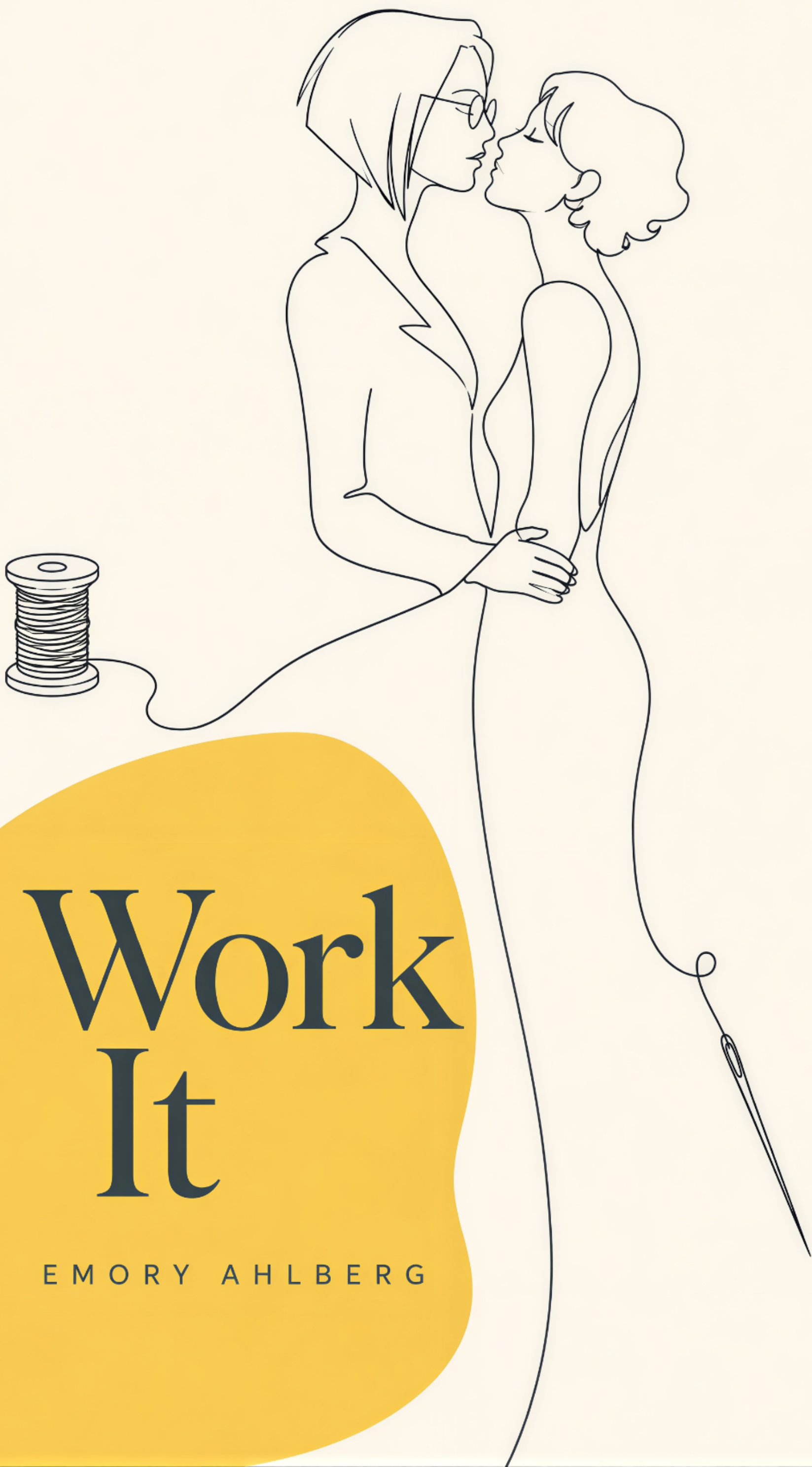




Work It

EMORY AHLBERG



Wes Kolbeck got off the G train at Flushing Ave with a duffel bag, overpacked with four shirts, two pairs of pants, and swim trunks (in case, he guessed, Brooklyn flooded). He wore his defenses: tee, flannel, black hoodie, all zipped and buttoned, despite the stinking summer humidity. He'd made the walk before, but this time he was loaded down and determined to look useful, like the kind of boyfriend who got asked to lift things and didn't complain, even if the things very often weighed more than he did.

