiting mouth.

Tentatively, as if on autopilot, my hands drifted lower. As the guy shoots ropes of cum into the girl's

waiting mouth, I dipped a finger into what had spilled from me and brought it to my own.

The taste was the same as before, salt, intimate, mine. "Good girl", I hear the voice in the video say. A shudder goes through me, sharp and complicated.

Disgust tried to rise on schedule and failed to fully form. The shudder was not only rejection. It was recognition. The same recognition that had tingled down my spine in the bathroom mirror. The same quiet part that had could coax me to slide a dildo into my ass, imagine it was a real cock, swallow cum and be thrilled by every second of it .



I licked and sucked the finger clean with one last small, involuntary sigh and moan and then pressed the back of my hand to my mouth as if I could push the admission back in.

"It tastes so good", I hear the girl in the scene gasp as she licks cum from her own fingers.

I snapped the laptop closed. I cleaned up slowly, the prosthetic still smooth and full of evidence, the toys wiped and put away. The long-game list and the body plan and the boxed Samuel clothes sat somewhere on the other side of what had just happened, quieter than the knowledge that my porn had changed sides and that I had put myself in the girl's place without effort, and come harder for it, and tasted the result again on purpose.

It didn't mean anything. That was the first thing I told myself, still lying there with the taste on my tongue. It was just the stress from the day. Tomas. The way the day had already been strange. Anyone would have drifted if the body under the sheets looked more like hers than his. It was practical. Temporary role play. A side effect of the clothes and the nameplate and the fact that I had spent the whole day being called Samantha. My brain had simply used the nearest available image. That was all.

I sat up and reached for a tissue. The explanation felt thin the second I finished saying it, even inside my own head. If it was only the body, why had the identification felt so complete? Why had the sound that left me matched the one on the screen so closely? I wiped my mouth and told myself again, more firmly, that it had been a one-off. Stress. The new job. The modules. The way the girls kept assuming I was exactly where I wanted to be. None of that had to mean I wanted to be the one underneath. It only meant the line had blurred for a minute while I was already open and half out of my head. Tomorrow I could watch something else. Or nothing. I didn't have to go back to that category at all.

The thought arrived too quickly to feel like a real decision. I left it there anyway, because the alternative, that the switch had been easy, and that I had liked it, was not something I was ready to examine while I could still taste the evidence on my lips.

The next morning, I was still feeling a pit of shame from the previous day's proceedings. Being grouped in with the new secretary hires for the training. Ostensibly being taught how to use a computer by my own former teammate. The way I'd so easily fantasized about being taken like a woman in bed.

I needed to take back control and make sure the long term plan was still on track. More than anything, I wanted to understand what was happening to me physically. I needed to speak to Eames properly, get some answers about my condition, the gynecomastia, all of it, and find out when his treatment would start to produce results.

I opened the Wellness App and navigated to the appointments section. Dr. Eames's calendar appeared, with the familiar list of available consultation times.

Except there weren't any.

I scrolled through the coming weeks, then the following month. The first available appointment was almost three months away.

I frowned at the screen and checked again, thinking I must have missed something. But no. There was nothing sooner.

Three months seemed an awfully long time to wait, particularly when I wasn't entirely sure what was happening to me. I knew the app collected my regular biometric readings, and I'd been keeping it updated with my measurements and workout stats, but that wasn't quite the same as sitting down with Eames and talking through my concerns.

I opened the messaging function and found his contact.

Me: Hi Dr Eames. I was hoping to book a follow-up appointment to discuss a few things about my treatment and the physical changes I'm still experiencing. I noticed your next available appointment isn't for three months. Is there any chance I could be fitted in sooner?

I put my phone down and returned to my emails. A few minutes later, it buzzed.

Dr Eames: Hello Samuel. Apologies, I'm afraid I'm travelling in Europe at present and my schedule is rather restricted. I won't be back in the clinic for some time. Is there anything in particular

concerning you?

I was a little disappointed, but at least he'd replied.

