

# The Catch

Alyson Greaves

*illustrated by*  
Emory Ahlberg

# Chapter Seven

Should he stand?

Should he sit?

Should he perhaps wait for her in the meeting room, and then walk into the main room of his office at the same time as she enters from the corridor?

No.

He will sit. And he will wait for her. And when she arrives, he will conduct himself with dignity.

Michael does not have to wait long. At precisely eight fifty-eight, the intercom fitted to his desk — which he has long since required Miss Steele to make use of, lest she injure herself on his office floor and require messy medical attention — lights up, and Miss Steele's voice, so much more pleasant when he cannot see her, says, "Antonia Bessemer to see you, Mr Lincoln."

He wore his best suit today. Every suit he owns is borderline identical, tailored to flatter his lines, but this is his most comfortable, the one which most perfectly sits upon his shoulders. The one in which he is most himself.

And today, he needs to be himself, because today is important.

"Send her in, Miss Steele," he says into the intercom. And then he has to say it again, because in his anticipation and excitement, he forgot to press the little button.

The doors to his office open quietly but not silently, and the soft susurrations of the brush strip against the flooring is all Michael can hear. All, that is, save his heart, thumping in his skull.

In the doorway stands Antonia, dressed elegantly in a dark grey pinstripe pencil skirt, black boots and light grey blouse, her hands clasped in front of her, the ghost of a smile on her face. Behind her, comically short and almost hunched compared to Antonia's straight, proud back, is Miss Steele, who as ever has apparently chosen to dress to match the furniture of a much shabbier office.

He dismisses Miss Steele with a nod, and directs the entirety of his attention to the radiant creature standing before him.

Antonia *glides* into his office atop her spike-heeled boots. She does not fall, she does not try to make herself small, and she does not look away. In this she is the antithesis not only of Miss Steele but of Anthony himself, and Michael's

heart — which is still, unfortunately, pulsing so hard and so fast he worries Antonia might hear it — begins to warm.

He was right.

Such grace, such elegance, such *flesh* was wasted on Anthony. He was Antonia's captor, her gatekeeper, the thing that kept her from being born into the world, and one look at her face as she walks quickly and confidently towards him confirms to him that she knows this, that she is well aware of the dignity and privilege of her new station in life.

Michael has taken a man whose life was about to lock into a path of tedium, drudgery and lost potential, and birthed something truly beautiful.

He stands as Antonia approaches, and she takes his hand. She doesn't shake it, like an ambitious young executive might, all enthusiasm and misplaced vim; she holds it in one hand, covers it with the other, and gently bobs on her



knees, minutely lowering herself before him for a moment. She's telling him that she is here to help him, that she is here to support him, that she is here to supply for him whatever he requires.

"Antonia Bessemer," she says, in the voice he's grown accustomed to on their calls but which is so much more velvet in person. He wants to ask her to speak her mind on any subject that interests her. He wants to ask her to read the business directory or the dictionary or something, anything so he can listen to her voice. "I am excited to be working closely with a man of your reputation."

Michael, caught in the moment, says, "You've heard of me, have you?"

And Antonia looks down for a second, smiles, and then looks up at him through her eyelashes. "You could say I've done my homework," she says.

Michael swallows. "I am delighted to welcome you to the team," he says, his throat dry.

"Thank you, Mr Lincoln," Antonia says.

She's still holding his hand. He doesn't want her to let go. He doesn't want her to *ever* let go. The warmth of her, the sheer vitality... The fact that he is *touching* her.

He catches himself, for just a second, wondering how she binds back her penis in her form-fitting skirt, and then dismisses the thought of it as unworthy of them both.

Or he tries to, at any rate.

What would it be like to reach for her, to ask her permission, to receive it, and to slowly raise her skirt, roll it up her thighs and over her hips, and—?

"I understand my office is down the hall?" Antonia says.

He blinks. Is he sweating? He's sweating. He will need to change his shirt.

"It is," he says.

"I can show you," he says.

"It's just down the hall," he says.

"It's close," he says.

Antonia smiles. Still holding his hand, she says, "I'm sure I can find it myself. Your offer is *very* generous, Mr Lincoln, but I'm sure you're a busy man."

And she takes herself from him. Relaxes her grip on his hand. He would grab her, hold her, keep her in his presence if he were anyone but Michael Lincoln, if he were the man he sometimes wishes he was, the man who could simply reach out and take what he needs, what he wants. But he lets her go, because he would despise that man, because as much as Antonia's womanhood, her femininity — and her wardrobe, her apartment — are gifts from him, Antonia's gift to *him* is her presence, her smile, and scent of flowers and vanilla.

As she steps back, her fingers linger on his hand, stroking him from knuckle to nail, and then she's gone, walking quickly from his office, leaving him with nothing but the sound of her heels and a laugh so soft he might as well have imagined it.

\* \* \*

What a rush. What a *rush!* Michael Lincoln, the richest and most influential man in the city — perhaps in this whole part of the country — in the palm of Anthony's hand! And that's quite literal: he could feel the power he had in just that near-insignificant skin contact. He'd known, somehow, that if he'd let Michael go but not actually moved his hand, if he'd just held his palm next to his, that Michael would have been stuck there, unmoving, hypnotised by Anthony's presence, by his touch.

Ahem. Not Michael, he reminds himself. *Mr Lincoln*. Anthony set boundaries inside his head for a reason; he might be letting Antonia out to have her fun, but he needs to stay in control. He can't lose himself to this.