He found the address with only minor navigation errors. On Google Maps, some of the streets doubled back or didn't show up at all. Wes kept checking his phone, squinting at the blue dot, then at the warehouse numbers half-painted over the old ones. Eventually, he found the right door. It was one of those industrial buildings that had once been something else. Probably a calculator factory, or they made radios, or some other thing nobody needed anymore. Now it was all entry buzzers and painted-over mail slots. The lobby directory listed two dentists, a dog groomer, and a medical supply store, all printed on ancient label-maker tape. Someone had drawn a mustache on each with a Sharpie.

Delia's name wasn't on the directory. If you knew, you knew. If



you didn't, there was no reason to be there.

Wes yanked the elevator gate shut and hit five. The whole thing rattled up slowly, alarmingly, like it might decide to kill you, and, really, wouldn't it be your own fault if it did? The elevator shuddered to a halt. He slid the gate open and knocked.

The door opened on Kit, eighteen years old and full of whatever it is that makes a person stand too close and talk too fast. She wore a cropped denim jacket with *SECOND HAND*, the name of Delia's company, hand-lettered across the back in lopsided block letters. Her phone was out, camera already up and recording before she'd even seen who was there.

"Oh!" The phone dropped an inch. "You're...Wes, right?"

Wes shook his head. "Kit, we've met like three times."

"Oh. Have we? Sorry, I don't remember men's faces very well. I think it's an ADHD thing? Or maybe a trauma thing. Probably both." Kit shrugged. "But you're the boyfriend, right?"

"I am. And you're the unpaid intern."

Kit grinned, unbothered. "Correct. So, you want to see Delia or are you just here to, like, drop off sandwiches or whatever?"

Wes stepped past her into the hallway. The linoleum floors were



scarred, patched and repatched. It smelled dusty, or maybe like mothballs? Was that how mothballs *actually* smelled? Farther down, a sewing machine ran hard and then stopped.

“I’m here to help,” he said. “Unless there’s a sandwich crisis. Then I could pivot.”

Kit laughed. She was texting, thumbs moving. “She’s in back with Rosalind.”

He was about to add something really clever about how Rosalind had been in fashion longer than Kit had been alive, but then she looked up at him and squinted. “Damn, dude, even I’m taller than you. That’s wild.”

Wes had no idea what the correct response was. He tried on a few in his head; none fit, so he just blinked like a lizard on a rock and let it pass.

Kit lifted her phone again. “Can I, like, get a reaction shot? Delia wants candids. I mean, she didn’t say that, but she always uses them.”

He shrugged, which was apparently enough consent. The artificial shutter sound went off three times.

“I like your face,” she said. “Like, photographically. You have that whole worried-about-something energy. It reads really well on

camera.” She said it the way you’d compliment a lamp at Ikea.

Wes set his duffel on the floor, dodging three women moving a folding table toward the floor-to-ceiling windows. All were taller than him. None of them looked up when he asked if they needed help. The table legs barked a shin on the way by. He muttered an apology.

The twelve garments for the show were on a rolling rack against the far wall under milky dry-cleaner plastic. He’d never seen any of them. Delia worked at their apartment, and he stayed out of that room because she’d told him to. Not unkindly, but like a fact that had already been decided somewhere else, and she was only passing it along as a courtesy. Most guys would’ve hated her directness, her precision, her way of locking a door before you even knocked. Wes found it restful. He never had to guess. Guessing was the thing that killed him—always had been—and Delia didn’t make him do it.

Kit was talking to him.

“Sorry,” he said. “What?”

“I said do you want water.”

“Got any Mountain Dew?”

Kit wrinkled her nose. “Gross. Just water, wine, or the vegan Red Bull. It’s not Red Bull, but it’s yellow and makes your heart go weird.”

Wes thought about it. “Water’s great.”

Kit jogged off, already calling, “Delia, your boyfriend’s here!” Her voice echoed down the hall. Nobody answered. Wes stood by the crate, hands shoved into his hoodie, and tried to look like he belonged there. Well, belonged anywhere, really.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the window. For a second, he considered unzipping something, standing straighter, but that never worked. No matter how hard he tried, Wes was always the smallest person in the room, whether that was physically true or just a vibe. You could be six-three and people would still look over you, through you, like you were an empty coat hook. He’d heard that once on one of those podcasts, and he’d thought, *yeah, that’s it exactly*, and then closed the app and never listened to that podcast again. Sometimes—okay, a lot of times—he wondered if that was why Delia liked him. He took up less space, left more for her. If so, he didn’t mind. She needed the room, like a building needs its footprint, and you either fit around her or you didn’t. But Wes was good at fitting around things.

