

The Catch

Alyson Greaves

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Chapter Nine

“Why did I say tonight? Why did I say *tonight*? I’m an idiot. I’m a moron. I’m an *unprepared* moron. Worse, actually, because I prepared for this and I *still* made a stupid decision. I’m like one of those mice with the cat parasites, and I’ve wandered right up to the local apex predator and said, ‘Hey, babe, what if I stuck my head in your mouth, that’d be cool, right?’ except I’m *worse*, because mice don’t have to find a *nice fucking dress* before they get eaten alive!”

“Uh—”

“Too blue! Too yellow! Too long! Too short! And this one, oh, this one is perfect if I want to *die on the Titanic!*”

“Hey, Ant—”

“Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus *Christ!*”

“Ant!”

He’s still holding five dresses draped over his forearm, five very likely extraordinarily expensive dresses, so he doesn’t react to the sudden reminder that Bridget’s been on speaker the whole time with the exasperation that he would prefer. Because he’s gotten *good* at pushing down his instincts over the last three weeks, and he’s even made a decent start on replacing them with new ones. But he doesn’t know what the fuck to do right now, and he realised as soon as he started going through his closet with Bridget on the line that neither does she, and that all he managed to achieve by calling her and practically sobbing into his stupid fucking iPhone is to spread the ignorance out over a wider area.

“Bridge,” he says, laying the dresses down on the end of the bed and avoiding looking at the phone as he speaks, like he’s avoiding making eye contact with her, “I’m a fucking idiot.”

“We knew that already,” Bridget says. She sounds like she’s chewing, and that means she probably has a pizza or something, and what Anthony wouldn’t give right now to have a simple evening planned, the sort he used to have with Bridget all the time: four slices of pizza; four bottles of wine; only a slight possibility of a stomach pump.

“No, I mean it. I’ve got *all* these dresses and they were all chosen *for* me by one of Michael’s personal shoppers and that’s great, but *none* of them come with *notes!* Just *one* post-it is all I ask, Bridge. One post-it to say, ‘This dress is particularly suitable for a lazy afternoon by the sea.’ Like, you see this one? With the yellow panel and the detailing along the—”

“This isn’t a video call, sweetie; whatever it is you’re talking about, I can’t see it.”

“It’s got yellow bits, Bridge.”

“I am visualising it perfectly.”

“And? Is it something you’d wear to a posh restaurant?”

“Oh *God*, no,” Bridget exclaims, and despite himself, Anthony smiles. He can picture her holding a hand to her chest in faux shock, and he hopes that this time she did it with whichever hand is not also burdened with a wine glass. “You *never* wear *yellow* to a posh restaurant!”

“Have you ever *been* to The Midland, Bridge?”

“Yes, of course I’ve been to the Midlands. Had to go to some stupid expo in Birmingham once. Skinny girl central. Hated it.”

“The. Midland.” Anthony spells it out, hoping that it’s just interference on the line and not Bridget being even more sozzled than he would expect at six o’clock on a Friday evening. “The hotel on St Peter’s Square. It’s *posh*, Bridget. They once kicked out The Beatles for being improperly dressed!”

“Oh. Shit. Well then, you’d better dress nice, hadn’t you?”

If Anthony throws his phone at the wall, Michael will buy him another one, right? What if he throws it *through* the wall?

“Yes,” he says through gritted teeth. “I know.” He picks up his phone and exercises great personal restraint in doing nothing more but switching off the speaker. “Look,” he continues, trying to maintain his Antonia voice while moderating his volume — for some reason, it’s easier to sound like a woman when he’s shouting; he should ask Dr Matheson about that. “Forget The Midland. It was just some place he suggested; we could be going anywhere. Have you ever been to *any* posh restaurants before? Like, ever?”

There’s silence on the line, followed by a slurping sound: Bridget, contemplating. Eventually: “I’ve been to Pizza Express. I was asked to leave.”

“Goodbye, Bridge.”

“Wait!” she shouts, becoming tinny as he once again pulls the phone away from his ear and fiddles with the screen, trying to remember how you end calls on an iPhone. “Don’t hang up! Don’t hang up, Ant! I can help—!”



Silence. Blessed silence. He was an idiot to call Bridget; she's the perfect person to ask for advice on how to look slutty for the pizza delivery guy, but for the new, upscale life he appears to be slipping further and further into, he needs someone with actual expertise.

Shit. Look at him. Standing here in his underwear, with his hair up and still wearing his work makeup, surrounded by dresses, all of which absolutely fucking baffle him. He needs *help*.

Well, he knows an expert, doesn't he?

* * *

The car drops him outside Butterfly Beauty and the driver helps him with his pile of dress bags. Anthony remembers to smile demurely, and then Nitya's

there, ushering Anthony up the path, grabbing the dress bags from the driver and shooing him away.

“When’s the reservation?” she asks, holding open the front door.

“Um. Eight-thirty.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Then you’ll be there at nine. We don’t have *time* for eight-thirty.” She hefts the bags. “Is this everything you have?”

“Everything even remotely posh-looking, yes.”

“Good. Come with me. And brace yourself, Antonia.”

Anthony follows her into one of the salon rooms. “For what?” he asks.

Nitya’s already holding up the first dress bag and examining its contents. There’s a second chair pulled up next to the salon chair, and it’s covered in arcane beauty devices.

“You know how they say beauty is pain?” Nitya says. “They were downplaying it.”