No matter how tempting it is.

God, and it's so tempting. He wants to turn around and walk right back in there, pretend to have forgotten something, to have dropped something, but he mustn't, and not just because it would spoil the game.

The frumpy girl is waiting for him.

She takes him down the corridor to his office, and he's surprised to find that it's been redecorated somewhat. There's more furniture scattered around, more places to sit, more places to work. Some of that is perhaps because Michael— because *Mr Lincoln* will be keeping Anthony in post when Sandra returns, and they'll both need somewhere to work, but it's not hard to imagine another motive.

Frumpy girl desultorily shows him around: his desk, his chair, his filing cabinets, etc. She points out to him a post-it with his new login credentials on it, and she stumbles on her way out, and that's Anthony's prompt to start work on the thing he was overtly hired to do.

His boss has a company to run, and Anthony's also here to help him do it.

So he logs in, changes his password, fends off the spam of welcome emails and setup messages, and gets to work, trying as he does so to calm the butterflies in his belly.

\* \* \*

Michael is sitting very, very still. He feels as if he is filled with liquid, and that at the slightest nudge he might spill, might overflow, might topple over and disgorge himself. It is a profoundly unsettling feeling.

He has lost control.

At the same time, it's rather funny. Not in a manner his mother would appreciate, certainly, but he must acknowledge that despite his achievements, despite his status, despite his wealth, it is only *now*, with the acquisition of a single employee, that he seems within reach of acquiring something he desires, something for which he would mortgage his future, his reputation, his very name. Further, said new employee has reduced him to a stuttering, uncertain mess. It is all rather ludicrous.

More than that: it is hilarious! Michael allows himself a single, careful laugh.

His mother did always insist that he would find the right woman one day. He will have to keep it from her that he *made* her.

Though it appears very much that she is making herself. Just weeks lie between Anthony and Antonia's respective first visits to Michael's office, and yet they are profoundly different people. And even if Michael can recognise in Antonia the minute and quickly hidden signs of someone who sometimes struggles to maintain her nerve, the fact remains that she is doing so. She is *not* faltering; she is not failing. He has known businessmen of twice her age and a hundred times her wealth fail to capture a room the way she has.

Granted, this is only her first day, but a woman who can step out into the world *as a woman*, despite the unfortunate accident of birth that rendered her male, requires more confidence and self-belief to do so than anyone else with whom Michael has ever shared an office.

To think, this wondrous, confident beauty could have been born from Anthony Bessemer! The man himself likely never even imagined himself capable of such feats; Antonia could therefore abandon all this tomorrow and be forever altered for the better.

Michael would prefer she did not, of course.

What is fascinating is that her self-confidence appears rather to sap *his*. In her presence, he feels inadequate, confused and lost, and the novelty of such sensations does not mean that he wishes to continue indulging in them. He cannot! He will next encounter Antonia at a meeting arranged for this afternoon, a meeting which Michael purposefully scheduled for today, for as soon as he experienced his first kiss, he felt an irrepressible desire to show Antonia off to his peers.

All eyes will be on both of them.

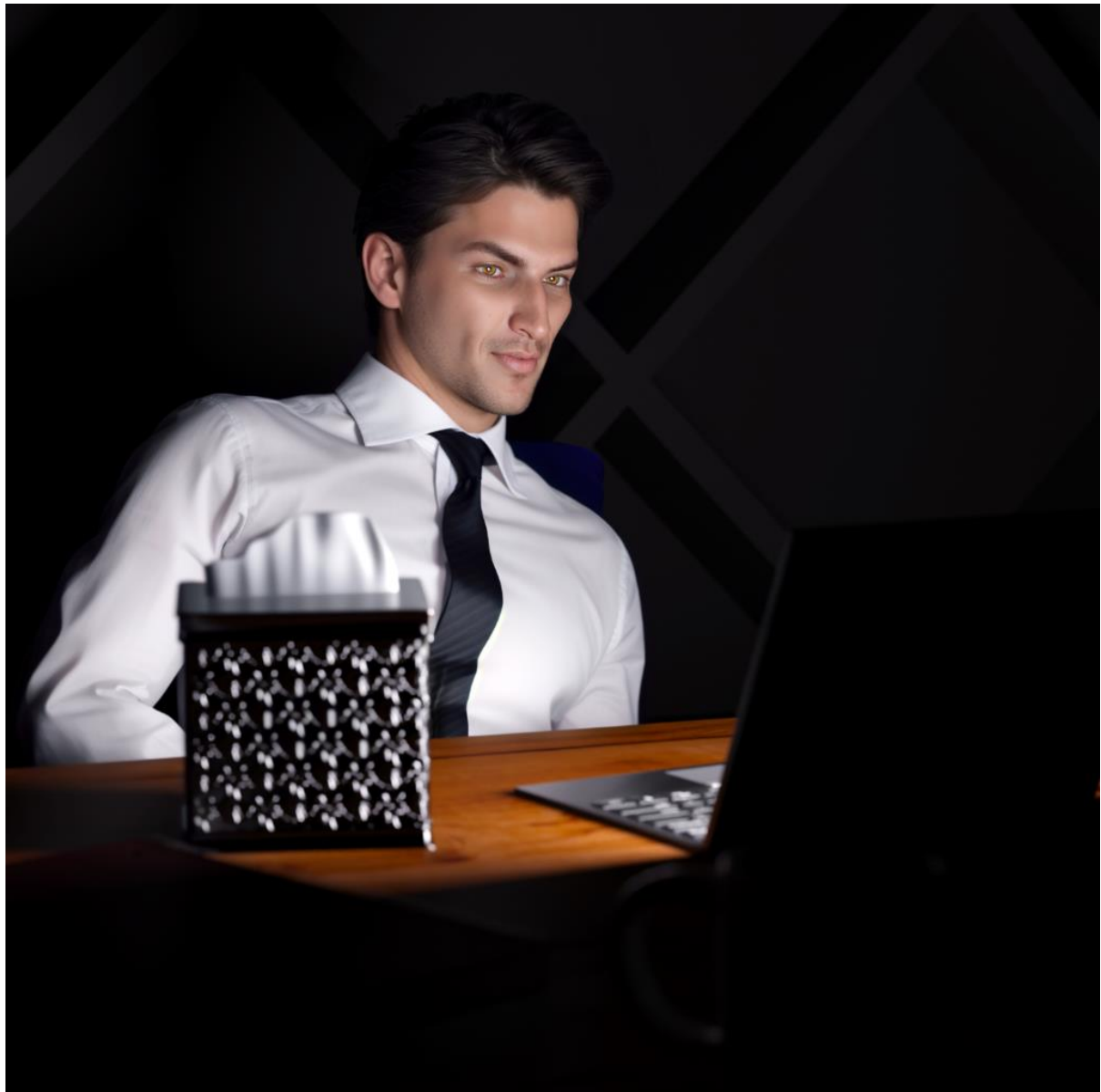
What is required of him, then, is to ensure that he does not fail himself. If he is as malleable in her presence as he was just now, then Antonia will already have unmade him, quite by accident, just hours into her first day.

