

Always Girly

A Novel by Lilly Lustwood



Copyright © 2026 by Brightlucky Press

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission from the copyright holder, except for brief quotations used in reviews, criticism, or as otherwise permitted by law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual companies, legal disputes, organizations, events, or locations is purely coincidental.

The legal proceedings, professional practices, companies, products, and courtroom situations depicted in this novel are fictionalized for dramatic purposes and should not be understood as legal advice or as an accurate representation of any specific real-world case.

First Edition

Published by Brightlucky Press.

Dedication



For you, who spent too long wondering whether you were allowed to want softness.

For you, who learned to hide the parts of yourself that felt too feminine, too tender, too different, or too difficult to explain. For you, who stood in front of a mirror and looked away before you could ask the question that had been waiting quietly inside you.

You do not need permission to become more honest.

You do not need permission to love the way beauty makes you feel, to choose the clothes that make you breathe easier, to take up space in a softer shape, or to discover yourself slowly and without apology. You are allowed to change. You are allowed to surprise yourself. You are allowed to become someone who feels more like home.

And if it takes time, that is all right too.

You were never late.

You were never too much.

You never needed permission.

Table of Contents

[Always Girly](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Also by Lilly](#)

Chapter One



At 7:11 on a Tuesday morning, I learned two things. The first was that I had slept through three alarms. The second was that, according to BarMax, I was apparently too stupid to practice law in the State of New York.

I lay on my back with my phone six inches from my face, staring at the red circle around **58%** as though enough concentrated hatred might force the number upward. The practice set had covered evidence, a subject I had once convinced myself I understood. During my second year of law school, I had earned an A-minus in the class, written a twenty-two-page paper about hearsay exceptions, and once corrected a classmate who confused present sense impression with excited utterance. I had spent the rest of that afternoon privately congratulating myself for being exactly the kind of insufferable person who deserved to become an attorney.

Now a phone application was informing me that I had missed a question about character evidence that, in retrospect, looked as if it had been designed for a particularly bright Labrador. I closed the score before I could study the damage again and dropped the phone onto the mattress beside me.

"Great."

My apartment was already bright with the ugly, unforgiving light of a Brooklyn morning. I had forgotten to close the blinds before collapsing into bed sometime after two, and the sun had found every object I would have preferred not to examine too closely: the stack of unopened mail on my kitchen counter, the coffee mug on the floor beside my mattress, the suit jacket hanging from the back of a folding chair, and the bar-review books spread across my tiny dining table like evidence in a trial against my own competence.

I was fine, or at least that was a sentence I had become very good at saying to myself. I was twenty-eight years old, had a Juris Doctor from a respectable law school, worked at one of the most successful boutique litigation firms in Manhattan, and earned a salary that would have impressed most of my relatives. I had health insurance and a one-bedroom apartment in Crown Heights with enough room to stand in almost every part of it without touching a wall. There were people who would have killed for my life, although admittedly some of those people had never seen my student-loan balance.

I rolled out of bed and stepped directly onto a casebook. The hard corner caught the soft center of my foot, and I grabbed the wall while swearing loudly enough to concern anyone who might have been passing in the hallway.

“Jesus.”

The book was *New York Practice*, which felt personal.

By 7:18, I was brushing my teeth while buttoning a white dress shirt. By 7:22, I had burned the inside of my mouth on coffee so cheap it came in a can large enough to survive a nuclear winter. At 7:26, I stood in front of the narrow mirror attached to my closet door and tried to make myself look like a man who had not spent four hours the night before studying for an exam he had already failed once.

Nobody at Hilton Pierce knew about the failure. At least, that was what I told myself.

The firm knew I had graduated from law school, and everyone knew I had not been admitted to the bar. Most people politely assumed I had delayed the exam because I was working full-time, and whenever anyone asked, I gave some variation of the same answer: I wanted to wait until I could properly prepare. It sounded responsible and strategic, the sort of decision a disciplined young legal professional might make after carefully evaluating his workload.

The truth was uglier. I had taken the exam nine months earlier, failed by enough points to make the result unambiguous, and then told almost everyone in my life that I had postponed it. I had never been especially proud of the lie, but I had discovered that shame was much easier to maintain when nobody else knew where to look.

At 7:31, I ran out of my apartment with my tie in my pocket and my laptop bag half-zipped. The subway rewarded my urgency by stopping between stations, because the Metropolitan Transportation Authority had apparently been informed that I worked for Benjamin Hilton and wished to participate in my suffering.

I stood in a packed train beneath fluorescent lighting while a recorded voice apologized for a delay caused by train traffic ahead of us. A toddler kicked my shin twice. A woman holding an iced coffee read an email over my shoulder until I angled my phone away, while somewhere near the opposite doors a man conducted a loud argument about cryptocurrency with someone who had clearly stopped listening several minutes earlier.

At 8:42, I checked the time and felt my stomach tighten. The morning litigation meeting began at nine, and I had built thirteen minutes of buffer into my commute, a habit developed through years of working for Benjamin Hilton, who regarded lateness as a moral defect somewhere between perjury and tax fraud. Thirteen minutes should have been enough. New York disagreed.

We moved again at 8:51. At 8:58, I came out of the station and nearly collided with a delivery cyclist. At 9:01, I crossed an avenue against the light, and at 9:03 I entered the marble lobby of the building where Hilton Pierce Litigation occupied three and a half floors of some of the most expensive commercial real estate in Manhattan.

At 9:04, the elevator doors opened.

Benjamin Hilton was standing directly in front of them.

I stopped so abruptly that the man behind me walked into my back. Benjamin looked at me, I looked at Benjamin, and the seconds between us developed the weight of a sentencing hearing.

There were people who became more attractive when they smiled. Benjamin was not one of them, largely because I had worked for him for three years and could count the number of times I had seen him smile without sarcasm on one hand.

He was forty years old, six foot two, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, and infuriatingly immune to the physical deterioration that came from working fourteen-hour days. He wore a charcoal suit that probably cost more than my monthly rent

and carried no briefcase because other people carried things for him. His face was all hard lines and controlled aggression: strong jaw, straight nose, dark brows permanently arranged in disappointment. He looked like a man who had been designed by a luxury watch company and then taught to bill in six-minute increments.

Benjamin glanced toward the clock mounted behind the reception desk.

“Manning.”

“I know.”

“Wonderful. Then I can save us both the time required to discuss clocks.”

The elevator doors began to close between us. Benjamin put one hand against them without looking away from me.

“Conference room. Now.”

“I need to put my bag down.”

“You have arms.”

“I’ve heard rumors.”

His eyes narrowed, but I stepped past him before he could decide whether my employment had run its natural course. Our receptionist, Olivia, stared intensely at her computer screen in the universal office gesture for *I heard that, but I value my health insurance*.

Hilton Pierce had been founded seven years earlier by Benjamin and his former law-school classmate, Gregory Pierce, although Pierce had left for a federal appointment before I joined the firm. Benjamin had kept the name because, according to office legend, changing the signage would have required him to attend too many meetings.

The firm specialized in high-stakes commercial litigation. We represented pharmaceutical executives accused of lying to shareholders, celebrities accused of breaching contracts, technology founders trying to retain control of companies they

had nearly destroyed, and corporations willing to pay a great deal of money for Benjamin to make terrifying problems become merely expensive ones.

Benjamin was very good at it, which was the unfortunate part. If he had been an incompetent asshole, I could have hated him cleanly. Instead, he was one of the best litigators in New York, the kind of attorney other attorneys came to watch when he conducted cross-examinations. Legal publications called him relentless. Former associates called him worse things in private.

I had once watched him destroy a witness using six emails and a calendar invitation. I still fantasized about pushing him into the Central Park reservoir.

The morning litigation meeting had already started when I entered Conference Room A. Seven people sat around the long walnut table, laptops open and legal pads aligned in varying degrees of anxiety. Serena Park, a fifth-year associate and my closest thing to an office friend, lifted her eyebrows at me.

I mouthed, "Train."

She glanced toward Benjamin and made a small sign of the cross despite being, as far as I knew, an atheist.

Benjamin entered behind me.

"Continue."

The junior associate who had stopped speaking immediately resumed. I moved toward an empty chair, but Benjamin spoke before I could sit.

"Manning."

I turned.

He held out a hand.

"What?"

"Timeline."

The litigation timeline was in my laptop. My laptop was in my bag, and my bag was on my shoulder because Benjamin had informed me less than two minutes earlier that I possessed arms.

I slowly handed him the bag.

His expression changed by approximately one molecule.

“The printed timeline.”

“You told me yesterday not to print another copy because the dates were changing too quickly.”

“Then presumably you found a solution.”

“I did. It’s called a computer.”

Serena covered her mouth.

Benjamin held my gaze long enough for me to begin mentally updating my résumé. Instead, he pointed toward the screen mounted on the wall.

“Put it up.”

I connected my laptop and projected the timeline. For the next forty minutes, I updated deadlines while associates argued about subpoenas, privilege logs, expert reports, and a deposition Benjamin had decided needed to occur three weeks earlier than any reasonable person had planned.

He interrupted people before they finished sentences. He rejected two proposed research strategies and informed a junior associate that the phrase *I assumed* was not legal analysis. Then he began assigning work to me.

“Manning, I want the deposition binders rebuilt by Thursday.”

“There are twelve.”

“Then I’m glad we agree on the number.”

“The exhibits changed yesterday.”

“I’m aware.”

“You’re the one who changed them.”

His gaze lifted from his notes.

“Is there a question hiding in there?”

Apparently there was not, because he continued. He wanted a revised master chronology by six, research on preliminary injunction standards in the Second Circuit, confirmation of three client interviews, an updated witness list, and a lunch reservation for a prospective client who had decided that dietary restrictions were a form of national security classification.

As everyone else began leaving, Benjamin stopped me with a lifted finger.

“And find the Whitmore email.”

I blinked.

“What Whitmore email?”

“The one Claire sent Friday.”

“I forwarded it to you Friday.”

“I know.”

“So you have it.”

“No.”

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for the rest of the explanation. It did not arrive.

“You deleted it.”

“I may have.”

“From your inbox?”

“Yes.”

“And your trash?”

A pause followed, which was answer enough.

“Yes.”

I closed my laptop very carefully.

“Do you know that most people solve this problem by not deleting things they need?”

“Do you know that most competent paralegals solve it by finding them again?”

“I hate working for you.”

“No, you don’t.”

The answer came so quickly that I almost laughed.

Instead I said, “You have incredible self-esteem.”

“I have evidence.”

He walked away, leaving me alone in the conference room with twelve deposition binders, a shifting chronology, and several increasingly sophisticated ideas about murder.

By eleven thirty, I had found Claire Whitmore’s email in a thread Benjamin had forwarded to outside counsel before deleting the original. By noon, I had revised half the witness list. At twelve fifteen, I was eating pretzels from the vending machine because the restaurant Benjamin had asked me to book would not accommodate his prospective client’s sudden objection to seed oils.

At twelve twenty-three, Olivia called my desk.

“Your two o’clock is early.”

“My two o’clock?”

“The shapewear people.”

I looked through the glass wall toward Benjamin's office. He was on the phone, pacing behind his desk while making hand gestures that suggested someone on the other end had disappointed him at a molecular level.

"They're his two o'clock."

Olivia laughed.

"You're adorable."

The elevator opened a few minutes later, and the first person out was a woman I recognized immediately although we had never met.

Nadia Vale was the founder and chief executive of VeraForm Intimates, a company that had gone from niche online retailer to fashion-industry obsession in less than five years. I had spent most of the previous week reading about her. She was thirty-eight, transgender, and wealthy enough that business magazines described her wardrobe as if it were an economic indicator.

In person, she was striking without looking overproduced. She wore cream trousers, a dark silk blouse, and gold earrings that disappeared beneath straight black hair. Three people followed her: VeraForm's general counsel, its product-development director, and a young man pulling two enormous black rolling cases.

The elevator doors closed, then opened again. Two more cases appeared.

Olivia looked at me.

I looked at Olivia.

"What the hell is all that?"

"Your two o'clock."

I walked toward reception just as Nadia saw me and smiled.

"You must be Benjamin."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Her smile widened.

“No. I’m Aaron Manning.”

“Ah. The famous Aaron Manning.”

That brought me up short.

“I’m sorry?”

Before she could explain, Benjamin’s office door opened.

“Ms. Vale.”

Nadia looked past me.

“Mr. Hilton.”

The temperature of the reception area seemed to change. Nadia’s general counsel straightened, the product director stopped whispering, and even Olivia sat differently.

Benjamin approached, extended a hand, and immediately became the version of himself clients paid for: calm, controlled, focused. There was no shouting, no sarcasm about clocks, and no indication that an hour earlier he had assigned another human being the task of recovering an email he had personally deleted.

I hated him even more.

“Manning,” he said without looking at me, “Conference Room B.”

Of course.

For the next ten minutes, I helped move rolling cases and document boxes into the conference room while Benjamin greeted the client. When I returned for the final box, Nadia was still standing near reception.

“Does he always call you by your last name?” she asked.

“Only when he’s awake.”

She laughed, and I liked her immediately, which was unfortunate because liking clients usually created more work.

The meeting began at one thirty-seven.

VeraForm had retained Hilton Pierce after being sued by Maison Sloane, a mainstream luxury shapewear company whose products were sold in department stores, celebrity boutiques, and enough upscale fitness studios to make me question what people actually did in fitness studios.

Maison Sloane alleged that VeraForm had copied elements of its signature compression architecture, including curved internal support panels marketed under the name **S-Curve Sculpting System**. The complaint also alleged trade dress infringement, misappropriation of campaign concepts, and unauthorized imitation of the visual styling associated with Maison Sloane's bestselling **Contour One** bodysuit.

The case was ugly, but it was also valuable enough that Benjamin had canceled two other client meetings when VeraForm called.

I sat to his left with my laptop open, managing exhibits and trying not to resent the way he had introduced me.

"This is Aaron Manning," he had said. "Manning knows where everything is."

Not Mr. Manning is our senior litigation paralegal. Not Aaron has been coordinating discovery. Apparently my professional identity was office furniture with search capability.

I said nothing because Nadia was watching.

Her product-development director, Leila Grant, opened one of the black cases and began removing sealed garment bags.

"We brought production samples from every disputed collection," she said. "Current pieces, discontinued pieces, development prototypes, and several third-party products we used as market references."

Benjamin looked at the growing pile of lingerie with the expression of a man watching raccoons enter his home.

"How much of this exists?"

Leila hesitated.

“In total?”

“No. Spiritually.”

Nadia smiled, while I looked down before Benjamin caught me.

Leila placed two black bodysuits on the table. At first glance, they looked almost identical. Both were sleeveless, both had low necklines, and both used curved seams around the waist and lower abdomen.

“The left is Maison Sloane,” she said. “The right is ours.”

Benjamin leaned back.

“Those look the same.”

“They aren’t.”

“That answer will be more persuasive with details.”

Leila began explaining the internal structure. Maison Sloane used lateral compression panels designed primarily to narrow the waist and smooth the hips, while VeraForm used angled support zones intended for different torso proportions and lower-abdominal compression. Some configurations had been developed specifically for transgender women who tucked, which meant the underlying engineering problem was not necessarily the same even when the exterior silhouettes looked similar.

Benjamin asked rapid questions. Nadia’s general counsel responded, and I pulled up documents whenever he snapped a reference number in my direction.

Eventually the discussion shifted to the advertising allegations.

According to Maison Sloane, VeraForm had copied a campaign featuring a model in silver shapewear photographed against mirrored panels. Maison Sloane claimed the concept had been developed internally in early 2023 and launched that September.

I opened the complaint again because something had begun bothering me. While Benjamin questioned Nadia about VeraForm's own campaign development, I scrolled back through the allegations.

"Your position is that the campaign concept came from the Prism development deck?" Benjamin asked.

"Yes," Nadia said. "Long before their campaign."

"When?"

"Early 2023. February, maybe March."

My cursor stopped.

I enlarged one of Maison Sloane's attachments.

"Wait."

Nobody responded at first, so I leaned closer to the screen and repeated myself.

"Wait."

Benjamin turned his head.

"What?"

I rotated my laptop toward him.

"They say this brief establishes development in January 2023."

"Yes."

"The template footer says MS Creative Suite 4.2."

"So?"

I searched the production database, found a batch of Maison Sloane marketing documents, and filtered by date.

"Version 4.2 didn't exist in January."

The room went quiet.

I clicked through the files, increasingly aware that every person at the table was watching me.

“The earliest document I can find using this template is from May 2023. Everything before that uses version 3.8.”

Benjamin pulled my laptop closer.

I continued before I lost my nerve.

“It could be nothing. Maybe the brief was migrated into a newer template after the fact. But if they’re relying on this specific document to establish when the concept existed, then the exhibit doesn’t prove what the complaint says it proves.”

Nadia leaned forward, while her general counsel frowned at the screen.

“They represented that document as contemporaneous,” he said.

“I know.”

Benjamin read the footer again. He did not praise me or acknowledge that I had caught something three attorneys had apparently missed, but he also did not dismiss it.

He pushed the laptop back toward me.

“Find out why.”

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for more. That was it. Three words. I should have been annoyed, and I was, but underneath the irritation was something embarrassingly close to satisfaction. Benjamin Hilton had seen what I found and decided it mattered enough to chase.

The meeting lasted another two hours. By the time Nadia and her team left, Conference Room B looked as though an upscale lingerie store had been evacuated during a fire. Sealed bags covered one end of the table, black rolling cases stood against the wall, and three cardboard boxes had appeared near the windows without my knowing who had brought them.

I was collecting legal pads when Benjamin entered and looked around.

“No.”

I glanced at him.

“No what?”

“This.”

He gestured at the room.

I waited for an actual noun.

“Manning.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do about the existence of objects.”

“I want them gone.”

“Those are client materials.”

“Some are client materials. Some are duplicate samples. Some are apparently underwear.”

“The underwear is also client material.”

“Then organize it.”

I put down the legal pads.

“I’m working on the timeline, the witness list, the research assignment, your deleted email, the deposition binders, and now the date discrepancy I found.”

“Yes.”

“You understand there are only twenty-four hours in a day.”

“I’ve always considered that a design flaw.”

He pointed toward the boxes.

“Those go with you.”

I looked from him to the boxes, convinced I had misunderstood.

“To document storage?”

“I said with you.”

“You want me to take a client’s shapewear home?”

“I want it out of my conference room.”

“I live in a one-bedroom apartment.”

“Then this will be an opportunity to explore efficient storage.”

“Benjamin.”

His brows lifted because I almost never used his first name directly.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Take the nonessential duplicates. We’ll retain authenticated samples and disputed exhibits here. Everything else can be donated, discarded, burned, turned into curtains. I do not care.”

“You absolutely cannot burn synthetic shapewear.”

He stared at me.

“I’m concerned that was the part of my statement you considered important.”

Ten minutes later, I stood in the elevator with my laptop bag, my suit jacket, and a cardboard box large enough to contain a household appliance. The doors closed, and I looked down at the VeraForm logo printed across the top before meeting my own reflection in the mirrored wall.

“I hate him,” I said.

The man standing beside me nodded sympathetically.

Chapter Two



The next morning, there were three more boxes waiting in Conference Room B. I stopped outside the glass wall and stared at them long enough to wonder whether I had developed some kind of stress-induced visual disorder.

I had gone to sleep at one fourteen after reviewing Maison Sloane's production history. I had woken at six thirty, completed twenty evidence questions, hated seventeen of them, and dragged myself into Manhattan with the conviction that surviving the day would count as a moral achievement. Now VeraForm appeared to be reproducing.

Olivia came up beside me carrying coffee.

"They arrived at eight."

"Why?"

"I didn't ask. I was afraid they'd send more."

One box was pink. The others were white, and all three displayed the VeraForm logo.

I rubbed my forehead.

"Where's Benjamin?"

Olivia pointed.

Through another glass wall, I saw him walking toward us with a phone pressed to his ear. This was never a good sign.

“No,” he said to whoever had disappointed him. “That is not what the order says.”

He listened for several seconds.

“I’m looking at it now.”

He was not looking at anything.

I stepped aside as he entered Conference Room B. He saw the new boxes, stopped walking, and went completely silent.

The person on the phone said something I could not hear.

Benjamin disconnected the call.

“No.”

I folded my arms.

“I had the same reaction.”

He looked at me.

“Why are they here?”

“Because objects continue to exist whether or not you approve of them.”

“Manning.”

“They’re additional comparison samples.”

“I told you to deal with this.”

“I took one box home.”

“There are now three.”

“I didn’t give birth to them.”

Olivia choked on her coffee.

Benjamin turned toward her. She immediately walked away.

He looked back at me.

“Sort them.”

“I have a research memo due.”

“Serena can take the preliminary-injunction section.”

“I already wrote most of it.”

“Then I’m sure she’ll be impressed.”

I stared at him.

“You’re punishing me for competence.”

“No. I’m exploiting it.”

At least he was honest.

By ten, I had turned Conference Room B into a temporary evidence-processing area. Leila from VeraForm joined by video call while I opened each box, confirmed contents against shipping manifests, photographed packaging, and separated potentially relevant samples from duplicates.

The work was more complicated than Benjamin seemed to understand. Some garments corresponded to specific allegations in the complaint, while others had been produced to demonstrate construction history. Several were preproduction prototypes with handwritten internal labels, and a few were ordinary retail items sent because VeraForm wanted us to understand how the broader shapewear market used similar features.

Then there were the duplicates.

There were so many duplicates that after the eleventh black garment I began questioning whether the fashion industry had discovered a secret legal definition of individuality.

“How many black bodysuits does one company need?” I asked.

Leila’s face filled my laptop screen.

“How many white shirts do you own?”

I looked down at myself.

“Four.”

“Exactly.”

“That comparison makes no sense.”

“It does to me.”

I held up a sealed package.

“VeraForm V-Line Compression Bodysuit, medium, black.”

“Duplicate.”

I set it aside.

“V-Line Compression Bodysuit, medium, sand.”

“Duplicate.”

“High-Rise Contour Brief, medium.”

“Duplicate.”

I picked up another package and read the label.

“Tuck-Smooth Everyday Panty.”

Leila glanced at her list.

“Those are extras.”

The model on the front was smiling with the kind of confidence I associated with people who had never received a bar-exam result.

“What exactly makes it different?”

“It’s designed for tucking.”

“I gathered that from the name.”

“You asked.”

“I regret it.”

Leila laughed, and I continued sorting.

By noon, two large boxes were filled with duplicate retail products that did not need to remain in our evidence room. I emailed Nadia’s general counsel asking whether VeraForm wanted them returned.

The answer came fifteen minutes later.

No need. Keep, donate, or dispose. More coming Friday.

I read the final sentence twice.

Benjamin entered as I was printing the email.

“Done?”

“No.”

He looked at the boxes.

“Why?”

“Because this is evidence management, not cleaning your garage.”

“You have thirty minutes.”

“I have lunch.”

“So does everyone.”

“You asked me to order yours.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“I’m busy.”

I laughed once, and the sound came out slightly deranged.

Benjamin ignored me and picked up a sealed garment bag from the table.

“What is this?”

“A bodysuit.”

“What does it do?”

I stared at him.

“I’m not putting on a demonstration.”

His eyes moved to mine.

For one terrifying second, I thought I had actually shocked him. Then the corner of his mouth shifted in what could only be described as a microscopic failure of hostility.

“Pity,” he said.

I stopped breathing long enough to notice.

He dropped the package onto the table and walked out before I could decide whether I had imagined the entire exchange. I remained where I was for several seconds, replaying the word and then firmly concluding that Benjamin had meant nothing by it because the alternative was ridiculous.

At six forty that evening, I carried another box home.

This one was heavier than the first. I took the train with it pressed against my knees while two teenagers argued about a basketball game and an elderly woman repeatedly glanced at the VeraForm logo.

By the time I reached my building, my lower back ached. My apartment looked worse than it had that morning, and the original box sat unopened beside the dining table where I had abandoned it the night before.

I placed the second box beside it, took off my tie, and stood in the middle of the room.

I should have studied.

I had scheduled ninety minutes of evidence review followed by thirty minutes of practice essays. My exam was still months away, which should have made the schedule feel manageable, but every study session seemed to contain the entire weight of my previous failure.

I opened my laptop. The dashboard loaded. **58%**. I closed it again.

“Not tonight.”

The apartment was too warm, so I took off my dress shirt, changed into an old T-shirt and sweatpants, and heated leftover noodles in the microwave. The first VeraForm box remained beside the table, and I ignored it with such determination that ignoring it became the main activity of my evening.

I ate half the noodles, checked my phone, walked to the sink, and returned. The box remained offensively present.

“This is stupid.”

I dragged it into the middle of the floor.

The tape had already been cut at the office when I checked the manifest, but I had not examined the contents closely. I opened the flaps and found neatly packed garments in individual plastic sleeves, a stack of measuring cards, and a glossy product guide.

The first package contained a black **V-Line Compression Bodysuit** in medium. The photograph showed a garment that looked simple enough: wide shoulder straps, a scoop neck, and a body shaped roughly like a one-piece swimsuit. According to the package, it provided “360-degree smoothing” and “targeted abdominal support.”

I put it aside and continued.

The next item was a pair of high-waisted shaping briefs, followed by tucking underwear, a pale blue satin camisole, padded hip-enhancing shorts with strategically placed inserts, and a soft bra. I stared into the box for a long moment before looking around my apartment as though someone might explain how my life had arrived at this point.

“This is a very specific hostage situation.”

There were more garments beneath them. I picked up the black bodysuit again. My back hurt, and that was the beginning of the rationalization.

Later, I would understand that I had built the decision one excuse at a time, carefully enough to make each step appear unrelated to the next. My back hurt. The package mentioned support. Compression garments existed for athletes, and men wore compression clothing all the time. This particular product had a scoop neckline, yes, and the model on the packaging was a beautiful transgender woman with waist-length hair, but that was marketing. Fabric did not have a gender, and I had spent enough money on law school to know how categories worked.

I opened the package.

The material was softer than I expected. Not soft like cotton, but smooth and dense, elastic in a way that felt expensive. I stretched it between my hands and watched the fabric immediately return to shape.

I read the instructions twice.

The first problem was that I had to take off my sweatpants. The second was that once I had done so, the entire situation became significantly harder to pretend was theoretical.

I stood in my apartment wearing a T-shirt and boxer briefs while holding a women's compression bodysuit.

“No.”

I folded it, put it back in the package, and placed the package in the box. Then I stood and made it three steps toward the kitchen before the ache in my lower back reminded me that, technically, I had not disproved anything.

I turned around.

“This is medical.”

Nobody responded.

I removed the garment again.

Getting into it was humiliating. The package recommended stepping into the bodysuit and gradually working the fabric upward rather than pulling aggressively, which sounded reasonable until I discovered that *gradually working the fabric upward* was marketing language for fighting for my life.

The garment reached my knees and stopped.

I pulled.

Nothing happened.

I adjusted the fabric around my thighs, and the material compressed immediately, tightening with enough determination to make me reconsider several personal choices.

“Oh, come on.”

I pulled again and eventually got it over my hips. The process required hopping twice, nearly falling into the dining table, and pausing to question whether firefighters would break down my door if I became trapped inside luxury underwear.

Once the bodysuit reached my waist, the struggle changed. The fabric tightened around my abdomen, and I sucked in instinctively while pulling the upper section into place. I pushed my arms through the straps, adjusted the material, and finally stood upright.

For a few seconds, I felt nothing except relief that the fight was over. Then I breathed.

The pressure was immediate but not painful. The bodysuit held my torso from my lower abdomen to just beneath my chest, smoothing everything with an even compression that felt strangely deliberate. I moved my shoulders, bent slightly, and straightened.

My back still hurt, but less.

I looked toward the mirror and then deliberately away. I had not put it on to look at myself, and that distinction felt important.

I was evaluating support.

Still, after another minute I walked to the closet door.

The man in the mirror looked ridiculous. That was my first thought, and I clung to it with the determination of opposing counsel defending a weak theory.

My T-shirt was bunched above my ribs. My hair needed cutting, and a faint crease remained on one cheek from sleeping badly. The black bodysuit exposed more of my thighs than anything I normally wore, while the high-cut shape of the leg openings made me immediately aware that the garment had not been designed around my usual expectations.

Then I looked at my waist. My attention stayed there. My body was not transformed. I did not suddenly have hips, and I certainly did not look like the model on the package. The garment had not performed a miracle, but my torso was smoother. The softness around my stomach had been compressed into a cleaner line, and my waist looked slightly narrower.

I turned sideways. My stomach looked flatter. When I faced the mirror again, something in my chest shifted. It was not arousal, which would have been easier. It was not even excitement, exactly. The feeling was quieter than that, and because it was quiet, I had no defense against it.

I looked less scattered. That was the thought that came to me.

My apartment was a mess. My bar-review score was a disaster, my workday had been controlled by a man who could somehow make the purchase of his lunch feel like federal litigation, and my career had stalled in a space I was increasingly afraid I deserved. Yet inside the bodysuit, under the steady pressure of the fabric, my body felt contained.

Held together.

I placed both hands on my waist before realizing what I was doing. The gesture startled me enough that I dropped them immediately and looked at my own reflection as though I had caught someone else committing an embarrassing act.