* * *

Michael decided against The Midland in the end. It has a grand old history — Rolls Royce was founded there! — and his family have been patrons since the fifties, but the atmosphere is wrong. Antonia came to him today asking to *get to know him*, and as much as Michael has been struck since that moment by a sincere doubt that there is anything inside him to know, he has been certain of one thing: he wants to dine with her somewhere intimate, somewhere special.

And so he is now waiting for her in the rooftop terrace of Spiral, a tenth-floor restaurant atop one of the newer commercial buildings in the city, and what it lacks in history it more than makes up for in ambience and romance. Spiral occupies three storeys, comprising a daytime café, a bar and, at the very top, a five-star restaurant with views across Manchester. Michael asked for a table with a view, and it certainly has one: he can see Lincoln-McCain, he can see the skyline, currently lighting up as the sun sets, and if Manchester were not such a consummate source of light pollution, he expects that later, he would be able to see stars.

Antonia is late, but she texted with many apologies to say that she was going to be, and Michael is not outwardly averse to taking his time with his water refills. Inwardly, he is squirming, because the rooftop terrace is starting to fill up with couples, many of them moneyed and most of them amorous, and Michael has never been comfortable among people in quantity. Worse, some of the young women are *looking* at him, directing at him that appraising gaze

he's always hated, that narrow-eyed speculative stare that says they're calculating his net worth under their breath. To distract himself, he once again peruses the menu, though he knew within thirty seconds of sitting down what he will be ordering, and what he will suggest for Antonia.

Almost fifteen minutes later, Antonia finally arrives, and Michael instantly forgets his discomfort. For the woman walking gracefully towards him is a *vision*, a delectable, delicate and impossibly desirable creature spun in asymmetric black silk. Her dress ends temptingly close to the top of her thighs, and though further folds of diaphanous black enclose her legs almost to the knee, they leave nothing to the imagination.

Her hair has been imbued with volume and shine, and curls lightly at her shoulders, and her makeup is... Michael does not know the words to describe what he sees, having no experience with makeup despite his boarding-school



education — the smaller, slighter boys were, thankfully, the ones who were made to play girls in the annual productions, and as they performed, Michael looked upon them with a sense of profound relief but also an impertinent and improper feeling of *longing* — but he knows that it is both beautiful and applied by an expert hand.

He rises to meet her, revels once again in the few inches of height he still has over her in her heels, and accepts a soft, quick kiss on the lips, inhaling her scent as he does so and trying to keep himself from imagining what she hides under her dress, what lies trapped inside her underwear, what waits for him when he is one day bold enough to ask her for it.

“Antonia,” he says, “you look lovely.”

* * *

Jesus *Christ*, the girls here are pretty!

Michael’s pulled out the chair and he’s gently sat Anthony down in it and that was *very* much appreciated, because it meant Anthony could concentrate on keeping his short dress from riding up and showing the whole of Manchester his knickers, and that’s important because from the moment he set foot in this three-storey abomination of wealth and excess, he’s felt eyes on him. The men are looking at him, yes, but less so than usual, and he knows why: it’s because of the selection of stunningly beautiful women here. Here, he is average *at best*. In fact, here it’s the women who are looking at him! And it couldn’t be more clear that they are finding him wanting, finding him an awkward, thick-limbed, small-breasted waste of flesh.

Anthony could swear he heard one of them laugh at him.

He feels... *wrongly shaped*.

It’s at its worst here on the roof terrace. For if the main body of the top-floor restaurant is split roughly equally between people with money and holidaymakers, out here, it’s wall-to-wall wealth. Men — uniformly older than Michael — with wives and girlfriends who are mostly under thirty, with some of them looking to be even younger than Anthony, and while the men are all well-tailored but otherwise aesthetically variable, the women are...

Fuck. They’re all so much *better at this* than he is.

Nitya made good on her threat, though most of the promised pain came from the corset she insisted on strapping him into, though she insisted on calling it ‘shapewear with boning’ when it was, to Anthony’s eyes, *clearly* a corset; the rest of it was mere discomfort from having to sit in the awkward

corset, from the padded breast forms she replaced his mastectomy bra with, and from having to look at himself in the mirror as she worked her magic on his hair and makeup. And the whole time while she was making him pretty, he was anticipating this moment, this table at this restaurant, the stage on which he must perform... and he couldn't stop focusing on the little bump in his nose, on the tall forehead he hides with a fringe, on his *shape*. For although Nitya promised that the black dress she picked out could be adjusted perfectly to both hide and enhance his figure — especially with the assistance of the uncomfortable corset — he knew with all his heart that there would be girls at the restaurant who needed no such help.

He was only wrong in that he underestimated just how beautiful they would all be. *So much more so than him.*

* * *

He must be doing something wrong. Antonia looks wonderful, and she smiles for him, and she accepts his choices for her from the menu, but she is subdued. Incredibly, it's as if she is afraid! She who walked in here as might a princess, as might someone who has been controlling rooms since she was born! And now here she sits, sipping daintily from her wine glass, picking at her chicken, and replying in short sentences to his questions.

It's Michael. It must be. He's *doing something wrong*.

And yet.

No.

She meets his eye and he reads her unease.

He's a fool.

It's an *act*. All of it: dressing as she does, walking as she does, *looking* as she does. It's so easy to forget how new to this she is, how fresh — how like a flower; unplucked — and Michael, guilty of many things, is most guilty of losing his mind when she is around, of being drawn helpless into her orbit, of becoming in front of her the nervous, inadequate person that Anthony once was in *his* presence. Of becoming once more the unsure person that Michael himself once was, before he was taught otherwise.