She has stepped up. She has proved herself. It is time for him to do the same.

Michael hits the button that closes the blackout blinds, locks his office door, and silences his desk phone. On his PC, he calls up a collage of images of Antonia, taken from security footage, video calls, and the selfies she sent him. He opens a desk drawer and withdraws several tissues, which he tucks into his shirt as if he is about to eat a particularly messy meal.

It's all a little tricky: his hands are shaking.

Preparations made, Michael leans back in his chair, unzips his trousers, and renews his confidence.



\* \* \*

It's a surprise when one of the other executive assistants enters Anthony's office, and it takes him a moment to remember once again that he's not *just* here as the plaything of the richest man in Manchester, that he also has meetings to coordinate, diaries to merge, that sort of thing. Weird to be falling so suddenly back into the same mundane bullshit that made up his entire working life barely a month ago, only now to be doing it in a skirt that restricts his movements.

Miss Huang, assistant to the CFO, does the thing people do when they're coming into your office anyway but they want to be polite about it: she opens the door and knocks at the same time, entering with a smile that gently apologises but a laptop and a thick paper folder that both promise *work*. Anthony met her before, and found her perfectly pleasant, if a little standoffish.

Today, though, she seems different.

"Hi!" she says, sweeping over to Anthony's desk and depositing her laptop and papers on the end. "Sorry to just *barge* in on you like this—" she accompanies the word 'barge' with a hearty elbow-jab to mid-air, "—but our respective bosses are going to be butting heads this afternoon and I thought we should break the ice first." She juts out a hand. "Sue Huang. You can call me Susie, though; everyone does. Everyone who earns under a hundred grand a year does, anyway!"

Her laugh is sweet and abrupt, and makes Anthony briefly homesick for Bridget. He wonders what Susie's like when she's drunk, because it is surprisingly easy to imagine her downing fruity drinks alongside Bridget and making obscene gestures at anyone unwary enough to wander close.

She's made up to look 'corporate pretty', i.e. less ostentatiously than Anthony, but she has better raw material than he does, so she can afford to play it light. The most she's really doing is plumping her somewhat narrow lips. Her boss probably thinks she doesn't wear makeup at all.

"Antonia," Anthony says, taking her hand and smiling. "Hi, Susie."

"Antonia Bessemer, right? That's so funny!"

Anthony fights the sinking feeling in his stomach: it's funny because there was a guy with almost that name here two weeks ago, right?

"Oh?" he says as innocently as he can.

"Yes!" Susie yelps, as if he ought already to understand the joke. "Oh, right. You probably didn't get properly introduced to the girl you're replacing. We had a temp — still do, actually, for the rest of the working day, I imagine — and her surname was Steele! And you have her job now!"

Anthony's eyebrows collide in his confusion. "Um, I'm not sure I—"



“Steele!” she says excitedly. “Bessemer! Steele? Bessemer? Ah. Huh. I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

“Done what?”

She taps herself on the chest. “I did history at uni, and now my brain’s full of useless facts. Sometimes they just—” she fights back a burst of laughter, “—sort of fall out of me! Look up the history of your surname someday.”

“I will,” Anthony says, smiling.

Does she not recognise him? They met only once, he’s sure, and he wasn’t exactly here for *long*, but...

Does she *really* not recognise him?

He’s just trying to think of something to say when someone *else* arrives, and this one’s far less welcome: Jeff Dutton, who described himself to Anthony in one of their previous encounters as ‘something senior in Marketing, you



know, near the top, tremendously important,' and who subsequently made several sotto voce and incredibly crude remarks about what a shame it was that Michael hadn't hired a pretty girl instead of Anthony.