He heard her before he saw her. Deliberate unhurried footsteps—Delia never rushed toward anything—and then she was in the doorway at the far end of the room. Chunky blue hair artfully tousled, glasses on, makeup perfect. A pincushion was strapped to her wrist like a small, angry animal. She looked at him the way she always did first, like she was reading ingredients on a label and deciding whether to buy. “You’re early.”

“Train was fast.”

“The G was fast?”

“I know, I think something’s wrong with it.”



That earned him a twitch from the corner of her lips. She crossed the room and put one hand flat on his chest, over the hoodie, over the flannel, over the tee, like she was checking how many layers deep she'd have to go to find him.

"You overpacked," she said.

"Dramatically."

She kissed him, her mouth cold from whatever she'd been drinking, and pushed her fingers into his shaggy hair. The strands caught between her knuckles, tugging a little. She was taller, so he tilted his head up, and she tilted down. That was the geometry of them, two mismatched pieces that worked at a specific angle.

She pulled back. "You need a haircut."

"I know."

"Or you could let it grow out."

"Okay."

"The in-between stage doesn't suit you." Delia set her hand lightly on the side of his neck. "How were classes?"

"We looked at phages, and I got corrected for saying 'virus' instead of 'virion,' which isn't actually a mistake, but whatever." Wes shrugged. "The professor hates me. It's mutual."



Delia's thumb pressed against his jaw, like she was lining up a cut. "You let them correct you?"

"I let them think they're right. It's strategic, you know? Those idiots will be deciding if I get into the doctoral program." He grinned, but it didn't quite land. "Anyway, glad to be here. Happy to be your emotional support boyfriend."

"Oh, babe, when have I ever needed your *emotional* support?" Delia's voice was dry as lint, but he felt her cool palm on the back of his neck. She held him there—not squeezing, not pulling—and he felt the weight of her full attention settle on him, the way it did on a bolt of fabric before the scissors came out, deciding where to cut.

"Unzip," she said.

Wes blinked. "Which layer?"

"All of them."

His fingers found the hoodie zipper first. She watched him pull it down, unhurried. He fumbled a flannel button and she didn't help. He got it open. The tee underneath was damp at the collar.

"Better," she said, and pressed her thumb harder into the hinge of his jaw, tilting his face up. Not rough, just... exact. The way you'd angle a piece of silk toward the light to check for flaws. "You were hiding in

there.”

His pulse thumped under her thumb. “I was insulated.”

“You were hiding.” She held his gaze. “I don’t like that.”

Delia turned and walked toward the hall without checking if he’d follow. He followed.

She led him past the fabric room, past the dark door, to a narrow space at the end of the hall that was half-office, half-storage. A dress form stood in the corner like a headless chaperone. Delia shut the door behind them and leaned against it.

“Come here.”

He came. She took the hoodie off his shoulders herself this time, peeling it down his arms and dropping it on a box of zippers. Then the flannel. She undid each button with the same unhurried focus, fingers moving down his chest as if she were reading braille. The flannel joined the hoodie.

“Arms up.”

He raised them. She pulled the tee over his head and held it in her fist for a moment, looking at him—bare from the waist up, damp-skinned, breathing faster than he wanted to be. She set one cool palm flat against his sternum and pressed, not hard, just enough that he took a half-step back and his shoulders touched the wall.

“There,” she said. “Found you.”

“Don’t they, uh, need you out there?”

“I don’t give a shit. I’m nervous as hell about this show and I need to fuck the brains out of my smarty-pants boyfriend before I have to go look Marguerite Sandoval in the eye.”

Wes’s brain snagged on the words *fuck the brains out*, the way a song lyric could get stuck and sour if you let it loop. He’d been hard since the hallway; now he was also nervous, which was a weird combination, but not new.