Antonia's ease is as learned as Michael's, and just as with Michael, when it comes under pressure, it falters.

A lesser man, perhaps, would order more wine, would attempt to lubricate her social responses and *force* the evening to go more smoothly, but that would be unwise. Her determination to get to know him is admirable, but

unfortunately it seems it cannot be conducted in a place such as this.

An error, then, on both their parts. And one they can work past.

They must finish their dinner first, though.

* * *

Anthony must concentrate on walking. Not because he is drunk — the two glasses of wine he paired with an unsurprisingly excellent dinner have barely touched him — but because he is returning from the ladies' loo, and because his every instinct is screaming at him to *run*, to run from this place, away from those catty bitches and their perfect faces and their perfect figures and their perfect femininity.

There were other women at the mirror, and even though he stopped only for long enough to wash his hands and check his face, it was time enough for one of them to comment on his 'spanks' — whatever that is — and another to suggest in the sweetest and most fake tone of voice Anthony has *ever* heard that he should apply more contour if he wishes to hide his brow ridge.

They saw right through him. And in the mirror, he saw himself next to them.

He wants to go home and wash off all this *shit*, rip this dress to shreds, throw the corset in the trash chute, and hurl these shoes out the fucking window. He wants to switch *off* for a while. And until he can, the need to escape is overwhelming.

So he places one foot carefully in front of the other, and he walks back to their table, and he suggests to Michael that perhaps they should not stay for dessert.

But Michael looks so crestfallen that Anthony's resolve breaks, and he agrees to let Michael drive him home.

* * *

"May I see you to your door?" Michael asks, expecting Antonia to refuse, to leave Michael alone once more, but the sight of her building seems to unlock her, seems to release the tension she's been carrying since she sat down in the restaurant, and she agrees. So Michael is able to play the role he's been dreaming of.

Even if this evening is short, and even though Antonia clearly did *not* have

a good time, there are still some moments to be cherished. He opens the car door for her and holds out a hand, and she accepts it, allowing herself to be helped out of the car. Together, they walk through the glass front doors of Antonia's building and to the lift, and she never lets go of his hand.

Michael commits every step to memory.

The elevator hums around them.

At her front door on the eleventh floor, she rummages in her clutch for her keys, and then hesitates. She's facing away from him, and he can't see her face, but he's certain that she's thinking hard; perhaps even arguing with herself.

Then she turns and says, "Would you like to come in? For a nightcap?" But before he can reply, her composure breaks and she giggles, adding, "Oh my God. A 'nightcap'? What am I *saying*?" She places a hand on his shoulder, and then leans fully against him, her elbow on his chest, her forearm crossing him and heating him with every inch of him that she touches.

"Antonia?" he asks. Carefully, because he's not sure what's happening.

"Sorry," she says, looking up at him with the most genuine smile he's seen all evening. Perhaps all week. Perhaps *ever*. "This was supposed to be a whole thing, a really good idea, and I screwed it up. Screwed up the *whole* night. And, for some reason, I want to make it up to you. So come in, and I'll Google what a nightcap is and see if I can make us one while we talk."

"Talk?" Michael repeats, feeling foolish. She's invited him in! And he is suddenly terrified that he could say the wrong thing and cause her to revoke his invitation.

The shade of his mother seems to remind him that *he* is the one paying *her*, that he could walk into her apartment without invitation, that he has a contract that says he can make her do whatever he likes, within reason. And, she seems to remind him, *money* can stretch *reason* quite a long way.

He ignores her. She only ever appears to give voice to his worst impulses, his least noble thoughts, and he is as accustomed to tuning out his imagined version of her as he is the real thing. Cruel old woman.

"Come on, then," Antonia says, unlocking the door and stepping inside. When he doesn't immediately follow, she takes his hand and leads him in, sweeping up a remote control from a little table just inside the main room and hitting a button. Soft music begins to play.

"You've done a wonderful job here," Michael says, making a show of looking around, though truthfully, it's still quite bare.

"It sucks," she says, waving a hand. And then she covers her mouth in mild shock at herself. "Not the apartment! The apartment's lovely. But it's still mostly undecorated, I know. I haven't gone nuts with it yet. I should." She

shakes her head, and her mouth twitches. “I need to start acting like this is all for real.”

“For real?” Michael asks, and he wonders when his conversational nous departed him, for it seems all he can manage is to mouth empty platitudes and occasionally echo her own words back to her.

“I’m going to be here for ten years. I should act like it.” She frowns. “I don’t know what a nightcap is. And I can’t be arsed to Google it. You want some wine? That’s probably a reasonable nightcap substitute, don’t you think?”

Michael follows her into the living room, lays his jacket on the arm of the couch, and sits. “I would love some wine.”

She nods and skips off to the kitchen, suddenly moving naturally and quickly on her heels. It’s as if she has been freed, as if a great weight which descended upon her at the restaurant has been removed. He realises, looking back, that what he has been reading as grace in her movements up to this point is more legible as *training*.

It is as he thought: it was an act, and the act was hard on her. What is a surprise, though, is that here, in her element, in her *home*, she is natural and carefree, but no less feminine.

More, perhaps.

“I’ve only got plonk, I’m afraid,” she calls from the kitchen. “Nothing fancy.”

