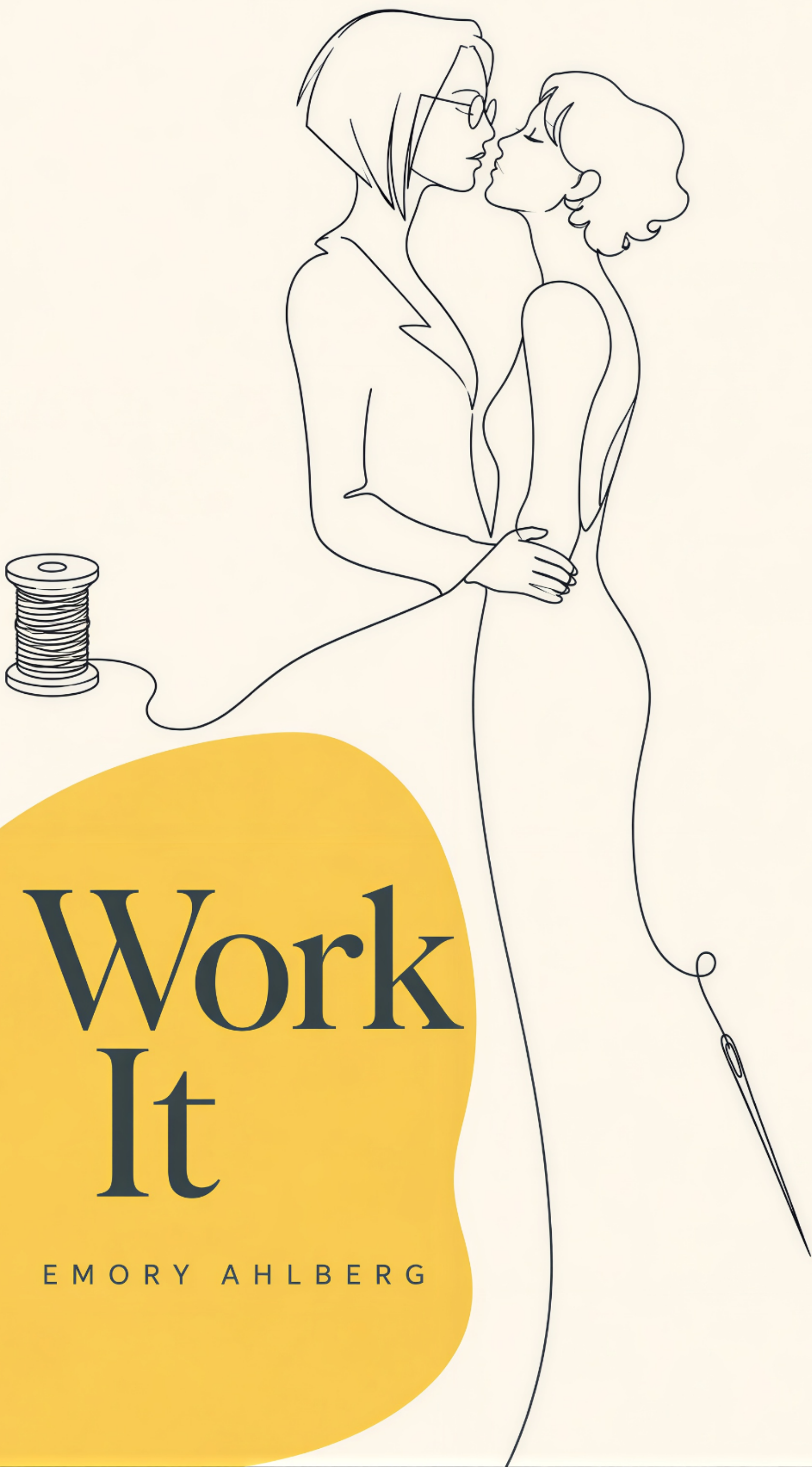




Work It

EMORY AHLBERG



A hallway between two fire doors was the runway's backstage. A mirror leaned against the brick wall with a handwritten sign: *DO NOT FUCKING MOVE THIS MIRROR*. Wes read it. He liked the clarity. He also liked that the mirror was angled so he only saw himself if he leaned, which he was careful not to do. When he leaned, he saw someone who might belong there—a stranger with Kit's mascara on her lashes and a look in her big eyes like she'd been caught stealing. That was bad. Worse was when his real face flickered through, Adam's apple bobbing, and the whole illusion fell apart.