“What the hell are you doing?”

The mirror offered no legal analysis.

I took the bodysuit off.

This was worse than putting it on. Halfway down my thighs, I became convinced I had dislocated something, and by the time I stepped free, I was breathing hard and deeply annoyed.

I stood in my boxer briefs looking at the garment on the floor. The relief should have been complete, but without the compression I felt oddly loose.

That thought frightened me.

I picked up the bodysuit and carried it toward the kitchen, intending to throw it away. Then I noticed that the fabric had twisted.

There was no reason to damage a perfectly usable garment. Even if I did not want it, someone else might. Donation centers preferred items in good condition, and I was simply being practical.

I smoothed the material across the dining table, folded one side inward, then the other, and aligned the straps. When I finished, the bodysuit formed a neat black rectangle.

I placed it on top of the box instead of inside.

I slept badly.

At 6:20 the next morning, I woke before my alarm and immediately looked toward the dining table. The bodysuit was still there, because apparently part of me had expected it to disappear overnight and save me the inconvenience of making another decision.

I showered, made coffee, and completed seven practice questions. I got five right, which was not excellent but also not 58 percent, so I accepted the small mercy.

Then I dressed for work. Gray trousers. White shirt. Navy tie. At 7:14, I stood in front of the mirror while the bodysuit remained on the table behind me. I checked the time, looked at it again, and finally picked it up.

“This is for my back.”

I said the words aloud because apparently I had become a man who required witnesses to his own lies. Ten minutes later, I buttoned my shirt over it.

Chapter Three



Benjamin was already angry when I arrived. I knew this before the elevator doors opened because I could hear him from reception.

“I asked for the final.”

A muffled voice responded.

“No, you sent me a document named final. That is not the same thing.”

I stepped out of the elevator, and Olivia looked up from behind reception.

“He’s been here since six.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t ask. I enjoy being alive.”

My first instinct was to turn around. My second was to become suddenly aware of the bodysuit beneath my clothes.

The sensation had faded during the commute. At home, every inch of the garment had seemed impossible to ignore, but somewhere between Crown Heights and Midtown the pressure had receded into the background. Now, standing in the office with Benjamin’s voice carrying through the glass, I felt it again.

Firm around my middle. Steady. I adjusted my laptop bag.

“Morning.”

Olivia narrowed her eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was a look.”

“I’m looking at you.”

“You’re doing it suspiciously.”

She tilted her head.

“Did you lose weight?”

My stomach dropped.

“No.”

“Okay.”

“Why would you ask that?”

“You look different.”

“I’m wearing a shirt.”

“You wear a shirt every day.”

“Exactly. No mystery.”

She continued staring, so I walked away before the conversation could become a deposition. At my desk, I set down my bag and opened my laptop. I had barely entered my password when Benjamin’s office door opened.

“Manning.”

I looked at the clock. 8:47. Thirteen minutes early. For once, I experienced a small and vicious pleasure.

“Yes?”

“My office.”

I stood. As I crossed the floor, I became conscious of my posture. The bodysuit prevented me from slumping as easily as usual, and my shirt sat differently over my waist. I had noticed both changes at home but dismissed them as paranoia.

Benjamin noticed everything. This had been a serious error. I entered his office. He was standing behind his desk with his jacket off and his shirtsleeves rolled to his forearms. Three printed briefs lay open in front of him.

“Close the door.”

I did. He looked at me. I waited. His gaze moved down, not very far but far enough. Chest. Waist. Back to my face. The entire inspection lasted less than a second, yet every muscle in my body tightened.

“What?”

Benjamin’s brows drew together.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You looked at me.”

“I frequently do.”

“Not like that.”

His expression became unreadable.

For one terrible moment, I thought he knew. I imagined the shape of the bodysuit visible beneath my shirt, a strap or seam or some obvious detail I had missed in my apartment mirror.

Benjamin picked up a document.

“Your chronology.”

I remained near the door.

“What about it?”

“The Maison Sloane campaign date.”

My fear rearranged itself into work.

"I'm still tracing the template history."

"Still?"

"It's been less than a day."

"A day is a unit of time in which people accomplish things."

"Thank you. I missed that class."

He held out the document, and I took it. His eyes dropped again. I saw it happen. This time there was no question. He looked at my waist, then looked away. My face became hot.

"Manning."

"What?"

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"What did I say?"

I stared at him.

Benjamin waited.

I had no idea.

"You said something about time."

"That was thirty seconds ago."

"Then no."

He leaned back against his desk.

"Are you ill?"

"No."

“Distracted?”

“No.”

“Then explain why you’re standing in my office looking guilty.”

I almost laughed, which would have made everything worse.

Instead I looked at the document.

“Maybe because being called into your office feels like a disciplinary proceeding.”

“Your emotional response to architecture is not my responsibility.”

“Your personality is.”

Something flickered in his eyes, but he pointed toward the document before I could decide what it meant.

“Maison Sloane produced records from its outside branding agency. I want every reference to the January brief compared against metadata, billing records, and email attachments. If the document was recreated after the alleged date, I want to know when and by whom.”

I nodded.

“Fine.”

“And the S-Curve filings.”

“What about them?”

“Claire’s letter claims continuous development beginning in 2021.”

“I saw.”

“Test it.”

I looked up.

“With what?”

“Public filings. Patent records. Archived product pages. Whatever exists.”

“That could take days.”

“You have until tomorrow.”

“Of course I do.”

I turned toward the door.

“Manning.”

I stopped.

Benjamin was looking at me again, but this time his expression was different. It was not suspicion, exactly, and his gaze settled for a moment on the front of my shirt where the fabric lay flatter than usual over my stomach.

I waited for him to say something.

He did not.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“That’s twice.”

“Go work.”

I left with the uncomfortable certainty that he had noticed something. The stranger part was that I could not tell what.

By ten thirty, the office had entered crisis mode over a separate case involving a technology executive and a disputed severance agreement. Benjamin shouted at two associates, one partner, and someone from opposing counsel before coming out of his office at eleven fifteen.

“Where is Patterson?”

A junior associate looked up.

“On the call with West Coast counsel.”

“I told him I needed the draft.”

“He said—”

“I know what he said.”

Benjamin turned.

“Manning.”

I did not look up from my screen.

“No.”

The office went quiet. I continued typing for several seconds before Benjamin spoke.

“Excuse me?”

“I am currently doing three assignments you said were urgent. Unless the building is on fire, pick someone else.”

Serena made a sound that might have been a cough. Benjamin stared at me, and I felt the bodysuit around my waist. Yesterday, I would have stood immediately. Today, for reasons I did not understand, his anger seemed to hit something before it reached me.

He approached my desk.

“Look at me.”

I looked up.

He placed both hands on the edge of my workstation.

“Find Patterson.”

“No.”

His eyes narrowed.

“The building is not on fire,” I said.

“Manning.”

“You told me to test the S-Curve development timeline by tomorrow. I’m doing that.”

“I need Patterson.”

“Then call him.”

“I did.”

“Call him with more intensity. That’s your specialty.”

Somewhere behind me, a chair squeaked.

Benjamin’s face went very still, and I expected fury. Instead, he studied me for several seconds.

“You’re in an unusual mood.”

“So are you.”

“No, I’m not.”

That was true.

He walked away.

Serena waited until his office door closed before rolling her chair toward mine.

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“You told Benjamin no.”

“I’ve done it before.”

“No, you’ve complained before. That was different.”

I returned to my screen.

“I’m busy.”

Serena continued looking at me, then let her gaze move lower.

I froze.

“What?”

She leaned back.

“Nothing.”

“Why is everyone looking at me today?”

“Who else looked?”

“Nobody.”

“Aaron.”

“I have work.”

She did not move.

Serena was thirty-one, five foot four, and possessed the investigative patience of someone who had spent five years reviewing corporate executives’ text messages. She wore her dark hair in a blunt shoulder-length cut and had never accepted an evasive answer in her life.

“You look good,” she said.

I frowned.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you look good.”

“I look exactly the same.”

“No, you don’t.”

My heart began beating faster.

“Did I button my shirt wrong?”

She laughed.

“No.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know. Posture, maybe.”

“Posture.”

“Your clothes fit better.”

I stared at her.

She shrugged.

“Whatever you’re doing, keep doing it.”

She rolled back to her desk.

I remained still for a moment before looking down at myself. The bodysuit was invisible, mostly, but my shirt sat smoothly across my stomach, and my trousers looked slightly looser at the waist because the compression changed how the fabric fell.

I should have gone to the restroom and taken it off. I did not. At twelve twenty, Benjamin shouted again. At one ten, a client called me directly because Benjamin had frightened his assistant, and at two I realized I had worked through lunch without developing my usual headache.

At three twenty-three, I found the filing. I had been searching federal trademark databases, archived catalogs, and product-development references when a design-patent record appeared in a related assignment. I opened it, then another, and finally searched by inventor.

Maison Sloane’s complaint repeatedly described the curved compression architecture of its Contour One system as the culmination of proprietary development beginning in 2021. The company had not necessarily claimed that every

element was patented, but the chronology mattered because it supported the broader story of originality.

The relevant filing date was later than I expected. Much later.

I checked the document twice and then searched for related applications. There was a priority claim, but even that did not reach as far back as the complaint's narrative suggested.

Next, I opened Maison Sloane's archived product pages and began comparing terminology over time. In 2021, the company marketed "targeted shaping." In 2022, it used "multi-zone compression." The phrase **S-Curve Sculpting System** appeared later.

I built a chart.

Then I found an old VeraForm interview.

Nadia had used similar language months before Maison Sloane's first archived S-Curve announcement.

My pulse accelerated, although I forced myself to slow down before deciding what any of it meant. This was not a win. It was not proof that Maison Sloane had copied VeraForm, because marketing terms changed and public filings did not necessarily capture private development. Companies could spend years designing products before seeking protection.

Still, the timeline was not as clean as the complaint made it sound. I printed three pages and walked to Benjamin's office. His assistant was away from her desk, so I knocked once and entered. He was on the phone. He looked at me. I held up the pages. His expression said no. I placed them on his desk anyway.

Benjamin continued listening to the call while I pointed toward the filing date. His eyes moved across the page and stopped.

He spoke into the phone.

"I'll call you back."

Then he disconnected.

“What is this?”

“The design filing connected to one of the disputed panel configurations.”

“I can read.”

“Congratulations.”

His eyes lifted.

I continued before he could respond.

“Maison Sloane’s narrative says they were developing the S-Curve architecture beginning in 2021. But this filing comes later than I expected, and the priority date doesn’t solve the entire gap. Their archived marketing also changes.”

I handed him the chart.

“They don’t use the S-Curve language publicly until later. Before that, they describe a different system.”

“That proves nothing.”

“I know.”

He looked at me.

I hated how much I wanted him to understand that I knew.

I was not a first-year student arriving with a dramatic conclusion because I had found one document. I understood evidence, and I understood that timelines could mislead.

“It doesn’t prove they copied anyone,” I said. “It doesn’t prove independent development either. But if they’re going to tell a story that starts in 2021, I think we should force them to show us the development records that make the story true.”

Benjamin looked at the chart again.

I waited while he read the filing and then the archived terminology. The silence stretched long enough to become uncomfortable.

Finally, he looked up.

“Good.”

That was all. One word. I should have been insulted. I had spent hours on the research, built a timeline, cross-checked public records, and found a potential weakness in a case being handled by attorneys billing more per hour than I sometimes spent on groceries in a week.

He said good.

I walked back to my desk, and Serena immediately looked at me.

“Well?”

“He said good.”

Her eyes widened.

“Benjamin?”

“Yes.”

“Benjamin Hilton?”

“No. Benjamin Franklin. Of course Benjamin Hilton.”

She smiled.

“That’s basically a standing ovation.”

“Shut up.”

I sat down and reopened my laptop.

For the rest of the afternoon, the word stayed with me longer than it should have. I knew it was pathetic, and knowing did nothing to help.

At 5:40, I was still thinking about it. At 6:15, Benjamin emailed asking for the chart in an editable format, and I sent it seven minutes later.

At 6:23, he replied:

Add source links.

I hated him again. Balance had been restored. I worked until seven thirty, by which time most of the office had emptied. I packed my laptop and was halfway toward the elevator when Benjamin called from behind me.

“Manning.”

I turned.

He stood outside Conference Room B.

“No.”

His brows lifted.

“I’m going home.”

“I didn’t ask whether you were going home.”

“Then this conversation is already disappointing.”

He pointed into the conference room.

A white VeraForm box sat on the table.

I stared at it.

“Absolutely not.”

“Take it.”

“I took two boxes.”

“And you did an excellent job. This is how responsibility grows.”

“You’re a terrible person.”

“So you’ve mentioned.”

I walked toward the box.

It was smaller than the others.

“What’s in it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t check?”

“I have a law degree.”

“So do I.”

The words came out too quickly.

Something tightened in my chest.

Benjamin’s expression changed almost imperceptibly.

“Yes,” he said. “You do.”

I looked away first.

The box was light enough to carry under one arm, and I picked it up while Benjamin remained near the doorway.

His gaze moved over me again.

This time I was certain.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Looking at me.”

He did not answer immediately, and I became acutely aware of the bodysuit beneath my clothes. My skin felt hot.

Benjamin’s eyes returned to my face.

“You’re standing differently.”

I forgot how to breathe.

“What?”

“Today.”

I forced a laugh.

“You’ve been monitoring my posture?”

“No.”

“That sounded like monitoring.”

“You asked.”

I tightened my grip on the box.

“My back hurt.”

He glanced at the box, then at me, and for one irrational second I had the insane feeling that he knew. That was impossible, of course.

Benjamin stepped aside.

“Go home, Manning.”

I left.

On the train to Brooklyn, I stood because there were no seats. The box rested against my shoes, my body felt tired, and the bodysuit still held me. I did not remove it until I was inside my apartment. The moment I peeled it down, the absence of pressure returned. I stood beside my bed in boxer briefs and looked at the garment before turning toward my reflection.

My waist had returned to normal. Of course it had. I folded the bodysuit more easily this time and placed it on the chair. Then I remembered the new box waiting near the door.

“No.”

I went to the kitchen and made a sandwich.

The box remained where I had left it.

I ate standing at the counter, checked my email, and found three new messages from Benjamin. After answering one, I opened my bar-review dashboard and saw a new mixed question set waiting.

I completed twenty-five questions. When the score appeared, I stared at it. **56%.** Lower. Somehow lower. My eyes burned. I closed the laptop and sat in the quiet apartment.

I had taken the bar once, and I remembered the morning of the first day too clearly: the security line, the clear plastic bag of permitted items, the rows of tables, and the nervous conversations around me. I had walked in believing fear was normal because everyone was afraid.

Months later, when the results came, I had opened them alone. There had been no dramatic collapse. I had simply sat at my table for almost an hour staring at the screen.

Then my mother called. I told her I had postponed the exam. The lie came out smoothly, and I had hated myself for how easily it came.

I stood so quickly that the chair scraped the floor.

“Enough.”

I did not know whether I meant the exam, the memory, or myself.

I walked toward the new VeraForm box and opened it.

There were fewer products inside, mostly underwear. I lifted one package and read the label.

Tuck-Smooth Everyday Panty.

I stared at it.

Then I laughed.

The sound came out too loud in the apartment.

“No.”

I put it down.

There were three pairs in different colors: black, nude, and pale pink. I read the packaging because reading was not trying.

The garment used an internal compression structure designed to create a smoother front profile without excessive pressure. According to the product description, it could be worn beneath jeans, dresses, or fitted clothing.

My attention caught on one word. Dresses. I returned the package to the box. I showered, changed into a T-shirt, and made tea. At 10:15, I opened my bar-review book, and at 10:22 I realized I had read the same paragraph four times.

The box remained near the door. This was different from the bodysuit. The bodysuit had support. The bodysuit had helped my back and was, if one was willing to commit several crimes against ordinary reasoning, practically orthopedic.

The underwear had no excuse.

I returned to the book. At 10:36, I closed it. The black pair was still sealed. I opened the package.

Outside the marketing photograph, the garment looked less dramatic. It was high-waisted and made from smooth fabric with a reinforced front panel. There was nothing decorative about it.

I held it up. Absolutely not. Five minutes later, I was standing in front of the mirror wearing it. The first sensation was compression. The second was panic. I almost removed it immediately, but instead I adjusted the fit according to the instructions, moving slowly and feeling ridiculous and deeply conscious of every movement. The process was unfamiliar enough that I refused to look at myself until I had finished.

Then I stood upright.

My heart began beating harder.

The effect was not perfect or magical, and my body had not changed. But the front of the garment was smoother. Much smoother.

I looked away and then back. Something inside me became quiet. That was the only way I could describe it.

I had spent the entire evening hearing noise in my own head: evidence questions, failure, debt, Benjamin's voice, deadlines, the lie I had told my mother, and the endless humiliating distance between the degree on my résumé and the title I had not earned.

In the mirror, none of those things disappeared. I simply stopped hearing them for a moment.

My eyes moved over my reflection. The high waist changed the line of my lower torso, and without the shape I was accustomed to seeing, my body looked unfamiliar.

Not female. I knew that. I was not delusional. But softer, somehow. Cleaner. My chest tightened. I touched the waistband, and the man in the mirror did the same. I should have laughed. I had laughed at the package, after all.

Instead, I stood there until the silence became frightening.

I took the underwear off too quickly, and my hands shook slightly, which made me angry. I pulled on sweatpants, carried the garment toward the laundry basket, and then stopped.

It was new. I should wash it properly. I folded it and placed it beside the bodysuit. Then I got into bed and turned off the light.

For almost an hour, I stared into the darkness and tried to explain what had happened. The worst part was not that I had tried it. The worst part was that, for a few minutes in front of the mirror, I had felt better, and I had no idea what that meant.

Chapter Four



Over the next two weeks, I developed a system, although I refused to think of it as dressing because *dressing* implied intention, and intention suggested a category of behavior I was not prepared to examine. I was using things. Testing things. Occasionally wearing items that happened to have arrived in cardboard boxes from a client and happened to fit my body well enough that throwing them away would have been wasteful. The distinction became increasingly difficult to defend, but I defended it anyway.

On Monday, I wore the black compression bodysuit beneath a pale blue shirt and spent the entire commute checking my reflection in subway windows for visible seams. On Tuesday, I switched to a pair of VeraForm compression shorts that stopped several inches above my knees and held my abdomen with less force. Wednesday, I wore ordinary boxer briefs and spent most of the day irritated without understanding why. By Thursday, I had returned to the bodysuit, and by Friday I had somehow developed opinions.

The black one compressed more evenly than the sand-colored version. The shorts worked better beneath my navy trousers because the bodysuit occasionally created a faint line near my hips if I moved too quickly. The high-waisted shaping briefs were comfortable for approximately four hours before the waistband began rolling, which struck me as a serious design flaw that I nearly emailed Leila about before realizing I would have to explain how I knew.

The tucking underwear remained at home, and I treated that as proof that I still had boundaries. I wore the black pair occasionally in my apartment, never for long and never for any reason I could describe without sounding ridiculous. Sometimes I put them on while studying. Once I wore them while doing laundry. Another evening, after Benjamin sent me an email at eleven thirty containing nothing

except the words **Need revised chart by 7**, I discovered that the steady pressure quieted the frantic feeling under my skin enough for me to work.

I did not wear them to the office. I was absolutely certain of that, and the fact that I had begun thinking of my rules as though I were negotiating with opposing counsel should probably have concerned me more than it did.

My system also included laundry, which was where things became dangerous in a quieter way. The first time I washed the bodysuit, I placed it in the machine with dark shirts and pretended not to notice that I checked the care label twice. The second time, I bought a mesh laundry bag because the packaging recommended one for maintaining elasticity. I stood in the cleaning aisle of a Brooklyn drugstore holding the bag and spent several minutes convincing myself that purchasing proper laundry equipment for women's shapewear did not represent a meaningful escalation.

I bought it anyway. Then I bought gentle detergent because it was on sale, which mattered, although I could not have explained why.

By the following Wednesday, the VeraForm products occupied an entire drawer of my dresser. I did not remember deciding to give them one. The drawer had previously contained old T-shirts and a collection of charging cables for devices I no longer owned, but one night, after finding the bodysuit draped over the back of a chair and the compression shorts folded beside my bar-review books, I cleaned everything out because I was tired of clutter.

That was all.

The garments simply looked orderly inside the drawer. Black folded beside sand, compression shorts beneath shaping briefs, tucking underwear at the back where I did not have to see it unless I was looking. I closed the drawer, then opened it again because the satin camisole was still in the box.

I had ignored the camisole almost completely since bringing it home. Unlike the bodysuit, it offered no support. Unlike the tucking underwear, it did not present itself as some kind of technical solution to a physical problem. It was pale blue, absurdly soft, and entirely unnecessary, with narrow straps and a slight sheen to the fabric that made it impossible to mistake for anything I normally wore.

I had touched it once while unpacking the box and put it away immediately.

That evening, I came home after a twelve-hour day and found a message from BarMax reminding me that I was “falling behind my personalized study goals,” which was an impressive way for an automated notification to sound disappointed. Benjamin had also emailed twice. The first message asked whether I had completed a supplemental production index, and the second had arrived six minutes later containing nothing but a question mark.

I stood in my kitchen staring at the screen.

“You’re forty years old,” I said. “Use words.”

I answered him, heated frozen dumplings, and tried to study. The first question concerned secured transactions, and I got it wrong. The second concerned criminal procedure, and I got that wrong too. By the third question, which was evidence, I found myself staring at answer choices I should have understood while every word seemed to lose meaning.

I closed the laptop before the score could appear.

The apartment felt too small. My shirt collar seemed too tight even though I had already removed my tie, and my skin felt stale from the office, the train, and twelve hours of recycled air. I went to the bathroom and turned on the shower, then stood under water hot enough to make the mirror disappear behind steam.

For almost twenty minutes, I did nothing productive. I washed my hair twice and used the expensive body wash my mother had given me at Christmas, something I had been saving for reasons I could no longer remember. By the time I stepped out, my shoulders had loosened, and for a few minutes I felt almost detached from the score waiting on my laptop and the emails waiting on my phone.

I wrapped a towel around my waist and returned to the bedroom. My dresser drawer was slightly open. The pale blue fabric was visible inside.

I stopped because there was no reason for what came next, and that was what made the moment different. The bodysuit had a reason. My back hurt, and compression helped. The tucking underwear had at least involved curiosity about a product central to a case I was working on, which was not a good excuse but could theoretically be presented in complete sentences.

The camisole had no function I needed. It was sleepwear. Women's sleepwear.

I reached into the drawer and let the fabric slide against my fingers. I should have put it back, but instead I lifted it out, checked the size despite already knowing it was a medium, and looked toward the mirror. Steam from the bathroom had followed me into the bedroom, softening the edges of my reflection.

"This is getting stupid."

I put the camisole on.

There was no struggle, which alone felt suspicious. The fabric slipped over my head and settled against my skin before I had time to reconsider, the narrow straps resting over my shoulders while the hem fell several inches below my waist.

I looked down.

The satin moved when I breathed.

It was absurdly soft, and I had known that from touching it, but touch was different when the fabric covered my body. My old T-shirts sat on my skin. The camisole seemed to move over it.

I turned toward the mirror and felt an almost ridiculous flicker of disappointment because nothing dramatic had happened. I still looked like myself. My hair was damp, my face bare and slightly red from the shower, and the camisole did not give me breasts or change my shoulders or erase anything I understood about my body.

It simply made me look softer.

The blue fabric caught the bedroom light. The straps made my neck appear longer, and because the garment fell without the usual bulk of a T-shirt, I became more aware of the line from my ribs to my waist. I touched the hem and felt my chest tighten with a reaction I could not categorize quickly enough to dismiss.

"No."

I almost removed it. Instead I sat on the edge of the bed. The satin gathered around my hips.

I had never given much thought to sleepwear. I owned sweatpants, boxers, old shirts from college, and one pair of flannel pajama pants printed with tiny martini glasses that an aunt had given me as a joke. The camisole was not practical, and that was precisely the problem.

Nothing about it could be explained as necessary, corrective, orthopedic, or useful. It did not make me better at my job. It did not improve my bar-review score. It would not help Benjamin stop deleting emails. It simply felt good.

I turned off the lamp and got into bed wearing it.

For the first few minutes, I lay rigid beneath the blanket because apparently some part of me expected the police to arrive. Nothing happened. The building made its ordinary noises, pipes knocking somewhere in the wall while a car horn sounded on the street below and another answered because New Yorkers considered silence an admission of weakness.

I rolled onto my side. The fabric moved against my stomach. I closed my eyes.

I could not explain why something so small made going to bed feel less miserable, and that was the part that stayed with me. I had not solved anything. My loans remained. My bar failure remained. Benjamin Hilton would still exist in the morning with his impossible deadlines and complete lack of respect for personal peace. Yet the familiar end-of-day dread, the sense that I had survived another twenty-four hours only to begin failing at the next set of obligations, felt muted beneath the simple physical fact of softness against my skin.

I had spent years treating comfort as something I was supposed to earn after work was finished, after exams were passed, after debts were smaller, after I became the version of myself I kept promising everyone would eventually appear. The camisole asked nothing from me. It did not care what title followed my name or whether I had answered the evidence question correctly. It was a piece of fabric, and somehow that made the relief more humiliating rather than less, because I could not even pretend the feeling came from accomplishment.

I slept for seven hours without waking.

That had not happened in months.

In the morning, I stood beside the bed holding the camisole and looking down at it as though the fabric might explain what had happened. Eventually I folded it carefully and returned it to the drawer, which should have been the moment I understood I had crossed another line. Instead, I went to work.

The production disaster began at 10:08, and by 10:14 Benjamin had frightened three people.

Maison Sloane had served a supplemental production consisting of nearly forty thousand pages, much of it dumped into a database with inconsistent naming conventions and several attachments separated from their parent emails. Worse, one of our outside vendors had apparently failed to process an entire category of metadata correctly, which meant documents that should have been searchable by custodian and date were not.

This was a real problem.

Benjamin's response remained excessive.

"What do you mean, the fields are missing?"

The litigation-support manager stood near his office door with a laptop open.

"We're reprocessing the set now."

"That was not my question."

"The load file—"

"I know what a load file is."

Across the office, people became very interested in their screens.

I kept working until Benjamin said my name.

"Manning."

I closed my eyes briefly. There it was.

"Yes?"

“Conference room.”

“I’m already working on the production.”

“Then bring the work.”

I carried my laptop into Conference Room A. The next hour became an exercise in collective misery as Benjamin demanded a reconstructed production map, a list of missing metadata fields, an estimate of how many documents had been affected, and an explanation of whether any of the gaps interfered with our ability to identify communications related to the disputed campaign timeline.

The litigation-support manager answered carefully. Serena joined by phone from court. Two junior associates began reviewing random samples while I built a spreadsheet.

By eleven thirty, we had established that the problem was serious but fixable, which should have calmed Benjamin.

It did not.

“How long?”

The vendor representative on speakerphone said, “We’re hoping to complete reprocessing by tomorrow morning.”

“Hoping.”

“We expect—”

“You said hoping.”

A pause followed.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because there are a number of variables.”

Benjamin leaned toward the conference table.

“There are always variables. That is what incompetent people call consequences after failing to plan.”

I stopped typing. The vendor representative began explaining the technical issue again, but Benjamin interrupted before the man finished.

“No. I want the documents.”

“We understand.”

“I don’t think you do.”

Something in me snapped. Maybe it was the lack of sleep I had accumulated over the previous month despite one good night. Maybe it was the pressure of the case, the bar exam, or the strange secret life developing one drawer at a time in my apartment. Or maybe I was simply tired of watching a grown man behave as though fear were a management strategy.

“You know, yelling does not make documents reproduce faster.”

The conference room went silent.

Serena’s face froze on the video screen. The junior associate beside me stopped moving, and even the vendor representative on speakerphone seemed to understand that something irreversible had occurred.

Benjamin turned his head.

“What did you say?”

I should have apologized. I knew that, but instead I closed the spreadsheet.

“I said yelling does not make documents reproduce faster.”

Only then did I remember the vendor representative was still connected.

Benjamin reached forward and disconnected the call.

He looked at me.

“My office.”

I stood while nobody else moved. As I walked out, I heard Serena say through the speaker, very quietly, “Oh, Aaron.”

Benjamin’s office door closed behind us.

I remained near it while he crossed the room, placed both hands on his desk, and stared through the windows overlooking Manhattan. For several seconds, neither of us spoke.

Then he turned around.

“What exactly is your problem?”

I laughed despite myself.

“My problem?”

“Yes.”

“How much time do you have?”

His jaw tightened.

“Do you believe that was appropriate?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“I also believe I was right.”

His expression sharpened.

“That was a client production.”

“It was a vendor issue.”

“A vendor handling client production.”

“Yes, and humiliating the person explaining the problem did not fix it.”

“I was not humiliating anyone.”

I stared at him, and he stared back as though waiting for me to retreat.

“That is an extraordinary interpretation of events.”

He came around the desk.

I held my ground.

“You have become increasingly comfortable forgetting where you work.”