“If it is served by your hand,” Michael replies, already unsure as to why he chose the stiff, formal wording, “I’m sure it will be wonderful.”

She stands up from where she’s been crouching by one of the kitchen cupboards, another smile on her face; this one wry, amused. “Oh, sure. *My* hands.” There’s something else there, something Michael can’t quite read, but she moves on before he can identify it. “At least I have wine glasses,” she says, returning from the kitchen with a bottle of white in one hand and a pair of glasses held by the stems in her other. “At Bridget’s, we’d run out. Constantly. Have you ever had rosé out of a Thermos?”

“I have not,” Michael says.

“It doesn’t improve it,” Antonia says, rounding the couch.

And then Michael comes to his senses, and rises, retrieving both bottle and glasses from Antonia and directing her to sit. Before she does, she shuffles some coasters out from a pile on the edge of the coffee table, so Michael has somewhere to put everything.

He pours for them both. For ‘plonk’, it doesn’t smell too bad. And neither, when he raises his glass to her in salute and then rests it against his lips, does it taste offensive.

Supermarket wine. Perfectly fine.

Does it mean anything that Antonia finishes her glass all at once and immediately reaches for the bottle to fill herself up again?

Probably not.

Michael decides to match her.

* * *

“We should get dessert,” Anthony says.

He’s kicked off his shoes and giggled at the way Michael briefly could not tear his eyes away from Anthony’s feet. He’s got them a second bottle of Sainsbury’s white. And he’s chosen to sit next to Michael, legs crossed, with his ankle playing against the fabric of Michael’s trouser, because the sensation is interesting and because it does funny things to Michael’s facial expressions.

This is so *easy!* Being back at home, back where he knows where everything is, where he’s not going to get ambushed by the contempt of a bunch of random girls who don’t know how lucky they are to have gotten twenty years’ experience of being a girl under their high-fashion belts before they set out to woo rich men.

“What kind of dessert?” Michael asks.

Anthony’s clutch is on the coffee table, so he reaches for it, extracts his iPhone and waves it in front of Michael like a magic wand. “Anything you desire,” he says, trying to sound sultry. “Seriously, though, I’ve been good today. I’ve had, like, three-quarters of a plate of chicken. You don’t even want to know what I had for lunch. So I deserve chocolate cake. Do you want chocolate cake?” Michael, still looking as mildly bewildered as he has for at least the last half-hour, nods, and Anthony starts scrolling, looking for the perfect balance of decadence, cream, and a little cherry on top.

He doesn’t know why, but he *really* wants a little cherry on top.

He might be drunk.

He orders them a slice each of Black Forest gateau from a place with good reviews, and knocks back the rest of the glass of wine he’s been working on. Replacing the iPhone on the table gives him the opportunity to rearrange himself on the couch, and he does so, tucking his ankles under his bottom and angling himself so he’s facing Michael more directly.

They still don’t really know anything about each other. And that was the purpose of tonight, wasn’t it? So? Let’s fucking *go!*

“What’s it like?” he asks. “Being rich?” Yeah, Anthony; shoot for the moon

right away.

Michael blinks at him. "I'm not sure I understand the question."

"Hmm. Okay. Yeah. Badly worded." Anthony nods, aware that the alcohol is making his nods slightly too emphatic. He reins it in a bit, but then he feels he probably looks like a bird pecking at a worm, so he just stops nodding altogether. "Did you go to boarding school? Oxford? Cambridge? Did you just get handed your current position or did you have to, like, knife-battle a bunch of rich relatives for it?"

"Yes," Michael says, and then smiles, shaking his head. "I mean, yes, I went to boarding school."

"What was it like?"

Another little hesitation. So Anthony reaches out and takes Michael's hand. He's often thought about how lonely Michael seems, how if he were a complete person, a fulfilled person, he would not resort to contracting a random temp to become his girlfriend. And it's been making Anthony increasingly sad; to see someone have so much money and still be so empty.

Michael looks down at the hand Anthony's taken, so Anthony massages Michael's fingers. Gently. *It's okay*, he's trying to say. *You can tell me*.

"I hated it," Michael says slowly. "Almost every minute of it. The uniforms. The *hats*. The culture. All of it. It seemed so perfectly designed to produce little princes, boys who would inherit the country and never question whether or not they deserved it." He bites his lip. "And they were beastly to each other, too."

"To you?" Anthony asks quietly.

"Not really. Not any more than anyone else. It helped that I was clever, I think. Quicker than most of them. And not in the same way; I wasn't interested in clever put-downs or cruel barbs. I got enough of that at home. And I *certainly* wasn't interested in excursions to the local town, to find homeless people to bully."

"They bullied *homeless people*?"

"A group of schoolboys would, yes. They would... burn money in front of them. Taunt them. Awful people." Another frown takes Michael's face, just for a second. "Several of them are in politics now."

"Wow." Anthony sits back a little, though he doesn't let go of Michael's hand. "That's... Wow."

"I know," Michael says, and then he shifts uncomfortably. "Sorry. I shouldn't be burdening you with this."

"No, Michael," Anthony says, "this is *exactly* the kind of stuff I want to know!" He sits forward again, and lets the alcohol carry him a little farther

than he intended, so he ends up leaning against Michael's shoulder. "You remember the contract, right?"

Michael looks away. "Of course."