Eleven women surrounded him, real women, with bare shoulders and makeup, hair in glassy sheets or tight braids. Two of them stood in bras and underwear, eating chips from a bag, their gowns being hastily steamed just off to the side. Another sat on the floor, cross-legged, painting her nails with a Sharpie. A redhead in a gold jumpsuit was telling a story about a wedding where the bride set her dress on fire and the maid of honor tried to put it out with champagne. Wes kept his back to the mirror, hands at his sides.

Why weren't they gawking? He'd expected whispers, side-eyes, the polite cruelty of "open-minded" people who still knew a fraud on sight. Instead, the woman in the jumpsuit handed him the chips



without breaking her story. He took one. Salt and vinegar, his favorite.

Delia had gone, probably to brief the buyers, but Kit was at the end of the hall, filming. She was wedged into the corner next to the door, phone held at chin height, filming the models as they lined up. God, his throat was dry, but he wouldn't ask for water; that would mean using his voice, and then the women would look at him, and the spell would be broken, the lie obvious. So he stayed thirsty.

"You okay?" The model in the gold jumpsuit frowned at him. She had an angular face and chipped blue nails. "You look like you're about to pass out."

Wes nodded, expecting her to shrug and move on, but she didn't. She licked salt off her thumb. "First show?"

He nodded again.

"Oh, honey, you're fine." She grinned, a chip stuck to her lower lip. "You're just in shock. Trust me, the first one's always a mess. You're with Delia, right?"

He nodded, again. It was getting pathetic.

"Jeez, I'm going to call you Ariel if you don't start talking. You know, the little mermaid? Gave up her voice for a man?"

"Gave it up for legs," Wes said, before he could stop himself.

“Oh, she speaks.” She offered him another chip, which he took.

“I’m Elena.”

“Wes.”

“Pretty.”

“Not really.”

Elena tilted her head and blinked at him slowly. “Relax, babe, nobody here gives a shit what is under the dress.” She paused, another chip halfway to her mouth. “Except Delia. She definitely gives a shit what’s under the dress.”

Rosalind came then, her hands full of pins, and without a word tugged the shoulder of the dress a quarter inch to the left. “You’re last,” she said.

“Right.”

“Don’t lock your knees.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t smile.”

“Wasn’t planning to.”

“You’ll want to, though. When people get scared, they smile. It’s one of those weird primate things, baring your teeth at a predator.” She smoothed the shoulder seam flat. “It looks desperate, and desperate doesn’t sell dresses.”

“Garments,” Wes said.

Rosalind looked at him for a long moment, then she kissed his forehead, quick and dry, and walked away.

“Holy shit,” Elena said. “I think Rosalind likes you. That’s crazy. She’s like a hundred and meaner than God.”

From the other side of the door, the music cranked up, the bass shaking the brick behind Wes’s butt. Then came the synths, like a worse version of a Journey song. The models looked up. Kit killed her phone light, pressed her back flat against the wall, eyes closed, lips moving, counting. When she hit fifteen, she opened her eyes and pointed at the first model like a ground crew waving a plane onto the tarmac.

Elena smiled. “Deep breath.” She popped the last chip into her mouth, wiped her hands on her hips—on the dress Delia had toiled over for weeks—and rolled her shoulders back. “Want a tip?”

“I’m not sure it’ll help.”

“Don’t look at faces, find something else. A spot on the wall, a lightbulb, fucking whatever. Walk like you’re headed there, like nothing else matters.”

“What if—” He faltered. “What if I trip?”

“Get up and keep walking. Think no one here’s ever tripped? Naomi Campbell ate shit in Vivienne Westwood platforms and, guess what, she’s still Naomi fucking Campbell. Own the fall.” She squeezed his arm.