“No, I’m very aware of where I work. It’s difficult not to be when somebody is shouting every twenty minutes.”

“I do not shout every twenty minutes.”

“Sometimes you take lunch.”

He stopped several feet away from me.

The office felt smaller.

I had argued with Benjamin many times. Usually there was a desk between us, or a conference table, or at least several coworkers available to witness my death. Now there was nothing.

His voice lowered.

“You think this is funny.”

“No.”

“You make jokes when you’re nervous.”

My stomach tightened.

“I’m not nervous.”

“Yes, you are.”

He took another step, and I became aware of his height in a way I usually resisted. Benjamin was broad enough that the expensive tailoring of his suits sometimes disguised how physically imposing he actually was.

I lifted my chin.

“You don’t know everything.”

“No.”

Another step brought him close enough that I could see the faint line of exhaustion beneath his eyes.

“But I know you.”

The words landed harder than they should have.

I folded my arms.

“You know my calendar.”

“I know you avoid eye contact when you lie.”

“That’s not true.”

“You’re doing it now.”

I looked directly at him.

His expression changed.

“Happy?”

“No.”

Something moved beneath my ribs, and I should have stepped back. I did not.

Benjamin stood close enough that I could smell his cologne, something dark and understated that I associated with expensive elevators and unreasonable expectations. He was angry, but the anger had shifted. So had mine.

The silence between us became something I did not understand. His eyes moved over my face more slowly than before. I felt heat climb my neck.

“You’ve been different,” he said.

My heart stumbled.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Yes.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“You argue more.”

“I’ve always argued.”

“Not like this.”

I laughed without humor.

“Maybe I finally got tired of being treated like your personal retrieval service.”

His mouth tightened.

“You are paid very well.”

“That does not make me furniture.”

“I’ve never treated you like furniture.”

“You introduced me to Nadia by saying I know where everything is.”

“You do.”

“That’s your defense?”

“It was accurate.”

I made a frustrated sound and turned away. My shirt shifted. That was all. One small movement.

I had worn the pale blue camisole beneath my shirt that morning, although I had not planned to. After sleeping in it, I had showered, dressed, and then stood beside the open drawer for several minutes while telling myself the camisole was clean, soft, and invisible beneath an opaque shirt.

Now, as I turned, the collar of my shirt pulled slightly to one side. Benjamin stopped speaking. I felt the silence immediately and looked back. His gaze was fixed below my neck. I followed it. A narrow strip of pale blue satin showed beneath the edge of my white undershirt where the fabric had shifted. Barely an inch, perhaps less, but enough.

My entire body went cold. I pulled my collar back into place. Benjamin's eyes returned to mine. Neither of us spoke. I waited for the question, but it did not come. His face gave me nothing, and I hated that more than I would have hated mockery.

"What?"

He looked away.

"Nothing."

My pulse hammered.

"You're doing that again."

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me and pretending you weren't."

He moved back toward the desk.

"I said nothing."

"That's not the same as nothing happening."

Benjamin picked up a file, which apparently meant the conversation was over. I remained where I was because I was not ready to let him decide that.

"You called me in here to fire me."

"No."

"To yell at me."

"No."

"You were absolutely going to yell at me."

“I was going to tell you that contradicting me in front of a vendor was inappropriate.”

“It was.”

His eyes lifted. The concession surprised him. I continued before he could recover.

“So was what you were doing.”

We stared at each other for several seconds before Benjamin spoke.

“Go back to work.”

I reached for the door.

“Manning.”

I looked over my shoulder.

His gaze stayed on my face this time.

“Do not do that again.”

I could not tell whether he meant challenging him in front of a vendor. I left before I asked.

At nine fourteen that evening, my phone rang while I was sitting cross-legged on my bed with a bar-review book open and the pale blue camisole folded on the pillow beside me.

Benjamin’s name appeared on the screen. I stared at it until the third ring. Then I answered.

“Yes?”

“Manning.”

I closed the book.

“What did I forget?”

“Nothing.”

“That seems unlikely.”

A pause followed. Benjamin did not pause. Benjamin spoke because silence allowed other people to participate. I sat straighter.

“Is this about the production?”

“No.”

“The timeline?”

“No.”

“Did you delete another email?”

“Not recently.”

I looked at the camisole.

Something in my stomach tightened.

“What do you want?”

Another pause.

Then Benjamin asked, “What were you wearing today?”

I stopped breathing.

The room became very quiet.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

I stood without knowing why.

“I was wearing a shirt and trousers.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

My hand closed around the phone.

“I don’t know what you think you saw.”

Benjamin said nothing, and I hated him for using silence against me outside office hours.

“It was an undershirt,” I said.

The lie came quickly.

Too quickly.

On the other end of the call, Benjamin exhaled.

“All right.”

I swallowed.

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“Then good night.”

“Manning.”

I closed my eyes.

“What?”

His voice was lower when he spoke again.

“Good night.”

The call ended.

I remained standing beside the bed for several seconds before looking down at the pale blue satin on the pillow. For the first time since this had started, the secret no longer felt entirely mine.

Chapter Five



Deposition preparation began on a Sunday, which was not unusual at Hilton Pierce, although Benjamin had once informed a prospective associate that the firm valued work-life balance with such a straight face that I nearly reported him to the state bar for fraud.

The deposition belonged to Martin Kessler, Maison Sloane's former vice president of product strategy. Kessler had overseen portions of the company's shapewear development during the period when the disputed S-Curve architecture allegedly originated, which made him important enough that half the office had spent the previous week organizing his documents.

According to Maison Sloane, Kessler would confirm years of independent product development. According to Benjamin, Kessler was "a man with a memory problem and too many lawyers."

I arrived at the office shortly after eight carrying coffee and a bagel.

Benjamin had already been there for hours.

Of course.

Conference Room A contained twelve banker's boxes, three laptops, a printer, two rolling whiteboards, and enough paper to reconstruct a small forest. I stopped in the doorway and looked around.

"This is obscene."

Benjamin did not look up.

"You're late."

“It’s Sunday.”

“Time continues on Sundays.”

I checked my watch.

“I’m fifteen minutes early.”

“Then your expectations were too low.”

I placed my coffee on the table.

“Good morning to you too.”

He slid a binder toward me.

“Start with employment history. I want every representation he made about his role compared against internal reporting lines.”

I opened the binder.

“You already did this.”

“I want you to do it.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked.”

I looked at him.

Benjamin looked back.

The tension from our phone call two nights earlier remained between us, although neither of us had acknowledged it. He had not asked again about the satin strap, and I had not worn the camisole to work again.

That was another rule.

For approximately forty-eight hours, I had been very committed to rules.

Then Sunday arrived.

I worked.

By ten, we had built a preliminary examination map. Kessler had spent nine years at Maison Sloane, joining as director of product strategy before rising to vice president and leaving under circumstances described by his separation agreement as “mutual” and by several internal emails as something else.

Benjamin read everything.

That was the first thing I understood as the hours passed. He did not skim. He read. A witness might have mentioned a supplier in one email eighteen months earlier, and Benjamin remembered the exact exhibit containing the reference.

At eleven, I found a discrepancy involving Kessler’s authority over prototype approvals. Benjamin immediately changed the deposition outline. At noon, Serena arrived with lunch and joined us for two hours. By two thirty, Benjamin had started testing questions on me.

“Did you approve the March specifications?”

I played Kessler.

“I don’t remember.”

“You signed them.”

“I sign a lot of documents.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“I’d have to see the document.”

Benjamin slid a page across the table. I looked down. He waited. The silence did the work. I understood suddenly why witnesses hated him. He did not perform anger in depositions. He removed it.

At the office, Benjamin was all impatience and sharp edges. In preparation, he became something colder. Every question had a purpose, and every document sat exactly where it needed to be.

I read the signature page.

“As I said, I don’t specifically remember.”

Benjamin leaned back.

“Then we agree your memory is unreliable.”

I frowned.

“That’s argumentative.”

“Good.”

“You can’t just—”

“Again.”

We repeated the sequence, then another, and by four I was exhausted while Benjamin was still going. Somewhere between the seventh and eighth version of a question about prototype review, I began understanding why clients paid him.

I had known intellectually that he was good. That was different from watching how he built a case. He anticipated evasions, designed questions around documents witnesses could not explain away, and knew when to push and when to let a bad answer sit in silence until the witness became afraid of it.

I hated him.

I also could not stop watching.

At five fifteen, Benjamin removed his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. I had seen the glasses only a few times and disliked how much they suited him.

“We need the garment comparison ready before Tuesday,” he said.

I closed the binder.

“Leila is bringing samples tomorrow.”

“She brought samples last week.”

“She’s bringing the authenticated comparison set.”

His expression darkened.

“Wonderful.”

“You love textiles.”

“I love evidence.”

“Some evidence has straps.”

He looked at me.

I looked away.

That had been too close.

Benjamin said nothing.

The authenticated comparison set arrived Monday afternoon.

Nadia came with Leila, and this time the garments were packed individually, tagged, photographed, and linked to production records. Conference Room B became a laboratory as Leila laid out two bodysuits, one VeraForm and one Maison Sloane, followed by shaping briefs, compression shorts, and several early VeraForm prototypes.

Benjamin stood at the table with his arms folded.

“Explain the difference.”

Leila picked up the Maison Sloane garment.

“The plaintiff’s design uses lateral tension.”

“Meaning?”

“Most of the compression force pulls inward from the sides.”

She showed the internal panels, then picked up VeraForm’s garment.

“Our disputed structure redirects more force diagonally from the lower abdomen toward the upper hip.”

Benjamin frowned.

“They look the same.”

Nadia sighed.

“You’ve said that.”

“Because they do.”

I moved closer.

Leila turned the VeraForm bodysuit inside out. The paneling was visible. I recognized it immediately. Not the exact product. The sensation. My hand moved before I thought. I touched the seam.

“This one pulls differently.”

Everyone looked at me. I should have stopped. Instead I continued.

“The compression isn’t strongest here.”

I touched the side.

“It’s lower.”

Leila’s eyebrows lifted.

“Yes.”

I traced the angled seam without thinking.

“It pushes upward.”

Silence followed.

I became aware of Benjamin.

His gaze was fixed on me.

Leila nodded slowly.

“Exactly.”

I removed my hand.

Benjamin spoke.

“How do you know that?”

My mind emptied.

“I read the product documentation.”

His expression did not change.

“What documentation?”

“The technical sheets.”

“Which one?”

I hated him.

“The one Leila sent.”

Leila looked confused. Benjamin saw it. Of course he did.

I reached for my laptop.

“I can find it.”

“No.”

My hand stopped.

Benjamin looked at me.

“Later.”

I forced myself to breathe. Nadia watched the entire exchange. She said nothing.

For the rest of the meeting, I stayed away from the garments as much as possible. The problem was that I understood more than I should. When Leila discussed pressure zones, I thought about the bodysuit. When she explained

waistband behavior, I remembered the shaping briefs rolling after four hours. When she described the challenge of creating a smoother front profile without painful concentration of force, I thought about the black tucking underwear in my dresser.

I took notes.

I did not speak.

Benjamin noticed anyway.

After the meeting ended, he stopped beside my desk.

“Manning.”

I kept typing.

“Yes?”

“What technical sheet?”

“I told you.”

“No, you didn’t.”

I looked up.

“Do you have work for me?”

His jaw tightened.

“That was a question.”

“I read things.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then mystery solved.”

He held my gaze long enough to make it clear that nothing had been solved. Eventually he walked away.

I exhaled.

Nadia's voice came from behind me.

"He really is exhausting."

I turned.

She stood near reception holding her coat.

"I thought you left."

"I forgot my phone."

She lifted it.

I nodded, then looked toward Benjamin's office.

"He's not always like this."

Nadia smiled.

"Yes, he is."

I laughed despite myself.

She stepped closer.

Her gaze moved toward the conference room.

"You understood the garment."

My stomach tightened.

"I read the materials."

"Of course."

She said it kindly.

That made it worse.

I closed my laptop.

"Everyone keeps acting like that's suspicious."

“I don’t.”

“You’re doing it right now.”

“Doing what?”

“Looking at me like you know something.”

Nadia considered me for several seconds before shaking her head.

“I don’t know anything about you that you haven’t told me.”

I did not believe her.

She saw that too.

“I mean it,” she said. “You work around people who turn everything into evidence. That doesn’t mean everything is.”

I looked toward the conference room again.

The garments remained on the table.

Nadia followed my gaze.

“Keep whatever you like.”

My head turned sharply.

“What?”

“The duplicate products.”

“I don’t need anything.”

“I didn’t say you did.”

“I’m not—”

She lifted a hand. There was no amusement in her face. No teasing. That stopped me.

Nadia said, "Aaron, I own a company that makes underwear. You touching a piece of fabric does not require a crisis."

Heat climbed my neck.

"You think I wear them."

"I think you're very defensive."

"That isn't an answer."

"No."

She adjusted her coat.

"It isn't."

I stared at her. Nadia remained calm. Too calm.

"I'm not transgender," I said.

The words came out before I had decided to speak. Something changed in her expression. Not surprise. Not recognition. Sadness, perhaps, but only for a moment.

"I didn't say you were."

I looked away. The office suddenly felt too bright. Nadia waited before speaking again.

"You don't owe me an explanation for liking something."

"I don't."

"Good."

"I mean I don't like anything."

"Also fine."

I laughed once.

"You're impossible."

“No. Benjamin is impossible. I’m expensive.”

That pulled a reluctant smile from me.

She touched my arm lightly.

“Keep whatever you like.”

Then she left.

That night, I walked three blocks past my apartment before realizing I had missed my turn.

I stopped outside a store.

It was not a lingerie shop, which would have made leaving easier. It was a chain clothing store with women’s and men’s sections, bright windows, and mannequins arranged beneath a sign advertising twenty-five percent off sleepwear.

I looked inside. Then kept walking. At the corner, I stopped. Nadia’s voice returned.

You don’t owe me an explanation for liking something.

I turned around. The store was warm. Too warm.

I entered through the men’s side because that felt important. I walked past sweaters, jeans, and a display of athletic shirts before reaching the central aisle.

Women’s sleepwear began on the other side. I stood there. Nobody cared. A cashier folded clothes. Two women discussed sizing. A man pushed a stroller while holding three dresses over one arm. The world continued.

I crossed the aisle.

The first table contained pajama sets. I touched nothing. The second had robes, and the third held sleep shorts.

My pulse changed.

They were simple. Soft knit fabric. Elastic waist. Tiny side slits. Nothing dramatic. I picked up a gray pair and immediately put it down. Then I checked the size chart. Medium. My hand returned to the gray pair.

This was different.

Every feminine item in my apartment had come from VeraForm. Benjamin had ordered me to take boxes home. The products were samples, duplicates, client material.

I had not chosen them. Not really. The shorts in my hand cost twenty-four dollars. I could leave. I should leave. Instead, I carried them toward the register.

Halfway there, I stopped. A woman nearly walked into me.

“Sorry.”

“No, sorry.”

I moved aside.

My hands were sweating.

This was ridiculous.

I had purchased alcohol underage with less fear.

I looked at the shorts, then at the door.

Then I went to the register.

The cashier scanned them.

“Do you want a bag?”

“Yes.”

My voice sounded strange.

She placed the shorts in a small paper bag.

“That’ll be twenty-six fourteen.”

I paid. Nobody asked who they were for. Nobody laughed. Nobody called Benjamin.

I walked home carrying the bag inside my laptop case.

When I reached my apartment, I locked the door and stood in the kitchen for several minutes before opening it. Eventually, I took out the shorts.

They looked exactly as they had in the store. Soft. Gray. Ordinary. I changed.

The waistband sat high on my hips, while the legs were shorter than anything I normally wore at home. I looked in the mirror and felt something warm move through me.

Not shock. Not fear. Something gentler. I touched the hem.

The VeraForm boxes were still stacked near the wall.

For weeks, I had blamed them. Benjamin sent them home. Nadia said to keep them. The client made them. The case required me to understand them. The excuses had formed a chain. Now I had broken it. Nobody had given me the shorts. I had chosen them. I had paid for them. I had carried them home.

I stood in front of the mirror with my hands at my sides and understood that this was the first thing I could not blame on anyone else.

Chapter Six



Three days after I bought the sleep shorts, my phone discovered femininity. This was not my fault. At least, not entirely. I had searched one question:

how to hide shapewear lines under men's clothes

That was practical.

The next search had been:

best underwear under compression bodysuit

Also practical.

Then:

how to stop shapewear rolling at waist

Still related to garment performance.

By the end of the evening, an algorithm apparently concluded that I was a woman named Madison preparing for her first date. My feeds changed almost overnight. Skincare. Seamless underwear. Women's lounge sets. Hair-removal devices. Beginner makeup tutorials. Lip oils. Nail products.

One video showed a woman applying concealer beneath her eyes and looking suddenly less exhausted. I watched it twice. That was the beginning again, although by then I was becoming increasingly aware that every beginning seemed to contain a previous beginning.

The next morning, my phone recommended a video titled **Five-Minute Makeup for People Who Hate Makeup**. I saved it, not because I intended to use makeup but because the woman had mentioned color correction. I was interested in color theory. I had taken art history in college.

That sentence became difficult to maintain even internally.

I started with skincare. Skincare was gender-neutral. Everyone had skin. Dermatologists existed. I bought a moisturizer. A good one. Not expensive. Reasonably expensive.

The box promised barrier support and improved texture, which sounded almost medical. Then I bought sunscreen because the moisturizer made a point about sun damage, and that was responsible.

The tinted lip balm happened because my lips were dry. The clear nail treatment happened because one thumbnail had begun splitting near the edge. The brow grooming happened because I had always had eyebrows and there was no legal doctrine preventing me from improving them.

Every purchase arrived with an explanation. I kept the explanations ready. Nobody asked. That was almost disappointing.

One Saturday morning, I stood in my bathroom beneath unforgiving light and examined my face. I had never thought of myself as unattractive. Average, probably. Presentable.

My features were finer than Benjamin's, but most human features were. I had brown hair that needed frequent cutting, pale skin in winter, dark brows, and eyelashes several women in my family had complained were wasted on me.

The algorithm had opinions. I trimmed one stray brow hair. Then another.

Then I noticed asymmetry.

Twenty minutes later, my brows looked cleaner. Not thin. Not obviously shaped. Just less heavy. I stared at my reflection and liked the change. That should have been enough.

Instead I shaved. More carefully than usual. Face. Neck.

Then, after standing in the shower for several minutes, chest. I had never liked chest hair. That was true. It irritated me beneath certain shirts. Also true. The fact that I watched the hair disappear beneath the razor with a sense of relief did not need to be analyzed.

I shaved my legs two days later, which took longer. The first pass left patches, the second produced a small cut near my ankle, and by the time I finished, the bathroom looked like a crime scene designed by a beauty influencer.

I stepped out of the shower and put on the gray sleep shorts. The fabric touched bare skin. I stopped. My legs looked different. Not feminine. I refused the word. Cleaner. That word had become dangerous.

I applied moisturizer and felt my stomach tighten as my hands moved over smooth skin. Then I sat on the edge of the bed because the physical sensation had become more noticeable than I wanted it to be.

My phone buzzed.

Benjamin.

Tomorrow 8. Client meeting. Wear a suit.

I stared at the message and typed:

I usually arrive clothed.

Three dots appeared.

A good suit.

I threw the phone onto the bed.

“Asshole.”

The next morning, I wore my best charcoal suit. Under it, I wore the black compression bodysuit. I had stopped pretending that choice was accidental. The bodysuit made the jacket sit better. That was simply true. I also used moisturizer. Clear nail treatment. The tinted lip balm.

Then I stood in front of the mirror. My brows looked different, although barely. My face looked rested even though I had slept five hours. I wiped the lip balm off. Then reapplied it.

The client was Julian Mercer, founder of Mercer North Holdings. His company owned luxury hotels, private clubs, and a development portfolio large enough that magazines occasionally used aerial photographs when discussing him.

He was also being sued by a former business partner who claimed Mercer had concealed information during a buyout.

Serena was supposed to attend.

At 7:32, she texted that she had food poisoning.

At 7:33, Benjamin called me.

“You’re coming.”

“I am coming. You told me eight.”

“To the meeting.”

“I thought I was preparing materials.”

“You are now attending.”

I looked down at my suit.

“Why?”

“Serena is sick.”

“There are other associates.”

“I want you.”

The words landed strangely.

Benjamin continued before I could respond.

“You know the document history.”

That fixed it.

Of course.

“Fine.”

“Lobby in ten.”

He disconnected. I looked at myself in the mirror beside the elevators. Charcoal suit. White shirt. Dark tie.

Nothing unusual. Except the bodysuit beneath it. Except the moisturizer. Except my brows. Except the tinted balm. I rubbed my lips together. The elevator opened. Benjamin stepped out and looked at me. Then he stopped.

My stomach tightened.

“What?”

His gaze moved over my face, then lower, then back.

“Nothing.”

I laughed once.

“You need another word.”

“For what?”

“Whatever this thing is where you stare at me and then say nothing.”

“I’m evaluating.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

My pulse changed.

He adjusted his cuff.

“The suit is acceptable.”

I stared.

“That was your evaluation?”

“Yes.”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

We walked to the car. Benjamin used a black sedan with a driver for client meetings because parking in Manhattan was apparently beneath litigation strategy. I sat beside him in the back.

The ride took fifteen minutes.

Benjamin spent most of it reading an email. I spent most of it aware that his knee was six inches from mine. At one point, the car turned sharply. Our legs touched. Benjamin looked up. I moved away. He returned to the email.

I hated him.

Mercer North occupied offices downtown with views designed to remind visitors that money could, in fact, purchase altitude. Julian Mercer met us in a private conference room. He was in his late fifties, silver-haired, tanned, and accustomed to being the most important person present.

Benjamin shook his hand.

“Julian.”

“Ben.”

I had never heard anyone call him Ben.

I nearly smiled.

Julian noticed me.

“And this is?”

“Aaron Manning,” Benjamin said. “Senior litigation paralegal.”

I looked at him.

The introduction was proper.

My surprise must have shown because Benjamin glanced at me.

Julian extended a hand.

“Good to meet you.”

“You too.”

The meeting began.

For the first twenty minutes, everything was normal.

Then Julian became irritated.

The plaintiff had produced evidence suggesting Mercer knew about a disputed valuation before signing the buyout documents. Benjamin wanted context. Julian wanted reassurance.

Those were not the same thing.

“I told you,” Julian said, “I don’t remember that email.”

Benjamin remained calm.

“You responded to it.”

“My staff responds to emails.”

“From your account?”

“Yes.”

“With your initials?”

Julian’s jaw tightened.

I took notes.

The exchange continued until Benjamin asked me for a document.

I found it.

Julian looked at me.

“No, not that one.”

I paused.

Benjamin said, “It is that one.”

Julian ignored him and pointed toward my laptop.

“Kid, there’s another attachment.”

I was twenty-eight.

I also had a law degree.

I opened the attachment list.

“There are three.”

“The spreadsheet.”

“I have it.”

“Then why are we wasting time?”

I looked up.

The room became still.

I had dealt with difficult clients. That was part of the job, and usually I let it pass.

Before I could respond, Benjamin spoke.

“Julian.”

His voice was quiet.

The client turned.

Benjamin's expression had changed.

"Mr. Manning is part of my litigation team. You will speak to him accordingly."

Silence followed.

Julian blinked, then leaned back.

"I didn't mean anything."

"I know exactly what you meant."

"Ben—"

"We are here because you are paying us to protect you from a lawsuit. Mr. Manning has reviewed more of your production than anyone in this room except me. If he tells you there are three attachments, there are three attachments."

I stopped breathing.

Julian looked at me, then at Benjamin.

"Fine."

Benjamin did not move.

Julian exhaled.

"My apologies, Aaron."

I nodded.

"Thank you."

The meeting continued, but I barely heard the next five minutes. Benjamin returned to the documents as though nothing had happened while I stared at my notes until the words blurred.

Apparently Benjamin was allowed to bully me. Nobody else was. The realization should not have warmed anything inside me. It did.

The ride back uptown was quiet. Rain had started, and water moved across the windows, blurring traffic lights into color. Benjamin sat beside me reading notes. I looked at him. Then away. Then back.

Finally I said, "Thank you."

He did not look up.

"Don't."

I frowned.

"What?"

"Thank me."

"Why?"

"Because I did my job."

"You defended me."

"I corrected a client."

"Same difference."

"No."

I studied him.

Benjamin turned a page.

I said, "You introduce me correctly now."

His hand stopped.

"What?"

"To clients."

He looked at me.

"Senior litigation paralegal."

“That is your title.”

“Yes.”

“You seem surprised.”

“You used to say I know where everything is.”

“You do.”

I laughed.

“There he is.”

The corner of his mouth moved. Barely. Then his gaze dropped.

My lips. I felt it. The tinted balm had faded but not disappeared, and I became suddenly aware of my mouth. Benjamin looked for half a second too long before returning to my eyes. Neither of us spoke. The car seemed smaller.

I swallowed.

“Do I have something on my face?”

“No.”

“That word again.”

His gaze dropped once more, then he looked out the window.

“Your lips look different.”

My breath caught.

“I have dry lips.”

“That wasn’t a question.”

“It’s lip balm.”

Benjamin said nothing.

I looked at the rain.

“It’s tinted.”

Still nothing.

I turned toward him.

“Say something.”

His jaw tightened.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“That has never stopped you before.”

He looked at me. The air changed.

I could not explain it more accurately than that. One second we were arguing. The next, Benjamin’s attention felt physical. His eyes moved over my mouth again. My body went very still. The bodysuit held my waist. My shirt collar felt too tight.

Benjamin leaned slightly closer.

Not enough. Maybe I imagined it. The driver changed lanes. The movement of the car shifted us toward each other. My knee touched his. Neither of us moved. I could hear my heartbeat.

Benjamin’s voice was lower when he spoke.

“You should stop thanking me.”

“Why?”

His eyes stayed on mine.

“Because I’m not as nice as you think.”

I almost laughed.

“I have never thought you were nice.”

Something in his expression broke. Not anger. Something worse. Then the car stopped. The driver said, "We're here." I moved first. Of course I did. I opened the door and stepped into the rain.

Benjamin followed.

By the time we entered the building, three feet of professional distance had returned between us. The secret beneath my suit felt more expensive than anything I had bought. And for the first time, I was not sure it belonged only to me.

Chapter Seven



VeraForm's product-development reconstruction was scheduled for a Thursday morning at the company's Manhattan headquarters, which occupied two floors of a converted commercial building in SoHo and looked nothing like the offices of a company currently spending a significant portion of its money defending a lawsuit. The reception area had curved cream furniture, smoked mirrors, and enough carefully placed orchids to suggest litigation was something that happened to uglier people.

I arrived at eight fifteen carrying my laptop, two binders, a portable scanner, and a legal pad Benjamin had handed me in the lobby after deciding the one I already owned was apparently insufficient. He walked three steps ahead of me, as usual, wearing a dark navy suit and the expression of a man who considered Thursday an administrative error.

"You know they have pens here," I said as I adjusted the weight of the binders against my chest.

Benjamin did not turn around. "I know."

"Then why am I carrying twelve?"

"Because three of them are mine."

"I'm beginning to understand why labor movements happen."

"You work in an air-conditioned office."

"That is not a complete theory of employment law."

He glanced at me as we reached the elevators. “Please do not explain employment law to me before coffee.”

“You started this.”

“I have no memory of that.”

The elevator doors opened, and Nadia Vale was waiting on the other side with a tablet in one hand and a headset around her neck. She wore a black jumpsuit with a narrow gold belt and looked so composed that I immediately became conscious of the fact that I had slept five hours and eaten a granola bar over the sink.

“There you are,” she said.

Benjamin checked his watch. “We’re early.”

“I was talking to Aaron.”

I smiled while Benjamin looked mildly offended by the existence of warmth.

Nadia led us through the main offices toward a large product studio that had been temporarily converted for the reconstruction. The purpose of the exercise was to document how several VeraForm prototypes had been assembled at different points in development, particularly during the period Maison Sloane claimed VeraForm had copied proprietary compression architecture. We were not recreating the products for spectacle; we were trying to establish a clean factual record connecting old pattern files, handwritten sample tags, manufacturing instructions, and surviving prototypes.

The room contained three cutting tables, two industrial dress forms, several rolling racks, cameras on tripods, and a row of sealed evidence boxes. Leila Grant stood near one table with VeraForm’s outside technical consultant, while two members of the product team adjusted lighting around a white backdrop.

I set down my materials and surveyed the equipment. “This is more organized than our war room.”

Benjamin removed his coat. “That is because I don’t allow designers into our war room.”

Leila looked over from the nearest table. “We heard that.”

“Good.”

Nadia handed me a schedule. “You’ll be documenting sample changes and linking every demonstration to the relevant product-development record.”

“I thought I was here because Benjamin enjoys transporting office supplies through human labor.”

“That too.”

Benjamin ignored us and walked toward the evidence boxes.

The morning began smoothly. For almost two hours, Leila demonstrated how several early prototypes had evolved, beginning with a 2021 shaping brief that used straight lateral panels and moving into later versions that introduced angled compression. Another prototype added lower-abdominal support after VeraForm received feedback from transgender customers who found mainstream shapewear uncomfortable when worn over a tuck.