Delia’s hands were already on his waistband, and she slid his shorts down in one motion. The waistband caught on his hips. Delia’s thumb hooked the band and worked it over his hipbone. She didn’t make a sound, and neither did he. The shorts dropped and pooled at his ankles. Cold air hit his skin. He stood there, bare and blinking under the office fluorescents, and for a second he felt like a frog on a lab table, all nerves and translucent skin and nowhere to hide. Her gaze moved down his chest, across the narrow architecture of his ribs, the olive skin darker where the summer had reached and pale where it hadn’t. He had the kind of body that made people ask, *Do you eat?* in that voice that sounded like a joke until you listened back that night in the shower, the memory triggering a dozen little flashbacks, moments he’d told himself didn’t matter.

She ran her finger from his collarbone to his navel, tracing the



faint dark hair below it, and he shivered hard enough that she felt it under her fingertip.

“You’re cold,” she said.

“I’m not cold.”

“No.” Her hand flattened against his stomach. “You’re not.”

She stepped back from him, reached down and gathered the hem of her dress and pulled it up past her thighs, bunching it at her waist. She held it there with one hand, casual as holding a curtain aside.

“Knees,” she said.

Wes went down. The linoleum was cold and gritty under his kneecaps. She looked down at him, and he looked up; there was that geometry again, the tilt, the angle, except now it meant something different. She set her free hand on top of his head, fingers threading into his too-long hair, and guided him forward.

“Go to work,” she said, quietly, not unkind. The same voice she used when she told someone where to hang a garment or how to fold a drape—like there was only one right way, and she was saving you the trouble of guessing.

So he did. He’d always been good at taking direction.

They almost didn't hear Kit's shouting over Delia's low, guttural moans. The first three shouts barely registered. Wes was on his knees, hands splayed wide on Delia's trembling thighs. The world had narrowed to the slick, heated seam of her, the taste of salt. Delia's palm, damp and warm, was pressed to the back of his head, fingers tangled in his hair. She held him steady, guiding but not forcing—a taut, silent geometry, her above, him below. He wanted to stay there, to hold that exact angle forever, to feel the press of her body against his skull, to breathe in her scent, but Kit's voice was relentless:

“DELIA! DELIA!”

The third time, Delia's hand tightened. She made a sound that might once have been frustration, but it was cut off by a gasp. Her breath caught—a sharp inhale, teeth on edge. Wes went still, mouth wet, hands braced. She held him in the hinge between sound and silence, her palm heavy on the back of his head.

Somewhere outside, Kit was still shouting. The words hit the door, muffled, but the urgency was obvious.

“DELIA!”

A pause. The briefest slackening of grip.

“DELIA, IT'S PRIYA!”

Delia's hand unclenched. She drew a shaking breath while Wes stayed on his knees, forehead pressed to her soft inner thigh, waiting for the next instruction. She sighed, then pulled her dress down in one motion, fabric to knees, like closing a drawer. Wes had to lean back fast to avoid being smothered by her dress, which was not how he wanted to die, although there were worse ways.

She looked down at him. Her face was flushed, glasses fogged. “Stay,” she said, and stepped over him toward the door.

Wes sat back on his heels, wiped his mouth, and stared at the dress form in the corner. It stared back, headless and unbothered. From the hallway he could hear Delia's voice, already leveled out, already cool—“What about Priya?”—and Kit's breathless tumble, something about a cancellation, a fitting, a disaster. The words blurred. His knees ached. The fluorescents buzzed.

He looked down at himself—bare-chested, kneeling on gritty linoleum in a storage room, hard and forgotten—and thought, *So this is “helping.”*

Delia shut the door. She stood with her hand on the knob and her back to Wes. He watched her shoulders rise once and fall. Then she turned around.

“Priya dropped out.” She looked at him. “I'm down a model.”

Wes was still on the floor. His knees hurt. His mouth still tasted like her.

“Stand up.”

Wes stood. Delia's eyes moved across his shoulders, his waist, his hips. “What are you looking at?” he asked.

Delia didn't answer right away. Her glasses were halfway down

her nose. “Your chest,” she said finally. “Your arms. Your hips.”

He blinked. “Is that a good thing?”

She stepped forward, the dress of her fabric clinging to her hips. For a second, her face went blank—a measuring tape, not a lover—and Wes’s breath caught. He felt embarrassed, exposed, excited.

She prodded his ribs, then his waist, pinching the loose skin at his side. “You’re the right size.”

Wes waited for the punchline. Instead, she circled him, bare feet silent on the linoleum, her gaze needle-sharp as it mapped the distance from shoulder to wrist, hip to thigh.

“You’re kidding,” he said.

“I am not.”

“Del, you have other models.”