Well, here are *two* pretty girls now.

"*Su-sie!*" he exclaims, marching in through Anthony's door without even a courtesy knock. "How lovely to see you out and about for a change."

Susie, whose demeanour has instantly frozen, says, "It is Miss Huang, Mr Dutton."

"O'course, o'course," Mr Dutton says, dismissing her with a rude little waggle of his hand. Anthony feels suddenly as if he ought to correct the man somehow, but then he is pinned under his gaze. "And who might *you* be?"

"Antonia Bessemer," Anthony says, borrowing some of Susie's new attitude and wondering if it was a mistake to give his surname.

But the man shows no sign of recognition. He does seem like he needs to be shot with a tranquiliser dart, though, because he's leaning on Anthony's desk and allowing his eyes to roam Anthony's body.

"Delighted to meet you," Mr Dutton says. Did Anthony imagine it, or did the man place a subtle emphasis on the word 'meat'?

Anthony tucks his chair a little farther under his desk, the better to conceal his legs.

"If you don't mind, Mr Dutton," Susie says, with perfect control, "Miss Bessemer and I were working."

"O'course!" Mr Dutton says. "I was just on my way to see the big man. Thought I'd stop by, introduce myself to the new girl. Great to have you on board, Antonia! Just great."

Susie closes the door firmly behind him. "Sorry about him," she says, visibly relaxing as she trots quickly back across the office and perches in the chair next to Anthony. "Office bastard. Every company has one. Keeps his behaviour just this side of the line. Don't give him an inch, Antonia."

"Thanks for the warning," Anthony says.

"Men!" she says, shaking her head. "They can't seem to stop themselves, can they?" And then she slaps her knee and briskly continues, "So! We were about to merge our bosses' diaries, and I was going to fill you in on all the goss, right?"

"You were?"

"Oh, Antonia," Susie says, pulling her chair up to his desk and opening her laptop, "there's *no* escaping the gossip around here."

\* \* \*

Incredible what a spot of light exercise can accomplish for body, mind and soul. Michael has refreshed himself, and no longer feels so discombobulated, so... out of control. Yes, he has the video feed from Antonia's office running in a corner of his screen — Antonia is currently liaising with the excellent and efficient Miss Huang, assistant to the CFO — and yes, he is wondering how the terms of the contract might be leveraged to encourage Antonia to accept, say, one or two cameras in her apartment, but by far the majority of his attention is focused on work.

A good thing, too: he is behind.

Judith Walker makes an appearance, right on schedule, and by the time she arrives, he is almost ready for her. He raises his left hand, to ask her wordlessly to wait for him, and quickly saves and closes his current brace of applications, returning his computer desktop to the pristine wilderness he prefers when he is between tasks.

"Headache?" Judith asks, sitting and setting her paperwork down as she does so.

Michael frowns. "No?"

"You closed the blinds," she says, nodding at the windows.

"Oh," he says, hitting the button to start them swinging open again. "Glare," he adds, hoping she doesn't require any further explanation.

"Don't mind if I do!" Judith says, and waits the customary two-to-three seconds for Michael to be perplexed by her sense of humour. "Oh, lighten up, Michael."

"Believe me," Michael says with a smile, "I *am* trying."

Reaching over her small pile of documents, Judith briefly touches his hand. "I know you are, Michael," she says. "There's... something we should talk about." Michael doesn't respond, just waits for her to continue, and after a moment, she does. "Antonia Bessemer. Her transformation is... quite difficult to believe, Michael. I know a little of how long hormone therapy takes to work, so am I to assume she has had some... other treatments?"

He affects a small shrug. "To the best of my knowledge, she has not."

"Right," Judith Walker says, nodding vaguely. "It's just, Michael, it's not hard to see why you're interested in her. She's a... vivacious young woman, and you have been single for so long, and..."

"Mrs Walker—"

"*Mister* Lincoln," she interrupts, "I believe I already questioned you about this. And you assured me that there will be no sexual harassment suits in our future."

"There will not."

“Then what I tell you now, I tell you as a friend: be careful, Michael. She may feel financially beholden to you. And that can cause young women, no matter whether they are transgender or... otherwise, to lower their inhibitions. To consent to things they would otherwise refuse.”

He nods seriously. “I am aware,” he says.

“Good,” she says. “Good. Just as long as you know.”

\* \* \*

Susie Huang finger-gunned her way out of Anthony’s office, leaving him alone once again, this time to contemplate just how insane it seems that three people in a row — Susie, that Dutton guy, to whom Anthony has taken an even greater dislike than before, and one of the secretaries from downstairs who dropped by to see Susie — all of whom met him *and spoke to him* as Anthony have now absolutely failed to recognise him as such.

So, either he’s passing really well, or people aren’t that observant, or they’re just being polite.

It occurs to him that Jeff Dutton, of all people, would not have come on so strong with someone he believed to be a trans woman, so that just leaves options one and two. Which, really, are both kind of the same thing, aren’t they?

The thought is exciting. Because if nobody recognises him, if Anthony Bessemer made such a minimal impression that people don’t even connect his relatively unusual surname to Antonia’s, then that means...

That means fuck it, right? That means he might as well go buy lunch in the canteen downstairs, because if no-one’s going to recognise him, no-one’s going to pull him aside and say, hey, weren’t you a bloke, like, two weeks ago?

Being so forgettable has never been an advantage before.