I photographed tags, recorded timestamps, and matched garments to development logs while Benjamin asked questions whenever a description became imprecise, which was often.

“‘Around spring’ is not a date,” he said after Leila referenced one of the revisions.

She sighed. “It was a development period.”

“Development periods occur within time.”

“Thank you, Benjamin.”

“You’re welcome.”

I kept my eyes on the laptop because laughing would only encourage him.

Nadia came up beside me and lowered her voice. “Do you ever want to throw something at him?”

“Constantly.”

“What stops you?”

“Debt.”

The first problem appeared shortly after eleven when one of the models contracted by VeraForm for fit reconstruction called from New Jersey to say she had been in a minor car accident. Nobody was injured, but she would not reach Manhattan in time.

Leila immediately checked the schedule. “Which set was she doing?”

“Archive series C,” Nadia said.

The answer changed the room because archive series C included an intermediate prototype related to the disputed compression layout. The sample had survived, but the original fit records were inconsistent, and the point of the reconstruction was to show how the prototype behaved on a body with dimensions close to those recorded in the old testing notes.

Benjamin looked toward the schedule. “Can we reschedule?”

Leila shook her head. “The technical consultant flies out tonight. We also have the camera team and independent documentarian booked today.”

“Use another model.”

“The others don’t match the measurements closely enough.”

Benjamin looked at the rack. “How close does it need to be?”

Leila read from the fit sheet. “Approximately thirty-eight chest, thirty-one waist before compression, thirty-seven to thirty-nine hip depending on padding configuration.”

My fingers stopped over the keyboard because I understood the problem before anyone said my name. Nadia looked at me, and I looked back at her with enough warning in my expression that her mouth twitched.

“No,” I said.

She had not spoken.

That made it worse.

Leila turned toward us. “What?”

“Nothing.” I returned my attention to the schedule, but Benjamin had already noticed.

“Manning.”

“No.”

“I haven’t asked anything.”

“I’m learning from experience.”

Leila looked between us, then at me, then back at the fit sheet. Understanding arrived slowly across her face.

“Oh.”

I stood straighter. “No.”

Nadia’s mouth twitched again. “Aaron, nobody is asking you to model.”

“Excellent. We agree.”

Leila approached with the tablet. “You’re actually close.”

“That sounds like a personal problem.”

“To the measurements.”

“I understood you.”

Benjamin folded his arms. “We are not putting my paralegal into disputed evidence.”

I looked at him because the objection should have relieved me. Instead, something about *my paralegal* lodged under my ribs in a way that had nothing to do with legal ethics.

Leila shook her head. “Not as evidence. We need to confirm fit behavior against the written notes. We can document that the reconstruction participant is not the historical model and that the demonstration is illustrative.”

Benjamin’s expression remained skeptical.

Nadia looked at me. “You would only be helping with documentation.”

“That sentence has already become dishonest.”

“No runway, no photography of your face, and no publication. We would use the garment to test a labeling issue and confirm which internal panel corresponds to a handwritten notation.”

I glanced toward the rack and recognized the shape of one of the sealed samples before reading the label. It looked more advanced than the bodysuits I had taken home, with visible structural zones and removable hip enhancement. My stomach tightened before I could stop the reaction.

Benjamin noticed my hesitation. “We can reschedule.”

The answer came so quickly that I looked at him.

His jaw was set.

For reasons I could not explain, that irritated me. “I can decide for myself.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t.”

“You just decided we should reschedule.”

“Because this is unnecessary.”

Nadia raised one eyebrow while I turned toward Leila.

“What exactly do you need?”

Benjamin said my name again, this time with warning. “Manning.”

I looked at him. “What?”

“Think.”

“I am.”

“Try longer.”

I laughed without humor. “You do realize telling me not to do something makes you significantly less persuasive.”

“That is not how legal advice works.”

“You’re not my attorney.”

Nadia stepped between us before the conversation became another employment crisis. “Aaron, come with me. You can look at the setup privately and decide. Benjamin can spend five minutes learning that other people possess autonomy.”

Benjamin gave her a cold look.

Nadia smiled.

I followed her.

Her office occupied a corner of the upper floor and had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking downtown. The space was elegant without feeling staged, with warm wood, books, framed campaign photography, and a low cream sofa near a rack holding several garments covered in muslin bags.

Leila joined us carrying the prototype while Benjamin remained in the studio. I noticed his absence immediately and was irritated by the fact that I noticed.

Nadia closed the door. “Before you panic, this is not a trap.”

“I am not panicking.”

“You have the facial expression of a man being audited.”

“That’s my normal face.”

Leila placed the garment on a long table and began explaining the issue. Up close, the prototype looked more complex than the retail shapewear I had worn. The base was a deep neutral color, almost taupe, with reinforced internal zones,

removable structures at the hips, and several diagonal panels crossing the lower torso.

“This is the archived sample,” she said. “We think one label was attached after a revision, but the handwritten development note is ambiguous. The note says the left lower panel was shortened after fit test three. The physical sample appears to have the longer configuration.”

I examined the seams. “So you want to see how it sits.”

“Exactly. We’re not testing aesthetics.”

I almost laughed. “Comforting.”

Nadia sat on the edge of her desk. “You can say no.”

I looked at her because she meant it, and that made the decision harder. My gaze returned to the garment.

I had worn shapewear for weeks, secretly enough that the dresser drawer in Brooklyn had started to feel like a second life. I knew what it felt like when compression pulled in the wrong direction. I knew what rolling waistbands did, and I knew that the tucking underwear changed something in my head that I still could not name.

This should have felt like more of the same, but it did not. Maybe the difference was that Benjamin knew enough to be suspicious, or that Nadia knew enough not to ask. Maybe every excuse had simply become thinner.

I touched the edge of the garment. “How private?”

“Completely,” Nadia said. “You can change in my bathroom. Leila and I will only inspect the fit if you agree. No one else enters.”

I looked toward the door. “Benjamin?”

Nadia smiled slightly. “He can survive not knowing something for ten minutes.”

That made me laugh despite myself. “Fine.”

Leila handed me the garment. “I’ll explain the closures.”

“I can figure it out.”

Both women looked at me.

I immediately regretted speaking.

Nadia said nothing, and neither did Leila. Their silence was far more effective than teasing would have been.

I took the garment into the bathroom and closed the door behind me.

The bathroom was larger than my bedroom, with a full-length mirror occupying one wall and soft lights surrounding another. Folded towels sat beside perfume bottles, and enough skincare products covered the marble shelf to bankrupt me.

I removed my suit jacket, tie, and shirt, then discovered the first practical problem. I was already wearing compression shorts underneath my trousers.

I stared at myself in the mirror, then at the prototype in my hands. “Excellent.”

Changing into the garment required more work than the bodysuit. I stepped into it carefully, adjusted the lower panels, and followed the internal markings Leila had shown me. The hip structures sat higher than I expected, and once the main closures were secured, I had to reach behind myself and pull the upper compression into position.

The pressure increased gradually as the garment settled. My waist narrowed, and the lower panels smoothed the front of my body while diagonal tension pulled inward around my middle. The hip structures created width where I had very little, and the contrast changed my proportions more dramatically than anything I had worn before.

I turned toward the mirror.

My breath caught.

The person reflected back at me still had my face, my shoulders, and my chest. My damp palms pressed against the edge of the sink while I stared below them at a body that curved.

There was a waist.

There were hips.

The line from my ribs downward no longer dropped almost straight.

I turned sideways and saw that my stomach looked smoother. When I faced forward again, something inside me opened so quickly that I became afraid.

For weeks, I had used safer words. *Cleaner. Contained. Softer. Quieter.* Each one had helped me move around the thing I refused to name, but the mirror did not care about the language I used to protect myself.

I touched my waist and watched the reflection do the same. My eyes burned, and I blinked hard because I had no idea what I was objecting to anymore: the garment, the body, or the fact that I liked what I saw.

A thought came to me with terrifying simplicity.

There you are.

I gripped the sink because my chest hurt with something too complicated to call happiness. There was grief inside it too, as though relief had discovered something I should have known years ago and was furious with me for taking so long. I could still see every masculine thing about myself, every reason the image should have felt absurd, and yet my eyes kept returning to the curve at my waist with a recognition that made no logical sense. I had not become anyone else in that bathroom. Nothing about my history had changed. I had simply looked at my own body and, for one impossible moment, felt less need to look away.

A knock sounded.

“Aaron?”

Nadia’s voice pulled me back.

I swallowed. “Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

I looked at the mirror. “No.”

She waited a moment before asking, “Do you want us to leave?”

I closed my eyes. “No.”

“Do you want more time?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

Her footsteps moved away, and I remained alone for another minute before finally opening the door.

Nadia and Leila were waiting near the table. Neither spoke immediately, and Leila’s attention went first to the garment rather than my face, which I appreciated more than I could explain.

“Can I check the side panel?” she asked.

I nodded.

She approached, touched only the fabric, and examined how the seam sat over my hip. Her expression changed almost immediately.

“That’s it.”

Nadia looked at her. “What?”

“The handwritten note. The label is wrong. This is the longer panel, and on someone close to the original measurements, it sits too high.”

Leila crouched slightly and pointed without touching me. “See this tension? The revised version should terminate lower.”

I looked down because I understood the difference now that the garment was on my body. “The pressure is pulling upward.”

“Yes.”

“Too much.”

Leila looked at me. “Exactly.”

I almost smiled, then remembered I was standing in Nadia Vale's office wearing shapewear that had given me hips. The smile disappeared.

Nadia walked to a cabinet. "You need something over that while they locate the other sample."

"I'm changing."

"Leila needs five minutes to retrieve the comparison garment."

"I can wait in the bathroom."

"You can, but you'll wrinkle your suit."

"I don't care."

"I do."

She opened the cabinet and held up a cream silk robe.

I stared. "No."

"It is a robe."

"It's your robe."

"It's an office emergency robe."

I looked at her. "You have an office emergency robe?"

"I run a lingerie company."

That was difficult to argue with.

I took it and slipped it over the shapewear, tying the belt loosely at my waist. Then I made the mistake of looking in the mirror again.

The robe followed the shape underneath.

My heart beat harder.

Nadia saw the reaction and said nothing, which nearly destroyed me more effectively than any comment could have.

Leila's voice came through her phone. "The comparison sample is in archival, not studio. Ten minutes."

I groaned.

Nadia walked toward another rack. "We have a meeting in here at noon. You cannot stand in my bathroom for ten minutes."

"I absolutely can."

"You're impossible."

"I learned from Benjamin."

She pulled a garment from the rack.

A dress.

Simple.

Dark green.

Knit.

Long sleeves.

No glitter, no dramatic neckline, and nothing that could be dismissed as costume.

I took a step back. "No."

Nadia held it up. "It's just to cover the sample."

"No."

"It will fit."

"That is not helping."

“Aaron.”

“No.”

She lowered the dress immediately. “All right.”

I looked at it.

She waited.

I hated her.

I hated Benjamin.

I hated the lawsuit.

Most of all, I hated that I wanted to know.

“Give it to me.”

Nadia’s expression did not change, another kindness I understood only because she could easily have smiled.

She handed me the dress.

I returned to the bathroom.

The dress was softer than I expected. I put it over my head, and the knit fabric slid down my body before catching briefly at the padded hips and falling into place.

I pulled the hem lower.

Then I looked up.

My attention narrowed completely to the person in the mirror.

The dress was simple enough that there was nowhere to hide. There was no wig, no makeup, and no heels. I saw my own short hair, my own face, my own hands, and a garment following the shape created beneath it, defining a waist before falling over hips that had not existed fifteen minutes earlier.

I looked feminine.

Not perfectly.

Not completely.

But unmistakably enough that my body responded before my mind did.

My shoulders dropped.

I breathed.

The person in the mirror breathed too.

I touched the side of the dress and felt a strange pressure behind my eyes. I wanted to cry, but I also wanted to laugh, and instead I stood there staring because the most frightening part was how little the image felt like a performance. I had expected embarrassment, absurdity, or perhaps the same detached curiosity I felt the first time I tried the bodysuit. What came instead was recognition softened by disbelief. I did not look like a woman in the uncomplicated way Nadia did, and I knew that, but I also did not look like a man wearing a joke. The distinction mattered more than I was prepared to understand. The person in front of me looked unfinished, frightened, and somehow closer to me than the man I had adjusted into suits every morning for years.

Another knock sounded.

“Aaron?”

I opened the door.

Nadia looked at me.

Her face became still.

I immediately crossed my arms. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were going to.”

“No.”

“You looked.”

Her expression softened. “I looked.”

“That’s worse.”

“It isn’t.”

I walked past her. “Where’s Leila?”

“Coming.”

The office door opened.

Benjamin entered.

He had a folder in one hand and his phone in the other, and he was already speaking before he crossed the threshold.

“Nadia, the 2022 manufacturing invoices—”

Then he saw me.

For the first time in three years, I watched Benjamin Hilton lose a thought.

He stopped in the doorway and said nothing. This was a man who could be interrupted during oral argument and return to a sentence thirty seconds later, a man who remembered exhibit numbers from cases he had not touched in months, yet now he simply stared.

My entire body became hot.

The dress suddenly felt too thin.

I looked at Nadia. “You said nobody else.”

“He didn’t knock.”

Benjamin still had not moved.

I turned toward him, and his eyes traveled over me once. The look was not crude, which would have been easier. His attention moved from my face to my

shoulders, down the dress and the shape beneath it, then back to my face as though the route had changed something.

“Manning.”

That was all.

My last name.

He had said it thousands of times: angry, impatient, distracted, and occasionally amused against his will. He had never said it like that.

My throat tightened.

I reached for the bathroom door.

Benjamin seemed to wake. “I was looking for—”

“I know.”

“You don’t know what I was looking for.”

“I don’t care.”

I entered the bathroom and shut the door.

My hands shook while I changed. I removed the dress too quickly, caught one sleeve at my wrist, then forced myself to slow down because tearing Nadia’s clothes would only add another humiliation to the day.

By the time I removed the prototype and put on my own clothes, my face felt hot enough to burn.

When I returned, Benjamin was gone.

Nadia sat behind her desk.

She looked at me.

I looked away. “Don’t.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Everyone is suddenly very committed to silence.”

Leila arrived with the comparison sample and stopped when she saw my face.
“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

Nadia said, “Benjamin happened.”

“Of course.”

I picked up my laptop. “Can we finish?”

We did.

I documented the fit discrepancy, linked the handwritten note, photographed the label, and worked until the reconstruction was complete. For the rest of the day, Benjamin barely spoke to me.

That should have been a relief.

Instead, his silence became more noticeable with every hour. At four, he asked Serena for a document he would normally have asked me to retrieve. At five, he sent me an email from twenty feet away instead of calling my name. During the ride back toward the office, he sat across from me in the car and looked out the window.

I watched him. He never looked back. By the time we reached Midtown, I had decided his silence was worse than his temper. I simply did not know why.

Chapter Eight



Benjamin waited until Monday morning to question me about what had happened at VeraForm. I spent the weekend preparing for a conversation that never came, and every time my phone buzzed, I expected his name. Every time I opened my email, I expected some carefully worded message about professional boundaries, client products, or the deeply unfortunate fact that he had seen me in a dress.

Nothing came. By Sunday evening, I had convinced myself he did not care. By Monday at nine ten, I knew I had been wrong.

“Manning.”

I looked up from my desk.

Benjamin stood outside his office with an expression that gave me nothing. “My office.”

Serena glanced toward me while I closed my laptop.

“What now?”

Benjamin walked away without answering, so I followed him and closed the door behind me.

He remained standing.

So did I.

Benjamin opened a file. “Did you wear client products before Thursday?”

The question was so direct that every answer I had prepared disappeared.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

I folded my arms. “I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“Then let me help you. We represent VeraForm in active litigation involving disputed product designs. You have access to samples. If you have been personally using those samples, I need to know whether that creates any issue involving preservation, chain of custody, or witness testimony.”

I stared at him. “That’s what this is about?”

“What did you think it was about?”

I almost laughed. “You tell me.”

Benjamin’s jaw tightened. “I am asking a legal question.”

“No, you’re asking whether I wear women’s underwear.”

“I did not ask that.”

“You found a longer way.”

His voice remained calm. “Have you worn authenticated evidence?”

“No.”

“Disputed prototypes?”

“No.”

“Products designated for preservation?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

I looked away because the office windows reflected part of the room, though not enough to show my face clearly. “Duplicates.”

Benjamin said nothing.

I continued because his silence became unbearable. “Retail samples. Things Nadia’s counsel said could be kept, donated, or discarded.”

“How long?”

My face heated. “That is absolutely none of your business.”

His expression changed slightly. “I’m determining whether there is a litigation issue.”

“There isn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Because unlike you, I do not delete evidence.”

That landed exactly as intended. Benjamin looked offended, and I continued before he could recover.

“I check labels. I know which samples are authenticated. I know which materials are on hold. I know because you keep assigning me to manage them.”

His gaze stayed on me. “Fine.”

I stared. “Fine?”

“Yes.”

“That’s it?”

“What else do you want?”

I laughed because the entire conversation had become absurd. “You dragged me into your office to interrogate me about underwear, and now you’re asking what I want?”

“I did not interrogate you.”

“You’re a litigator. You interrogate people when you ask if they want coffee.”

Benjamin looked away briefly.

That was unusual enough that I noticed.

My anger shifted. “Do you care?”

His eyes returned to mine. “About what?”

I hated him for making me say it. “You know what.”

He remained silent.

I forced the question out. “Do you care that I wear them?”

Something moved across his face and vanished. “No.”

The answer hurt.

I had no right to be hurt, and that made it worse.

Benjamin continued before I could speak. “I do not care what you wear privately.”

The word landed harder than the rest.

Privately.

My pulse changed because he knew enough to divide my life into public and private versions, even if neither of us was prepared to name the difference.

I laughed without humor. “Then stop staring at me.”

His expression went still. “I don’t stare.”

“You do.”

“No.”

“You’re terrible at lying.”

“I am not lying.”

“You stared at me in Nadia’s office like I had developed a second head.”

“That was an unusual situation.”

I pointed at him. “There. You admit it.”

“I admit nothing.”

“You walked into a room and forgot how language worked.”

Benjamin’s mouth tightened. “I was surprised.”

“By the dress?”

“By you.”

The answer came too quickly.

Neither of us moved.

I swallowed. “What does that mean?”

He looked at the file. “Nothing.”

I laughed again because *nothing* had become his favorite refuge. “Of course.”

“Manning.”

“No. You don’t get to do that. You ask what I wear, say you don’t care what I do privately, then admit you were surprised by me and suddenly we’re back to nothing.”

Benjamin closed the file. “What do you want me to say?”

I stared at him because I had no answer, and the absence frightened me more than anything he could have said.

A knock sounded before either of us recovered.

His assistant opened the door. “Sorry. Claire Whitmore just filed something.”

Benjamin’s attention shifted instantly. “What?”

“Emergency motion. They’re seeking expanded discovery and forensic access.”

His expression changed.

The conversation ended.

For the next thirty-six hours, the dress ceased to matter.

Maison Sloane's motion was aggressive. They argued that VeraForm had failed to produce complete historical development records and sought broad forensic access to archived servers, personal devices used by certain executives, and repositories containing proprietary design materials far beyond the original scope of the case. If granted as written, the request would be expensive, invasive, and potentially disastrous.

Benjamin read the motion once, then again, and by the third pass he had become unbearable.

By noon, two conference rooms had been converted into emergency workspaces. Serena took privilege issues, another associate handled proportionality and burden, and I built a chronology of every discovery request, response, collection effort, and supplemental production related to the disputed records.

Benjamin moved between us like weather.

"I want declaration support for every burden estimate."

An associate looked up. "I'm getting it."

"Who has the collection logs?"

"I do," I said.

"Why is this date different?"

"Because the supplemental request was amended."

"No, don't summarize the request. Read it."

At six, most of the office ordered dinner. At eight, nobody had eaten it. By ten thirty, Olivia had left, and at midnight the cleaning staff came through while we were still surrounded by binders and half-finished coffee.

At one fifteen, I was working through production logs while Benjamin stood at the whiteboard with his tie removed and his sleeves rolled up. He had not yelled for nearly an hour, which was how I knew he was truly worried.

I checked one production log, then another, and realized the numbers had begun to blur.

“You’re duplicating.”

I looked up.

Benjamin was watching me. “What?”

“You entered the same date twice.”

I checked the spreadsheet and discovered he was right. “I’ll fix it.”

“Take a break.”

I laughed because the suggestion sounded absurd coming from him.

He did not. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“Manning.”

“Benjamin.”

His eyes narrowed. “Ten minutes.”

I pushed back from the table. “Fine.”

I went to the small break room, where the coffee machine had reached a stage of existence best described as criminal. I poured water instead and sat at the corner table.

My laptop was still in my bag. I should have rested, but instead I opened it and let BarMax load.

I had fallen behind again.

Of course I had.

I started a practice set because answering questions felt easier than sitting with the case. Question one concerned civil procedure, question two involved evidence, and question three was constitutional law. By question six, my brain had shifted enough that Maison Sloane, the emergency motion, and Benjamin disappeared temporarily behind familiar legal problems.

Then I got question seven wrong.

Question eight followed.

I stared at the explanation long enough that I did not hear Benjamin approach.

“You’re studying.”

I closed the laptop so quickly that the screen nearly caught my fingers.

Benjamin stood in the doorway.

“No.”

He looked at the computer. “That was convincing.”

“I’m on break.”

“You are.”

“Then why are you supervising it?”

He walked in and pulled out the chair across from me.

I stared. “What are you doing?”

“Sitting.”

“I know the mechanics.”

“Then why ask?”

I hated him.

He looked at the closed laptop. "Bar review?"

I said nothing.

"When are you taking it?"

I reached for my water. "Taking what?"

"The bar."

"I haven't decided."

"Why?"

"Because I haven't."

"That isn't an answer."

I laughed. "You really cannot stop."

"No."

At least he knew.

I looked toward the hallway, where the office had gone quiet enough that I could hear the hum of the refrigerator. For once, there were no witnesses.

Benjamin said, "You have a law degree."

"I know."

"You work sixty-hour weeks doing legal analysis."

"I know."

"You catch issues associates miss."

"I know."

"Then take it."

Something in me tightened. "You make everything sound very easy."

“I didn’t say it was easy.”

“You say it like I simply forgot to register.”

He studied me while I reached for the laptop. I wanted to end the conversation before it found the place I had spent nine months protecting.

“My ten minutes are over.”

“Manning.”

I pulled the laptop closer.

He spoke again, more quietly this time. “Why haven’t you taken it?”

I froze because the lie was already waiting. I had used it for nine months and could have delivered it perfectly: workload, timing, preparation, the demands of full-time employment. I could have explained that I was waiting until I had enough time to study properly and made the decision sound responsible rather than terrified.

Benjamin waited while I looked at him, and for reasons I could not explain, I heard myself answer with the truth.

“I did.”

His expression changed.

I laughed because I could not tolerate the silence. “Congratulations. You finally found something about me you didn’t know.”

“When?”

“Nine months ago.”

He sat back slightly. “And?”

I looked away. “And what do you think?”

He understood.

I hated the exact moment he understood because I had expected pity, and pity was the one reaction I was not sure I could survive. Benjamin's face remained unreadable for several seconds, and then he said the last thing I expected.

"Take it again."

I stared at him. "That's your response?"

"Yes."

A hot wave of anger moved through my chest. "Of course it is."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you make everything sound like a command."

"Fine. Consider it one."

I almost threw the water at him. "You think I haven't thought about that?"

"I think you're studying at one thirty in the morning."

"You think I don't know I can retake it?"

"I think you failed an exam."

The words hit harder than they should have, and Benjamin saw my face change.

He continued before I could interrupt. "So take it again."

I stood so quickly that the chair moved backward. "You have no idea what that was like."

"No."

"You have no idea what it feels like to spend three years in law school, work yourself half to death, sit for two days in a room with hundreds of people, and then open a result that tells you none of it was enough."

"I know what failure feels like."

“Do you?” My voice sharpened. “Because from where I’m standing, everything you touch turns into a newspaper profile.”

Benjamin’s eyes hardened. “You know almost nothing about me.”

“Exactly.”

The irony landed between us, but I was too angry to retreat.

“You order people around,” I said. “You tell me to take it again as if confidence is something I can schedule between a production review and your lunch reservation.”

“I didn’t say confidence.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I said take it again.”

“Why?”

His expression shifted. “Because you should be a lawyer.”

The room became very quiet.

I looked at him and felt something in my chest tighten so sharply that I almost laughed.

“You don’t get to say that.”

“Why?”

“Because you treat me like a servant.”

He flinched, very slightly, and I saw it.

Good.

“You make me order your lunch,” I continued. “You make me find emails you delete, carry boxes, and rebuild binders because you changed your mind. Half the time you call my name like you’re summoning a dog.”

Benjamin stood. "That is not fair."

"Isn't it?"

"No."

"Then tell me what part is wrong."

He opened his mouth.

Nothing came.

The anger inside me changed shape, becoming quieter and more painful. I nodded because the silence answered for him.

"That's what I thought."

I reached for my laptop.

Benjamin said my name.

Not sharply.

"Aaron."

I stopped because he almost never called me that.

When I looked at him, his face had changed.

"You are one of the best legal minds in my office."

I could not speak.

He continued. "I give you work because I trust you with it."

"That is not the same as respecting me."

"No."

The admission surprised both of us.

Benjamin looked away briefly, then back. "No, it isn't."

The anger left me too quickly.

That was worse.

I sat again while Benjamin remained standing. For several seconds, the only sound came from the refrigerator.

Finally he said, "I have been unfair to you."

I stared at him. "Are you ill?"

His mouth moved slightly. "I am attempting something."

"An apology?"

"Don't ruin it."

I almost smiled.

He looked toward the closed laptop. "You failed once. That does not alter what I know about you."

The shame rose immediately, but I forced myself to ask, "What do you know?"

His eyes held mine. "That you see things other people miss."

The answer moved through me slowly. I thought of the campaign template, the filing dates, the prototype seam, and the man who had called me *kid* at a client meeting.

I looked down.

Benjamin said, "Take it again."

This time, it did not sound like a command.

That made it harder.

We worked until dawn.

At five forty, the sky outside the windows began turning gray. Benjamin stopped shouting, I stopped making jokes, and something between us shifted even though I could not identify its shape.

At six fifteen, he placed coffee beside my laptop.

I looked at the cup, then at him. "You bought this?"

"No."

"Of course."

"I told the overnight assistant what you drink."

I stared. "You know what I drink?"

He looked at me for a moment before turning away. "I notice things."

The sentence stayed with me long after he returned to his office.

Chapter Nine



I lasted six days before the idea of a wig stopped feeling hypothetical. After the dress, I told myself I had seen enough. I had learned what the prototype did, helped document a labeling discrepancy, and survived Benjamin seeing me in a way I had never intended. The fact that the mirror in Nadia's bathroom had made something inside me ache was unfortunate but not actionable.

I had a case, a job, and a bar exam I had not yet registered to retake. I also had a boss who now knew enough about me to make every interaction feel slightly dangerous.

I did not need a wig.

That thought arrived on a Wednesday, and I ignored it. By Thursday, the internet showed me three, so I closed the browser. Friday night, I searched again, not because I intended to buy one but because I wanted to understand prices.

That was research.

By Saturday morning, I was on a train to Queens.

I had deliberately chosen a shopping area outside my neighborhood because the possibility of being recognized in Brooklyn felt unbearable. This was irrational. Crown Heights contained hundreds of thousands of people, most of whom had no interest in my purchases, but fear rarely required statistical support.

I wore jeans, a dark jacket, and a baseball cap.

The cap made me look more suspicious.

I kept it anyway.

The first store sold beauty supplies, and I walked past twice before entering on the third pass. Nobody looked at me.

This had become a recurring disappointment.

I wandered through aisles of hair products, lashes, cosmetics, and wigs. The selection was overwhelming enough that I almost left, but an employee approached before I reached the door.

“Need help?”

“No.”

She nodded and started to turn away.

I immediately said, “Maybe.”

She smiled. “What are you looking for?”

“A wig.”

“That helps.”

I laughed nervously. “Something natural.”

“For you?”

My throat tightened because I could lie. I had lied about larger things and had years of practice making dishonesty sound reasonable.

“Yes.”

She did not react. “Okay. Human hair or synthetic?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s your budget?”

“Not human hair.”

That made her laugh.

We looked at several options. I rejected anything too long, too glamorous, or too obvious, and eventually she showed me a shoulder-length brown synthetic wig with subtle layers and a natural-looking part.

“Try it.”

I froze. “Here?”

“We have a mirror.”

“I know what mirrors do.”

She looked amused while I took the wig.

The fitting area was partially private. I removed my cap, tried to flatten my own hair, and discovered immediately that I had no idea what I was doing.

The first attempt was terrible. My hair bulged beneath the cap, and the wig sat so far forward that I looked like a witness in disguise.

The employee adjusted it. “Back.”

She moved the hairline slightly, then smoothed the sides.