Three models went out. Came back. One was breathing hard and grinning, the other unzipped her dress, the third edged past him. “Scuse me, hon,” she said. He pressed flat against the brick. The dress



pressed with him, the fake foam bust tickling his real flesh nipples. The wall was cold, the music was loud, Kit was counting down and pointing, and the line ahead of him was getting shorter.

“Wes.” Delia stood at the far fire door. Her glasses were off. Her eyes looked bigger. Wet. Unsure. “How are you doing?”

“Great, just excellent, having the time of my life, really. Is my mascara running?”

“Your mascara’s fine.” Her gaze fixed on the dress. Or him in it. She reached out and adjusted the neckline, undoing what Rosalind had fixed, then trailed her fingers up his neck. “You’re after Elena. She’s in the gold lamé.”

“We met.”

“When she comes back through the door, count to five. Then go.”

“Count to five.”

“Not out loud.”

“I wasn’t going to count out loud, Del.”

She smiled, careful, like handing him something breakable. “You’ll be fine. Go straight, don’t stop, and if you feel like you’re walking too slow, slow down more.”

“What do I do at the end?”



“Nothing.”

“Don’t I have to, like, vogue or something?”

That got the cute smirk she usually only showed him in private.

“Don’t pose, don’t flirt. Just stand there for a sec, turn, and come back.”

“You keep saying ‘come back’ like maybe I won’t.”

“Hey.” She took his chin between her fingers. “I’m not putting you out there to make a point. I hope you know that. You look incredible. You’re gonna kill them.” She kissed him, then opened his mouth with her tongue. He tasted her wine, his vinegar, and underneath it all something metallic. “Come back,” she said, and let go.

The line moved. Kit pointed. Elena’s gold lamé flashed back into the hallway and disappeared behind him.

One. Two. Three. The door opened. Bass thumped against his sternum. *Four. Five.*

Wes stepped through into a corridor of light. The runway stretched thirty, maybe forty feet. Shapes stirred in the dark on either side, but with the spotlights aimed at him, everything beyond was a black hole.

He put one foot forward. The dress resisted, then followed. Foam bounced on his chest, music devoured his ears, and he walked. There

was a red Exit sign at the far end, so he aimed for that. Hell, maybe he really would just keep going.

Suddenly, his left heel caught on nothing, he skidded, and the dress stretched wide at the knee before he caught his balance. Shit! He corrected. Nobody gasped—or if they did, the music swallowed it up. Maybe that was the point, like blinders for horses. The fabric settled back against his legs.

Halfway already. That was too fast, had to be. He shortened his stride, and it was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. The heels thudded on plywood, and he couldn't really feel his arms. He half-wished someone would stand and point. "There's a man in that dress!" they'd shout, "Get a load of him." No one did.

Wes reached the end. The black beyond was alive, breathing, a hungry crowd pressed up to the edge of the light. A camera flash went off to his left, printing a blue square on his retina. He counted to five again, just because, then pivoted. The runway was longer going back, time-dilation in effect.

As he neared the door, he thought maybe he heard clapping, but that was crazy. Wes didn't look to confirm either way, he just walked back into the dark.

Rosalind was there. She caught him by the elbow. "Good," she said.

"I'm going to puke," he replied.

Rosalind sat him on a crate and started pulling pins. She worked fast, one hand inside the dress at his waist, the other collecting pins between her lips like she was eating them. The models—the other models—were already back in yoga pants and sports bras and were funneling out of the hallway. Apparently there were snacks and hard liquor waiting for them in the break room. Wes didn't like hard liquor, but he'd soon be drinking quite a lot of it.

Rosalind yanked the zipper. Air rushed in, cold on his back, and the foam padding flopped loose.

"How bad was it?" he asked.

"Not."

"Not what?"

"Bad."

He exhaled. The dress gaped at the underarms where she'd unpinned him, disappointed to let go. "I think I fucked it up."

"I'd tell you if you did. You think I sugarcoat shit?" Rosalind tugged the zipper down the rest of the way. "Delia wanted shy, she wanted pretty, she wanted vulnerable. That's what you gave them." She pulled the last pin free. "You're done."

"Thank God."

"We're not on speaking terms." Rosalind slid the pin into her

tomato and looked at him. “Like I already said, you did good. Now relax.”