Me: It's mainly the physical changes. The gynecomastia in particular seems quite pronounced now, and my figure has changed more than I expected. I've had to make a lot of wardrobe changes to accommodate. Everything's taking longer to settle than I'd hoped.

There was a pause before his response appeared.

Dr Eames: I understand. I've reviewed your recent biometrics in the Wellness App, and I should reassure you that they look very strong. Your indicators are all tracking well, and there is nothing in the latest data that suggests an adverse response beyond common side effects.

I read the message twice. It was reassuring, to a point, although it didn't quite answer the question I was trying to ask.

Me: That's good to hear. I suppose I'm just concerned about how long it's taking. I thought things might have started to improve by now.

Dr Eames: These processes can take time, Samuel. I appreciate that these side effects can be unsettling, particularly when they accumulate. The most important thing is that your health indicators remain strong. I would encourage you not to make assumptions based on individual changes or day-to-day fluctuations. I would recommend maintaining your course of vitamins and mindfulness sessions.

I sat looking at the screen. I'd been taking the vitamins everyday and doing the usual Wellness App logs every night. They'd become so routine I barely even kept track of them. I wanted to ask whether the development in my chest was going to reverse, whether my figure would return to something more familiar, and whether the other changes were temporary. But I wasn't sure how to put all of that into a message without making it sound as though I was panicking.

Me: I understand. I just want to be sure there isn't anything I should be doing differently.

His reply came a little later.

Dr Eames: Of course. If you would prefer a more intensive approach, I can forward a referral letter for a specialist consultation. There are testosterone-based hormone therapies that can produce more rapid changes, although given the extent of the physical changes already present, surgery may also need to be considered. It would be a more involved course of treatment, with the associated risks and recovery time. I can send you the information if you'd like to explore that option.

I felt a small knot form in my stomach.

Testosterone therapy and surgery. That sounded considerably more serious and expensive than anything I'd been contemplating. I'd wanted answers and reassurance, not to be presented with the prospect of an intensive medical intervention. The idea of surgery made me particularly uneasy. I wasn't even sure I understood exactly what would be involved, let alone whether I wanted to consider it.

Me: Thank you. I think I'd prefer to discuss it with you in person before considering anything like that.

Dr Eames: Naturally. I'll send the referral information through so you have it for consideration. In the meantime, continue with your usual routine and keep logging your readings. Your progress is encouraging, and we'll have a proper opportunity to review everything when I'm back.

A moment later, a notification appeared in the app confirming that a document had been added to my records. I opened it briefly. The referral letter outlined the proposed specialist assessment, intensive testosterone treatment and possible surgical options. Even the clinical language made the whole thing feel rather intense and daunting. I skimmed the first page, then closed it.

I wasn't ready to make a decision like that. Perhaps I was overreacting to the changes because I was seeing them every day. Eames had said my readings were strong, and if there was nothing medically wrong, I could probably afford to wait until he returned and speak to him properly. I saved the document and put my phone down.

Three months was a long time, but it wasn't forever. In the meantime, I could keep following the programme and try not to dwell on every change. I still had the hope that, once the treatment had run its course, my body would settle and I'd begin to look like Sam again.

And until then, I could put up with the secretary role. It wasn't where I wanted to be permanently, but I could manage it for a while longer. Once things were back to normal, I could start thinking seriously about getting back to IT.

I was sitting at my desk turning the two halves of my old IT supervisor ID badge over in my hands when my phone lit up beside the keyboard.



The photograph on the front had been cut cleanly in two, right down through the middle rendering it useless. I'd kept the pieces in my desk drawer, but every so often I found myself taking them out, idly wondering when I would ever see my old face in the mirror again.

My phone buzzed again.

A message had appeared in the secretary girls' group chat.

Mia: Is everyone ready for tonight?! 🍁

Jess: SO ready!

Chloe: Can't wait. The outfits are going to be amazing.

I stared at the messages.

Oh, no.

The Halloween party.