“Better.”

I looked up.

My stomach tightened because the hair framed my face in a way I had never seen. Nothing else had changed, but my brows looked softer, my jaw less obvious, and my eyes larger.

I looked away. “I’ll take it.”

She smiled. “Good choice.”

I paid before I could change my mind.

The next store was harder because it sold women’s clothing. I walked in with the wig hidden inside a plain bag and told myself I could leave at any moment. I chose a blouse first. Cream. Soft fabric. Nothing dramatic. Then a skirt. Black. Knee-length.

I picked up small earrings near the register, and when I discovered a rotating display with clip-ons, I bought a pair of simple silver hoops.

The shoes took longest. I wanted heels, which frightened me enough that I bought flats instead. They were black, simple, and available in a women's size large enough to fit.

By the time I left, my hands were numb from carrying bags. I should have gone home. Instead, I entered a drugstore. Makeup was waiting. There was too much of it.

Foundation, concealer, powder, mascara, liner, blush, sponges, brushes, and several entire categories of products whose purpose I could not identify from the packaging. I stood in front of a wall of cosmetics and finally understood why economies collapsed.

A teenage employee asked whether I needed help.

I nearly said no, then remembered the wig store. "Beginner makeup."

She looked at my face. "For you?"

The question was easier the second time. "Yes."

She helped me choose inexpensive products: tinted moisturizer instead of full foundation, concealer, brown eyeliner, mascara, neutral blush, and a lipstick close to my natural color. I also bought makeup remover and a cheap sponge.

Then I saw the total. "This is robbery."

The cashier smiled. "Beauty is expensive."

I thought of Benjamin. Apparently secrets were too.

At home, I locked the door and checked it twice. The bags sat on my bed while I spent twenty minutes doing absolutely nothing.

Eventually I showered, shaved, moisturized, and put on the gray sleep shorts because they had become familiar enough to calm me. Then I stood in front of the dresser and opened the makeup.

The first mistake was using too much tinted moisturizer. The second was trying to fix it with more, and five minutes later my face looked as though it had been painted by someone who disliked me personally.

I stared at the mirror. "This is horrifying."

Removing it was not easy either. The makeup remover made my eyes water, and by the time I washed my face again, I had begun reconsidering the entire beauty industry.

I waited for my skin to calm and tried again. Less product. Better.

The concealer became another problem because I put too much beneath my eyes and blended one side more effectively than the other. The result made one eye look brighter and the other look injured.

I laughed. The sound surprised me because I had expected fear. Instead, I was having a terrible time in a way that felt almost fun.

I removed one side and tried again. The eyeliner was catastrophic. I watched two tutorials and still managed to create a reasonable line on my right eye and an event on my left. I wiped both. Then I tried again. After an hour, I had achieved something. Not good makeup. Something.

The tinted moisturizer looked mostly even. The concealer reduced the shadows under my eyes. I had applied mascara without blinding myself, and the blush no longer made me appear feverish. The lip color looked subtle enough that I might have believed it was natural from several feet away.

Then I put on the wig. I used the cap correctly this time, adjusted the hairline, and combed the layers. I looked at the mirror. My heart started beating faster. It was not enough.

The clothes were still in their bags.

I stood and tried the blouse. It fit, barely, although the cut pulled slightly near my shoulders. The skirt sat strangely without shape, and I knew exactly what could change that.

I opened the dresser.

The VeraForm drawer waited.

I took out the hip-enhancing shorts and stepped into them carefully. The garment changed the skirt immediately, giving the fabric something to fall over instead of hanging almost straight.

I put the blouse back on, then the flats and earrings.

When I faced the mirror again, I did not recognize myself immediately.

That sounds dramatic, but the reality was full of flaws. The makeup was uneven. One eye had more mascara. The wig was slightly too shiny beneath the bedroom light, the blouse pulled near my shoulders, and the skirt would have looked better with different proportions.

I saw all of it. Still, I stared. A feminine face looked back. Not a beautiful woman. Not a fantasy. Not someone transformed beyond recognition. Me. Somehow.

My throat tightened while I moved closer to the mirror. The face reflected there looked tired, but less tired, and that thought broke something open inside me.

Why did I look less tired?

I had spent more than an hour fighting with eyeliner, slept badly, and traveled across the city because I was afraid of buying a blouse near my own apartment. Nothing about the day should have made me look rested, yet the person in the mirror appeared relieved.

I touched my cheek. The reflection followed. I removed the glasses I sometimes wore for reading, then put them back because they felt more like me. The girl in the mirror wore them. My chest hurt.

I sat down and looked at myself for a long time. The emotional weight of the moment did not come from believing I had become beautiful, because I had not. It came from the terrible possibility that I had been misunderstanding exhaustion for years. I had assumed the heaviness in my face belonged entirely to work, debt, failure, and the endless effort of becoming an attorney. Maybe some of it did. Yet the person in the mirror looked as though she had stopped holding a muscle I had never known was tense. The softness was not only cosmetic. Something in my expression had

changed because, for the first time, I was not monitoring every detail for evidence of what it meant.

I smiled. The smile looked unfamiliar, so I laughed. That looked better.

I stood again and turned sideways, watching the skirt move around the shape beneath it. I touched the wig, adjusted the blouse, and for the first time wondered about a name.

Not seriously. Names were bigger than this. This was clothes, makeup, and a Saturday. Still, *Aaron* felt strange in the room.

I picked up my phone because the food-delivery app was open and I had not eaten since breakfast. After choosing Thai food, I reached checkout and saw the saved delivery name.

Aaron Manning

I stared at it. My thumb moved. I deleted Aaron. The field became blank.

I typed:

Ari Manning

My heart pounded. I erased it. Typed Aaron again. Then erased that too. The mirror stood across from me, and the woman in it looked frightened.

I typed:

Ari Manning

This time, I left it and placed the order.

Panic arrived immediately. I nearly canceled, but then I laughed because the delivery driver did not care. No one cared, which had been the lesson repeatedly offered to me.

The food arrived thirty minutes later. I put a cardigan over the blouse because opening the door still felt impossible otherwise.

The driver handed me the bag. "Ari?"

My chest tightened. “Yes.”

The word came out softly.

He gave me the food. “Have a good night.”

“You too.”

I closed the door and leaned against it while my heart continued beating too quickly.

Ari.

I looked toward the mirror.

My eyes burned.

Then my phone rang.

I jumped.

Benjamin.

Of course.

I stared at his name before answering. “Yes?”

“Manning.”

The name landed differently.

I hated that.

“What?”

“Do you have the original Kessler exhibit folder?”

My stomach tightened. “No.”

“You signed it out Friday.”

“I returned it.”

“It isn’t here.”

“I put it with the comparison binders.”

“Which comparison binders?”

“The VeraForm archive set.”

Silence followed. My eyes moved toward the cardboard boxes near the wall.

One box sat open. I remembered bringing work home. I remembered a folder. My stomach dropped while I crossed the room and opened the box. There it was. Redwell folder. Original exhibit sticker.

My entire body went cold. “I have it.”

Benjamin said nothing.

That was worse.

“It got mixed with the boxes.”

“We need it before morning.”

“I know.”

“I’m coming.”

My heart stopped. “No.”

A pause followed.

“What?”

“I’ll bring it.”

“It’s Saturday night.”

“I know.”

“You’re in Brooklyn.”

“You know that too.”

“I’m already in the car.”

Panic moved through me. “Benjamin.”

“What?”

“You cannot come here.”

Silence.

Then his voice changed. “Why?”

I looked at the mirror and saw the wig, makeup, blouse, skirt, earrings, and the unfamiliar shape beneath the clothes.

My hands began to shake. “I’m busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Something.”

“Manning.”

“I can meet you downstairs.”

“I’m ten minutes away.”

I nearly dropped the phone. “Ten?”

“Nine.”

“You were already coming?”

“I was heading downtown.”

“That is not Brooklyn.”

“I know geography.”

I hung up.

Then I moved.

The flats came off first.

One earring fell under the bed.

I reached for the wig, then stopped because removing it would not solve the makeup.

I grabbed makeup remover and spilled some because my hands shook too badly. When I wiped one eye, the mascara smeared instead of disappearing.

“Come on.”

I removed the lipstick, but the eyeliner remained. I looked at the clock and saw that seven minutes had already become five.

My phone buzzed.

Outside.

I stared at the message. “No.”

The buzzer sounded. My entire apartment became silent. I looked toward the door, then back at the mirror. I could not remove everything quickly enough. The buzzer sounded again. My phone rang. Benjamin.

I stood in the middle of my apartment wearing a blouse, skirt, one earring, a half-smeared eye, and the wig I had not managed to remove.

Then someone knocked on the door.

Chapter Ten



The knock came again, harder this time, and I stood in the middle of my apartment with one hand still holding a makeup-remover pad and the other gripping my phone. My right eye was mostly bare, my left still had eyeliner, and the shoulder-length brown wig remained on my head because every attempt to remove one thing had created two new problems.

“Manning.” Benjamin’s voice came through the door, unmistakably impatient even through an inch and a half of painted wood. “I know you’re in there.”

I closed my eyes and considered death.

Not seriously, although the distinction felt technical.

The redwell folder sat on my dining table beside a half-open VeraForm box. I could have grabbed it, opened the door six inches, shoved it through the gap, and ended the evening before Benjamin saw anything more than my hand. That plan would have worked if Benjamin Hilton were the kind of person who accepted objects through narrow openings without asking why someone was behaving strangely.

Unfortunately, he had built a career out of noticing strange behavior.

“I’m coming,” I called, then immediately hated the way my voice sounded. The makeup, the blouse, and the wig had somehow made me hyperaware of everything else about myself, including the pitch of two ordinary words.

Benjamin knocked once more. “You said that thirty seconds ago.”

“I’m moving as fast as I can.”

“Toward the door?”

“No, Benjamin. Toward Canada.”

Silence followed for just long enough that I imagined his expression.

I looked at myself in the mirror near the bedroom.

There was no fixing this.

The cream blouse still covered the hip-enhancing shapewear beneath my black skirt, although one side had come untucked during my panic. A single silver hoop remained clipped to my left ear. My lip color had mostly survived because I had spent too much time attacking my eye makeup first, and the brown wig looked surprisingly natural from a distance that did not permit inspection.

The person in the mirror no longer looked polished enough to be feminine with confidence, but I looked far too feminine to explain.

I removed the remaining earring and placed it on the dresser.

Then I walked to the door.

My hand rested on the lock.

For several seconds, I could not make myself move.

“Manning.” Benjamin’s voice was quieter now, which frightened me more than the knocking had. “Open the door.”

I unlocked it.

Then I opened it.

Benjamin stood in the hallway wearing a dark overcoat over a black sweater and trousers. He had apparently dressed for a Saturday evening without a suit, which should not have been surprising, except I had spent three years assuming he was born in a tie and would eventually be buried in one.

His eyes found mine. Then nothing happened. That was the worst part. He did not laugh. He did not recoil. He did not make one of the cutting observations I had spent the last nine minutes preparing to survive.

He simply looked.

The hallway light caught the side of his face while his attention moved over me slowly enough that I felt each second. He saw the wig, the uneven makeup, the blouse, the skirt, and whatever shape the VeraForm garment created underneath. When his gaze returned to my face, something in his expression had changed, but I could not tell what.

I folded my arms. "The folder is inside."

Benjamin did not move. "All right."

I waited for more.

Nothing came.

"That's it?" I asked, because apparently I had decided humiliation was more tolerable if I actively pursued it. "You don't have anything to say?"

His eyes stayed on me. "You asked me here for a folder."

"No, you invited yourself here for a folder."

"That is more accurate."

I laughed once, but the sound came out thin. "There he is."

Benjamin looked past me into the apartment. "May I come in?"

The question startled me enough that I stepped back before answering.

He had never asked permission to enter a conference room, an office, a conversation, or possibly a country. Yet there he was in the hallway outside my apartment, waiting.

I moved aside. "Fine."

Benjamin entered.

My apartment immediately became smaller.

I had always known it was small, but small was different when Benjamin Hilton occupied it. He seemed built for rooms with ten-foot ceilings and private elevators, not a Crown Heights one-bedroom where the kitchen began four steps from the couch and the dining table also functioned as my desk, storage surface, and occasional laundry station.

He looked around.

I wanted to stop him.

There was nothing to stop.

My life was everywhere.

Bar-review books covered one end of the table. A stack of evidence flashcards sat beside an unopened electric bill. Two VeraForm boxes remained against the wall, one open and one flattened. The gray sleep shorts I had bought with my own money were draped over the back of a chair because I had changed out of them before getting dressed.

Then there was the dresser drawer.

It was open.

My stomach dropped.

I had opened it to take out the hip-enhancing shorts.

Inside, the garments were arranged exactly as I had started arranging them weeks earlier: the black bodysuit folded beside the sand-colored version, compression shorts stacked beneath shaping briefs, pale blue satin tucked carefully near the side. The tucking underwear sat farther back.

Benjamin saw it.

Of course he did.

He stopped.

My face burned. "Don't."

His attention returned to me. "I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to."

"I'm aware."

That answer irritated me.

I walked toward the table and picked up the redwell folder. "Here. Take it and go."

Benjamin accepted it but did not open it. "You signed this out Friday."

"I know."

"It was mixed with client boxes."

"I know."

"That could have been a serious problem."

"I know."

He looked at me for several seconds before placing the folder on the table again. "You're repeating yourself."

"Because I would like you to leave."

"I noticed."

"Then this should be easy."

Benjamin removed his coat.

I stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"Your folder log is inside."

"I can tell you where."

"I need to confirm the exhibit sequence before I leave."

"You absolutely do not."

His eyebrows lifted. “You brought an original exhibit into your apartment by mistake.”

“And I called you the second I found it.”

“You called me because I called you.”

“Details.”

He folded the coat over the back of my kitchen chair. The domesticity of the action nearly killed me. Benjamin Hilton had put his coat in my kitchen.

I stood there in a blouse and skirt with one eye darker than the other and wondered how my life had become a situation no amount of student debt had prepared me to manage.

He opened the folder.

I went to the sink.

“What are you doing?” he asked after a moment, and his voice had lost some of its sharpness.

“Removing my face.”

“That seems dramatic.”

I looked at him through the reflection in the dark kitchen window. “You walked into my apartment while I was dressed like this.”

“Yes.”

“Do not make me explain why I’m dramatic.”

“I wasn’t asking you to explain.”

I opened the cabinet beneath the sink and found the makeup remover.

My hands still shook.

I hated that he could probably see it.

Benjamin looked down at the folder again, but his attention did not remain there.

I wiped my left eye.

The eyeliner smudged.

“Perfect.”

Benjamin glanced up. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was not nothing.”

I laughed without humor. “You do not get to criticize my use of that word.”

He closed the folder.

The sound was soft.

I turned toward him. “What?”

His gaze moved to my face. “You’re making it worse.”

“Thank you.”

“The makeup.”

“I understood.”

“You’re rubbing too hard.”

I stared.

Benjamin stared back.

I said, “I am not accepting cosmetic advice from you.”

“I didn’t offer cosmetic advice.”

“You just critiqued my removal technique.”

“I observed that you are turning your eye red.”

“Please retrieve your exhibit and return to Manhattan.”

His mouth moved slightly.

Almost.

I pointed at him. “Do not smile.”

“I’m not.”

“You are thinking about it.”

“That isn’t regulated.”

I hated how relieved I felt.

That made me angrier.

I turned back toward the sink and removed the rest of the eyeliner more carefully.

Behind me, Benjamin opened the folder again.

For almost a minute, the apartment filled with ordinary noises: paper shifting, water running, traffic outside. The scene became so normal that it felt surreal.

I dried my face with a towel.

When I turned around, Benjamin was looking at the bar-review books.

My stomach tightened.

He picked up one of the flashcards.

“Put that down.”

He did. “You made these.”

“No, a small educational fairy enters at night.”

“You color-coded them.”

“I like organization.”

“You failed once and turned your apartment into a testing center.”

I folded my arms. “Careful.”

His expression changed.

“I wasn’t criticizing you.”

“You usually are.”

“I know.”

That stopped me.

Benjamin looked toward the table again. “How long have you been studying like this?”

“On and off.”

“That means constantly.”

“It means on and off.”

“I know you.”

The sentence returned me instantly to his office, to the moment he had stood too close and told me the same thing before seeing a strip of satin beneath my collar. My pulse changed. I looked away. Benjamin did not move. Then his gaze drifted toward the VeraForm boxes.

I became defensive before he said anything. “They were duplicates.”

“I know.”

“Nadia’s counsel said we could keep them.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t take evidence.”

“I know.”

I laughed once. “You have become very agreeable.”

“I’m trying not to frighten you.”

The answer hit me so unexpectedly that I forgot to respond.

Benjamin looked almost irritated by his own honesty.

I said, “You don’t frighten me.”

His eyes moved over me. “You opened the door looking like you expected me to arrest you.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

I looked toward the dresser.

He followed my gaze.

The open drawer seemed impossibly exposed.

I crossed the room and pushed it closed.

Benjamin said nothing.

I kept my hand on the drawer.

“This is not funny.”

“I know.”

“I’m not doing some joke.”

“I know.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because I understand.”

I turned.

“No, you don’t.”

His face remained calm. “Then tell me.”

My throat tightened.

The invitation was too large.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

Benjamin looked at me.

I hated the gentleness that entered his expression because it made everything harder.

He said, “All right.”

I laughed weakly. “That’s it?”

“What else should I say?”

“I don’t know. Something awful would be easier.”

“I can arrange that.”

I almost smiled despite myself.

Benjamin’s mouth softened.

The room changed.

Not dramatically.

There was still a folder on the table and traffic outside, but something shifted between us.

I became aware that I was still wearing the wig.

The realization made my face burn again.

I reached toward it.

Benjamin said, "Don't."

My hand stopped.

His expression changed immediately, as though he regretted speaking.

I stared. "Why?"

He looked away. "It doesn't matter."

"No. You don't get to do that again."

"Manning."

"Why did you say don't?"

Benjamin remained silent.

I waited.

Eventually he said, "Because you looked as though you were about to remove it for my benefit."

My fingers lowered.

I did not know what to do with that.

He continued, more carefully, "You don't need to."

The apartment became too quiet.

I looked at him. "You don't care?"

"That is not what I said."

My heartbeat accelerated.

"What did you say?"

Benjamin's jaw tightened. "You heard me."

I laughed because the alternative was shaking. "You are unbelievable."

“I know.”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

I walked toward the table, needing distance.

Benjamin stayed where he was.

The redwell folder remained open.

I pointed at it. “Is everything there?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can go.”

He did not move immediately.

I felt anger rise again because some part of me wanted him to resist.

That was humiliating.

Benjamin looked toward the dresser, then at me. “Do you want me to pretend I didn’t see?”

The question stopped everything.

I stared. He waited. I had no answer. The obvious answer should have been yes. Pretend. Forget. Return to Monday morning and call me Manning as though nothing had happened.

Instead, I looked at the folded garments behind the closed drawer, the VeraForm boxes, the makeup remover on the counter, and the life I had spent weeks building in secret.

“I don’t know.”

My voice sounded smaller than I wanted.

Benjamin nodded once.

“Then I won’t decide for you.”

I looked at him. He had spent three years deciding for me.

Lunch orders.

Deadlines.

Which binder I rebuilt. Where I sat. What I carried.

Yet here, in the most frightening moment I had given him, he stopped. Something inside me gave way. I sat on the edge of the couch. Benjamin remained standing. For several seconds, neither of us spoke.

Then he said, "Is there a name?"

My body went still.

"What?"

"For this."

I looked at him. His expression was careful. Too careful. I thought of the delivery app. The driver at my door.

Ari?

My chest tightened.

"No."

The lie sounded weak. Benjamin noticed. Of course he did. He did not challenge me.

Instead, he nodded again. "All right."

I looked down at my hands. The nail treatment caught the light. Benjamin followed my gaze. His eyes moved over the clear shine, then back to my face.

I said, "You're staring."

"I am."

The admission shocked me.

I looked up.

Benjamin seemed equally surprised that he had said it. My pulse became loud.

“At least you’re honest now.”

“Occasionally.”

“That must be exhausting.”

“It is.”

I smiled despite myself. Benjamin took a step closer. The smile disappeared.

He stopped in front of me. I had to tilt my head slightly to look at him. His eyes moved toward my mouth. I became aware of the lip color that remained. Not all of it. Enough. Benjamin raised one hand. I froze. His fingers stopped before touching me.

He asked, “May I?”

The question almost hurt. I nodded. His thumb touched the corner of my mouth. My body forgot how to behave. Benjamin wiped gently at something near my lower lip and looked at the faint color transferred to his skin.

“Smudged,” he said.

I could not answer. His hand remained close to my face.

I looked at his mouth. That was a mistake. Benjamin’s attention sharpened. Neither of us moved away. I could feel the heat of him. His thumb touched my cheek again, lighter this time.

My breath caught.

Benjamin looked at me as though waiting for an objection. I had none. He leaned closer. Slowly. Not enough to call it a kiss. Enough that I stopped breathing.

The distance between us narrowed until I could feel the possibility of contact more strongly than contact itself.

Then Benjamin closed his eyes.

For one second, I thought he would do it. Instead, he stepped back. The loss of warmth was immediate. I stared at him. His face had gone hard again, but not with anger.

“Manning.”

The old name. The old defense.

I swallowed. “What?”

He picked up the redwell folder.

“I have to go.”

I laughed once because the alternative was saying something unforgivable. “Of course.”

“Aaron.”

“Don’t.”

His face changed. I stood and walked toward the door. Benjamin put on his coat. Neither of us spoke while I opened the door. He stepped into the hallway. Then he turned. I waited.

He looked at me once more, taking in the wig, the blouse, and whatever remained of the person he had almost kissed.

“Good night.”

I held the door. “Good night.” Benjamin left. I closed it. Then I leaned against the wood. My entire apartment felt different. I remained there until his footsteps disappeared. Only then did I look toward the mirror. The woman reflected there looked miserable. So did I.

Chapter Eleven



Benjamin behaved perfectly on Monday morning. I hated him for it. He arrived at eight twelve, entered the office carrying coffee, spoke to two associates about deadlines, and walked past my desk without looking at me any longer than professional courtesy required. At nine, he sent a neutral email requesting an updated deposition chart. At nine twenty, he asked Serena whether the conference room was available.

By ten, I wanted to throw something.

Nothing in his behavior acknowledged Saturday night. Not my apartment, not the wig, not the drawer, and certainly not the moment his thumb had touched my mouth before he nearly kissed me.

I had spent Sunday replaying it until the memory became unreliable. Perhaps he had only leaned closer to inspect the makeup. Perhaps I had imagined the tension. Perhaps Benjamin Hilton regularly touched employees' faces and I had simply missed an important section of the handbook.

At ten thirty, Serena appeared beside my desk with a stack of documents.

"You look angry."

"I'm working."

"You can do both."

"I am proving that."

She set the documents down. "Did something happen?"

“No.”

Her eyes narrowed.

I looked at the first page.

Serena said, “That was suspicious.”

“Everything is suspicious to litigators.”

“You work with us voluntarily.”

“Financially.”

She remained for another second before returning to her desk.

I looked toward Benjamin’s office.

He was reading.

He did not look up.

I hated him more.

The VeraForm team arrived shortly before noon for deposition preparation. Nadia came with Leila and a younger attorney I had seen once on a video call but never met in person.

His name was Miles Bennett.

He worked as outside commercial counsel on several of VeraForm’s contracts and had recently joined the litigation coordination team because the case was expanding into technical licensing issues. He was thirty-two, maybe thirty-three, with warm brown skin, dark curls, and the kind of easy smile that suggested he had not spent his formative years working for Benjamin.

Nadia introduced us near reception.

“Aaron, this is Miles. Miles, Aaron is the reason Benjamin knows what is happening.”

I smiled. “That is not the official description of my role.”

Miles shook my hand. "I've heard about you."

I glanced at Nadia. "Why does everyone say that?"

She looked innocent. "You're memorable."

Benjamin appeared from his office. His gaze went first to me. Then to Miles. The change in his expression was slight enough that nobody else would have noticed.

I noticed.

"Conference room," he said.

Miles smiled at me. "Does he always greet people like a subpoena?"

I laughed.

Benjamin stopped walking.

He looked back.

"Something funny?"

Miles answered before I could. "I was asking Aaron about your management style."

Benjamin's attention moved between us. "Then I'm sure he gave you an unbiased account."

"I try to preserve objectivity," I said.

"You fail."

Miles leaned closer to me slightly. "I like him."

Benjamin's jaw tightened.

The reaction was so small that I almost enjoyed it.

Almost.

We entered Conference Room A.

For the next two hours, we worked through Martin Kessler's deposition exhibits and the new discovery motion. Miles sat beside me because we were sharing access to the licensing files.

He was easy to work with.

That should not have been remarkable.

He asked rather than ordered. He said thank you when I found documents. When I corrected one of his dates, he smiled instead of behaving as though I had challenged his constitutional authority.

At one point, he looked at the color-coded chart on my screen.

"You made that?"

"Yes."

"You're terrifying."

I glanced at him. "Thank you."

"I meant it as a compliment."

"I accepted it as one."

Miles smiled.

Across the table, Benjamin stopped speaking. Everyone looked at him. He held a deposition transcript in one hand.

Nadia asked, "What?"

Benjamin's eyes moved toward Miles.

Then me.

"Nothing."

I nearly laughed.

The universe had become repetitive.

We continued.

During a break, Miles stayed beside my chair while the others went for coffee.

“You went to law school, right?” he asked.

I closed one database window. “Yes.”

“Planning to practice?”

“Eventually.”

“That sounded complicated.”

“It is.”

He leaned against the table. “You’d be good.”

My fingers stopped.

I looked at him.

Miles shrugged. “I watched you correct three attorneys in under an hour.”

“That is less impressive around here than you think.”

“Maybe. Still attractive.”

My brain stalled.

“What?”

He smiled.

Not aggressively.

Not as a joke.

“I said competence is attractive.”

Heat climbed my neck. I looked toward the conference-room door. Benjamin stood there holding two coffees. Of course. His expression could have frozen water. Miles followed my gaze.

“Ah.”

Benjamin entered and placed one coffee near Nadia’s seat. The other remained in his hand. I knew the order.

Mine.

He looked at it. Then at me. Then he set it on the far end of the table instead.

“Break is over.”

Miles sat. I picked up my own water. For the next forty minutes, Benjamin became unbearable. Not loud. Worse. He questioned every point Miles made.

He rejected a proposed licensing theory before Miles finished explaining it. When Miles referenced a contract amendment, Benjamin asked for the exact date and page.

Miles answered correctly.

Benjamin looked disappointed.

I should have been irritated. Instead, something warm and embarrassing moved through me. Jealousy was ugly. Benjamin wore it beautifully.

The breakthrough appeared inside a footnote.

I found it at six thirty that evening after most of the VeraForm team had left. Miles remained because he was helping review licensing records, and Nadia had gone to dinner with Leila.

Benjamin was in his office.

I was reading a 2019 deposition exhibit from an unrelated contract dispute involving one of Maison Sloane’s former consultants. The exhibit had been produced because the consultant later worked on the disputed campaign.

Most of it concerned payment terms.

Then I saw a reference to an event.

Northstar Fashion Technology Accelerator.

The name meant nothing at first.

I searched it.

An old article appeared.

The accelerator had operated for several years, bringing together small apparel startups, investors, manufacturers, and established fashion companies. It was not famous. I opened another result. Then another. A memory surfaced. Nadia had mentioned an accelerator. Not recently. During the first client meeting.

I searched my notes.

There.

Early prototypes shown at small fashion-tech program.

My pulse changed. I opened the deposition exhibit again. The consultant had attended. I searched Maison Sloane. Nothing. Then I searched the accelerator archives. The site no longer existed. I tried cached pages. Old press releases. Event photographs.

Miles noticed.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“That sounds promising.”

I ignored him.

A participant brochure appeared in a dead link listed on an archived news page. The file was gone. I copied the title. Searched exact phrases. Nothing. Then I found a reference in an old university entrepreneurship newsletter.

Northstar Cohort Showcase, 2018.

I stood. My chair rolled backward.

Miles looked up. “What?”

“I need Nadia.”

“She left.”

“Call her.”

I grabbed my laptop and walked toward Benjamin’s office.

He looked up when I entered.

“No.”

I stopped. “What?”

“You have that face.”

“What face?”

“The one you have when you think you found something.”

“I did.”

“You usually say that before giving me three days of additional work.”

I placed the laptop on his desk. “Northstar Fashion Technology Accelerator.”

Benjamin looked at the screen.

“So?”

“Nadia presented there.”

“When?”

“2018, maybe 2019. I’m verifying.”

He leaned back. “And?”

I stared.

“And Maison Sloane used the same outside consultant.”

“That proves nothing.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you here?”

My irritation rose instantly.

“Because if Maison Sloane had anyone at that accelerator, it changes access.”

Benjamin looked at the article.

“You don’t know that they did.”

“Not yet.”

“Then this is a tangent.”

The word hit the exact place he had already irritated all day.

I closed the laptop.

“Fine.”

“Manning.”

“No. You’re busy.”