Kit dropped onto the floor next to him, phone in both hands. “Oh my God, I’m posting the whole thing. I got it from the wing.”

“You were filming? I didn’t see you.”

“You’re not supposed to see me, I’m supposed to see you.” She tilted the screen toward him.

There, in vivid high-resolution, stood an alternate-reality version of Wes Kolbeck. The face was softer, eyes wider, lips parted. He looked like a woman. No, a girl. A vulnerable, pretty, shy girl in a dress that she clearly hadn’t chosen but belonged in anyway, and the rest of the world could go to hell.

“Fuck me,” he said.

“Sorry, that’s not my department.”

“Don’t post that.”

“Kinda already did.”

“No.”

“Yes? Don’t worry,” she said, “it’s on Second Hand’s account, not yours.”

“That’s not better! I have like ten followers. How many do you have?”

“Uh, well, more than ten.”

“No, no, no. C’mon, I don’t want half of New York to see me in drag.”

“Well, then you shouldn’t look so fucking good in a dress.” She jabbed the screen. “It’s already at a hundred likes. Oh, shit, fifty more.”

He tried to swallow. Couldn’t. “Delete it please.”

“Dude, I can’t. This is my job.”

“You’re an intern.”

“Delia wants engagement,” Kit said. “And you were in her favorite dress for the show. So, you want me to take it down, you ask her, not me.”

Wes put his face in his hands. The foundation was sticky against his palms, and he was going to ruin Kit’s meticulous work, but now he really didn’t give a shit.

“Check out this comment.” Kit turned her phone around again.

“I’m not looking.”

“Well, they like you. A lot. The dress too, obviously, but you—”

“Wes.” Delia was in the doorway, her hand braced on the frame. She had the look she got coming home from a good trunk show, or a day when everything for once bent her way—she’d walk in and shepherd him into the bedroom and they wouldn’t come out until she was sated. He liked that. But this wasn’t their apartment. She couldn’t—

Delia crossed the cramped hall in four strides, her hands landing on his bare shoulders. She kissed him hard, then harder, like she’d been saving it up, like nobody else was in the room or the whole world. Her lipstick smeared. Her breath was fast.



Kit made a cartoon *yikes* noise and jumped up. “Okay, I’ll just be over here,” she said, and didn’t leave.

“You looked so fucking hot out there in my dress, in front of all those people. And you have no idea, you have no idea what you looked like.” Delia’s hand traced where the foam padding had been, and she was laughing, wild. “I could barely keep from jumping your bones in front of everyone. God, I should have.”

“You’re trending, apparently.” Wes nodded at Kit.

“*We’re* trending.” Delia gently bit his earlobe. “Thanks for doing this. Seriously.”

He shuddered. “You’re welcome. Seriously.”

Kit saw her first. “Oh shit,” she said, putting down her phone. “Guys, guys, stop making out, here the fuck comes—”

Through the fire door came a woman holding a very large glass of very red wine. She had the unhurried stride of someone who’d never been late for anything in her life. If you were there before she arrived, you were early. She was late-forties, dark hair in a pixie cut that could’ve been done at a kitchen table but was definitely done in a salon on the eighty-something floor of some building where the elevator had its own doorman.

“Delia,” said the woman.

Delia’s hands left his shoulders, and she suddenly stood very tall and very still. “Marguerite. Thank you for coming.”

“You’re welcome, you’re welcome.” Marguerite gulped the wine as her gaze dipped from Delia to Rosalind. “Rosy. Hello.”

“Margie.” Rosalind set her sewing kit on the crate. She didn’t stand. “How are you?”

“Fine. You?”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

Marguerite nodded, as if concluding a ritual. The wine glass was already half-empty. She looked back at Wes, her eyes flicking up and down. “This is the closer.”

Delia said, “Yes.”

Marguerite tilted her head. “Stand up, sweetheart.”

Wes looked at Delia. Delia gave him nothing. He stood.

Marguerite circled and sipped wine—slower now that there wasn’t much left—and peered into his face. “Not what I expected.”

“I get that a lot.” Fuck. Why’d he say anything? Since when was he coy with strangers?