The firm had booked out the local bar for the evening, with the executive team and support staff all invited. There'd been talk of costumes for weeks, and I vaguely remembered the girls mentioning that they'd organised something matching for the four of us.

Somehow, in the chaos of the past few days, I'd completely forgotten about it.

I sighed and picked up my phone, already trying to think of a plausible excuse. I could say I wasn't feeling well. Or that I'd made other plans. Perhaps I could just tell them I hadn't realised the costumes were compulsory—

“Sam!”

I looked up. Chloe was standing at the end of my desk, smiling brightly.

“Come on. I've got something to show you.”

“What's up?”

“Come with me.”

She didn't wait for an answer, turning and heading towards the row of wardrobe cupboards used by the executive support team. I put down the pieces of my ID badge and followed her, my phone still in my hand.

Chloe unlocked one of the cupboards and reached inside.

“Now, I know we've kept you in suspense,” she said, “but I think you're going to love these.”

She pulled out a garment bag and unzipped it, then carefully lifted out a costume on its hanger.

I stopped.

It was a magician's assistant outfit. A fitted, shimmering pink-silver waistcoat covered in sequins, with a plunging neckline framed by glossy black satin lapels and a neat black bow tie. The lower half was even more startling: a pair of high-cut black satin briefs with long, flowing panels hanging from either side, giving the impression of a miniature magician's tailcoat.

It was much more elaborate than anything I'd imagined.

Chloe held it up proudly, turning it slightly so the sequins caught the light.

“Ta-da!”

I stared at it for a moment.

“That's... what is that?”

“It's your! Isn't it gorgeous?” She reached into the cupboard again and brought out three more garment bags. “One for each of us. We've got the whole set.”

I looked at the outfits hanging together. They were identical, all glittering in different shades, blue, green and gold, with matching bows and black satin details. I was stunned.



“We’ve been planning it for ages, it’s perfect that they had one for each of us.”

I took the hanger from her, cautiously, and examined the outfit more closely. The waistcoat was beautifully fitted, but there was very little to it below the waist. I’d never worn anything remotely like it before. In fact, I couldn’t think of a single occasion when I’d worn anything that revealing, let alone something I was expected to wear in front of half the company.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Chloe tilted her head. “About what?”

I gestured towards the costume.

“Isn’t it a little... revealing?”

She laughed.

“Sammy, honestly. It’s practically modest compared to what we wore last year.”

I wasn’t sure that was especially reassuring.

“Besides,” she continued, “all the execs are going as magicians. We’re their assistants. It’s a whole theme.”

I looked down at the costume again. The idea of standing around a crowded bar dressed like this, with Max and the other executives wandering around in magician outfits, was difficult to imagine. I could already picture the attention it would attract.

“I’m not sure I’m quite—”

Chloe’s phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen and made a face.

“Oh, I’ve got to run. I’ll leave yours with you.” She slipped the remaining costumes back into the cupboard and closed the door, leaving me holding the hanger. “We’re getting ready in the ladies’ room at six,” she said, already backing away. “Don’t be late!”

“Chloe, wait—”

But she was halfway down the corridor.

“See you tonight!”

I stood there, looking down at the costume draped over my hands. The sequins shimmered under the office lights. The black satin panels hung almost to the floor, swaying slightly as I shifted my grip. I hadn’t even managed to come up with an excuse before she’d disappeared, and now I was apparently expected to turn up at six and put it on. I looked back towards my desk, where the two halves of my old ID badge were still lying beside the keyboard. Then I looked at the costume again.

I really wasn’t sure I was ready for this.

The next few hours passed more quickly than I expected.

Once I was back at my desk, the costume was safely tucked away in the cupboard, and the familiar rhythm of work gradually took over. Max had a fairly full afternoon, with two meetings, a call with the London office and a stack of documents that needed reviewing before the end of the day. I kept his calendar moving, fielded a handful of calls and made sure he had everything he needed for the afternoon briefing.