“That is not what I said.”

“You said tangent.”

“Because right now it is.”

I picked up the laptop.

Benjamin watched me.

I said, “I’ll prove it.”

His eyes narrowed. “Do not waste the night.”

“Thank you for the support.”

I left.

Miles was waiting.

“Well?”

“He thinks it’s a tangent.”

Miles looked toward Benjamin’s office. “Then I assume you’re about to become impossible.”

“I learned from him.”

For the next two hours, I searched. The accelerator had been poorly documented online, but badly documented was not the same as undocumented.

I found a sponsor announcement. A photograph. An Instagram caption reproduced in an old marketing article. Then I found the university newsletter again. It listed participating startups. VeraForm’s predecessor company appeared under its original name. I opened every link. One event photograph showed Nadia, younger and with shorter hair, standing beside a display board featuring early garment concepts.

My heart beat faster.

Access still required someone from Maison Sloane. I searched sponsors. Investors. Judges. Mentors. Nothing. At nine fifteen, Miles left after making me promise to eat. At nine thirty, Serena went home.

Benjamin remained.

I searched another hour. Then I found a PDF. An archived annual report from a nonprofit partner. Inside was a list of program attendees. I scrolled. Found VeraForm. Then sponsors. Then corporate observers.

The name appeared halfway down the second page.

Rebecca Harlan — Director of Strategic Product Innovation, Maison Sloane.

I stopped. Read it again.

Then searched Rebecca Harlan. She had become senior vice president by 2021. The same executive referenced in several S-Curve development records.

My hands went cold. I printed the page. Then I walked toward Benjamin's office. He was on the phone. I entered anyway.

His eyes lifted.

I placed the page in front of him. Benjamin continued listening for several seconds. Then he looked down. His face changed. He said into the phone, "I'll call you back." The call ended.

He read the page again.

"Where did you get this?"

"Archived annual report."

"Authenticity?"

"Hosted by a nonprofit partner. I saved the URL, metadata, and archive capture."

His eyes moved to mine.

I folded my arms. "Tangent?"

Benjamin looked at the page.

Then at me.

"Not anymore."

Satisfaction hit me so strongly that I almost smiled.

He stood.

"Find every record connecting Harlan to Northstar."

"I already started."

"Photos."

“Searching.”

“Emails.”

“We need discovery.”

“Public statements.”

“I have two.”

Benjamin stopped.

He looked at me.

I looked back.

The energy in the room changed.

Adrenaline.

Vindication.

Something else.

He said, “You were right.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“You were right.”

“I need that in writing.”

“Manning.”

“No, this is historic.”

His mouth tightened.

I smiled.

Benjamin came around the desk.

“You have no idea how infuriating you are.”

“I learned from you.”

He stopped in front of me. The smile disappeared from my face. His eyes moved to my mouth. I became suddenly aware of Saturday night. The apartment. His thumb. The almost kiss. Neither of us spoke.

My pulse accelerated.

Benjamin said, “Miles likes you.”

The statement was so unexpected that I nearly laughed.

“What?”

“He was flirting with you.”

I stared. “Are you jealous?”

“No.”

The answer was immediate.

Terrible.

I folded my arms. “You are.”

“I am not.”

“You interrogated him over a licensing amendment.”

“He was wrong.”

“He was right.”

Benjamin’s jaw tightened.

I smiled. “Oh my God.”

“Do not.”

“You’re jealous.”

“Manning.”

I laughed. Then Benjamin kissed me. There was no warning.

One second I was smiling, and the next his hand was at the back of my neck and his mouth was on mine. The kiss was hard enough to erase the joke. I froze for half a heartbeat. Then I kissed him back. Everything I had imagined about Benjamin was wrong.

He was not careful at first.

He kissed the way he argued: decisively, with complete commitment and no apparent interest in retreat. My hands caught the front of his shirt because I needed somewhere to put them.

Benjamin pulled me closer. My body hit his. Heat moved through me so quickly that I stopped thinking. I tasted coffee. Felt the pressure of his fingers at my neck.

Then his other hand found my waist.

The shapewear beneath my shirt held me there. Benjamin felt it. His hand stopped. Panic flickered. He knew. Of course he knew. Before I could pull away, he kissed me again. Slower. That was worse.

The second kiss contained choice.

I opened my mouth slightly and heard him breathe. My fingers tightened in his shirt. Benjamin's thumb moved once against the side of my neck. Then he pulled away. Abruptly. I stared at him. His breathing had changed. So had mine.

"What—"

"No."

I almost laughed from shock. "You kissed me."

"I know."

"That was not a question."

Benjamin stepped back. His face had gone hard again. I hated that face.

"You work for me."

The words landed like cold water.

I looked away.

“Right.”

“Manning.”

“Don’t.”

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

My chest tightened. There it was. Regret.

I nodded.

“Fine.”

“That is not what I—”

“I said fine.”

I grabbed the printed annual report from his desk. Benjamin caught my wrist. Not hard. Enough to stop me. I looked down at his hand. He released me immediately.

His voice lowered. “I am your boss.”

“I know.”

“There are rules.”

“I know.”

“Power problems.”

“I know.”

He looked at me.

I laughed bitterly. “You really do think I’m stupid.”

“No.”

“Then stop explaining basic ethics.”

“That is not what I’m doing.”

“It sounds exactly like what you’re doing.”

Benjamin’s jaw tightened.

I stepped back.

“The good news is I found your access evidence.”

“Our access evidence.”

“Whatever.”

“Manning.”

I looked at him.

His expression had changed again.

He said, “I do not regret kissing you.”

My pulse stopped.

Benjamin continued before I could speak. “I regret that I did it without fixing what should have been fixed first.”

I stared. He looked furious. Not with me. With himself. That somehow hurt more.

I said, “Then fix it.”

His eyes sharpened. I turned and left. For the first time in three years, Benjamin did not call me back.

Chapter Twelve



I arrived at the office the next morning prepared to be humiliated. Benjamin had kissed me. I had kissed him back. Then he had pulled away and delivered a lecture about power imbalance while my mouth was still warm from his.

There were several possible interpretations, and I spent the entire train ride choosing the cruelest one.

Perhaps he had been curious because of the dress. Perhaps the femininity had interested him until the reality became inconvenient. Perhaps he had kissed me in a moment of adrenaline and then remembered I was still Aaron Manning, senior litigation paralegal, failed bar applicant, and owner of a drawer full of shapewear he could not explain.

By the time I entered Hilton Pierce, I had decided I did not care.

This was a lie.

Olivia looked up from reception. "Morning."

"Is it?"

She studied me. "You look homicidal."

"I'm trying something new."

"Very flattering."

I walked to my desk. Benjamin's office was empty. Good. I opened my laptop. At 8:06, an email arrived from Human Resources. My stomach dropped. I stared at the subject line.

Reporting Structure Update

For several seconds, I could not open it.

Then I clicked.

The message was formal.

Effective immediately, administrative supervision for my litigation assignments would shift to Serena Park for matters in which Benjamin served as lead counsel. Performance reviews, scheduling approvals, compensation recommendations, and workload escalation would route through Serena and the firm's managing partner rather than Benjamin.

I read it twice. Then a third time. Anger arrived before understanding. He had moved me. After one kiss. I stood. Benjamin entered the office at exactly that moment. I walked directly toward him. He saw my face.

"Manning."

"My office."

Several people looked up.

Benjamin's eyebrows lifted.

I pointed toward the conference room instead.

"Now."

He followed.

The door closed.

I turned toward him.

"You moved me."

"Yes."

"That's your solution?"

“One of them.”

I laughed because the alternative was shouting. “You kiss me, panic, and transfer me.”

“I did not transfer you.”

“You changed my reporting line.”

“Yes.”

“You removed me from your supervision.”

“Yes.”

I stared at him. “You planned this overnight?”

“I started last night.”

“Of course you did.”

Benjamin remained calm.

That made me angrier.

“Do you regret it?”

His expression changed.

“The reporting change?”

“The kiss.”

He looked at me.

I hated the silence.

“Answer me.”

“No.”

The word landed differently from the one in his office the day before.

I folded my arms. “Then why are you behaving like I filed a complaint?”

“Because you work for me.”

“You already said that.”

“And you dismissed it.”

“I did not dismiss it.”

“You told me to fix it.”

“I did not mean restructure the firm before breakfast.”

His mouth moved slightly.

I pointed at him. “Do not smile.”

“I’m not.”

“You are internally.”

“That remains unregulated.”

I hated him.

Benjamin took a breath.

Then he said, “You deserve the ability to say no to me without wondering whether it affects your assignments, salary, schedule, evaluation, or future here.”

The anger stopped.

Not completely.

Enough.

He continued. “Serena will supervise your administrative work. I remain lead counsel on VeraForm. We will still work together.”

I looked away.

The conference room suddenly felt too bright.

Benjamin said, "The managing partner approved it."

"You told someone?"

"I told him there was a potential personal conflict."

My face heated. "Personal."

"Yes."

"What exactly did you say?"

"That I needed a reporting separation."

"Did you say why?"

"No."

I looked at him again.

He was serious.

I said, "You really did this because of the kiss."

"I did it because of what I want after the kiss."

My breath caught. Benjamin seemed to realize what he had said. Neither of us moved.

I asked, "What do you want?"

His jaw tightened.

The old Benjamin would have avoided the question.

This one looked directly at me.

"You."

My heart slammed against my ribs.

I laughed weakly because the answer was too simple.

Benjamin continued. "That is the problem."

"Very romantic."

"I am not trying to be romantic."

"I noticed."

He almost smiled.

Then the expression disappeared.

"I wanted you before I understood what I was noticing."

The sentence stopped me. I looked at him. Benjamin's voice remained controlled, but I could hear the effort beneath it.

"You changed slowly. Your posture. Your clothes. Your face. I noticed every difference and did not understand why I was noticing."

My mouth went dry.

He continued. "Then I saw the strap."

I looked away.

"The camisole."

"Yes."

My face burned.

Benjamin said, "I called you that night because I spent hours telling myself it was a litigation issue."

I laughed despite myself. "That is insane."

"I know."

"You called an employee after nine at night to ask what underwear he was wearing."

“Yes.”

“That is horrifying.”

“I know.”

I stared at him. He looked almost embarrassed. Benjamin Hilton. Embarrassed. The world had become unstable.

I asked, “And Nadia’s office?”

His gaze sharpened.

“The dress.”

“Yes.”

He looked away for the first time.

That answered more than words could.

I said, “You stopped talking.”

“I know.”

“You never stop talking.”

“I know.”

I almost smiled.

Benjamin’s eyes returned to mine.

“I wanted you before that.”

The humor disappeared.

He continued. “The dress did not create anything. It made something impossible to ignore.”

My throat tightened.

I asked, “What?”

His voice lowered.

“Attraction.”

The room became quiet. I looked down at my hands. Clear nail treatment. No color. Still enough.

I said, “You’re attracted to this.”

Benjamin frowned. “What does that mean?”

I gestured vaguely toward myself. “Whatever is happening.”

His expression hardened. “Do not reduce yourself to a situation.”

The answer hit me harder than I expected.

I laughed once. “You have no idea what is happening.”

“No.”

“You don’t know what I am.”

“No.”

“I don’t know what I am.”

“I know.”

I looked at him.

Benjamin stepped closer, but not too close.

“I am not asking you to decide.”

The line echoed something from Brooklyn.

Then I won’t decide for you.

My chest tightened.

I said, “You kissed me.”

“Yes.”

“You called me Manning afterward.”

His face changed.

“I know.”

“That hurt.”

Benjamin went still. The admission had come out before I could stop it. I looked away.

He said, “I’m sorry.”

I laughed weakly. “You’re getting alarmingly good at that.”

“I have had reason to practice.”

That almost made me smile. Benjamin moved one step closer. I held my ground.

He said, “I pulled away because I realized I had crossed a line while still controlling too much of your professional life.”

“Not because of the shapewear.”

“No.”

“Not because you saw me dressed.”

“No.”

“Not because I might be—”

The word would not come. Benjamin waited. I shook my head. He did not finish it for me. That mattered.

I asked, “And now?”

“Now Serena controls your formal reporting line.”

“You still lead the case.”

“Yes.”

“You still assign work.”

“Through the team structure.”

“You will absolutely still order me around.”

“Yes.”

I laughed. Benjamin’s mouth moved. Barely.

I said, “At least you’re honest.”

“I’m trying.”

The air changed. Again. I hated that I recognized it now. Benjamin’s attention dropped to my mouth. I felt it. My pulse accelerated.

He did not move.

Neither did I.

I thought of the kiss. The force of it. The way he had stopped. The shame I had carried home. Then I thought of the email. The reporting change. The fact that he had done something concrete instead of giving me a speech.

I stepped closer. Benjamin’s eyes sharpened.

I said, “This time I’m deciding.”

His breath changed.

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

Then I kissed him.

The first contact was softer than I expected because I had spent too much time imagining impact. My mouth touched his, and for one second Benjamin remained perfectly still.

Then his hand came to my waist. The kiss deepened. Slowly. No surprise. No adrenaline excuse. I chose it. He chose it. That difference moved through me like heat.

My hands settled against his chest. Benjamin kissed me with more restraint than the night before, but restraint did not make it less intense. It made every movement deliberate. His thumb pressed lightly into my side. The shapewear beneath my shirt held my torso. I felt the exact moment he noticed. His hand stopped. Panic arrived immediately.

I pulled back.

Benjamin looked at me.

“What?”

I stepped away. “Nothing.”

“Manning.”

“Don’t.”

His expression tightened.

I laughed because I hated myself. “You felt it.”

Understanding entered his face.

“The shapewear.”

I looked away.

“Yes.”

Benjamin said nothing.

My chest tightened.

“There. Now it’s weird.”

“No.”

“You stopped.”

“So did you.”

“Because you stopped.”

“I stopped because you went rigid.”

I folded my arms. The movement felt defensive. Benjamin looked at me for several seconds before stepping closer.

I almost moved away.

He stopped.

“May I?”

The question returned me to Brooklyn.

I swallowed. “May you what?”

“Touch you.”

My heartbeat became unbearable.

I nodded.

Benjamin placed one hand at my waist. Over the shirt. Over the hidden compression. He did not pretend it was not there. His palm followed the shape gently. I stopped breathing.

Benjamin looked at my face.

“I know.”

The words were quiet.

Everything inside me shifted.

I laughed weakly. "You keep saying that."

"Because you keep expecting me not to."

My eyes burned.

I hated him for noticing.

Benjamin's thumb moved once over my waist.

I said, "It makes my clothes fit better."

"I know."

"It helps my back."

"I know."

"I like it."

The confession escaped.

Benjamin's expression softened.

"I know."

I almost cried. Instead I kissed him again. Harder.

Benjamin responded immediately. His hand remained at my waist while the other moved to the back of my neck. The kiss became deeper, warmer, and less careful. I pressed closer. The compression garment no longer felt like a secret barrier. It felt like part of what he was touching.

Benjamin's mouth moved from mine to my jaw. My breath caught. He paused. I did not ask him to stop. His lips touched the side of my neck. Heat moved through me.

I gripped his shirt.

"Benjamin."

He stopped immediately.

I looked at him.

“That was not stop.”

Something dark entered his expression.

“Be clear.”

The command in his voice sent another wave of heat through me.

I swallowed. “Don’t stop.”

He kissed my neck again.

Slower.

My knees felt unreliable.

Benjamin’s hand moved along my waist through the shirt, never beneath clothing, never faster than I could understand. The shapewear held me firm beneath his palm, and for the first time I experienced the strange, overwhelming sensation of being desired while wearing something feminine under masculine office clothes.

The contradiction broke something open.

I was still Aaron. Still in trousers. Still in a button-down shirt. Still the man everyone in the office believed they knew. Underneath, compression shaped my waist. Benjamin knew. He wanted me anyway. Or because of it. Or around it. I did not know. For once, I did not need to.

He kissed me again. My hands moved to his shoulders. The moment deepened until the conference room disappeared behind heat and breath and the sound of my own pulse. Then Benjamin stopped. I stared at him. His forehead rested briefly against mine.

“We are at work.”

I laughed breathlessly. “You noticed.”

“This is a conference room.”

“Yes.”

“There are glass walls.”

I looked toward them. The blinds were open. I nearly died. Benjamin stepped back and adjusted his shirt.

I turned away, face burning.

“Oh my God.”

“No one saw.”

“You cannot know that.”

“I would know.”

“You think you know everything.”

“I usually do.”

I laughed despite myself. Benjamin watched me. The warmth remained in his expression.

I said, “This is going to be complicated.”

“Yes.”

“You’re still impossible.”

“Yes.”

“I still hate you sometimes.”

“I know.”

I looked at him. He looked back. Something between us had changed beyond repair. For the first time, I did not want it repaired.

Chapter Thirteen



Three days after I kissed Benjamin in a conference room and discovered that apparently the firm's sexual-harassment policy had not been written with my exact life in mind, I went shopping.

I did not take a VeraForm box with me. I did not need to return anything, document anything, compare construction, test compression, investigate a lawsuit, or relieve back pain that had become suspiciously selective about which garments it preferred. Benjamin had not ordered me to bring anything home, Nadia had not encouraged me, and no algorithm could be blamed for physically moving my body out of my apartment on a Saturday morning.

I went because I wanted things.

The admission felt obscene.

For nearly two months, I had constructed every decision behind an excuse. The bodysuit had been practically orthopedic. The tucking underwear had been professional curiosity. The camisole had already been in my apartment. The gray sleep shorts had marked the first serious crack in that reasoning, but even then I had bought one small item in a store I chose because I was afraid of being recognized.

This time, I made a list.

I wrote it in the notes application on my phone while drinking coffee at my kitchen counter, then stared at the screen until the words seemed to belong to someone else.

foundation

jeans

sweater

underwear

shoes

perfume

I almost deleted the last one because perfume felt extravagant in a way moisturizer did not. Foundation could be explained as an extension of the makeup I already owned, jeans were clothes, underwear was necessary, and shoes were simply another category of object human beings used to prevent direct contact between their feet and New York sidewalks.

Perfume had no defense. I left it on the list.

By eleven, I was in Midtown wearing a dark jacket, ordinary jeans, and the same baseball cap I had used during my first frightened shopping trip. I had chosen a large department store precisely because anonymity seemed easier inside several floors of commerce than in a small boutique where someone might remember me.

The strategy worked for approximately five minutes. Then I reached the cosmetics floor. Everything shone.

Counters displayed bottles that looked like laboratory equipment designed by jewelers, and women in immaculate makeup stood beneath lighting so unforgiving that I assumed the building had waived constitutional protections. I slowed near one foundation display, read three labels, and immediately understood nothing.

A sales associate approached.

She was perhaps forty, with silver eye shadow, warm brown skin, and the calm expression of someone who had seen every possible version of customer panic.

“Looking for anything specific?” she asked. Her gaze moved briefly over my face without becoming invasive.

I considered lying, but the list existed in my phone like sworn testimony.
“Foundation.”

“All right. Full coverage, medium, light, natural finish, matte, radiant?”

I stared at her. “I thought foundation was the specific part.”

She smiled. “First time?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Only because you look like you want to cross-examine the bottles.”

That made me laugh, and the tension in my shoulders eased slightly.
“Something natural. I don’t want to look painted.”

“Daily wear?”

I hesitated before nodding. “Maybe.”

She did not ask for whom.

That helped.

For the next fifteen minutes, she tested three shades along my jaw, explained undertones, and demonstrated the difference between applying product with fingers, a sponge, and a brush. I watched my face change by increments rather than transformation. The redness around my nose softened, the shadows beneath my eyes became less obvious, and my skin looked more even without becoming unfamiliar.

The associate handed me a mirror. “This one disappears best.”

I looked carefully.

She was right.

My first instinct was relief. My second was fear at how quickly relief had become desire.

“I’ll take it.”

She nodded and reached for a boxed bottle. "You'll probably want a lighter hand than you think. Start with less."

"I learned that through suffering."

Her smile widened. "You already tried makeup."

"Badly."

"Everyone does."

I paid sixty-eight dollars for foundation.

Outside the cosmetics department, I stopped beside an escalator and stared at the small bag in my hand.

"This is irresponsible."

A woman passing with two much larger bags looked at me strangely. I continued upstairs. The women's denim section was worse because cosmetics could still be hidden in a bathroom drawer. Jeans implied a body moving through the world.

I touched several pairs without removing them from the rack. Straight leg, wide leg, bootcut, high rise, mid rise. The vocabulary was familiar from years of existing near women but different when every label became a question about my own shape.

Eventually, I chose dark high-waisted jeans with enough stretch to accommodate the hip-enhancing garment I already owned. I also selected a fitted cream sweater that looked conservative on the hanger and terrifying in my hands.

The fitting-room attendant counted the pieces.

"Two?"

"Yes."

She handed me a numbered tag. Nobody stopped me.

Inside the fitting room, I locked the door and looked at myself in the mirror. I had deliberately worn one of VeraForm's lighter shaping briefs beneath my clothes, which meant the jeans fit differently than ordinary men's denim would have.

I changed slowly. The jeans came up over my legs and stopped at my hips. For one humiliating minute, I thought I had chosen the wrong size. Then the stretch gave, the waistband settled, and I buttoned them.

I looked up.

The rise sat higher than I was accustomed to. The cut narrowed at my waist and followed the slight shape created beneath it, changing the proportions of my lower body even without padding.

Then I put on the sweater. The fabric fit close enough to show the waist. My breathing changed. There was nothing theatrical about the outfit. That mattered.

I had expected the dress at Nadia's office to be emotionally dangerous because dresses were obviously feminine, but the jeans and sweater frightened me for a different reason. They looked normal. A woman could have worn them to a grocery store, a café, an airport, or a casual office on Friday.

I looked like someone who might exist outside a locked apartment. The thought stayed with me as I changed back. I bought both. The underwear came next. That section nearly defeated me.

I had worn lingerie from VeraForm and purchased sleep shorts, yet selecting underwear from an ordinary store felt more intimate because there was no technical story attached. The racks held seamless briefs, bikinis, hipsters, thongs, cotton multipacks, lace, satin, and enough variations in nude to prove color terminology was a conspiracy.

I chose three pairs of seamless briefs. Black. Cream. Muted rose.

I told myself I valued practicality. Then I added one pair with a narrow lace edge. No one made me. That realization followed me to the shoe department.

The low heels were black slingbacks, two inches at most, with a shape elegant enough to change my posture without becoming impossible. I tried them on in a size that almost fit, then asked for the next one up.

The sales associate brought them. I stood. The mirror showed the dark jeans, my ordinary jacket, and shoes that altered the line of my legs just enough to make my heart beat faster.

I walked six steps. Turned. Walked back.

The associate said, "Those are better."

I looked at her. "Than what?"

"The first size. Your heel was fighting for freedom."

I laughed and bought them.

By then, I had spent enough money to make returning home the financially responsible choice. Instead, I went downstairs and stopped in front of perfume. This was the item I could still refuse.

I tested one fragrance and immediately disliked it. The second smelled like flowers trapped in an expensive elevator. The third was sweet enough to make me understand why insects flew toward danger.

Then I found one in a simple glass bottle. The sales associate sprayed it onto a paper strip. I smelled citrus first. Then something soft. Vanilla, perhaps, but not sugary. A warmer note remained underneath, something woody enough that the fragrance did not feel childish.

I held the strip longer than necessary.

"Would you like to try it on skin?" the associate asked.

I looked at my wrist.

"Yes."

She sprayed once. I walked away without buying it. That was my attempt at discipline. Twenty minutes later, I returned.

"Still there?" she asked.

I lifted my wrist.

She smiled.

I bought the perfume.

At home, I arranged everything on my bed.

The foundation. Jeans. Sweater. Underwear. Shoes. Perfume. No boxes from Benjamin. No product labels from a client. No chain-of-custody spreadsheet. I sat beside the purchases and looked at them until the apartment became quiet enough for honesty. This was intentional.

The word no longer frightened me in the same way.

I had chosen every item. I had spent my own money. I had tested shades and sizes, walked in heels beneath department-store lighting, and returned for a perfume because I liked how it smelled on my body.

There was no accident left. I picked up the bottle and sprayed my wrist once. The fragrance settled into my skin. For the rest of the afternoon, I kept smelling it.

I asked Nadia the question four days later.

We were alone in a small conference room at VeraForm after a meeting about archival records. Benjamin had already left for court, Serena was reviewing declarations, and Leila had gone downstairs with the technical consultant.

I should have packed my laptop and returned to Hilton Pierce. Instead, I remained seated. Nadia noticed.

“Something wrong?”

I looked at her. “Can I ask you something?”

“You usually do.”

“This is different.”

Her expression softened slightly, but she did not become falsely serious. “All right.”

I closed the laptop because I needed something to do with my hands. “How did you know?”

Nadia looked at me for several seconds.

Then she said, “I didn’t.”

I frowned. “That’s not true.”

“It is.”

“You knew about the clothes.”

“I suspected you had worn some of the products.”

“You looked at me like—”

“Like what?”

I stopped.

The answer was harder to articulate than I expected.

“Like you recognized something.”

Nadia leaned back in her chair.

Her voice remained calm. “Aaron, I recognized fear. That is not the same as knowing what the fear means.”

I looked down.

She continued before I could retreat. “I knew you touched the garments like someone who understood them. I knew you became defensive when nobody had accused you of anything. I knew that when you wore the prototype, you looked different afterward.”

My throat tightened. “Different how?”

“Happier.”

I laughed weakly. “I was panicking.”

“Yes.”

“That is not happiness.”

“No. But panic and happiness can occupy the same room.”

I looked at her.

Nadia folded her hands over the table. “You keep asking people to tell you what you are. Maybe not directly, but you ask anyway. You watch our faces. You wait for Benjamin to react. You ask me how I knew because some part of you hopes I can hand you an answer.”

The accuracy irritated me.

“I am not asking you to label me.”

“Good, because I won’t.”

I looked away.

She waited.

Eventually I asked, “Then what did you know?”

Nadia smiled, but there was sadness inside it. “I knew you looked happier whenever you were allowed to stop policing yourself.”

The sentence moved through me slowly.

I said nothing.

She continued. “The first time you touched the prototype, you forgot to be afraid for several seconds. When you came out of my bathroom in the robe, you were terrified, but you were also standing differently. In the dress, before Benjamin walked in, you looked at yourself like you had found something.”

My eyes burned.

I looked down at the table.

Nadia’s voice softened. “I did not know what that something was. I still don’t.”

“You think I’m trans.”

“I think you are asking a question.”

“That is not an answer.”

“No. It is respect.”

I swallowed.

For several seconds, I stared at the edge of my laptop.

Then I asked, “What if I’m just a crossdresser?”

“Then you are.”

“What if I’m a feminine man?”

“Then you are.”

“What if I’m nonbinary?”

“Then you are.”

I looked at her.

She waited.

I forced out the last possibility. “What if I’m a woman?”

Nadia’s expression did not change.

“Then you are.”

My chest hurt.

“That cannot be the answer to everything.”

“It isn’t. The answer is that I don’t get to decide.”

I laughed weakly. “Benjamin said something like that.”

“Do not tell him I agree with him. His ego is already a public-health concern.”

That saved me. I laughed harder than the joke deserved, and Nadia smiled. When the laughter faded, I asked, “How long did it take you?” She understood.

“A long time.”

“That’s vague.”

“It is also mine.”

I nodded immediately. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I only mean that my timeline will not solve yours.”

I sat quietly. Nadia reached across the table but stopped before touching my hand.

“You are allowed to be uncertain.”

I looked at her fingers. Then at my own. Clear nail treatment. Foundation beneath my eyes. Tinted balm. Things that had become ordinary so quickly.

“What if I get it wrong?”

Nadia’s answer came gently. “Then you learn something.”

That night, I searched the words.

Not clothing. Not makeup. Not shapewear. Identity.

crossdresser

feminine man

nonbinary

trans woman

I read definitions. Personal essays. Forum posts. Medical pages. Stories written by people who seemed certain and stories written by people who had spent decades becoming uncertain in increasingly precise language.

Nothing fit perfectly. That should have reassured me.

Instead, I wanted a test.

Some hidden diagnostic instrument that could measure the feeling in Nadia's mirror, the relief of tucking underwear, the comfort of satin, the way the name Ari had sounded from a delivery driver.

Crossdresser made sense until I remembered that taking the clothes off sometimes felt worse. Feminine man made sense until I imagined growing older as a man and felt something in my chest close. Nonbinary opened possibilities but did not immediately create recognition. Trans woman frightened me so deeply that I kept returning to it.

I closed the laptop. Then opened it again. At two in the morning, I still had no answer. For once, I let that remain true.

Benjamin asked me to dinner on Friday. He did not call it a date. That was how I knew it was one. We were leaving the office when he stopped beside my desk.

"Tomorrow night."

I looked up. "What about it?"

"Dinner."

"With a client?"

"No."

"The team?"

"No."

I waited.

Benjamin looked irritated.

I enjoyed that.

"Are you asking me out?"

"Yes."

I smiled. "That was painful."

"Seven thirty."

"Where?"

"I'll send you the address."

"That is not how normal people invite someone to dinner."

"You already agreed."