“I imagine that’s true.” She turned to Delia. “The column dress is yours?”

“Everything tonight is mine.”

Marguerite waved her free hand. “Everything tonight you *own*, but did you farm out this design? Buy it from some Peruvian seamstress and stick your own label on it? You can tell me, I’ve seen worse.”

Delia’s mouth twitched. “It’s all mine, every single one. The pattern, the drape, the finish. Ask Rosalind.”

Rosalind grunted. “I sewed it, but she’s the brain.”

“The brain and the hand,” Marguerite said, turning to Wes. “What does that make you, dear?”

The body. That was what she wanted to hear. Wes stood straight and silent.

Marguerite smiled at him. It was a small smile, and it was worth a lot of money. “What’s your name?”

“Wes.”

“Wes what?”

“Kolbeck?”

Marguerite finished her wine. “Is that a question?”

“No.”

“Who reps you?”

The question sat there for a second. “What do you mean?”

“He’s mine,” Delia said quickly.

“*He*—” Marguerite’s eyebrows rose. “—is your model?”

“That’s right.”

“And *he* is new?”

“Brand new.”



“Well.” Marguerite looked at Wes again. “He doesn’t walk like a model. I loved the hesitation, the little stumble at the top. Was that choreographed?”

“No,” Wes said.

“Good. There’s nothing worse than a model that believes she’s an actress. You wear Delia very well, Wes Kolbeck.” She turned back to Delia. “I want six pieces for the fall buy. We’ll start with ten stores and see what happens. I want the column for sure—” she gestured at Wes with her wine glass— “and I want him in the lookbook.”

“The lookbook.” Delia’s voice was steady, but she gripped Wes’s hand very, very tightly.

“Is that a problem?”

Delia shook her head.

“Is it a problem for you?” Marguerite asked Wes.

“What’s a lookbook?”

Marguerite’s wine-stained lips curled back. “How precious. A lookbook is a little magazine with all the season’s clothes, sometimes with prices, sometimes just for your enemies to see how much better you are than last year. The pretty ones get sent to buyers, editors, bored billionaires’ wives, and the TikTok children.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh.” Marguerite set the glass on the crate. “Rosy knows how to get in touch, or at least she used to. I’ll send my assistant around to handle the order. If you want to talk rates, we’ll do it tomorrow when I’m less drunk. Great show, Delia. But next time, buy better wine. Good night.”

She walked out through the fire door; the hydraulic closer sighed behind her. Four seconds. Click.

“Six pieces,” Delia said, to no one. “Holy shit.”

“Is that...good?” Wes asked, but Delia’s face was blank, or maybe rebooting, so he turned to Rosalind. “You had twelve.”

Rosalind had picked up Marguerite’s wine glass and was staring at the lipstick on the rim. “You don’t get more than three with a first collection. Six is—Yeah, it’s good.”

Kit leaned back against the wall. “I think I need a cigarette. Does anyone smoke?”

Delia let go of Wes’s hand, running her fingers through her hair, mussing the top until the blue chunks stood out like coral. “Shit. Okay. Shit! We should go back out there.”

“Del,” he said.

“People are going to want to talk to you.”

“Del.”

She stopped. “What?”

“I’m really proud of you.”

Wrong thing, right thing, he couldn’t tell. Delia blinked fast and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. “Same,” she said, already walking. “C’mon, and please don’t touch your hair.”

They stayed another hour. After all the guests were Ubered away, Wes changed in Delia’s office. It didn’t have window blinds, but the neighboring buildings were dark and, hopefully, empty. By the time he was all zipped up, he looked exactly like the guy who’d come off the G train six hours ago, except for the makeup, which Kit had only half removed with a coconut-scented wet wipe.

“You’ve still got eye makeup,” she said. “It looks good.”

“Goodnight, Kit.”

“I’m just saying. Some guys can pull it off, and you’re one of them.”

“And *I’m* just saying, ‘Goodnight, Kit.’”

She hugged him. He didn’t expect it, and her bony arms were stronger than they looked. “You did really good tonight,” she said into his neck. “Check the account tomorrow, you’ll freak out.”

“Already there.”