"Ten years. *Ten* years. And we both signed it when we didn't even know if we liked each other! Because we *both* get something we need out of it. And—" Anthony's still holding Michael's hand, but he has another free, so he reaches out and strokes Michael's cheek, "—I'm coming to terms with the things I need to do in order to *get* what I need."

Michael shifts away from Anthony's hand. "I don't like that I'm coercing you."

Anthony snort-laughs. He wants to say that it's a little late for that! But then he circles back to Michael's loneliness, evident even now in the way he's sitting so stiffly, allowing Anthony so much control over the shape of the evening. How desperate must you become after going so long without having your needs fulfilled?

"You know what?" Anthony says softly, pushing his limited voice training as far as he can. Trying to sound as *Antonia* as he can. "Everything's coerced." Michael frowns at him. "No, really. None of us have a free choice in anything. You, at that boarding school; you hated it. But you had to go. And I don't know if it helped you become the man you are today or hindered you, but it's *part* of you."

"You're saying you hate this," Michael says, "the way I hated boarding school."

"No. Absolutely not. I thought I would. I thought I would struggle along for the whole ten years and then pop out the other side, covered in money. But you wanna know something, Michael? Being a girl is— is *fun*." Say this shit out loud? Why the fuck not? If there's *one* person he can be real with about this, it's the guy who so wants to fuck a trans woman that he makes one. "It's scary. But it's fun."

"What *is* it like?" Michael asks, loosening up. No longer drawing away. "Being a woman?"

"Throw my own question back at me, huh?" Anthony says teasingly.

"I've thought about it for years. Never from your perspective, but—"

"*Never* from my perspective?"

"I hope you don't take offence," Michael says, "but part of what makes what you are doing so intriguing to me is how averse I would be to it myself. I can't imagine doing that. Wearing those clothes. Changing my voice. But for someone else to do it... for someone else to do it *for me*..."

Yeah. The alcohol's making Michael spill his secrets, too. Good.

“I was never you, Michael. When you told me what you wanted of me, it was a shock. It was... *more* than a shock.” Anthony giggles, remembering rushing to the toilet to throw up after seeing himself regendered in that dumb app, after imagining himself kissing Michael. To prove to his past self that he was being stupid, Anthony leans forward and kisses Michael on the cheek. See? Nothing to it; one cheek is very much like any other. “But I got over it. Would I have picked this for myself? No. And maybe it means there’s something wrong with me, that I’m coping with this. Maybe it’s the other way round.” He sighs. “But I was never you. You’ve got it all, and I don’t just mean the money and the prestige. You’re tall, handsome, fit...”

“Thank you.”

“I was never you,” Anthony says again. “I think maybe that made it easier to become... to become *me*.” He taps himself on the chest, as if that is where he keeps Antonia. But her thoughts are his now, no more alien to him than the fingers on his hand or the eyes in his head. Was it *Antonia* who was outraged and embarrassed and ashamed at the restaurant? No, it was *him*.

‘Him’; hah. Seems a bit silly to keep thinking of himself that way, but maybe he’ll get over that, too. Maybe in the future Antonia will look back at this moment and realise she doesn’t think of herself as Anthony any more.

Maybe that’ll be the moment when it gets easy like this *all the time*. Wouldn’t *that* be nice?

Maybe... Maybe there’s a half step.

“Antonia—” Michael starts, but Anthony holds a finger to his lips, silencing him. He gets temporarily distracted by the sensation of Michael’s mouth under his finger, by Michael’s warm breath against his skin, so he closes his eyes.

A half step.

Maybe he can just be Ant for now. That’s pretty gender-neutral, right?

And maybe she can play with the other pronoun set. To try it out.

She opens her eyes. “There,” she says.

“Are you okay?” Michael asks, and there’s nothing but genuine concern in his eyes.

“I think so,” Ant says, and he’s still confused, so she kisses him again. “Yes. I think so. It’s just... There was something I needed to think about. I’m getting used to this, you know? The more I do it, the easier it gets. Mostly.” She wags a free finger at him. “And don’t say anything else about coercion. You and I both know I could have walked away any time before I signed that contract. Hell, I could walk away now. Maybe dealing with the fallout would bankrupt me, but—”

“I would never bankrupt you,” Michael says quickly.

“And I’m not going to walk away.” She doesn’t kiss him again, though she kinda wants to because he looks *adorable* when she does; instead she pulls away from him, stands and walks to the door, and it doesn’t count as walking away because the intercom makes a high-pitched whining sound when it’s about to come on, and that means the chocolate cake is here.

* * *

The Black Forest gâteau is really very good. What’s better, though, for Michael, is the way Antonia eats it. She’s sitting sideways on the couch with her bare feet tucked under Michael’s bottom, she’s holding the plate in one hand and her fork in the other, and she’s eating each bite in... a certain way.



There are many things tonight that Michael has had trouble finding words for. With some — like the intricacies of Antonia’s makeup — he simply lacks the appropriate education. But with others, they are experiences so far beyond anything he has ever encountered that it is like trying to—

And that’s it. He doesn’t have anything to compare it to. But when Antonia lances another small piece of cake with her little fork, when she places it carefully inside her mouth and closes her lips over the tines, when she shuts her eyes and slides the utensil out of her mouth, wiped almost completely clean of dessert, it *does* something to him. It’s not the same thing that happens to him when he thinks about the parts of herself she keeps folded away, but it’s related.