“I have twelve looks and eleven bodies. Priya was wearing the column dress. You’ve got the size for it, and the coloring.”

“It’s a *dress*.”

“It’s a garment.” Delia’s hand landed on his hip, rotating him a quarter turn. Professional now, all the heat from five minutes ago filed somewhere he couldn’t reach until she needed it. That was how she worked. Every mood, every flicker, sorted and stowed.

“For fuck’s sake, you want me to crossdress?”

Delia didn’t flinch. Didn’t even blink. “I want you to wear the garment. The dress was made for a body with your proportions. You’re the only one here who can wear it the way it’s meant to be worn.” She stepped back and let her eyes run over him again. “And sitting out there in the audience tonight will be Marguerite Sandoval. The buyer from Nordstrom. If we land that account, Second Hand isn’t just scraping by anymore. It would change everything.” She paused. “For both of us.”

Wes opened his mouth, closed it. He was suddenly and completely aware that he was standing naked in a storage room while his girlfriend pitched him a modeling gig for women’s wear, and that his erection had not entirely gotten the memo that the situation had changed.

“Can I at least put my shorts back on before we negotiate?”

Delia looked down. The corner of her lips curved. “No. I think you’re more agreeable like this.”

He looked down at himself—bare, goosebumped, half-hard, knees still red—and thought, *She’s not wrong*. “I haven’t shaved.”

“We have razors.”

“I don’t know how to do the walk,” he said.

“I’ll teach you.”

“In two hours?”

“Less. You know I’m a very good teacher.”

He looked at the dress form in the corner. It stood there, patient, headless, waiting to be useful. He knew the feeling.

“Wes.” She stepped close and set her hand flat on his chest again, over the heartbeat. “I need you.”

Not *would you*. Not *could you*. Just *I need you*.



And that's all it took.

Shaving didn't take very long but Delia stood in the small bathroom the whole time, hand on the knob, watching him with the same impatience she gave a slow elevator. "We don't have much time."

"Just let me—"

"It's fine, you got it all. Come."

She led him down the hall, past the fabric room where bolts stood stacked like cordwood, past the dark door he'd never been through, into a back room where Rosalind was kneeling on the floor with a *garment* spread across her lap like a patient on an operating table. She was older, maybe sixty, with reading glasses pushed up into silver hair, and a gold watch wedged above her wrist bone. She didn't look up. Her hands were busy picking stitches out of a seam. Pins were everywhere. A tomato pin cushion sat by her knee, stuck full of sharp heads, like a tiny planet bristling with satellites.

"Rosalind, Wes. Wes, Rosalind."

Rosalind glanced up. Her eyes moved over him, then she went

back to her seam. “This is the boyfriend.”

“This is the boyfriend,” Delia confirmed. “And the model.”

“What model?”

“For the column dress.”

Rosalind’s eyes flicked up again. For a second, she just stared, as if she was waiting for him to sprout a second head. “No.”

Delia crossed her arms. “Priya’s out. I need him.”

Rosalind set her seam ripper down with a clack. “It won’t work.”

“It will.” Delia’s tone was flat, final. “He’s the closest we have to Priya’s size. I have nothing but Amazons, Priya was petite. She was the only one who could carry that dress without it dragging. He’s five-three—”

“Five-four,” Wes said.

“—she was five-five. The proportions work.”

“It’s not about the size,” Rosalind said, “it’s about the shape.”

“We’ll use a little padding, it’s not like Priya was stacked.”

Rosalind pulled her glasses off and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Skip the column, show eleven looks. Nobody’s counting.”

“Marguerite Sandoval is counting.” Delia didn’t get louder, but her voice was tight—a band pulled just short of snapping. “And if I walk eleven looks after promising her twelve, she’ll know I couldn’t handle a last-minute problem. That’s all she needs to pass. Also, the column dress is my centerpiece.”

“I know,” said Rosalind.

“It’s the only piece in the collection I’m a hundred percent satisfied with, all the others... I failed in some way.”

“That’s because you’re a perfectionist,” Wes said. “They’re all beautiful.”

“They’re all *fine*, but I want the best one out there. I want Marguerite Sandoval to see the best thing I’ve designed.” Delia’s arms were still crossed. She’d gone into that mode where nothing mattered except the problem. Wes recognized the way her jaw set, the lines at the corners of her mouth. She’d shut out the world. Even him.