She disappeared around the corner. He heard her say goodbye to someone by the elevator, then the gate folded shut, and she was gone.



Rosalind didn't say goodbye because she wasn't leaving. "To much to do," she told him, and that was all. She was back at her machine, head down, pulling thread through glossy black fabric. A lamp glared at her profile, and only her hands moved. Wes watched her for a while, then walked out.

Delia was waiting for him in the hallway. She looked tired, she looked happy, and Wes had never seen that combination on her. He liked it. Taking his hand, she led him into the freight elevator, then onto the loading dock, into the fuzzed, pink-gray night. It was late, but not late enough for Brooklyn to be empty, even in the industrial wasteland where Second Hand squatted. Down the street, people were laughing loudly, probably coming out of a bar, but for the first time in Wes's life, those others were the extras. The camera was on him and Delia, and he could be in a column dress or nothing at all, and no one would look away. It started raining, just a mist, and she pulled him under an awning. She leaned against the cinderblock wall, hands in her jacket pockets, and tipped her head back to watch the sky.

"I can't believe it," she said after a while.

"I can."

She looked at him. This time, she didn't press the heels of her

hands to her eyes. She let whatever was welling up there come. “Let’s go home,” she said.

Their apartment was dark when they got in. Wes went to turn on the light, but she stopped him, pulling him away from the door by the hand, into the kitchen. Behind them, the hallway light glowed through the peephole.

“You want water?” he said.

She shook her head.

“Wine?”

She shook her head again and reached for the hoodie zipper. She pulled it down, slow, the teeth parting with that sound he’d been hearing all night—things opening, being undone. She pushed the hoodie off his shoulders, then the flannel. “You were beautiful.”

“Hey, Del, c’mon don’t tease—”

“I’ll only say it once.” The tee came off. She put her palm against his sternum, and his heart was there, and she pressed into it. “You were beautiful. *Are.*”

What do you say to that? He’d spent the whole day watching himself in windows and mirrors and phone screens as if beauty were something you caught the way you caught a cold, never sure if it was real or just the light or just Kit’s makeup or just Delia’s wanting.

But maybe it wasn’t any of those. Maybe it was something you could try on, see how it fit, and maybe it wasn’t so bad. Maybe it was something you could step into and out of, like a garment—like a dress.

“I want to see you in something,” she said.

He waited.

“I made it a few months ago. It’s in the bin.”

The bin. He knew about the bin—the box in the back of the closet with outfits Delia made for herself and never wore. She claimed that was bad luck, or maybe just bad taste, but he’d never gotten her to explain why.

“It’s not for me,” she said, “I mean—I made it for me, to see if I could. But... I was thinking about you. I didn’t realize it then, but—” She stopped. “I just want to see you in it.”

“What is it?”

“Just a slip.”

“Another dress?”

She nodded, like the rest was obvious. “Try it on, please.”

He glanced at the clock. 10:41 p.m. “Now?”

“Yeah.”

He looked at her, blue shadows on her face, rainwater still in her hair. She smiled, a little crooked, and for a second he thought: *this is what keeps you alive, one day this will be gone*, and he wanted so badly to keep it, to hold this dumb, happy moment and watch it shimmer



while it lasted.

Delia didn't blink or look away. She stood there, arms at her sides, letting him decide.

He did.

Wes went to the closet. He found the bin. Blue plastic, a cracked corner. It was under her out-of-season boots. He hauled it out and pawed through the folded layers. On top was unhemmed muslin, a failed pair of pants, a skirt with a safety pin where the zipper should be. At the bottom, a slip of black silk, cool and liquid in his hands. The tag inside read *Second Hand*, stitched in bright blue.

He took off his shorts, his underwear, and stepped into it. The fabric came up over his hips, his waist, his chest. It was lighter than the dress—almost nothing, just a whisper—and it settled around him. He turned. Delia was waiting in the dark, a rectangle of light on her arm from a window across the alley.

“Jesus,” she said.

He didn't make a joke. He couldn't find one.

She pulled her shirt over her head, her skirt off her hips. Her body was the body he knew, the one she kept in solid colors and never made patterns for, wide at the hips, full at the shoulders, the body that had



made her the tallest person in the room since she was twelve. She stood in her bra and underwear, and then she crossed her arms and looked away.