It was almost a relief to have something ordinary to concentrate on. By late afternoon, Max emerged from his office with his jacket over one arm and paused beside my desk.

“Are you coming along tonight?”

I looked up from the spreadsheet I’d been checking.

“The Halloween party?”

He smiled. "That's the one."

Before I could answer, Mia called across the room.

"Yes, of course she is!"

I turned and stared daggers at her. She was sitting at her desk, grinning at me. I heard giggles from Chloe and Jess.

"I haven't actually decided yet," I said.

"Oh, don't start that," Mia replied. "We've got your costume and everything."

Max laughed softly.

"Well, I hope you do come. It might be good to blow off some steam after the last few weeks." He glanced towards the cupboard where Chloe had left my costume. "Besides, I think I need you there to make my outfit make sense." He said with an amused smile.

"No pressure, though. Come if you feel like it."

I nodded, though I wasn't sure what to say.

The idea of wearing the costume was still making me uncomfortable. I couldn't quite picture myself walking into a bar dressed in something that barely covered my backside, surrounded by colleagues who knew me in an entirely different capacity. It was one thing to wear skirts and fitted tops around the office. This was something else altogether.

But Max seemed genuinely pleased at the thought of me coming. And the idea of disappointing him, however irrational that might have been, made the prospect a little harder to dismiss.

By six, the office had begun to empty. Chloe, Mia and Jess appeared together at my desk, all carrying their bags and looking considerably more excited than I felt.

"Ready?" Chloe asked.

I glanced at the time on my computer, then at the three of them.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you do," Jess said, smiling. "But you're coming."

Mia was already reaching for my handbag.

I looked at the three of them, then towards Max's office. I could still go home. I could send a message saying I'd changed my mind and spend the evening doing something considerably less embarrassing.

But I thought about Max's smile and his little comment about needing me there.

"Alright," I said, getting to my feet. "I'll come."

The girls exchanged pleased looks.

“That’s the spirit!” Chloe said, taking my arm.

We headed towards the ladies’ room, where they’d apparently arranged to get ready. The office was almost deserted now, and the sound of our footsteps echoed along the corridor.

Inside, the girls had already claimed the larger section of the room. Their costumes were hanging from the hooks along the wall, and an assortment of makeup bags, brushes and hair products had been spread across the counter.

It hit me how all too familiar this was. It was only a few days ago we’d been doing the very same thing before the Gravity launch, the four of us getting ready, a garment bag with a pink revealing outfit I was destined to wear and a role for me to play for the evening. Even after the dramatic turn that evening took, here I was again, repeating history.

Chloe unzipped my garment bag and held the costume up again.

“Right. Let’s get you into this.”

I took it from her, still not entirely convinced. Up close, the sequins were even more striking. The fitted waistcoat was covered in tiny pink and silver discs that caught the light with every movement. The black satin lapels formed a deep V down the front, meeting at the narrow waist, with a little black bow tie attached at the neckline. The matching bottoms were cut high at the hips, with two long panels of black satin falling from either side like the tails of a miniature tailcoat.

I started by changing out of my work clothes, folding my blouse and skirt neatly and putting them into my bag. The costume came with a small pair of matching briefs, which I pulled on before stepping into the waistcoat. It fastened at the front with a discreet row of hooks, drawing snugly around my waist and chest.

I adjusted the neckline, trying to get the satin lapels to sit evenly. The fit was close, much closer than anything I would normally wear, and the sequins felt cool against my skin.

Next came the black satin bottoms. I stepped into them carefully, pulling them into place and checking the fit in the mirror. They sat high on my hips, leaving my legs almost entirely bare. The long panels hung down on either side, but did little to disguise just how little fabric there was underneath.

I turned slightly, looking over my shoulder. I’d never worn anything like this before. Not even close. The most daring thing I’d worn recently was the red leather mini skirt, and that suddenly seemed positively conservative by comparison.