Though it’s also a thing of the past, isn’t it? Anthony might have been a borderline-hallucinatory creature, an urban cryptid, shambling from temp job to temp job, existing in the memories of a dozen former managers and a hundred former coworkers as, ‘Oh, I don’t know, I don’t really remember; didn’t he have brown hair, maybe?’ but that’s not Antonia. Antonia commands attention just walking down the street.

Then she can also command attention as she buys herself a nice executive sandwich, can’t she?

Anthony takes the stairs. It’s only a couple of floors down to the canteen, and he’s noticed that almost nobody else uses them, this far up the building. The

stairwells are largely for the denizens of the lower floors; up here, where all the most important people work, nobody seems to bother.

He wobbles a little on his spike heels a couple of times, but there's no-one to see him, and it's good practice: he has flat surfaces mastered, and even the potholed and uncertain pavements of Manchester are mostly no longer a challenge, but he is not entirely perfect at descending stairs, especially not the steep and near-slick stairwells of Lincoln-McCain. There's a knack to it, and he's still learning how to angle his feet so he is at no point resting his entire weight on a barely centimetre-thick metal spike. He feels a little dumb, right at this moment, for selecting a skirt that slightly restricts his thighs, but it made quite an impression on Mr Lincoln, so it was thoroughly worth it. Just so long as he doesn't trip and arrive at the canteen level in a crumpled — but highly fashionable — heap.

The canteen floor is laid out differently to the other floors: where on every other storey the stairwells and elevators disgorge you into a small lobby area, usually with misted-glass-walled offices directly in front of you and tastefully discreet little signs informing you who the lords and ladies of the relevant departments are, and where they might be found, the canteen is immediately open, and the noise that hits Anthony as he rounds the corner and lands without incident in the lobby is... Well, it's not deafening, not even close, but compared to the sombre executive floors, it's like stepping into another world.

Fortunately, Anthony has experience with that.

There are a few chains set up in each corner, each with short queues, and several other more generic serving stations in a huge circle, right in the centre. Anthony joins the queue for the cold food station, eyeing the sandwiches and the fruit and thus almost missing how many heads have turned to watch him.

He doesn't so much as pause. Antonia wouldn't. Antonia's used to attention. She seems to thrive on it, actually, though whether that's because Anthony's been starved enough of it over the years to have developed an independent craving for it, or whether Antonia's just like that, is something he hasn't yet decided. Nevertheless, he allows his nascent conception of her to direct his actions, and looks out across the room, smiling at no-one, trying to create the impression that while, yes, she is here, and, yes, she belongs, and, yes, she might well know *someone* in this vast and noisy canteen, it's probably not any of the several dozen people currently looking at him.

His eye alights on one in particular, one who seems to be watching him more closely than most of the others. He carefully doesn't frown as he tries to focus on her without focusing on her, and it takes him another couple of shuffles towards the serving counter as the queue moves on, with him idly sweeping the

room with his eyes each time, to identify her: Sharon Blair, from Online Rec. They met. Oh shit, they met! And she's still *looking!*

She recognises him!

Except, no, she doesn't seem to. She looks away, returns to her food and her conversation, and Anthony's almost disappointed, because if there was *one* person at Lincoln-McCain he'd like to remember him, it's Sharon Blair. She made quite the impression on him at their one and only meeting, being not only beautiful but charitable enough not to laugh when he tripped over a trashcan in her presence.

God. He remembers her face so clearly.

And that, he suddenly understands, is a tremendous mistake, because his dick, previously mostly quiescent and only a little sore in its prison, makes its desires known.



*Fuck.*

The queue moves on again, and Anthony tries to think of boring, unerotic things, like pencils and trains and sausages and that rocket on the news the other week that blew up; unsuccessfully, because the image of the gorgeous girl from Online Rec keeps popping back into his head, and his body reacts in the predictable manner of a hungry male body that hasn't gotten to have an orgasm in a *long* time.

He feels himself shift under his skirt.

*Double fuck.*

He's not Antonia any more; he's Anthony, trapped in a tight skirt and a mastectomy bra and a pair of boots he can barely walk in, and he's surrounded by hundreds of people. He feels broad, he feels shapeless, he feels stupid, and most of all he feels like if he doesn't get the hell out of here as quickly as possible, he's going to pop a boner in the middle of the Lincoln-McCain canteen.

Anthony grabs the first food item to hand — a banana — and takes the final step up to the hand-scanners. He pays for it and leaves as quickly as he can, moving awkwardly in his restrictive skirt so his penis doesn't come completely untucked, wobbling on the heels he can't walk in, practically falling forward instead of walking. He makes it to the elevators, throws his stupid banana in his bag, and collapses against the wall of the first lift to open up and accept him.

He really hopes Sharon didn't see his nervous glance back at her as he left.

\* \* \*

Anthony's office has blackout blinds now. All he has to do is slap the button next to the light switch by the door and they close, shutting out both the world outside and, more importantly, the corridor he just stumbled in from. Mr Lincoln probably has some other use in mind for them — Anthony doesn't want to think about that right now — but right now they are good for one thing: stopping any other fucker in this building from watching him have a minor breakdown.

Jesus Christ, that was close! He's got to be more *careful!* False confidence will get him exposed, literally!

He slides home the little lock on the inside of his office door — another new addition — and staggers over to his desk. He flops into his chair, dumps his handbag and his single-banana lunch somewhere out the way, and takes a moment just to calm down.