He glanced at Rosalind, who was giving him the same look as before—sizing him up, but with less hope now. Like she wanted to be proven wrong but didn’t expect to be. “He is... twinkly.”

Wes frowned. “Like the snack?”

For the first time, Rosalind smiled. A little. “Adorable.”

“Okay.” Delia let out her breath and uncrossed her arms. “Let’s get him in the thing. I want to see the drape before we decide anything.”

“We’ve decided,” Rosalind said, already reaching for the dress. She lifted it off the rack with both hands, the way you’d lift a sleeping cat. The plastic came off, and the fabric underneath was teal, heavy and fluid at the same time. Wes didn’t know textiles, but he could see it moved like something alive.

“Shorts off,” Delia said.

“Again?”



“Wes.”

He stepped out of them. Rosalind didn’t look away. “Hm.”

“Tee,” Delia said.

He pulled it off. Rosalind circled him, tape measure in hand. The vinyl strip landed across his shoulders, then dropped to his waist. She muttered numbers like a prayer. “Shoulders are narrower.”

“I know,” Delia said.

“Hips are... wider, actually. All bone, but I’ll take what I can get.”

Rosalind draped the tape around his chest, pulled it snug. “Thirty.”

“Priya was thirty-two,” Delia replied. “We pad the bust, take in the side seams a half inch each.”

Rosalind looked at Wes’s face for the first time. “You’re really going to do this, boyfriend?”

Wes looked at Delia. Delia looked at the dress. “Yes, he’s really going to do this.”

Wes cleared his throat. “And Margaret whoever—”

“Sandoval. Marguerite.”

“Right. She won’t care that you have a man dressed as a woman?”

Rosalind made a sound. It started low, a rumble behind her sternum, and came out as a bark that shook her glasses loose from her

hair. She laughed the way older women do when a young man says something so immaculately stupid it loops back around to charming. Her gold watch glinted as she pressed a hand to her chest.

Delia's reaction was worse. She covered her mouth with both hands, her shoulders shaking. "Oh, baby," she said.

"What?"

"It's Marguerite Sandoval." Delia took off her glasses, wiped them on her hem. "She put a six-foot-six drag queen in the Nordstrom holiday campaign two years ago. Shot the whole thing in a church."

"Sold four million dollars of eveningwear," Rosalind said. "In December alone."

"She's going to love you," Delia said. "She's going to eat you alive."

Wes stood in his boxers, arms at his sides, as two women laughed at him with what he was fairly sure was affection. But then, he'd been wrong about a lot of things today.

Rosalind held the dress open at the neck, arms wide, the way you'd hold a net. "Step in."

Wes did. The fabric came around his shoulders, soft and slippery, the sensation unlike anything he'd ever worn. It slithered over his chest, cool and heavy. Rosalind pulled the shoulders up and settled them. The dress hung straight, columnar, like its name promised, and for a second he thought, okay, this is just fabric, fabric doesn't care who's wearing it.

Then Rosalind zipped the back and the garment found his body, pulled in at the waist, pressed flat across his pecs. Suddenly he could feel the absence of what was supposed to be there—the curves the dress was reaching for but not finding.

"Breathe," Rosalind said.

He did. The fabric moved with him, grudgingly.

Delia stood three feet away, head tilted, thumb pressed to her lower lip. He'd seen her look at models like this, at strangers, at mannequins, but he'd never been on the receiving end. It was a strange, weightless feeling, being appraised by the person who knew exactly where you were softest. Her eyes went from hem to shoulder, cataloging. She wasn't looking at him, exactly. She was looking at what the dress made of him.

"Turn," she said.

He turned. The fabric followed a half-beat behind, swinging past his knees and settling. Delia made a small sound, not approval, and not disapproval. Data, he supposed.

"Again. Slower."

He turned again, slower. The dress liked slower.

Rosalind, pins in her mouth, knelt and pulled the side seam taut against his ribs. She pinned it fast and sure. The fabric snugged closer, as if the dress had decided to fit him, or at least stop arguing.

“Padding,” Rosalind said through the pins.

Delia handed her two crescent-shaped pieces of foam, which Rosalind slipped inside the bodice, one on each side, pinning them into place. The dress shifted, sitting fuller on his chest. Wes looked down and saw the faintest suggestion of something that wasn’t supposed to be there.

Delia watched his face. “It’s okay to think about having tits,” she said. “Because it makes you blush, which makes you cute.”