The girls, meanwhile, were getting on with their own preparations. Chloe’s costume was blue, the sequins shimmering as she moved around the room. Mia had a vivid green version, while Jess’s was a rich gold. All four outfits were otherwise identical, with the same black satin lapels, bow ties and flowing panels.

“Look at us!” Mia said, admiring herself in the mirror. “We’re going to look fantastic.”

Chloe came over to adjust the back of my waistcoat.

“It’s sitting perfectly. See? I told you it would look good.”

I wasn't quite ready to agree, but I let her straighten the fabric.

The next stage was hair and makeup. The girls had brought their usual collection of products, and I followed their lead, applying foundation and concealer before adding a little more definition around my eyes than I would normally wear to work. Chloe suggested a darker eyeshadow to complement the pink sequins, and Jess helped me blend it out. I finished with mascara, a touch of blush and a pinkish lipstick.

It was considerably more makeup than I was accustomed to wearing, but the others were doing much the same.

When I finally stepped back from the counter, I looked at myself properly. My first reaction was that I looked ridiculous.

The costume was so far removed from anything I'd worn before that I barely recognised the person in the mirror. The deep neckline, bare shoulders and high-cut bottoms made me feel horribly exposed. The whole thing had an unmistakable playboy-bunny quality to it, albeit with a magician's assistant twist.

I tugged instinctively at the waistcoat, as though I could somehow make it cover a little more.

"Stop fussing," Chloe said, catching my eye in the mirror. "You look hot."



I glanced at her reflection. She was standing beside me in her blue costume, looking completely at ease. Mia and Jess were behind us, checking their hair and laughing about something. They all seemed so comfortable in their outfits. They weren't self-conscious or awkward. They simply looked as though they were having fun.

And, annoyingly, they did look fantastic.

I looked back at myself. The waistcoat, bodice combo was fitted closely around my chest and waist, emphasising the shape of my figure. The high-cut bottoms showed off my legs, while the long satin panels gave the outfit a little movement. The sequins caught the light whenever I shifted, and the matching bow tie made the whole thing look more like a deliberate costume than a particularly revealing piece of clothing.

I looked from myself to the girls again.

There was something oddly reassuring about standing alongside them. We were all wearing the same outfit, just in different colours. I wasn't the odd one out, or some reluctant addition to their group. I looked like I belonged with them.

And perhaps that was what made the difference. I was still exposed. I was still wearing something I would never have imagined putting on a year ago. But seeing how naturally the others carried themselves, and how closely my own appearance mirrored theirs, made it feel a little less absurd.

I looked at my reflection once more, taking in the fitted waistcoat, the sequins and the way the outfit showed off my curves. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

"See?" Chloe said, smiling at me. "Told you."

I gave a small, uncertain smile of my own.

"Yeah," I said. "I suppose you did."

By the time we arrived at the bar, I was beginning to feel a little more comfortable.

The place had been transformed for the occasion. Fake cobwebs hung from the ceiling, carved pumpkins and flickering candles lined the windowsills, and orange and purple lights washed over the walls. There were skeletons propped up beside the bar, a few particularly gruesome decorations around the entrance, and enough Halloween-themed bunting to make the place look like a haunted house.

The party was already in full swing.

I followed the girls inside, initially feeling rather conspicuous in my pink sequined outfit. But a quick look around was reassuring. I wasn't remotely the only one wearing something revealing. There were witches in short skirts, vampires in corsets, devils in tiny red dresses and a surprising number of people who seemed to have interpreted Halloween as an excuse to wear as little as possible. A few of the costumes were considerably more daring than mine.

I relaxed a little. At least I wasn't going to be the most conspicuously dressed person in the room.

Still, I couldn't quite shake the feeling of self-consciousness. The outfit was undeniably feminine, and there was something different about wearing it outside the office, in front of colleagues who might know me from both sides of my recent transition into executive support.

I caught my reflection in the darkened window beside the entrance. Pink sequins, black satin, bare shoulders and legs. It was quite a sight. I reminded myself that it was Samantha wearing the outfit. Not Sam. This was the sort of thing Samantha could wear to a Halloween party. I was simply getting into the spirit of the occasion.