"I did not."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you saying no?"

I looked at him. The reporting change mattered. The question mattered. I could say no. I realized I did not want to.

"Seven thirty."

His expression shifted. Barely. Enough.

The next evening, I changed six times. I did not wear the dress. That felt too much. Instead, I chose the dark women's jeans I had bought, the fitted cream sweater, and a long charcoal coat. Beneath them, I wore light shapewear and the black seamless underwear I had chosen myself.

The low heels changed the way I stood.

My makeup remained subtle. Foundation. Concealer. Mascara. A little brow definition. Lip color close to my natural mouth.

I wore the shoulder-length wig but tucked one side behind my ear, which made the look less glamorous and more ordinary.

Then I sprayed perfume. Once at the wrist. Once near my neck. I looked in the mirror. The result was feminine but not formal. Androgynous enough that someone might hesitate. That hesitation felt safer.

I arrived at the restaurant five minutes late. Benjamin was already there. Of course. The restaurant occupied a narrow space in the West Village with dark wood, small tables, and lighting that made everyone look more interesting than they probably were.

Benjamin stood when he saw me. Then he stopped. I had begun recognizing that reaction. This time, I let myself enjoy it. His gaze moved over me once, from the hair to the sweater, jeans, and shoes.

I took off my coat. His expression became more complicated.

“Say something.”

Benjamin blinked. “You’re late.”

I laughed. “There he is.”

He pulled out my chair.

I stared at it.

“What?”

“You pulled out a chair.”

“I know.”

“For me.”

“Manning.”

I sat before he changed his mind. Dinner began awkwardly. That surprised me.

Benjamin could question hostile witnesses, argue motions, and make executives confess things they had not been asked. Yet without a case file between us, he seemed almost irritated by the absence of structure.

I enjoyed watching him suffer.

“So,” I said after we ordered, “what do you do when you are not ruining lives?”

“I don’t ruin lives.”

“Interesting opening lie.”

He looked at me. “I read.”

“Legal briefs do not count.”

“History.”

I stared. “You read history for pleasure?”

“Yes.”

“That is the oldest thing you have ever said.”

“I’m forty.”

“Exactly.”

His mouth moved. I smiled. The conversation became easier after that. I learned he cooked. Badly.

He had a younger sister in Chicago. He hated golf despite having several clients who treated it as religious obligation. He had once considered becoming a prosecutor and changed his mind after a summer internship.

I told him about law school without mentioning the failure until he raised his glass.

“To taking it again.”

I looked at him.

“Do not make my bar exam a toast.”

“Why?”

“Because I have not registered.”

“You will.”

“Alpha-male optimism is exhausting.”

“You like it.”

I nearly choked on my drink. Benjamin’s eyes darkened. I looked away. The food arrived. For almost an hour, I forgot to be afraid. Then someone said my name. Not Manning. Aaron.

“Holy shit. Aaron?”

My entire body tightened. I turned.

Daniel Burke stood near the bar. We had attended law school together. Not close friends, but close enough. He had been in my evidence class, joined the same moot-court organization, and attended at least two parties where I drank enough to sing.

Daniel looked almost the same. Older suit. More expensive watch. Same open expression. His eyes moved over me. Confusion arrived.

“Aaron?”

My mouth went dry. Benjamin looked at me. He did not speak. That saved me.

Daniel approached slowly. “Sorry. I thought you were someone I knew.”

I could lie. I wanted to. Then he looked at my face again.

“No, wait. It is you.”

My heartbeat became painful.

“Hi, Daniel.”

His eyes widened.

“Oh.”

I could see questions forming. The wig. Makeup. Sweater. He looked toward Benjamin. Then back to me. I prepared for explanation. Benjamin remained silent.

Daniel said, “Wow. It’s been years.”

“Three.”

“Right. You’re at Hilton Pierce, aren’t you?”

I looked at Benjamin. He gave me nothing except attention. My choice.

“Yes.”

Daniel smiled awkwardly. “That’s great. I heard you were doing litigation.”

“I am.”

He nodded. Then the silence became dangerous. His eyes moved over me again.

“Are you—”

Benjamin shifted slightly. Not threatening. Present.

I interrupted. “I’m having dinner.”

Daniel stopped. Understanding arrived. Not about gender. About boundaries.

“Right. Sorry.”

He smiled more carefully. “It was good seeing you.”

“You too.”

He looked at Benjamin. “Good night.”

Benjamin nodded. “Good night.”

Daniel left. I stared at the table. My hands shook. Benjamin said nothing. That was exactly right.

After a minute, I asked, “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He looked at me. “What should I have said?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither did I.”

I swallowed.

“He knows me as Aaron.”

“I noticed.”

“You could have explained.”

“It was not mine to explain.”

The words entered slowly. I looked at him. Benjamin reached for his glass. No speech. No claim. No demand that I thank him. Just a decision not to take control.

I said, “I almost ran.”

“I know.”

“I still might.”

“Then I’ll pay the check.”

I laughed despite the pressure behind my eyes. Benjamin looked at me. His expression softened.

I asked, “Do you think he knew?”

“Something.”

“That’s not helpful.”

“You asked what I think.”

I looked toward the door where Daniel had disappeared. Then I looked back.

Benjamin said, “You did not owe him an answer.”

The fear remained. So did I.

Chapter Fourteen



On Sunday morning, I woke at eight twenty-three and dressed like a woman for no reason. There was no reconstruction at VeraForm. Benjamin was not coming over. I had no client meeting, no product comparison, no legal excuse, and no emotional crisis severe enough to transform clothing into emergency treatment.

I simply wanted to.

That frightened me less than expected.

After showering, I shaved carefully and moisturized. I put on the seamless underwear I had bought, then light hip-enhancing shorts and the dark jeans from the department store. Instead of the cream sweater, I chose a soft black top I had ordered online during one of the late-night searches I no longer pretended were accidental.

I applied the new foundation with less product than I thought I needed. The sales associate had been right. A little concealer. Mascara. Brows. Muted rose lipstick. The wig went on last. I adjusted the part and looked in the mirror.

The person there was not glamorous. That mattered. She looked like someone going for coffee. The thought settled into me with surprising warmth. I sprayed perfume.

Then I left the apartment. That was new.

My body remained tense through the hallway, elevator, and lobby. Outside, Brooklyn continued without permission from me. A man walked a dog. Someone argued over parking. A delivery cyclist nearly hit a pedestrian and apologized with enough profanity to create ambiguity.

Nobody stopped. I walked three blocks. Then four. Every reflective window became a threat. Every stranger seemed capable of recognition until I realized most were not looking at me at all. The café was small and crowded. I almost turned around. Instead, I joined the line.

The woman ahead ordered an oat-milk latte. A man behind me spoke into his phone about a real-estate closing. Normal life pressed around me. When I reached the counter, the barista smiled.

“What can I get started for you?”

My voice almost failed.

“Latte.”

“Size?”

“Medium.”

“Hot or iced?”

“Hot.”

He tapped the screen.

“Name?”

The question arrived. Simple. Routine. I had typed the answer before. I had never spoken it. My heart beat so hard that I wondered whether the barista could hear.

“Ari.”

He typed.

“Ari?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Got it.”

That was all. I paid. Then I stepped aside. My hands shook. No one knew. No one applauded. No music played.

Ari existed for thirty seconds on a café order screen because I had said she did.

I waited near the pickup counter.

When the drink arrived, another employee called, “Latte for Ari.”

I stepped forward.

“That’s me.”

The words came more easily. I took the cup.

The label read:

ARI

I carried it to a small table near the window and stared at the name until the coffee began cooling.

I told Nadia two days later. Not everything. One thing. We were in her office reviewing deposition preparation when she called me Aaron and I reacted. Not dramatically. Enough that she noticed.

She looked up from the document.

“Wrong?”

I swallowed.

“Maybe.”

Her expression stayed neutral. I hated how grateful that made me.

I said, “I tried a name.”

Nadia waited.

“Ari.”

She smiled very slightly. "All right."

"That's it?"

"What would you prefer?"

"I don't know."

"Then I'll avoid interpretive dance."

I laughed.

Nadia closed the file. "Do you want me to use it?"

The question made my chest tighten.

"Sometimes."

"Privately?"

"Yes."

"With Benjamin?"

I froze.

She noticed.

I looked away.

"I don't know."

Nadia nodded. "Then I won't."

I picked up my coffee.

After a moment, I said, "Maybe."

She waited.

"With Benjamin."

"All right."

The conversation returned to the case. That was the gift. Twenty minutes later, Benjamin entered without knocking. Of course. Nadia looked up.

“Ari found another mismatch in the supplier dates.”

The name entered the room. Benjamin stopped. I stopped breathing. Nadia turned a page as though nothing had happened. Benjamin looked at me. Then at her. Then back.

“The 2020 supplier dates?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

He walked toward the table.

Work continued.

I spent the next thirty minutes understanding nothing I read.

Benjamin waited until we were alone. We had returned to Hilton Pierce, and most of the team had left for the evening. I was gathering my things when his voice came from behind me.

“Ari?”

I stopped.

The office seemed too open. I turned. Benjamin stood several feet away. His expression was careful. I hated that I could now recognize care in him.

“Maybe.”

He nodded once. “All right.”

That was it.

I stared.

Benjamin looked toward my desk. “Are you finished with the supplier chart?”

I almost laughed.

“Yes.”

“Send it tonight.”

“There he is.”

His mouth moved slightly.

I put my laptop into my bag.

Benjamin said, “Do you want me to use it?”

The question stopped me.

I looked at him.

“Not here.”

“All right.”

“Not around the team.”

“All right.”

“Maybe when we’re alone.”

His gaze held mine. “All right.”

I swallowed. The answer had become almost unbearable because he refused to make it dramatic.

I walked toward the elevator. Then I stopped.

“There’s something else.”

Benjamin waited. I looked around the empty office. This was harder.

“I think maybe I want to try something.”

His expression changed slightly. “What?”

“Pronouns.”

He said nothing.

I forced myself to continue.

“When it’s private.”

“All right.”

“I don’t know if I mean permanently.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I might hate it.”

“Then we stop.”

I looked at him.

The simplicity frightened me.

“She.”

Benjamin’s face remained calm.

“She?”

I nodded. “Maybe.”

He took that in.

Then he said, “All right.”

I laughed nervously. “You are very repetitive.”

“I’m trying not to interfere.”

“You usually interfere professionally.”

“That is different.”

I looked down.

Benjamin said, “Do you want me to start now?”

My heart accelerated.

“Yes.”

He nodded. Then nothing happened. I laughed.

“What?”

He looked mildly irritated. “I do not have a sentence prepared.”

“Imagine. Benjamin Hilton without words.”

“I am regretting this already.”

The elevator arrived. We entered. Benjamin pressed the lobby button. The doors closed. He looked at me. Then said, “She is enjoying this too much.”

My chest tightened.

The pronoun entered me more physically than I expected. I looked at the floor. Benjamin saw. His voice softened.

“Ari?”

I swallowed. “Again.”

Something changed in his face.

He looked forward.

“She is impossible.”

I smiled. The elevator descended. For the first time, the name and the pronoun occupied the same space. I could not stop smiling.

Benjamin made his first mistake that Friday.

We were in his apartment. I had been there once before for a work dinner with three associates, but that experience had not prepared me for arriving alone. His home occupied part of a high floor overlooking Central Park. The space was elegant, restrained, and irritatingly consistent with him: dark wood, pale stone, books

arranged by subject, no visible clutter, and furniture that seemed to assume nobody had ever spilled sauce.

I arrived wearing a dark burgundy dress. I had bought it two days earlier. Deliberately.

The neckline was modest, the sleeves long, and the skirt fell just above my knees. Beneath it, I wore black shapewear and the lace-edged underwear I had purchased because apparently I had developed an interest in making my own life emotionally complicated.

Benjamin opened the door. Then he forgot to speak. I smiled because I recognized the pattern.

“You need help with that.”

His eyes moved over me. “With what?”

“Language.”

He stepped aside. “Come in.”

I entered. The apartment smelled faintly of garlic. I looked toward the kitchen.

“You cooked?”

“Yes.”

“Should I call emergency services now?”

Benjamin closed the door. “You can leave.”

“I just got here.”

“Then behave.”

I took off my coat. His gaze followed the movement. I enjoyed that too much. Dinner was pasta. Actually good.

I distrusted this.

“You said you cooked badly.”

“I said I cook.”

“You allowed me to infer badly.”

“That sounds like your error.”

We ate. Talked. Drank wine. At some point, I forgot I was wearing a dress. That was new.

I stood to carry my glass toward the kitchen.

Benjamin said, “Leave it. He can—”

The correction came immediately.

“She.”

I stopped.

Benjamin did too.

For half a second, shame crossed his face.

Then he said, “She can sit down while I clear the table.”

No apology speech. No self-punishment. No demand that I reassure him. He simply corrected himself. I sat. My throat tightened. Benjamin noticed. He carried the plates away.

I watched him.

When he returned, I said, “Thank you.”

He leaned against the table. “For dishes?”

“For not making that into a funeral.”

Understanding entered his expression.

“You asked me to try.”

“I know.”

“I will make mistakes.”

“I know.”

“Then I will correct them.”

I looked at him.

“You make everything sound like contract language.”

“I am a lawyer.”

“So am I.”

His gaze sharpened.

“Yes.”

The word touched the same wound and no longer hurt in exactly the same way.

I stood. Benjamin did not move.

The distance between us narrowed because I crossed it. I kissed him. His hands came to my waist. The dress changed everything. There was no shirt collar to hide beneath. No masculine trousers creating plausible deniability.

His palms settled over the shape I had chosen. I kissed him harder. Benjamin responded. Slowly at first. Then not. His hand moved up my back. I felt heat spread beneath my skin.

When his mouth left mine, I whispered, “Bedroom.”

He looked at me. The intensity in his face made my knees feel unreliable.

“Ari.”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

The question steadied me.

“Yes.”

He took my hand. We walked down the hallway. The bedroom was darker than the living room. City light entered through tall windows. I stood near the bed. Suddenly, the confidence disappeared.

Benjamin saw. He stopped.

“What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Ari.”

I looked at him. The name made lying harder.

“I’m nervous.”

His expression softened. “We can stop.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Those are different questions.”

I laughed weakly.

“You really are unbearable.”

“I know.”

He approached slowly.

His hand touched my waist.

“May I unzip the dress?”

My heart pounded.

“Yes.”

I turned.

Benjamin moved my hair aside. His fingers found the zipper. The sound seemed impossibly loud as it descended. Cool air touched my back. Then the dress loosened. My confidence vanished completely.

I remembered what was underneath. The shapewear. Not sexy lingerie. Compression. Panels. A garment designed to alter the body I had. I caught the front of the dress before it could fall.

Benjamin stopped.

“Ari?”

“I can do it.”

He waited.

I looked at the floor.

“I should change.”

“Why?”

The question irritated me because the answer felt obvious.

“This.”

I gestured toward my body.

Benjamin said nothing.

I forced the words out.

“The shapewear.”

Understanding entered his face. My shame deepened.

“I don’t look like this underneath.”

He stepped closer.

“I know.”

“No, I mean the waist, the hips. It’s not me.”

Benjamin’s expression changed.

“Who put it on?”

I stared. “What?”

“Who chose it?”

“I did.”

“Who bought the dress?”

“I did.”

“Who came here?”

I looked at him.

“You know the answer.”

“Yes.”

His voice softened. “I want you to hear it.”

My eyes burned.

“I did.”

Benjamin nodded.

“Then stop telling me you are not here.”

Something inside me gave way. I released the front of the dress. The fabric slipped lower. Benjamin saw the black shapewear. His gaze moved over it. I wanted to disappear. He did not look disappointed. He looked affected. That was somehow worse.

“Benjamin.”

His eyes returned to mine.

“May I touch you?”

I nodded. He placed both hands at my waist. Over the garment. The compression held me beneath his palms. My breath changed. Benjamin moved slowly. No grabbing. No surprise.

His thumbs followed the shaped line at my sides.

“You like this?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“The pressure?”

“Yes.”

“The shape?”

My face heated.

“Yes.”

He looked at me.

“Then I like that you like it.”

My throat tightened.

“That is suspiciously reasonable.”

“I can be unreasonable if it helps.”

I laughed. The tension broke. Benjamin lowered his mouth to my shoulder. The dress had slipped enough to expose skin. He kissed there. Then lower, where fabric began.

My breath caught. He paused.

“Still yes?”

“Yes.”

Benjamin knelt. The sight stopped me. This man. This impossible, arrogant man. He pressed a kiss against the shapewear at my waist. Through the fabric.

My hands shook.

“Benjamin.”

His eyes lifted. I could not speak.

He kissed the garment again. Slowly. Not mocking. Not pretending it was absent. My knees weakened. He stood before I lost balance and held me. I buried my face near his neck. The perfume I had chosen mixed with his cologne.

Benjamin whispered, “You are allowed to be here.”

My eyes closed.

The rest of the evening became warmth, kisses, permission, and the gradual disappearance of fear. He asked before touching anything new, slowed whenever my body tightened, and treated the feminine things I had chosen not as obstacles to get past but as part of the person standing in front of him.

When the room finally darkened, I was still wearing the name. For the first time, I fell asleep beside someone without feeling that I had left part of myself hidden in another room.

Chapter Fifteen



Maison Sloane produced the email at 8:17 on a Tuesday morning. By 8:23, Benjamin had called an emergency team meeting. By 8:31, VeraForm's general counsel was on speakerphone. At 8:36, I understood why everyone looked afraid.

The email had been recovered through a third-party subpoena served on a former VeraForm product designer named Molly Chen. She had left the company two years earlier and now worked for an athletic-wear startup in California.

The message appeared to be dated February 14, 2023.

The sender was an outside industry consultant.

The recipient was Molly.

The subject line read:

Reference materials

The body contained seven words.

Thought these might help with the silhouette problem.

Attached was a PDF bearing Maison Sloane branding. The file included internal-looking product images, panel diagrams, and several pages related to the Contour One bodysuit.

VeraForm's disputed product had not been finalized until months later.

The room became very quiet. Benjamin stood at the head of the conference table with the printed email in one hand. Nadia's general counsel spoke through the phone. "We did not have this."

Benjamin's voice was controlled. "You had Molly Chen."

"We collected her company mailbox."

"Apparently not her personal account."

"We asked whether she used personal email for VeraForm business."

"And?"

"She said no."

Benjamin placed the email on the table.

The movement was gentle.

That frightened everyone.

Serena asked, "What is the source chain?"

I pulled up the cover letter. "Third-party production from Chen's former personal account provider after a subpoena. Maison Sloane says they received it yesterday."

Benjamin looked at me. "Authentication?"

"Not established yet."

"Metadata?"

"Limited load file."

"Attachments?"

"One PDF."

"Native?"

I checked. “Email native. PDF produced separately within the family.”

His jaw tightened. Nadia’s voice came through the speaker. “I never saw that document.” Benjamin turned toward the phone. “That is not enough.”

“I know.”

“Did Molly?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did anyone?”

“I don’t know.”

He laughed once without humor. The temperature in the room changed. Benjamin began asking questions faster. Who supervised Molly? Who approved the disputed garment? When did she join the team? Did she have access to the relevant design repository? Had she communicated with the consultant before? Why had her personal account not been collected? Every answer created another problem.

By nine fifteen, he was shouting. Not about me. Not about Ari. About the case.

Still, watching him become the worst version of himself no longer felt abstract.

“This is exactly why collection protocols exist,” he snapped at VeraForm’s general counsel. “You do not ask a custodian one casual question and decide the universe has become honest.”

The general counsel responded sharply. “We followed the agreed protocol.”

“You followed the minimum protocol.”

“We disclosed the mailbox.”

“You disclosed the mailbox you knew existed.”

Serena stepped in. “We need to focus on response strategy.”

Benjamin turned toward her. “I am focused.”

“No, you’re angry.”

“I can do both.”

I looked at the email again. Something bothered me. Not the content. The timing. I opened the native-message properties. The received timestamp matched February 14. The header path looked plausible.

I opened the attachment properties.

The PDF filename was:

MS_ContourOne_Development_v7.pdf

I stared. Version seven. Maybe irrelevant. I opened the PDF. The first page showed Maison Sloane branding. The document properties were limited in the review platform.

I downloaded the permitted working copy. Creation date. May 18, 2023. My pulse changed. That was after the email. I looked closer. PDF metadata could change. Exported files could be recreated. Production processing could alter fields. Not enough. I checked the load file. The attachment family relationship pointed to the February message.

I opened the native again. Then the message attachment table. The filename listed in the original MIME structure was different. My heartbeat accelerated.

The email showed:

Contour_reference.pdf

The produced PDF showed:

MS_ContourOne_Development_v7.pdf

I sat straighter. Serena was speaking. Benjamin interrupted her. I barely heard either. I opened the hash values. The family record. The extraction report. Something was wrong.

I stood.

“Benjamin.”

He did not look at me.

“Not now.”

“I think the attachment—”

“Later.”

I stared.

“This matters.”

“So does everything in this room.”

I carried my laptop toward him.

“Look at the file names.”

Benjamin turned.

His face was hard.

“I said later.”

“The PDF was created after the email.”

That got his attention.

For one second.

Then he looked at the screen.

“Metadata changes.”

“I know.”

“Then do not build a theory on one field.”

“I’m not.”

“Manning.”

I hated the name at that moment. Not because it was wrong. Because of the way he used it.

I continued. "The native email references a different attachment name. The produced PDF may not be the original file."

Benjamin looked toward the phone.

Nadia's counsel was still talking.

He said, "Send it to forensics."

"I already did."

"Good."

Then he turned away. That should have been enough. It was not. Something in the structure still bothered me.

I returned to my seat.

For another hour, the team built response plans. Preservation. Custodian interview. Emergency call with Molly Chen. Potential supplemental production. Possible motion implications. Maison Sloane would argue direct access. If the email held, the entire case changed. At eleven forty, Molly joined by video from California. She looked terrified. Benjamin questioned her.

"Did you receive this email?"

"I don't remember."

"Do you recognize the sender?"

"Yes."

"Did he send industry materials?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you receive Maison Sloane internal documents?"

"I don't know."

Benjamin's voice sharpened. "That was not the question."

Molly looked near tears. I watched the screen. The old Benjamin would not have bothered me this much. Now I knew another version of him. That made the cruelty harder.

Molly said, "I don't remember seeing that PDF."

Benjamin held up the email. "It was attached to a message in your account."

"I understand."

"Did you use it?"

"I don't know."

"Did you share it?"

"I don't remember."

The call ended badly.

Benjamin disconnected.

Then he turned toward the room.

"No one leaves until we know what this is."

My chest tightened.

Serena said, "We need food."

"Order it."

"You need to calm down."

"I need facts."

I looked at my laptop.

Forensics had replied.

Reviewing. Initial observation: produced family may reflect substitution or later attachment replacement. Need source container.

I stood again.

“Benjamin.”

He closed his eyes briefly.

That was warning.

I continued. “Forensics sees the mismatch too.”

“Then let them work.”

“The MIME structure—”

“I know what MIME structure is.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

He turned toward me. The room became still. I had seen this before. The production disaster. The vendor. The moment I told him yelling did not make documents reproduce faster. This time, more was at stake. So was I.

“The original email appears to reference a different attachment,” I said. “If Maison Sloane produced the PDF as part of the same family without explaining substitution, we need to know where the version-seven file came from.”

Benjamin rubbed one hand over his face. “Yes.”

“The creation date is May.”

“I heard you.”

“Then why are you acting like the email is proven?”

His eyes hardened. “Because I plan for the worst evidence, not the most comforting theory.”

“This is not comfort.”

“Manning.”

“No. Look.”

I turned the laptop. Benjamin did not. Something inside me snapped.

“Ari.”

The name escaped quietly. His face changed. The room changed too. Serena looked between us. She did not understand. Nadia, on speakerphone, went silent. I regretted the word immediately. Benjamin’s expression became complicated.

I said, more softly, “When we’re alone.”

His jaw tightened.

“We are working.”

“I know.”

“Then focus.”

The word hit me. I stared at him.

He continued, already angry enough not to hear himself. “Right now I need my paralegal focused on the case. I do not have time to manage everything else you are working through.”

Silence. Absolute. Serena stopped moving. Nadia said nothing through the phone. Benjamin’s face changed almost immediately.

Too late. I looked at him.

The sentence entered every frightened place I had spent months trying to leave. My paralegal. Focused on the case. Everything else you are working through. The dress. The name. The pronouns. The night in his bed. The shapewear he had kissed through fabric. All of it became, in one sentence, something he had to manage. A distraction. I closed the laptop.

Benjamin said my name.

“Aaron.”

I laughed weakly. That made it worse.

“Perfect.”

His face tightened. “That is not what I meant.”

“I know exactly what you meant.”

“No.”

“Then congratulations. You should have used different words.”

I picked up my laptop.

Serena stood. “Aaron.”

“I’m going to work somewhere else.”

Benjamin stepped forward. “We are not finished.”

I looked at him. The old power entered the room. Boss. Employee. The structure he had claimed to fix.

My voice remained calm.

“Yes, we are.”

I walked out. Nobody stopped me. I did not resign. That would have been easier.

I returned to my desk, saved every note, forwarded the metadata comparison to Serena, uploaded my working chart to the case folder, and documented the exact questions I believed forensics needed to answer.

Then I worked for three more hours. I did not speak to Benjamin. At four thirty, he sent a message.

We need to talk.

I did not answer.

At five ten:

What I said was wrong.

I closed the message.

At six:

Please do not leave without speaking to me.

I packed my bag. Serena approached. She looked tired.

“So.”

I kept my eyes on the laptop.

“So.”

She sat on the edge of the neighboring desk.

“I’m not going to ask questions.”

“Thank you.”

“I am going to say he was an asshole.”

I looked at her. She shrugged.

“That part is within my professional competence.”

I almost smiled. Almost. She continued. “Your notes are good.”

“Send the attachment mismatch to forensics.”

“I did.”

“The native email filename matters.”

“I know.”

“The produced PDF may be later.”

“I know.”

I looked down. Serena's voice softened.

"Go home."

I swallowed.

"Can I?"

"I supervise you now."

That nearly broke me. I laughed once. Serena smiled faintly.

"Go."

I left. Benjamin's office door opened as I reached the elevators.

"Aaron."

I pressed the button. He approached.

"Please."

The elevator arrived. I stepped inside. Benjamin stopped before the doors. He could have entered. He did not. That should have mattered. I was too hurt to let it.

"I need time."

His face changed.

"All right."

The doors closed.

At home, I removed my suit. Then the shapewear. Then the makeup. I put on an old T-shirt and sweatpants. Not because I wanted them. Because I wanted to disappear. My phone rang. Benjamin. I declined. He called again twenty minutes later. I turned the phone face down. At eleven, a message arrived.

I am sorry.

I read it. Then locked the screen. The apartment felt wrong. The dresser drawer remained closed. I did not open it. Benjamin stayed at the office. I learned that later.

At the time, I only knew he stopped calling shortly after midnight. The team continued working. Forensics obtained more information from the third-party production. The native email container showed an attachment record.

The original filename was:

Contour_reference.pdf

The file size differed from the PDF Maison Sloane had produced as the child attachment. More importantly, the hash did not match. The version-seven PDF had been created in May 2023. The February email could not have contained that exact file.

At 1:47 in the morning, Benjamin opened my notes. He read the first page. Then the second. I had mapped every discrepancy. Original MIME filename. Produced family filename. File-size mismatch. Creation metadata. Hash conflict. Later appearance of the version-seven document in a separate May production.

At the bottom, I had written:

Possible family substitution during collection or production. Do not concede that Feb. 14 email transmitted the produced PDF without source-container validation.

Benjamin stared at the note. Forensics confirmed at 2:03:

Initial conclusion: produced PDF is not the original attachment contained in Feb. 14 native message. Source record indicates replacement or incorrect family association. Further validation pending.

The email was still a problem. Someone had sent Molly something. But not necessarily the damaging Maison Sloane file attached to the plaintiff's production. The worst version of the evidence had begun collapsing. Because I had seen what other people missed. Again. Benjamin sat alone in his office with my notes open. He had told me I was one of the best legal minds in his firm.

Then, at the exact moment I trusted him enough to offer him another name, he had reduced me to *my paralegal* and turned the most vulnerable part of my life into something he had no time to manage.

I did not know any of that yet. I was asleep in Brooklyn wearing an old T-shirt because I could not bear to open the drawer. Benjamin knew. And for once, knowing did not give him the slightest idea how to fix what he had done.

Chapter Sixteen



Benjamin came to Brooklyn the following evening, but for once he did not simply appear at my door as though access to my apartment were another professional privilege he had forgotten to question. At six fourteen, while I stood in my kitchen stirring pasta that had already begun sticking to the bottom of the pot, my phone lit with a message from him.

I am downstairs. I will leave if you tell me to.

I read the sentence twice and hated how carefully constructed it was. Angry Benjamin was simple because I knew how to resist him; careful Benjamin required me to acknowledge that he was trying, and I was not yet prepared to reward effort merely because it came from a man who usually treated basic emotional awareness as an unfunded mandate.

I put down the wooden spoon and typed:

You have five minutes.