Girls of his family’s acquaintance used to flirt with him, back when he could not extract himself from his mother’s social obligations, and with a handful of them he shared dinner, dessert included. One of them ate her dessert in a similar manner, and Michael recalls finding the whole process rather exaggerated.

Either he was a fool back then, or Antonia really does have something other girls don’t. Something other than the obvious.

It might also be that Antonia doesn’t seem to realise she’s doing it. She’s not flirting; she just really, really likes Black Forest gâteau.

“I owe you an answer,” she says suddenly, dragging his attention away from her exquisite lips and back to the whole of her. She’s placing her plate with its half-finished cargo onto the table, and when she’s done, she leans forward and hugs her bare knees.

“An answer to what?”

“You asked me what it’s like being a woman. And I was distracted. But now I’m not.”

He smiles. “Then what is it like?”

“Scary sometimes,” she says with a shrug. “When a guy yells at me or whistles at me. And uncomfortable sometimes. Tonight, especially. Not now,” she adds quickly. “Earlier. At the restaurant.”

“Did something happen?” he asks. He wants to cover one of her hands, the way she did for him, but they are inaccessible, wrapped around her knees, so he awkwardly places his hands in his lap instead.

“*I* happened. I looked at the other girls, and— Hah; ‘other girls’. I keep doing that.” She grins. “I think that’s a good sign, don’t you? Shows I’m acclimatising. Anyway, I looked at the other girls, and all I could see was the ways they had it easier than me. Curves without a corset, boobs without stuffing, faces that aren’t, when you look past the makeup and the filler, still

kinda boys' faces. At the time, I was just insecure. And scared, because what if they clocked me, you know? And, also, a handful of them were actually pretty fucking rude to me. But I've been musing on it since — not on the rudeness — and it was more than that. More than insecurity. I envy their *comfort*, Michael."

"I'm sorry."

"That's what I'm getting at, I think," she says. "Being a woman is, to me, so far, largely about feeling uncomfortable and wishing desperately that I didn't." She reaches for him again, takes one of the hands that waits for her in his lap. "I mentioned the contract earlier. And one of the things we agreed on when I signed was that we would get *this* sorted." With her free hand she taps on her nose, on the little kink it has. "I want to do that. And I was thinking about... maybe more."

Michael, very carefully, swallows. "More?"

"Right now, I'm a creation of shapewear and carefully chosen clothing. So, um, what if I wasn't? What if we did my nose? What if we did a little lipo around my waist? And maybe a few other things, I don't know. All reversible stuff, obviously," she adds. "But just enough to give me some more confidence. Since I'm going to be in for work on my nose, anyway."

"It's a good idea," he says, "and I will obviously pay for the operation, authorise the time off, et cetera. Though — and this is a dreadful thought — I'll have to get another temp in for a while. That *will* be a sacrifice." He smiles at her. "You're very good, you know."

"I know." She pats his hand. "You'll manage."

"And," he begins awkwardly, "about confidence. You said before that the other girls had, ahem, 'boobs'. Without stuffing. Is that... something you would also be interested in? Since it is also reversible?"

And she leans farther forward, frowning at him thoughtfully.

* * *

She put him to bed shortly after that. She has more bedrooms than she needs, she told him, so pick one, wash up, and get some sleep. No, she insisted, there's no reason to send for his car again; neither of them need to be in the office in the morning, so why not take the easy option? She can always run down to the little supermarket in the morning and buy him a toothbrush, since it's definitely possible that Bridget has systematically worked her way through every one of the spares.

She.

She.

It's not as uncomfortable as she expected. It was weirder when she adopted it to play a role, when she treated Antonia as something she could temporarily become, whether to cope with an awkward situation or to, well, seduce Michael. But Antonia has already collided in her mind with Anthony, and now that she's *here*, it seems silly to pretend otherwise.

So. She. She/her. It's weird that it's *not* weird. But then, it's what everyone uses already, excepting Bridget and the family that Ant has so far managed to keep at arm's length. It's on her email signature at work. She kinda got used to it by accident.

Yeah, it's really not that odd.

She didn't answer his question. About the boob job. But she's thinking about it. Because it would be easier, right? If she didn't have to pad, if all she had to worry about in the morning was tucking little Anthony away in Antonia's knickers.

And why *not* make things easy on herself?

Fuck. She doesn't know if it's a terrible idea or an amazing one. Much like, she thinks with a giggle, this whole endeavour. Ten million quid.

Oh yeah, actually. There are bonuses if she agrees to more operations. She forgot.

She could be more comfortable and *even richer*.

Into her pillow, she laughs, imagining what she could do with another few million pounds. She doesn't really know what she's going to do with that first ten mil, but somehow the extra, being extra, seems even more frivolous, even more just something to have fun with.

"Helicopter lessons," she mutters to herself, half-muffled by the pillow. "I'm going to get helicopter lessons. And a helicopter."

She could park it on top of the apartment building.

* * *

The second bedroom at Antonia's apartment is so bare that it almost reminds Michael of home. The main differences: the sheets aren't as nice, being fairly basic Habitat generics; the colour scheme is mildly less monochrome, being rental beige in most places; and Michael had to remove a blue-and-white-striped pair of women's underwear from the bed before he lay down. From context — and from its stained and tattered nature — he assumes

it belongs to Antonia's friend, Bridget. The one he is currently overlooking, because she has so far been quite helpful.