Heat started at the base of his throat, working its way up. In just a few seconds, his face was absolutely, predictably, on fire. “Yeah, well,” he managed, voice rough, “I don’t get a lot of practice thinking about having tits.”

Kit appeared in the doorway with a zippered case, a look of open delight on her face. “Oh my god, oh my *god*.” She set the case on the table and unzipped it, revealing rows of brushes, compacts, and tubes. “Wanna sit?” she said, pulling out a stool with a scrape against the floor.

“Wait!” Rosalind cried, then stuck another pin in the side seam. The dress cinched even tighter, fabric closing in over ribs, under arms, down the length of Wes’s body like it meant to compress him into some new geometry. He felt the not-quite-weight of his chest, the foam padding making the dress believe its own lie. He breathed in and a pin bit his side.

“Ow.”

“Don’t breathe,” Rosalind said.

“Ever again?”

She ignored him. Kit was already mixing foundation on the back of her hand, humming something he almost recognized.

“Done,” Rosalind finally said, sitting back on her heels. She pulled the pins from her mouth and stuck them into the tomato. “Now sit. Don’t crease the back.”

He sat, the stool’s hard surface cool against his thighs. Kit’s brush touched his cheekbone and he flinched—Loss of nerve? No. Just cold bristles—and she whispered, “Easy,” like he was something small and half-wild.

She dabbed a sponge across his forehead, his cheeks, the bridge of his nose. “This is so weird,” Wes said.

“Stop worrying.” Kit smiled. “There’s nothing to be worried about. Delia, does your cute boyfriend always look like he’s about to bolt?”

Delia snorted, the half-smile returning. “Only when he’s happy.”

Kit beamed. “That’s so emo. Wes, relax your face.”

He tried. The stool wobbled under him. The foundation was cold and tacky, and it erased him in increments—the redness at his jaw, the dark circles, the uneven skin at his temples. Each pass took something away and left a smoother, softer canvas.

“Close,” Kit said, and drew a line across his eyelid. Then the other. She leaned back, squinted, leaned in again. Mascara next—the wand so close to his eye he flinched, but Kit was ready. She caught his chin in



two fingers. “Hold still. Don’t blink.”

“I’m really being manhandled today,” Wes said.

“Pft, you mean womanhandled,” Kit corrected. “And you love it.”

“Don’t flirt with him,” Delia said, watching. “It’s a waste of time. He doesn’t know what to do with it.”

“That’s not—” Wes started.

“Hold the fuck still,” Kit said, and painted his lower lip with her pinky finger, a muted rose that tasted like wax. She turned his jaw left, then right, studying him. Then she pulled his hair back off his forehead and pinned it, and suddenly there was nowhere left to hide.

“Look,” Kit said, and held up her phone, camera reversed.

A pretty near-stranger peered back. They had a soft jaw, small nose, and big, slightly pink lips like a doll’s. The eyes weren’t his either. Kit had done something so the lashes looked unreal, dense and fragile at the same time. The skin looked like skin in a magazine, if you ignored the places the makeup had caught on a patch of stubble.

She grinned at him over the phone. “You look amazing. Like, actually really hot.”

Wes looked at Delia. She was nodding, pleased with what she saw, and the glint in her eye was the same one from the storage room, the



one that had put him on his knees. Except now it was aimed through the lens of the dress, refracted, and what came back wasn't lust exactly—it was closer to ownership. She crossed the distance between them and set two fingers under his chin, tilting his face.

"There he is." Quiet. To herself, almost.

"You keep saying that like I was missing."

"You were." She brushed her thumb across his lower lip, smudging Kit's careful work. Kit made a noise of protest. Delia ignored it. "You've been missing all day—hoodie, flannel, all of it. And now look at you. Nowhere to go."

Wes swallowed. The dress held him still. "Is that the point?"

"That's always the point," Delia said, letting go of his chin. He felt the absence immediately, cool air where her fingers had been.

"Okay," he said. "So teach me the walk."

"No."

He waited. She didn't elaborate, just stood there, looking at him the way you look at a match after you've struck it.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean I don't want you to walk like a model. I want you to walk like you." She stepped closer, her dress brushing his bare knee where



the fabric had ridden up on the stool. “I want you out there exactly like this. Confused. A little scared. Not knowing what to do with your hands.” Her voice dropped. “That’s what makes it beautiful.”