He's okay. He's okay. No-one saw anything.

He looks down. He doesn't *think* there's a visible bulge under his skirt, but the erection — *No, be accurate, Ant, it was a half-on at best* — fatally disturbed his tuck, and he won't feel confident or comfortable until he puts it back.

Fine.

Sighing, he unzips and kicks off his boots, stretches out his toes — have his little toes started to curl in? *Focus, Ant!* — and stands again, briefly taking pleasure in stomping around his office on flat feet. Then he turns away from the glass walls out to the corridor and unzips and lowers his skirt.

Yeah. Nothing to see. Thank *fuck*. Nothing to see.

He still needs to fix it, though, so he does, realising as he painfully digs his partially squashed penis out of the folds of his two pairs of knickers that Nitya was absolutely, one thousand percent correct to recommend he wear shapewear under his skirt and blouse; without it, he's pretty sure his partially untucked dick would have shown through.

He should get her a thank-you card or something.

With it all fixed, with his skirt zipped back up and his boots back on his feet, there's now only one more matter to address: he's still Anthony. Down there in the canteen, he lost Antonia, lost her confidence, and now he has — he checks the clock on his PC — just fifty minutes to get her back, because he and Mr Lincoln have a meeting, and he absolutely cannot be Anthony in front of Michael.

He sinks back into his chair, closes his eyes, and tries to become *her* again.

The kiss floats back into his head — though it has never been far from his thoughts ever since it happened — and this time he welcomes it, because that was something Antonia chose. That was her sympathy for Michael breaking through; frankly, and it's difficult to admit this even in the roaring silence of his own head, it was her lust for Michael, too. Just a little bit.

She was created for him. She likes him. She enjoys seeing him smile and she *really* enjoys seeing him squirm. When she is with Michael it's like she crystallises, becomes her purest and most brilliant self.

Is that how to get her back?

Damn. Kinda seems like it. Or maybe it's not the only way, but it might be the quickest way, and he's not exactly flush for time.

So Anthony leans back in his chair and he thinks of Michael. He thinks of how sweetly flushed he was this morning when Antonia touched his hand, when she ran her fingers along his knuckles. He thinks of how it felt when Antonia kissed him. And he thinks of the dreams, the many dreams, in which Antonia has taken control of Michael and Anthony both, and led them in an intricate, intimate dance.



Under his skirt and his shapewear and his two pairs of knickers, Anthony's dick shudders again, fighting once more against its prison, but Anthony doesn't notice.

\* \* \*

She had a little trouble, that much is obvious. After Judith Walker left for her out-of-town appointment, Michael returned to his work and that meant, quite coincidentally, once again running the small window focused on Antonia's office in the corner of his screen. He resisted the temptation to follow her with the security cameras when she left her office at lunchtime, but when she returned seeming both flustered and unsteady on her feet, he wished he hadn't. She shut herself immediately inside her office, made herself invisible to everyone but the security cameras, and then...

He'd thought, at first, that she was about to masturbate, but before he could formulate a suitable rebuke, he realised that she was just rearranging herself. And nobody, not even Michael, would pleasure themselves while so clearly distressed.

And then she just... sat there. Her eyes closed, her breathing slow. As if it was all suddenly too much for her.

He wanted so badly to go to her, to offer his assistance, but Judith's intervention provided a timely reminder that this is all — for now — quite alien to Antonia; his presence might well have been a detriment.

He's already decided that if she doesn't show for the meeting, he will run it without her, and *then* he will check on her, and he's starting to act on that assumption — closing down his computer, assembling papers, etc. — when his office door opens and Antonia steps briskly inside, a laptop bag in one hand and a sheaf of documents in the other. She nods professionally at him, allows herself what Michael would love to believe is a flirty smile, and strides over to the meeting room, opening the door with the slightly scolding nature of a mother who insists on 'airing out' the childrens' rooms.

"Refreshments in five," she says, and then she disappears into the meeting room and begins setting it up. Almost exactly five minutes later, one of the older ladies from the canteen downstairs arrives, and she acknowledges Michael with a smile that is thankfully not at all flirty before guiding her trolley into the meeting room. Inside, Antonia greets her with a delighted, "Betty! Let me help you with that."

For a little while, all Michael can concentrate on is the clink of glassware and the sotto voce chatter of employees exchanging pleasantries while well aware that their boss is in the next room.

She seemed so troubled just minutes ago! For her to bounce back so quickly and seem so normal...

Michael's impressed.

And then he scolds himself: he knew all along that she was exceptional, so why is he even surprised?

Antonia is a miracle.

\* \* \*

The others start to file in. In truth, Michael despises holding meetings in the room attached to his office: fastidiousness is not a requirement for an executive position at Lincoln-McCain, despite Michael's repeated temptation to make it so, and after so many people have passed through his office, he often finds it to be almost *spiritually* dirty, even though the worst that usually happens is perhaps a scuffed footprint or two, from someone who has rushed to attend and has come straight up from street level. On such days, he leaves his office after the meeting, and has the cleaners straighten everything up.

But he wanted the meeting here today so Antonia would feel comfortable.

He's beginning to think he needn't have worried.

Antonia greets his executives as they arrive and directs them to their seats. She directs a professional nod toward Miss Huang, who is her usual tightly wound self. The woman from the canteen — Betty — starts to serve water, coffee and tea, and Antonia assists her, halving the time it takes everyone to get situated. And when everything is ready, Antonia settles into the chair next to Michael's, opens her laptop, and prepares to take notes.