"Come on, Sammy!" Jess called, already making her way towards the bar.

I followed the girls through the crowd.

Jess returned a few minutes later with a tray of drinks, distributing them among us. We gathered together near one of the tables, raising our glasses.

"Right," she said. "A toast!"

Mia lifted hers. “To our lovely Samantha, officially one of the team!”

“Finally!” Chloe added.

There was a chorus of agreement, and four glasses clinked together.

“To the secretary squad,” Jess said.

I smiled and took a sip. “Thank you, everyone.”

It was a small thing, really, but I appreciated the gesture. They’d made me feel welcome from the beginning, and I knew they’d put a lot of effort into making sure I was included tonight.

The chatter soon moved on to the usual mixture of office gossip, weekend plans and stories about the various costumes. Chloe was telling us about a particularly disastrous Halloween party she’d attended a few years earlier, while Mia was trying to convince Jess that her costume had been the best of the group.

I found myself joining in, laughing and adding my own comments. The drinks helped, of course, but so did the familiarity of being with the girls. It was easy to fall into their rhythm. They didn’t make a fuss about me, or treat me as though I needed special consideration. I was simply there with them.



“So, what outfits did you wear last year that was more than... this?” I asked, gesturing at the four of us.

A chorus of groans and laughs ran through the group.

“Oh god, what did you hear?” Jess said, already putting her head in her hands.

“Chloe’s to blame for all of it,” Mia added.

“Honestly, you should’ve seen Liz’s face,” Chloe said, beaming. “She didn’t even know where to look.”

“You picked the set,” Mia said, pointing at her. “And blackmailed us into wearing it.”

“It was coordinated,” Chloe protested, still grinning. “That was the point.”

Jess lifted her head just enough to mutter, “Mine had the cut outs, I nearly froze to death.”

“You looked good in it,” Chloe said, unrepentant. “Would’ve been worth it.”

Mia shook her head. “I had the sheer version. Same cut, just... less. I spent the whole night holding a drink in front of me like it was going to help.”

I laughed before I could stop myself. “So this year’s the restrained version?”

“Comparatively,” Chloe said. “We’re practically modest now.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jess said, but she was smiling.

For a while, I forgot about everything else. The banter kept rolling, easy and half-overlapping, the way it did when none of them were performing for anyone outside the group. I stayed in it with them, adding the occasional dry comment, and no one treated the fact that I was there as anything that needed explaining.

I wasn’t thinking about the Gravity launch, or the confusion surrounding my transfer. I wasn’t thinking about the IT team, or the changes to my body, or the messages I’d exchanged with Eames that morning. I wasn’t even thinking particularly hard about the costume I was wearing. I was just having fun.

Then I saw them.

Across the room, near the far end of the bar, stood Adrian, Priya and Tomas.

My old IT team.

They were dressed as Ghostbusters, complete with khaki jumpsuits, proton packs and little name badges. Adrian was holding a drink and laughing at something Tomas had said, while Priya was adjusting one of the straps on her costume.

For a moment, I just stared.

It was strange seeing them all together, out of the office and looking so much like the team I’d once managed. I could almost picture them back on the fourth floor, gathered around one of the desks, discussing a deployment or arguing over a technical problem.

Then I became acutely aware of what I was wearing.

The pink sequins suddenly seemed much brighter. The black satin bottoms felt considerably smaller. I imagined their reaction if they turned and saw me standing there.

I didn’t particularly want to find out.

I turned sharply towards the girls, pretending to have spotted something behind me.

“Everything alright?” Mia asked.

“Yeah. Just—thought I saw someone.”

I hoped they hadn't noticed where I'd been looking.

I was suddenly very conscious of my position in the room, of the fact that Adrian was now in my old job, that Priya and Tomas reported to him, and that I was standing in a bar dressed as a magician's assistant. It was an uncomfortable collision of two parts of my life that I was trying very hard to keep separate.