“Del—”

“You came through that door today in three layers but underneath—” She set her palm flat on his chest, over the slate-colored fabric, over the foam, over his heartbeat. “Is this.” Her fingers curled, gathering the fabric in her fist, pulling it taut against his skin. “I don’t want invisible, I want them to see what I see.”

“What do—”

Her mouth found the hinge of his jaw, and she kissed it, slow, open-lipped, her breath warm against the edge of Kit’s foundation. He felt it down through the dress, through the padding, into the bare skin underneath, and his whole body tightened like a thread pulled through a needle.

“Someone who doesn’t know how gorgeous he is,” she said against his neck. “That’s this whole fucking show.”

Kit had gone still with a brush in one hand and her phone in the other, mouth slightly open, like she’d walked into a movie twenty minutes late and was trying to catch up. Then her face split into

something enormous and unfiltered.

“Okay, that was—” She fanned herself with the brush. “That was, like, legitimately the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in person. And I went to Berghain.”

Rosalind had turned away. She was fussing with the pin cushion, rearranging pins that didn’t need rearranging, her shoulders set in a very deliberate line. The tips of her ears had gone pink. She cleared her throat twice—the second time louder, like the first one hadn’t done the job.

“We have ninety minutes,” Rosalind said to the pin cushion.

“Rosy, are you blushing?” Kit was already lifting her phone.

“Listen, I’m sixty-three years old and I’ve seen everything.” She pulled a pin out and stuck it back in the exact same hole. “I just think there’s a time and a place.”

“The time is now, the place is here!” Kit said. “That’s, like, the whole vibe of this collection. Get with the times.”

Rosalind shot her a look, then her eyes drifted, almost against her will, back to Wes—still on the stool, still flushed under Kit’s foundation, Delia’s lipstick print on his jaw like a watermark. Her expression softened, became a little sad, an older woman looking at young people who didn’t know what was coming for them.

“Fix his lip,” Rosalind said to Kit. “She smudged it.”

Kit was already moving, pinky loaded with fresh color. She tilted Wes’s chin up—gently, nothing like Delia’s grip—and painted his lower lip back into place. Her face was close enough that he could smell her peach lip balm. “You’re going to destroy them,” she whispered. “You know that, right?”

Wes did not know that. He didn’t know anything. The dress breathed when he breathed. Delia was already gone, back down the hall, footsteps unhurried as ever.

Kit stepped back and studied her work. Nodded once. Then she picked up her zippered case and followed the sound of Delia’s voice down the hall, leaving Wes alone with Rosalind and the headless dress form and the buzzing fluorescents.

Rosalind was sewing—hand-stitching the pinned seams into permanence, needle moving in quick silver arcs. She didn’t look up. “Stand,” she said.

He stood. She circled him one last time, tugging the hem, smoothing the shoulder, her hands brisk and impersonal. Then she stepped back. “All right, you’re finished. Now, don’t sit down again, don’t lean, don’t put your hands in your—” She stopped. “Oh, you don’t have pockets.”

“Great.”

“It is great. Pockets are the worst invention. They’re where people go to disappear.” She gathered her things—pins, tomato, scissors. At the door she paused. “When you walk out there, don’t think about the fact that you’re wearing a dress.”

“It’s a garment.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s a *dress*, sweetie. But don’t think about that, and don’t think about who’s watching. Just think about her.”

“Delia?”

Rosalind gave him a look that said who else would I mean. Then she was gone.

He was alone. The room was quiet except for the fluorescents and the distant murmur of the show taking shape somewhere beyond the dark door. He turned toward the window. The glass was old and warped and the reflection it gave back was warped too—the column dress liquid in the bad light, the slate fabric pooling into shadow below his waist, his face a pale smudge above it. He looked like a painting some art history major would write a paper about, if they got bored enough. Or maybe a ghost, a little hollowed out and not sure which house to haunt.

He thought about Delia’s hand on his chest. The way she’d gathered the fabric in her fist, pulled it taut, held him in the tension between the garment and his skin. The way she’d said *that’s the whole fucking show* with her hot breath against his neck, and how he’d believed her, completely, the way he always believed her—not because she was right but because her certainty was so total it left no room for his doubt, displacing oxygen in a sealed room.

He touched the foam on his chest. It shifted under his fingers, warm now, body-warm, and for a second he couldn’t tell where the padding ended and he began.

Somewhere down the hall, someone called his name. He went.

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