Michael is profoundly glad that it is not him who is leading this meeting, because as Antonia sits, attentively watching Sherise Winters from Sales, she crosses her legs, raising her pencil skirt father up her thigh. As Sherise advances through her presentation, Antonia dangles one booted foot off the floor and absently swings it back and forth. And when the CFO takes over for the next portion of the meeting and Antonia looks up, fingers poised on her MacBook, she is so professional, so present, so *sexy* that Michael simply cannot stand it.



And then she glances at him and shares a little smile, something meant just for him, and Michael has to cross his legs lest he lose all control.

\* \* \*

Yeah! Okay! That went well! Sure, all Anthony really had to do was set everything up, make sure the stupid audio recorder was working, and take notes on his laptop without, for example, falling out of his chair, but he managed it all, and even directed a couple of conspiratorially exasperated grins Mr Lincoln's way, when the dull-as-dishwater CFO got into whatever feedback loop it is that makes him say everything in triplicate; no wonder Susie said she spends most of her time at work singing show tunes in her head.

And now all the important people are gone, with Susie only lingering to ask if he wants to join her for drinks after work — he declines, but agrees to a solid maybe for the next time the executive assistant gang gets together for a bitchfest. And then it's just him. Him and the cleaning up.

Anthony fusses around the table, collecting a few sets of abandoned minutes, sweeping up the shavings from when that one guy from HR decided he wanted noisily to sharpen his pencil while the CFO was talking, and checking that the stupid audio recorder actually has a file waiting for him. He hasn't trusted the bloody things since he worked for three weeks at an office complex out in Salford, where they were always breaking, either failing to record anything at all or delivering corrupted, useless files, so he made sure to record everything on his MacBook, too. He jams a USB key into it — he doesn't trust their network connectivity, either — and he's waiting for it to copy the file when he realises Mr Lincoln's still here.

Oh yeah.

Mr Lincoln's still here, still sitting in his chair at the end of the table, and he's looking up at Anthony with a little smile on his face. So what Anthony needs to know now is whether this is a work thing — maybe Mr Lincoln has something important to say — or if it's all part of the game.

*But then, it's all part of the game, isn't it?*

"Miss Bessemer," Mr Lincoln says, "how is your first day going?"

Anthony decides not to mention his little freakout at lunch, because, yeah, this is absolutely part of the game. "Very well, Mr Lincoln," he says, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "And please, call me Antonia."

Mr Lincoln stands, carefully shunts his chair under the conference table, and crosses his hands in front of him. "Antonia, then," he says.

He's standing so stiffly, seeming so unsure of himself, and Anthony couldn't be more delighted. It's easy to remember why his first encounter with Mr Lincoln today was so intoxicating; easier still to remember Antonia's reaction to it, and the things he made himself remember — indulge in — in order to bring her back just two short hours ago.

Anthony has the advantage here. And he knows *exactly* what to do about that!

"Are you not going to allow me to call you Michael?" he says, stepping closer.

Mr Lincoln's temples are starting to bead with sweat. He might even be trembling.

"I, uh, suppose that would be acceptable," Mr Lincoln says.

Another step closer. Anthony's now close enough to feel every shallow, tense breath, and he reaches out towards Mr Lincoln, moving slowly so that his boss — more importantly, the man who will eventually make him a multi-millionaire — can back out at any time, can say no, can proclaim that he doesn't want this, that this is disgusting, that Anthony is a man, et cetera, et cetera.

But he's not going to, is he? Anthony's seen himself, and he's seen himself through the eyes of others, and he *knows* he makes an attractive woman. And yes, a lot of it is in the makeup, in padding himself in appropriate places and choosing clothing carefully to flatter his otherwise unexceptional figure, he also knows that won't be the case forever.

And so does Mr Lincoln.

Fuck it; be in the moment, Antonia.

So does *Michael*.

She takes his tie in her manicured fingers, runs it through her grip. Tightens her fist at the end of it, and pulls gently, forcing Michael forward, closer still, close enough that not just his breath but his heartbeat pounds against her. Their bodies are touching, and only her hand is in the way, so she releases her tie and straightens her back.

In her heels, Antonia and Michael are very nearly of a height.

"Just acceptable?" she says softly.

"I don't—"

She makes a show of leaning away, looking around. She finds the security camera exactly where she expects to, and she turns back to Michael. "Could we perhaps have some privacy?"

She's teasing him with this, she knows. But she's teasing herself, as well: this close, close enough to see every pore on his face, every twitch of every muscle, every failure of control, she's *drinking* him in, and for what seems like the hundredth time today, she shifts inside her underwear.

But it's not like it was when she caught the eye of the girl from Online Rec. This is *immediate*, and furthermore, it is guaranteed. She and Michael are bound by contract, bound by their shared secret, and even if they weren't, Antonia is only slightly surprised to realise that if she were asked if she could swap Michael Lincoln, as he is now, sweating and shaking and reaching slowly for his laptop to switch off the camera, for Sharon Blair, she absolutely would not.

She wants him.

"There," he says. "We have—"

Why let the man finish? She knows what he's going to say, and she's uninterested in it. What she wants from him now isn't more of this nervous, unpractised roleplay, it's *him*.

She kisses him. Pushes herself against him, takes him by the waist and kisses him.

Under her mouth, he relaxes. Michael is powerless against her.