“You’re so pretty,” she said, and her arms tightened.

Wes reached for her. When was the last time she’d been reached for? Last month, last year? Had he ever reached for her, or had he always made her do the reaching, the pulling, the finding? How unfair.

He let his hands slide over Delia’s arms, and her skin prickled under his palms. She didn’t move when he touched her shoulder, letting him trace the line up her neck to the hinge of her jaw, the same spot she always found on him. He kissed it, and she flinched, not away, but into him, her whole weight tipping forward. He caught her against his chest. The silk slip was cold, her skin hot, flushed from her neck to the tops of her breasts. She shivered, and for a moment she was the small one, the one who could be broken, and he held her, hands pressing into the hard muscle of her back.

He kissed her. She made a sound into his mouth and it vibrated his teeth, his chest, and between his legs. She backed up, he followed. The geometry was the same—her tilted down, him tilted up—but now he was the one moving forward, and she was the one giving ground. Her

shoulders hit the bedroom door frame and he pushed her inside, until the back of her knees found the bed and she sat.

“I want you to fuck me,” she said.

“Like this?”

“Please.”

His hand found the clasp of her bra. He’d done this before, hundreds of times, but tonight his fingers were steady. The clasp opened. She shrugged the straps off and the bra fell between them. His chest was against hers, silk on skin. The slip was so thin he could feel her heartbeat.

She pulled him down on top of her and the silk rode up his thighs. Her hands went under it, and she pulled him in and made that sound again—the low one, the almost-word—and this time he understood. It was his name.

He took his time. She let him.

Wes woke up before her, which never happened.

The apartment was gray with early light. Delia was on her side, facing the wall, one arm over a pillow, bare back rising and falling slowly. He watched her sleep for a few minutes. The slip was still on him, wrinkled and twisted, but he didn’t take it off. Instead, he walked to the kitchen, bare feet on cold tile, and started the coffee. While the water heated, he picked up his hoodie from the counter. It felt heavy and rough under his fingers. He put it back down.

His phone was dead. He plugged it in, waited, and rubbed a hand over his face, the sticky smudge of yesterday’s makeup still heavy in the corners of his eyes. When it came on, he logged into Instagram. Kit’s post had twelve hundred likes. He put it down.

Then he picked it back up. The comments on the video were a scroll he couldn’t stop reading and also couldn’t begin to process. *Who is she. Obsessed. That DRESS. Is she new? What’s her name!?* He swiped to the second slide in the carousel. Kit had included a high-res still of the moment he’d stopped at the end of the runway—chin up, hands at his sides, the dress catching the light. He looked at the photo for a long time, searching for the Wes he knew and finding nothing to hold onto.

Except, that wasn’t right. The person in the photo had his mom’s eyes, his dad’s nose, the dark circles Kit had painted over, the shaggy hair Rosalind had pinned back, and every single cell of him, all forty trillion. The person in the photo was him, always had been him, standing there the whole time, under the hoodie, under the flannel, under the tee, waiting for someone to say *unzip*.

The coffee maker clicked off. He poured two cups, setting one on the counter for Delia before taking his to the window.

Below, Queens was already wide awake. A truck backed down the



street, its warning beep going. A woman walked her dog, the animal pulling left, she pulling right.

Six pieces from Delia. A lookbook featuring Wes. A future where he was more than an empty coat hook.

He sipped his coffee. The slip caught the light and went silver at the hem. Behind him, Delia turned over in bed, the sheets rustling, a small sound that might have been his name again.

The hoodie was on the counter. He was cold. He left it there.

A woman with short, wavy blue hair and light brown eyes is looking directly at the camera. She is wearing a strapless, dark teal lace top. She is positioned in front of a large, dark-framed mirror. The mirror reflects her face and the back of her head. To the right of the mirror, a piece of white paper is taped to a brick wall. The paper has the text "DO NOT FUCKING MOVE THIS MIRROR" written in black, hand-drawn capital letters. The background is a brick wall, and there are blurred figures of other people in the distance, suggesting a public space like a museum or gallery.

DO NOT
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