Overall, not a bad place in which to wake up. Especially if one discounts the discarded knickers and factors in the presence of Antonia, who is presumably still asleep just one room away. Though it is still bare, and not intentionally so, not as with Michael's home. She should do something about that.

And he should discourage her from her assumption that she will be here for the next ten years! This apartment is transitional, at best. For a woman of the lifestyle to which she ought to aspire, it is very nearly slumming it. Now that she is committed — and thank all that is holy, none of Michael's fears regarding her dedication or her nerve have come to pass; she is going to see it through to the end, he's certain — she should be searching for somewhere she can purchase. Somewhere she can make truly her own.



There's a noise outside his door, which does *not* startle him, because Michael Lincoln — even a Michael Lincoln for whom bright lights and loud noises are currently a sensitive issue — is not a man who is *ever* startled. But he does sit up in bed, and thus it is that when Antonia shyly pushes open the door to his borrowed bedroom, she sees him naked from the hips up.

“Good morning,” she says with a smile. She looks him up and down and her smile broadens, and though it is briefly interrupted, her frown does not last, and she is smiling again when she adds, “There's coffee on. I don't know what sort of rich-guy coffee you're used to at home, but I've come into some money — I don't know if you've heard — so I've been pushing the boat out recently; I have Marks & Spencer.”

“I'm sure it will be wonderful,” he says. He looks her up and down in turn; fair is, as he learned repeatedly at boarding school, only fair. She wears a light purple *négligée* and a pair of silk sleep shorts, and she is soft and smooth all over. Michael is suddenly very glad that the duvet has pooled where it has.

He'll have to take care of business before he joins her in the living room.

“Five minutes,” she says, and her smile turns almost impish as she glances down, farther down than she did before, as if she knows about his erection and is amused by it.

“Five minutes,” Michael agrees.

She giggles at him, sweeps her dark hair out of her face, and closes the door quietly behind her.

Michael, alone again, satisfies himself.

* * *

“Okay, that was normal,” she's telling herself as she prepares mugs and delves into the fridge for eggs. “That was a completely normal reaction you just had to him, Ant. When you opened the door and there he was, with his *chest* and all that *hair on it*? And when you had to force yourself to stop looking at him? Normal. Normal. Completely normal.”

She starts cracking eggs on the side of a mixing bowl.

“Perfectly natural and perfectly normal. I'm a girl now, right?” She glances down, like she needs proof, and finds her hairless chest and her still-basically-flat nipples. “Well, kinda sorta. Not as much of a girl as those bitches from Spiral last night.” Ugh. No. Forget them. She's going to get *that* sorted, at least. She's going to get her nose fixed. Maybe get a little lipo. And maybe... boobs?



She's going to get boobs.

“Oh, am I? Am I really? Am I actually going through with it? Oh, you *know* what you said, Antonia. You know it. ‘Give me all the operations, Michael, my darling. Give me the full Barbie’s Dream Chest.’ That was it, right? Idiot. Can’t back out now. Well,” she adds to herself, cracking another egg, “I *could*, but where would that leave me? Still stumbling around in my half-finished body, feeling embarrassed and mannish every time we go out together. No.” Crack. “Absolutely not.” Crack. “So where that’s left me, is that I’m committed. Always committed. Think of the money, Ant. Think of— Shit. I’ve cracked a *lot* of eggs. Hmm. Rich guys like eggs, right?” She shrugs. “They do now.”

She taps around on the induction hob, throws a pan and a knob of butter into place, and starts whisking her vat of eggs while she waits for the butter to melt.

“So your heart beat a little faster when you looked at him?” she says to herself, violently thrashing the eggs. “You’ve been telling yourself you *need* to want him, haven’t you? And if you’re doing all this other stuff for him — if you’re *going under the knife for him* — then why *not* be attracted to him? It just makes you really, really good at your job.”

Eggs in the pan. She grabs the pepper shaker and the plastic thing of chilli flakes out of the rack and, with one eye on the eggs, she pours coffee for two, being careful to add milk to their mugs and not, for example, chilli flakes. Anthony once gave Bridget a particularly exciting morning when he tried to do too many things at once while hungover.

But she’s not all that hungover, really. She feels like she did when she was younger, when the alcohol would burn itself off overnight and leave her with nothing but kind of a dry sensation all over.

“Not fucking dry everywhere,” she mutters, and shifts uncomfortably in her sleep shorts. She didn’t tuck when she got up this morning, because it’s not like she has any secrets to keep from Michael in that department, and she’s beginning to regret that decision. It’s one thing to be flaccid down there, just kind of innocently dangling; another to be... uncomfortably interested.

“Shit.”

She checks that the eggs aren’t going to ruin themselves and then practically runs back to her bedroom, shutting the door and going straight to her chest of drawers. She pulls out one of her tightest pairs of knickers, drops the sleep shorts to the floor and wrangles herself into the knickers, pressing up on her penis to flatten it as much as possible. It doesn’t want to cooperate? Fine! Have a second pair of knickers! Have a third!

There. Done.

Jesus. *That* was almost a disaster.

She doesn’t know why it’s important to keep from Michael that she’s attracted to him, that it’s not just playing along or doing her job or any of the other bullshit excuses she’s been practising. It just is. It feels like if she let it slip now, revealed what has turned out uncomfortably to be her genuine interest, she’d be giving up some intangible yet crucial advantage over him: he fancies her; she is... doing her job.

Hmm. Feels unfair.

Oh well. She’ll salve her conscience with all the money.