Nobody prepared her for this. Nobody made her understand the degree to which her body is a weapon, that it can be *wielded*, and not in the ugly, blunt, masculine ways she theoretically aspired to before. No, this is a body that is powerful because of how it is perceived, because of how it is worshipped, and it is a power she can use.

Michael opens his lips, and she slips her tongue inside.



There's a pressure against her body. Michael's erection, the thing she suddenly understands he's been struggling with for the entire meeting, the reason he seemed sometimes to be squirming in his seat, and other times to be sitting almost comically straight up... It's pressing against her, and raised as she is on her heels, it is positioned almost exactly where *hers* would be, were her penis not still tightly bound under her skirt.

She ought to be horrified. But what would be the point? Michael is erect, and he's erect *for her*, and that means only one thing: in this game they're playing, where the stakes are Anthony's body and Michael's reputation, *she's winning*.

Antonia pulls away. Michael doesn't want to let her go, but he doesn't grasp or pull at her. He lets her, frowning a little, but not fighting.

She could fuck him right here. It's a stunning, heady realisation, but she could. He would do anything for her right now.

Instead, she leaves him wanting. And he allows her to.

"Good boy," she whispers.

\* \* \*

He's closed all the blinds again and he's locked the door again and he's masturbating. Again.

He's ashamed of this, oh *God*, he's ashamed. Antonia deserves better than this, she deserves more, she deserves someone with self-control and not someone who falls apart multiple times a day over a simple handshake, a simple kiss, but as soon as she left, closing the door to his office behind her and throwing back a simple, sultry, "Thank you for this opportunity, Mr Lincoln," he could no more prevent himself from the need to indulge himself than he could stop his own heart.

This is just temporary.

It's *just* temporary.

He will learn self-control around her.

He *will*.

She kissed him, and all he wanted was to take her with both hands, to throw her against the wall, to press his shameful erection against her, have her massage it, accept it into herself. The desire had been so all-consuming that he had no choice but to lock himself up completely, to allow only the barest of movements.



When she pulled away, when she smiled at him while he stood there, tongue rapidly retracting, arms still stiffly bound at his side, she must have thought him such a fool.

He will learn self-control.

And it starts with exposing himself to as much Antonia as he can.

He cleans up, throwing away another pair of tissues and checking — again — that he hasn't got mess on his suit, and then he calls up the recording from the second camera in the meeting room, the one that isn't on the main system, the one he bought online.

There. The kiss. The view is partially obscured by a pot plant, unfortunately, but he can see enough. Antonia walks up to him, takes his tie in her hand, pulls him close, kisses him.

He rewinds. Again.

Again.

Again.

He will not be so craven around her again. He will expose himself to her as much as is necessary, and next time — tomorrow — he might even manage to say something borderline intelligent in her presence.

He'll also move the pot plant a bit, in case she wants to kiss in the meeting room again.

\* \* \*

Susie Huang catches up to Anthony on his way out, and he's grateful for it, because he's been caught in the comedown, trapped in an unaccustomed and slightly terrifying space between Antonia's wants and the things he is still learning slowly to be comfortable with.

She really took control.

So Susie is a welcome distraction, and they natter a bit as they wait for the elevator. She's a reassuringly normal presence — and still reminds him of Bridget — and she grounds him.

"You just get used to tuning him out," Susie's saying as their elevator opens into the main lobby. She's holding Anthony's bag for him as he pulls on his trench coat — he still loves this deep green colour — and when she hands it back, she adds, "Don't let him know you're doing it, though! I recommend occasionally nodding and going, 'Uh-huh,' or, 'Yes, Mr Singleton.' That's got me through a *tonne* of interminable lectures. Anyway, what's Mr Lincoln like?"



The question is a harsh reminder of what recently happened, and Anthony blushes. Antonia, however, turns a happy grin on Susie, and says, “He’s... nice.”

“Ant-*onia!*” Susie exclaims. “Do you... *like* him?”

Antonia shrugs. “Little bit. Maybe.”

“Well, I wish you luck. I don’t think anyone’s seen him with a girl — or a guy — in all the time I’ve worked here. I was beginning to think he, you know—” she leans closer, “—was a bit Patrick Bateman.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for axes,” Anthony says, regaining the initiative over both the conversation and the part of him that’s already replaying one of the scenes from the movie where Christian Bale gets naked, and imagining Michael in his place.

Out in the lobby, there are a few people milling about, and Anthony’s about to follow Susie out to the exit when a figure breaks off from one of the groups



and walks confidently towards them both.

Sharon Blair. The girl from Online Rec. The one whose eye he caught at lunch and who nearly — unknowingly — unmade him.

“Hi!” she says, all smiles, greeting Anthony directly. “It’s so nice to see you again!” She frowns for a moment when Anthony doesn’t say anything, and adds, “Sharon Blair. From Online Rec.”

“Hi, Sharon,” Anthony says, feigning ignorance. “From the canteen, right?”

Her eyes widen for a moment, and then she nods. “From the canteen, yes.” She turns to Susie and says, “Miss Huang, do you mind if I borrow her?”

“Not at all!” Susie trills, and she gives Anthony a finger wave before striding towards the main doors.

“So,” Sharon says, turning back to Anthony, and looping an arm through his, “do you want to go somewhere? I was thinking maybe we could have a coffee and you could... reintroduce yourself.”

Oh shit.

She knows.

So what choice does he have but to go with her?