I could feel myself starting to retreat into my thoughts, replaying the embarrassment of the Computer 101 class and wondering what the others would make of the whole situation.

"Having a good night?"

I turned.

Max was standing beside me.

He was wearing a black magician's outfit, with a fitted jacket, white shirt, waistcoat, and a very elaborate bow tie. A tall top hat sat neatly on his head, and he held a small wand between his fingers.

I couldn't help staring for a moment. He looked fantastic. The outfit suited him surprisingly well, it was one very could have pulled off. The jacket fitted his shoulders perfectly, and the top hat gave him an air of theatrical confidence. He looked as though he'd stepped straight out of a stage show.

"Max!"

He tipped his hat.

"Miss Chambers," he said, with an exaggerated flourish. "I was beginning to wonder if the better half of my act was going to make it."

I laughed, the tension in my shoulders easing.

"Is that what I am?"

"Well, I can't very well saw Liz in half can I?"

"Be my guest", I laughed.

"How about for our first trick, we make these drinks disappear", he said, handing me a champagne.

I smiled. It was such a silly exchange, but it was exactly the sort of thing I needed. Max had a way of making things feel uncomplicated. He didn't seem to be thinking about my old job, or the awkwardness of my costume, or any of the other things that had been occupying my mind. He was just pleased to see me.

We chatted for a few minutes about the party and the various costumes. I asked him whether he'd chosen the magician outfit himself.

"Absolutely. I thought it was important to commit to the theme."

I gave him an incredulous side eye.

“Ok it was Chloe that sourced them all for the whole floor”.

“She has a habit of that. Well, it’s certainly convincing.”

“High praise. I’ve been practising the hat tip all afternoon.”

He demonstrated again, and I laughed.

Someone nearby called out that we should pose for a photograph. Before I could respond, Max stepped beside me and put an arm around my back. I felt his hand settle gently against the small of my waist, warm through the thin fabric. I stood beside him, smiling towards the camera, with an estimate of a pose I’d seen the girls use earlier. The flash went off.



For a moment, I was conscious of his hand resting there. The contact sat low and steady. Without really thinking about it, I shifted a little closer, the side of my hip brushing his. It was only a small movement, almost instinctive, but I felt the way my body had answered it before my mind caught

up. The warmth of his palm stayed with me after the flash faded.

Max didn't seem to think anything of it. He simply smiled, thanked whoever had taken the photo, and continued our conversation as if nothing had shifted. I was still smiling when Chloe appeared beside us, though the smile felt a fraction less automatic than it had a minute earlier.

"There you are!" she said, taking my hand. "We've been looking everywhere for you."

"Have you?"

"Yes. Come on, we're dancing."

She gave Max a quick smile.

"Borrowing your assistant."

"By all means," he said, tipping his hat again. "Just make sure you bring her back in one piece. She's not supposed to be sawn in half til midnight."

"I'll do my best."

Before I could protest, Chloe had pulled me towards the dance floor, with Mia and Jess following close behind. The music was louder there, and the crowd was already moving beneath the coloured lights. Chloe grabbed my hands and pulled me into the middle of the group.

"Come on, Sam!"

I laughed and let myself go along with it. The drinks were beginning to take effect, and the more we danced, the less I thought about how I looked or what anyone else might think. The sequins shimmered under the lights, the satin panels swayed around my legs, and the girls were having far too much fun for me to stand there worrying about my dignity.

I danced with Chloe, then Mia, then Jess. We sang along to songs we barely knew, laughed at one another's attempts to keep up and occasionally stopped to collect another drink.

At some point I caught sight of Max across the room. He was talking to a group of executives, his top hat slightly askew. He glanced over, caught my eye and raised his glass.

I smiled and raised mine in return. Then the girls pulled me back into the crowd. For the rest of the night, I let myself forget about everything else. I danced, laughed and enjoyed being part of the group, without thinking too hard about what it all meant.

For once, I was simply having a good time.