* * *

Antonia made a lot of scrambled eggs, enough that Michael asked with only brief consternation whether she was expecting company, but she said, no, she just hates not using a whole box at once. OCD thing, she said.

“You have OCD?” he’d asked.

Sheepishly, she replied, “No.”

And now they’re finishing up, plates empty, mugs drained, with the dirty Manchester morning starting to brighten, and Michael has to admit to himself that he doesn’t want to leave.

When has he ever had such a pleasurable morning? When has he before engaged in simple small talk over coffee, toast and eggs? He already knew his life up to this point was empty, but he knew it dispassionately, as one might accrue critical but distanced information about an endangered species, and now he feels as might a biologist who stepped out of his office one day to find a stricken, wounded Javan Rhino waiting for him on the pavement, breathing its last.

When he returns home, he will be alone. The only comfort is that, for the first time, his loneliness will be a temporary affair.

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything for you to wear, Michael,” Antonia says. “You’ll have to do the walk of shame. Unless you’d like to borrow something in pink?”

He coughs. “I will just leave off the jacket and tie,” he says. “It’s a nice morning.”

Antonia taps the phone on the table. “It’s very nearly a nice afternoon.”

“Antonia,” he says, suddenly, quickly, “were you serious last night? About—”

“Getting surgery? Yes.”

“Are you sure?” *Why* is he asking this? She’s giving him what he wants! Again!

She purses her lips briefly, thinking. “Yes,” she says. “At work, it’s been bearable, but even talking to Sharon and Susie, I can feel the distance between us. And I *also* know that it’s early days and hormones take a long time to work, and all that, but... I don’t know. I agreed to the nose job already, and I just think, while I’m under for that, I might as well...” She twirls her breakfast fork, allowing it to finish a thought that seems difficult.

“I understand,” he says gently. “I, ahem, know a surgeon. He could fit you in on Monday.”

“For *surgery*?” she blurts out, eyes wide.

“For a consultation.”

“Oh. Right. Yes.” She starts nodding vigorously. “Absolutely. That

sounds—” And then she stops, holds herself still, and grins ruefully. “That sounds great,” she says, the manic edge gone from her voice. “If I’m going to have a new life, I think I’d rather have it sooner rather than later, you know? I’ve adjusted, so now I just want to get on with it.”

Michael nods. He’s had a surgeon prepped and ready for this since before he started drawing up the contract. The man is known to Michael’s family, is attached to a first-class clinic, and is known especially for his exquisite noses.

He is also amenable to suggestions. If Antonia is to see him on Monday, then Michael will perhaps contact him this afternoon, to discuss the direction of the consultation. She is, after all, in this for the long haul, just as he is, and if she has any lingering reticence towards minor surgical alterations, a persuasive, avuncular doctor will be just the man to talk her around.

A spark of headache as he catches the full force of the late-morning sun reflected in Antonia’s still-hyperactive fork causes him to reconsider his plans: he’ll talk to the doctor tomorrow. Today, he thinks he will probably sit very still in his apartment with the curtains closed.

* * *

Well, he passed the audition. Michael Lincoln, richest man in this part of the country, is apparently perfectly capable of eating mediocre scrambled eggs with Ant on a Saturday morning. He’s capable of a bit of light, hungover chat. He’s capable of being *normal*.

And that’s good, because otherwise the next ten years would be particularly awful.

But as she escorts him to her front door, to catch the elevator down to his waiting driver, she stops him. Because it’s been eating at her ever since she finished her eggs, since they talked about the surgery and the consultation and all the other stuff that still, she’s got to admit, scares the fuck out of her.

“Michael,” she says, with a hand up to stop him leaving through the open door, “I like you. I’ve only scratched the surface of you, I think, but what I’ve seen, I like.” She’s not even lying. He’s sweet and he’s thoughtful and he’s not what she expected a rich man would be. In some ways. “Do you like me? And I don’t mean, are you attracted to me? I mean, as a person, do you *like* me?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Yes, Antonia,” he says, smiling softly. “I like you. I enjoy your perspective. And... you make me smile.” His eyebrows divot just slightly. “That is... uncommon.”

“Good,” she says, pushing into the syllable all the certainty she *wants* to

feel about all this, and somehow keeping from it all the confusion that keeps seeping in at the edges. “Have a wonderful weekend.”

“I will, Antonia,” he says, and he’s turning to leave when she decides, no, fuck *that*, she saw him naked in bed this morning and she didn’t even *do* anything about it, and that’s *not fair*, and if she’s going to be all confused and weird about this she can do so after she’s gotten something for herself.

So she loops a hand around his neck, turns him back around, and kisses him. Snakes her tongue into his mouth, presses herself against him. Breathes in his scent and his heat and *all of it*, and takes it for herself.

It’s no game. It’s no job. And it’s not fucking coerced. This? This is for *her*.

When finally she pulls away, he’s as flushed as she feels, so she smiles broadly, pecks him on the mouth, and stands back, hands clasped behind her back, feeling like a teenager with her first boyfriend.



“Thank you for coming, Mr Lincoln,” she says.

“Um,” he says. It takes him a moment to rally. “Thank you for an enchanting evening,” he finally manages, regathering some of his business-guy composure. But she sees through it. Right through it to *him*, to the lonely boy inside, the one she wants to kiss again and again and again.

She lets him go, watches from the living room window as he walks to his car and is driven away, and then she shuts herself in her bedroom again, and does not sleep.