His response arrived before I could decide whether I meant it.

Understood.

I regretted the invitation immediately, but I buzzed him in anyway.

The apartment looked almost exactly as it had the first night he came for the Kessler exhibit folder, although the VeraForm boxes had since been flattened and moved into the closet. My bar-review books still occupied one end of the dining table, the garment drawer remained closed, and the gray sleep shorts I had once considered evidence of psychological collapse were folded neatly over the arm of the

couch. I had spent the previous night in an old T-shirt and sweatpants because I wanted distance from every feminine thing that had become connected to Benjamin, but by late afternoon I had become angry at myself for surrendering clothes I liked simply because he had hurt me.

So I had changed into the dark women's jeans and fitted cream sweater.

Not for him.

I repeated that to myself when the knock came.

I opened the door and found Benjamin standing in the hallway in a charcoal overcoat, his hair slightly damp from rain and his face marked by enough exhaustion that I almost felt sorry for him. The sympathy irritated me, so I stepped aside before he could see it.

"You have five minutes," I said. "If this turns into a courtroom closing argument, I am opening the door again and letting the neighbors learn how emotionally constipated one of Manhattan's most expensive litigators can be."

Benjamin entered and removed his coat with unusual care. "I did prepare what I wanted to say, but I did not write it down, which I assume earns me no credit."

"It earns you exactly none," I replied as I closed the door. "Also, your time is already running."

He folded the coat over the same kitchen chair he had used before, and the familiarity of the movement made my chest tighten because my apartment remembered him even when I wanted not to. Benjamin glanced toward the stove, where foam had begun rising around the pot lid, and lifted one eyebrow.

"Your dinner is escaping."

I turned and swore, then moved the pot off the heat while he remained near the table. "Your timing continues to improve lives."

"I can wait until you finish."

"You have four minutes and thirty seconds, so I suggest developing a stronger relationship with efficiency."

His mouth almost moved into a smile, but he seemed to think better of it, which was wise.

I drained the pasta because the physical routine gave me something to do with my hands. Benjamin stood in the narrow space between the table and the kitchen, unusually still, while rain tapped against the window above the sink and traffic hissed on the wet street below.

When I finally turned around, he said, "I was wrong."

I folded my arms. "That sounds suspiciously like an opening statement."

"It is the beginning of an apology, and I am trying not to make it a performance." His expression tightened as though the admission itself irritated him. "What I said in the conference room was cruel, but I do not want to pretend it was an isolated mistake caused by a difficult morning."

That was not what I expected, and I hated that surprise weakened my anger for even a second. "Go on."

Benjamin drew a slow breath. "I use anger when I cannot control what is happening."

I laughed without humor. "I have worked for you for three years, so I assure you this revelation has not destabilized me."

"You know that I become angry," he said. "That is not the same as knowing why, and until yesterday I am not sure I admitted the difference to myself."

I looked at him more carefully.

Benjamin stepped toward the table but did not come closer to me. "When evidence changes unexpectedly, I push people harder because I believe speed can restore control. When a witness surprises me, I become more aggressive because I want the room back. When I do not understand something, I make other people explain it until my uncertainty becomes their emergency."

"That sounds familiar."

“I know.” He lowered his gaze for a moment before continuing. “I tell myself I am protecting the case because sometimes I am, but that is not the entire truth.”

I leaned against the counter. “Then what is?”

His eyes returned to mine. “Uncertainty frightens me.”

The admission sounded so unlike Benjamin that for a moment I thought he had rehearsed it purely because it would be effective. Then I saw how much he disliked saying it and believed him more.

“You hide that well,” I said.

“No, I hide it loudly.”

The answer caught me off guard, and I looked away before he could see the reaction.

Benjamin continued with the same controlled effort. “The email frightened me because it could have changed the entire case. Your name frightened me because I knew it mattered and did not know what you needed from me. Those two things were not equivalent, but I treated them as though they were competing demands on my attention, and when I felt control slipping, I used the worst weapon I had.”

My throat tightened.

“That is exactly what I heard,” I said after a moment. “When you told me you needed your paralegal focused on the case.”

“I know now.”

“No, I do not think you do.” I unfolded my arms because anger had made them ache. “I heard that everything I told you had become a distraction. The clothes, the name, the pronouns, all of it. I heard that I had become inconvenient at exactly the moment the case became difficult.”

Benjamin’s jaw tightened, but he did not interrupt.

I forced myself to continue because I had already spent too much of my life turning pain into something easier for other people to hear. “You called me your paralegal like that was the only part of me you could still use.”

His face changed.

I had wanted the words to hurt him, and the fact that they did brought no satisfaction.

“You are right,” he said.

I stared at him because Benjamin did not surrender arguments easily, not even when he should.

He continued before I could answer. “I have treated your competence as a permanent resource. I assume you will find the missing document, correct the date, rebuild the chronology, notice the contradiction, and stay when everyone else leaves because you have always done those things.”

“That sounds flattering when you say it slowly.”

“It is not finished.” He rested one hand on the back of a chair without sitting. “I have treated you as indispensable while rarely treating you as valuable, and I understand now that those are not the same thing.”

The sentence landed quietly and remained there.

I looked toward the rain-dark window because looking at him became difficult. For three years, I had wanted recognition from Benjamin so badly that one word of praise could sustain me for an entire day, yet I had never understood the distinction he had just made until he said it aloud.

“You told me I was one of the best legal minds in your office,” I said.

“You are.”

“Then you told me to stop distracting you.”

“Yes.” His voice remained steady. “I know what I did.”

“You cannot fix that by admitting you are emotionally constipated.”

One corner of his mouth moved despite himself. "I would not have chosen that description."

"It is the description available in Brooklyn."

Benjamin almost smiled, then let the humor disappear. "I am not asking you to forgive me tonight. I am asking you to believe that I understand why I was wrong."

I studied him for several seconds. "Do you?"

"Yes."

The answer came without hesitation, but the anger inside me did not vanish. I did not want it to vanish because anger was easier to hold than hope.

I sat at the dining table and gestured toward the other chair. "You can sit, although your five minutes expired approximately a decade ago."

Benjamin sat without pointing out the inconsistency, which may have been the strongest evidence of personal growth he had offered so far.

For a while, neither of us spoke. I looked down at my hands and noticed that the clear nail treatment had begun chipping near one thumb, so I picked at the edge until Benjamin's gaze dropped there.

"There is something worse," I said.

His expression sharpened, but he remained quiet.

"I do not know if I am real."

Benjamin's brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

I laughed weakly because the question sounded impossible even to me. "Exactly what it sounds like. I started wearing shapewear because you kept sending boxes home with me, and then I bought sleep shorts, makeup, a wig, clothes, perfume, and things I would have been terrified to touch a few months ago."

He waited.

I looked toward the closed dresser drawer. “What kind of woman discovers she might be a woman because she got stressed and tried on a bodysuit?”

Benjamin did not answer immediately, which helped because the wrong reassurance would have destroyed me.

“I read stories online,” I continued. “People who knew when they were five, people who wore their sisters’ clothes at twelve, people who spent decades knowing exactly what was wrong while hiding it from everyone. I do not have that story.”

“You have yours.”

“That sounds like something printed inside a greeting card.”

“It can still be true.”

I shook my head. “What if I am just a man who likes feminine things?”

“Then that is what you are,” he said. “I will believe you when you tell me.”

“What if I am a crossdresser?”

“Then I will believe that too.”

“What if I am confused because I like how you look at me?”

Benjamin’s expression tightened, but his answer remained careful. “Then that is something you are allowed to discover without me deciding it in advance.”

I stared at him because he refused to give me the certainty I wanted.

That was why I trusted the answer.

“What if I tell you I think I might be a woman and later discover I was wrong?”

“Then I will believe what you tell me later.” He leaned forward slightly but kept his hands on the table. “I am not going to define you because you are frightened of defining yourself, and I am not going to require evidence before I respect what you say about yourself.”

A laugh escaped me because the irony was unbearable. "You do not need evidence."

"I recognize the seriousness of the statement."

"You should put that on firm letterhead."

"I would probably be disbarred."

"You are not funny."

"I know."

I looked at him and smiled despite myself. Benjamin saw it, and the relief on his face was so small that I might have missed it months ago. Now I knew him better.

"I am still furious with you," I said.

"I know, and I am not asking you to stop."

"I am not coming back because you apologized."

"I understand."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

I stood and went back to the stove, where the pasta had become one large adhesive structure. "You ruined dinner."

"I can order something."

"Of course you can."

Benjamin reached automatically for his phone.

I pointed the wooden spoon at him. "That was not permission."

He put the phone down. I laughed, and the sound surprised both of us.

Benjamin stayed for another hour, although neither of us called it reconciliation.

We ate damaged pasta with bottled sauce at my small table, and for once he did not comment on the fact that I owned no proper wine glasses. He told me the forensic team had confirmed the attachment mismatch and that the supposedly devastating Maison Sloane PDF could not be authenticated as the file originally transmitted in Molly Chen's February email.

I listened despite myself because the case remained capable of reaching into every emotional disaster and demanding attention.

"The email still matters," I said. "Someone sent her something."

"Yes, and the consultant's role matters more now because the attachment family is compromised."

I looked at him. "Did you review my note about the Northstar invoices?"

His expression changed just enough to answer.

"You did not."

"I reviewed the metadata comparison first."

"Benjamin."

"I know."

"You have built an entire personality around priorities and still choose them badly."

"I am discovering that."

I stood and retrieved my laptop from the table near the window, then stopped before opening it. "This is not reconciliation."

"I understand."

"This is the case."

“I understand that too.”

I sat again and showed him the invoices.

Nadia called the next afternoon and asked whether I wanted lunch. She did not ask whether Benjamin had apologized, which was why I agreed to see her. We met near Union Square at a restaurant with outdoor heaters and tables far enough apart to make eavesdropping inconvenient.

She arrived wearing sunglasses despite the clouds and looked at me critically before sitting.

“You look terrible.”

I stared at her. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

We ordered lunch and spent several minutes discussing the case because legal problems remained easier than personal ones. Eventually Nadia set down her glass and studied me.

“How are you?”

I hesitated. “I do not know.”

“Good answer.”

“I hate when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Act like uncertainty is a personality achievement.”

She smiled. “You are getting better at surviving it.”

I looked down at my wrist, where the perfume I had bought remained faint enough that I could smell it only when I moved my hand. Nadia noticed the gesture, and her mouth curved.

“Do not.”

“I said nothing.”

“You and Benjamin have become irritatingly committed to that defense.”

That made her laugh.

I shook my head and looked toward the street. “This all started because Benjamin kept sending me home with underwear.”

Nadia laughed harder.

“I am serious.”

“I know, which is why it is funny.”

“He gave me boxes.”

“He ordered you to remove boxes from his conference room.”

“Exactly.”

“You put on the clothes.”

“Under duress.”

“Aaron.”

I looked at her. “Ari. Maybe.”

Her expression softened without becoming theatrical.

I looked away before the tenderness could become another question.

Nadia reached for her water. “Sweetheart, no box of shapewear did this to you. You were always girly. The boxes just destroyed your excuses.”

I stared at her.

She smiled.

The sentence should have embarrassed me, but instead it found something tender enough that I had to look down at the table.

“Always girly,” I repeated.

“Yes.”

“That sounds ridiculous.”

“So does pretending your bodysuit was orthopedic.”

I covered my face with one hand, and Nadia laughed again until I joined her.

When the laughter faded, I asked, “Do you really think that?”

“I think you have spent years explaining yourself away. The clothes did not create the part of you that relaxed when you wore them, and Benjamin did not invent the part of you that wanted to be seen differently.”

I looked at my hands.

Nadia continued more gently. “You do not have to be a woman because I say something poetic over lunch, but you also do not have to pretend femininity appeared from nowhere because that version feels safer.” I nodded because the distinction mattered.

I returned to the office that evening, but not because Benjamin asked me. He had not.

Serena had sent one message:

Forensics confirmed your attachment issue. Nice catch.

I stared at it for ten minutes before opening the VeraForm case folder from home. The more I read, the angrier I became, not at Benjamin but at the possibility that Maison Sloane had shaped its chronology around records that did not mean what the company claimed.

Nadia had built VeraForm for people mainstream companies ignored. The case was no longer merely work I performed because a partner assigned it. I cared what happened, and realizing that made the decision for me.

At seven thirty, I entered Hilton Pierce carrying my laptop.

The office was mostly empty. Benjamin stood in Conference Room A with Serena, reviewing a whiteboard covered in dates, and both looked up when I entered.

Serena smiled first. "You are back."

"I am working."

"That counts."

Benjamin said nothing, which was exactly right.

I placed my bag on the table and opened the laptop. "The Northstar consultant invoices overlap Maison Sloane's early S-Curve development window, and I want to trace every payment against project codes."

Benjamin looked at me carefully. "Do you?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "All right."

I opened the first invoice, then looked at him again. "This is not because you told me to come back."

"I know."

"This is not because we are fine."

"I know that too."

"The case matters."

His expression softened. "I know."

I almost smiled before turning back to the screen.

For once, Benjamin did not tell me what to do next.

Chapter Seventeen



The Northstar Fashion Technology Accelerator had died quietly, leaving behind the digital equivalent of an abandoned office after everyone took the useful furniture. Its website disappeared in 2020, its social-media accounts stopped updating a year earlier, and the nonprofit that once administered the program had merged into a larger entrepreneurship organization before dissolving its original identity.

If Northstar had known it would become relevant to multimillion-dollar litigation, perhaps someone would have preserved the records more carefully. Instead, I spent three days reconstructing the program from old newsletters, archived event pages, university announcements, sponsor brochures, forgotten photographs, and PDFs uploaded to servers nobody had cleaned in years.

The work became obsessive because every fragment promised another connection.

I started with the participant list that had already placed Rebecca Harlan of Maison Sloane at the same showcase where Nadia presented early VeraForm concepts. Attendance established opportunity, but opportunity was not copying, and Claire Whitmore would have no difficulty explaining that hundreds of people attended industry events every year without stealing one another's ideas.

She would be right.

We needed more.

I built a timeline across one conference-room wall, arranging dates, participants, project names, and corporate relationships until the case began resembling a conspiracy designed by someone with access to highlighters.

In September 2018, Nadia's predecessor company entered Northstar. Two months later, she demonstrated a prototype compression concept designed around lower-abdominal support and altered hip proportions. Rebecca Harlan attended as a corporate observer for Maison Sloane, and within several months she joined an internal strategic-development group.

By late 2019, Maison Sloane had begun using a consultant named Graham Voss.

The name appeared in an invoice I had flagged before the rupture with Benjamin.

I circled it and searched again.

Voss Product Strategy LLC

The billed description remained vague:

Market positioning and technical commercialization advisory.

I opened another invoice, then a third, and discovered that Graham Voss had worked with Maison Sloane for nearly two years.

That alone meant nothing.

I searched his name through the accelerator records and found nothing, so I tried archived newsletters. One reference appeared in a PDF that looked as though someone had designed it during an era when gradient backgrounds were considered modern.

Technical mentor — G. Voss

My pulse changed.

I opened the PDF and verified the date.

Graham Voss had served as an outside mentor at Northstar during the same cohort as Nadia.

I stood so quickly that Serena looked up from the opposite side of the room.

"What happened?"

“The consultant was at Northstar.”

She came around the table while I rotated the laptop toward her. “Which consultant?”

“Graham Voss. He mentored the cohort, then Maison Sloane hired him less than a year after Nadia’s showcase.”

Serena read the reference twice and glanced toward Benjamin’s office. “That is worth showing him.”

“Not yet.”

She smiled because she understood exactly what I meant. “You want something he cannot dismiss as networking.”

“I want something Claire cannot explain in three sentences.”

“That is ambitious.”

“I work here.”

“Unfortunately.”

We kept digging.

Graham Voss was sixty-one and lived outside Boston. He had spent most of his career advising apparel companies on product strategy, manufacturing scale, and market positioning, and his website described him as an expert in translating emerging design concepts into commercially viable consumer products.

That phrase bothered me.

Commercially viable.

I returned to the Maison Sloane invoices and opened the earliest billing detail. Most entries remained generic, but one line from March 2019 read:

Review emerging niche compression solutions for mainstream adaptation

I stared at it long enough for Serena to notice.

“That is interesting.”

“Interesting is not enough.”

“No, but it is a beginning.”

I opened every Voss invoice we had.

The phrase did not appear again, which made the single reference more intriguing rather than less. We needed underlying communications, project codes, or some internal record connecting his work to Maison Sloane’s disputed design process.

Benjamin joined us at four and stopped in front of the wall timeline. His eyes moved over the dates, then settled on Voss.

“What changed?”

I pointed to the mentor record. “Northstar technical mentor, then later consultant for Maison Sloane.”

“When did he begin billing them?”

“The first invoice in Maison Sloane’s original production was July 2019.”

“Nadia’s presentation?”

“November 2018.”

He read the line about mainstream adaptation.

Then he looked at me. “Find him.”

“I already did.”

His mouth moved slightly. “Of course.”

I smiled because the old rhythm had returned without erasing what happened between us. That mattered more than I expected.

Graham Voss refused to speak with us voluntarily.

His lawyer sent a two-paragraph email explaining that Mr. Voss had no relevant knowledge and would not participate in informal interviews. Benjamin read the message twice, then leaned back in his chair with an expression that made refusal look like a tactical error.

“No relevant knowledge,” he said. “Remarkably efficient, considering nobody has asked him a question yet.”

I looked up from my notes. “Perhaps he learned from you.”

Benjamin ignored that, although Serena smiled.

Because Voss lived in Massachusetts and had worked through his own consulting company, subpoena strategy required coordination with local counsel. We could seek documents and testimony, but the scope needed to be defensible, which meant attendance at Northstar and a handful of invoices were not enough.

Serena tapped the invoice. “We need a cleaner connection.”

“I know.”

Benjamin looked at me. “What are you thinking?”

The question surprised me because of the tone. He was not asking as a boss testing whether an assistant had completed an assignment; he was asking as lead counsel waiting for analysis from someone whose judgment mattered.

I turned the invoice toward him. “The billing descriptions are vague, but payments may connect to specific cost centers or internal project codes. If Maison Sloane had a development project related to the S-Curve architecture, Voss’s invoices might have been allocated to it.”

Benjamin leaned closer. “Do we have their complete accounts-payable mapping?”

“Not directly.”

“Then where do you get it?”

I smiled. “Prior production.”

His eyes narrowed with interest.

Maison Sloane had produced finance records months earlier to support damages calculations. Most people had focused on revenue, product profitability, and marketing expenses, but I searched Voss across the entire database and found twenty-six hits.

Then I searched project codes. The early invoices used generic consulting categories. Later ones changed.

Project Helix

I searched Helix. The database returned seventy-three documents. Benjamin moved behind my chair while Serena leaned over the table. I opened the earliest result. An internal budget request appeared.

Helix — next-generation contour architecture

Serena exhaled. “There it is.”

I checked the dates and felt my pulse accelerate. Project Helix began six months after Nadia’s Northstar presentation, and Graham Voss’s invoices were allocated directly to it.

Not all of them.

Enough.

Benjamin said, “Pull every Helix document and prioritize communications with Harlan.”

“I am already doing it.”

His hand briefly touched the back of my chair, and although he did not touch me, I noticed. We worked until midnight. The invoices gave us a connection, but the communications created a larger problem.

Maison Sloane had produced many Helix records, yet several referenced attachments, workshops, or meetings that did not appear in the database. Some might have been privileged, while others looked simply absent.

I built another chart.

Benjamin did not complain.

At one twenty in the morning, I found a calendar entry:

Helix workshop — G. Voss / R. Harlan / Product Innovation

The description included:

Review niche architecture examples

I looked across the conference room, where Benjamin was reading another production set. “I need a moment.”

His head lifted, and I rotated the screen toward him.

He came over, read the entry, then looked at the timeline. “Still not enough.”

“I know.” I smiled because the phrase no longer felt dismissive. “You taught me something.”

“That is unfortunate.”

The next morning, the subpoena went out.

Graham Voss’s lawyer objected, then negotiated, then produced.

The first production contained invoices, calendars, and selected correspondence. I reviewed it with Serena and found very little until a filename pattern caught my attention.

Several invoices referred to project codes that did not match names in Maison Sloane’s production. One February 2019 invoice included a suffix:

VF-ARCH

I stared at the letters. VF could mean anything. VeraForm could mean exactly one thing. I searched the Voss production and found three hits. One was the invoice, another was a calendar entry, and the third was an email attachment log without the underlying attachment.

I opened the email.

Sender: Graham Voss.

Recipient: Rebecca Harlan.

Date: February 6, 2019.

Subject:

Architecture notes

The body read:

Attached are the observations from the niche-category review. I still think the lower diagonal approach is the most transferable concept, but it needs repositioning.

My hands went cold.

Serena read over my shoulder. "That is a problem for them."

"We need the attachment."

"Yes."

The attachment was missing, but the email record preserved its old name:

VF_ARCH_notes.docx

I stood and went directly to Benjamin's office.

He was meeting with two associates, but one look at my face made him stop the discussion. I placed the printout on his desk and waited while he read. Then he dismissed everyone else.

When the door closed, he looked at me. "VF."

"Yes."

"Could mean anything."

“Yes.”

“Lower diagonal approach.”

“Yes.”

“Transferable concept.”

“Yes.”

Benjamin read the email again. “You found this in Voss’s production.”

“I did.”

His eyes returned to mine. “Good.”

Months earlier, that one word could have sustained me through an entire afternoon. Now I folded my arms and waited.

“That is all?”

Benjamin’s expression changed.

Then he smiled. Actually smiled. The effect transformed his face enough that I almost forgot the case.

“Excellent.”

My chest tightened. “Better.”

We moved for the attachment.

The missing file changed the discovery fight.

Maison Sloane insisted it had never received it. Voss’s counsel initially claimed the document no longer existed, but our forensic consultant identified a backup reference that eventually led to an old consulting archive.

The recovered file did not contain a direct copy of VeraForm’s prototype, which would have made the case easier. Instead, it contained observations from the Northstar showcase, descriptions of several startups, and one section referencing Nadia’s company by its original name.

The notes discussed lower abdominal redirection, diagonal tension, altered hip proportion, market limitations, and trans-specific fit requirements. Near the end of the section, one sentence stood out:

Strong architecture. Current positioning too narrow for mainstream adoption.

I read it three times.

Benjamin stood beside me while Serena opened the metadata report.

Nobody needed to explain why it mattered.

I scrolled further.

At the bottom of the document, a later-added comment appeared under Rebecca Harlan's name:

Can we make this commercially acceptable for the broader market?

The room went still.

Serena spoke first. "That is extremely bad."

Benjamin corrected her quietly. "For them."

I stared at the comment because the evidence was not an automatic victory. It did not prove Maison Sloane copied every disputed design, establish that VeraForm owned all diagonal compression concepts, or erase the complicated problem involving Molly Chen's personal email.

But it devastated Maison Sloane's clean story of independent development. Their executive had seen Nadia's work. Their consultant had documented it. The consultant later joined a Maison Sloane development project.

The executive asked whether the architecture could be adapted for a broader market. Then Maison Sloane built the chronology it now claimed VeraForm had copied.

Benjamin looked at me differently. Not the way he looked when he wanted a document or needed someone to fix a timeline. His expression held recognition.

“Walk me through it.”

I blinked. “You just read it.”

“I want your analysis.”

The distinction moved through me.

I stood and went to the whiteboard.

Then I explained the Northstar attendance, Harlan connection, Voss relationship, invoices, Project Helix, missing attachment, and chronology. Benjamin listened without interrupting until I finished, then asked three questions.

All good ones. I answered two.

On the third, I said, “I do not know yet.”

He nodded. “Find out.”

I smiled. There he was. But the words no longer felt like dismissal. They felt like trust.

Chapter Eighteen



I decided what to wear to federal court at two seventeen in the morning, which was not ideal but seemed appropriate for a life increasingly organized around poor sleep and consequential clothing.

The hearing had been scheduled for weeks, but its importance changed after the Voss production. Maison Sloane's motion for expanded forensic discovery remained pending, and VeraForm had filed a targeted response challenging the plaintiff's chronology and the provenance of several key materials. Benjamin also intended to argue that the Northstar evidence justified additional focused discovery into Maison Sloane's own development process. By then, VeraForm had also asserted counterclaims arising from Maison Sloane's alleged use of its development information and from representations that no longer matched the record emerging in discovery.

I was not counsel. I would not argue. I did not need to attend. That was precisely why the decision belonged entirely to me.

My bed was covered in clothes. The dark women's jeans looked too casual, the burgundy dress felt too personal, and a skirt suit I had ordered online made me look as though I had borrowed someone else's idea of professionalism.

At two seventeen, I stood in front of the mirror wearing tailored black women's trousers, an ivory silk blouse, and a fitted charcoal blazer.

The trousers sat high enough to define my waist without exaggerating it. I wore light shapewear but no hip padding because I wanted the body in the mirror to feel as close as possible to the one I intended to carry through the courthouse doors.

The low heels were black.

My jewelry consisted of small silver earrings and a thin watch.

Makeup remained understated enough for court: foundation, concealer, brows, mascara, and muted lip color. The wig had become easier to style, and I wore it tucked behind one ear in a way that made me look less like someone dressing for transformation and more like someone who simply had a morning routine.

I looked professional. I looked feminine. I looked terrified. I slept three hours.

The next morning, I stood outside Hilton Pierce for almost five minutes while people entered around me. Lawyers carried briefcases, assistants balanced coffees, and clients checked phones without noticing that the building had become a psychological border crossing for one exhausted paralegal from Brooklyn.

I nearly went home.

Then my phone buzzed.

Serena.

Where are you? We leave in twenty.

I typed:

Downstairs.

Her reply arrived immediately.

Then come upstairs. I need the exhibit index.

I laughed because she had accidentally given me exactly what I needed.

The elevator ride took less than a minute, which was still long enough to reconsider everything. When the doors opened, Olivia looked up from reception and her eyes widened.

I stopped.

She recovered almost instantly. "Morning. Benjamin has already asked for you twice."

My throat tightened. "Morning."

That was it. No interrogation. No speech. I walked farther inside.

Two associates noticed. One looked away too quickly, another smiled, and the office continued functioning. Then Serena appeared from the conference room carrying three folders.

She saw me and stopped for a fraction of a second before her expression shifted into assessment rather than surprise. Her gaze moved over the trousers, blouse, blazer, and shoes, then returned to my face.

"Good," she said. "You are here, and I need the exhibit index before Benjamin develops a personality emergency."

I stared. "Good?"

"Yes. Also, your left earring is slightly crooked."

I touched it automatically.

Serena stepped closer, adjusted the earring, and handed me one of the folders. "Better. Now explain why Exhibit 42 appears twice."

Emotion pressed unexpectedly behind my eyes.

"Thank you."

"You can thank me by correcting the index."

There was the gift. Normality. Work.

I followed her toward the conference room. Then Benjamin came out of his office. He stopped. The entire floor seemed to narrow around the distance between us.

His gaze moved over me once, slowly enough that I felt the reaction from across the room. He took in the hair, blouse, fitted blazer, trousers, and heels before returning to my face.

Then he looked at the clock.

“You are late.”

I almost laughed. “By thirty seconds.”

“Unacceptable.”

The normal rhythm survived.

That mattered more than praise.

I walked toward him. “Good morning to you too.”

His gaze stayed on my face. “Good morning.”

The softness beneath the words belonged only to us.

We left for the courthouse at nine.

The case was in federal court in lower Manhattan, and the drive downtown gave me enough time to become increasingly convinced that I had made a terrible mistake. I sat beside Serena while Benjamin sat across from us reviewing argument notes.

Every time the car stopped, I considered leaving.

Serena noticed because my knee would not stay still. “You are bouncing.”

I forced my leg to stop. “Sorry.”

“I do not care.”

Benjamin looked up from the file.

I looked away.

Serena continued. “You know nobody at the courthouse is thinking about you as much as you are.”

“That is statistically comforting.”

“It is also true.”

Benjamin closed the file. "Claire will notice."

My stomach tightened.

Serena glared at him. "Excellent contribution."

He ignored her and looked at me. "I am telling you because pretending otherwise would be insulting."

That was fair.

"What do I do?"

Benjamin's expression changed. "Whatever you want."

The answer returned me to Brooklyn.

Then I won't decide for you.

I nodded.

The car continued downtown.

Later, the courthouse steps nearly defeated me. People moved everywhere: attorneys carrying boxes, reporters checking microphones, tourists taking photographs, security officers directing traffic, and members of the public entering through different doors.

I stood beside the car with my bag over one shoulder and felt the entire city become an audience.

Benjamin waited several feet away without rushing me.

Serena adjusted her coat. "We are going to be late."

I looked at her.

She smiled slightly. "By more than thirty seconds."

I laughed. Then I walked.

Every step toward the entrance felt visible, but I kept moving. The heels sounded against stone, my blouse shifted beneath the blazer, and the perfume at my wrist remained faint enough that only I could smell it.

At security, the officer looked at my identification. My New York ID still said Aaron Manning. The photograph looked masculine. My stomach dropped. The officer compared the picture with my face. I prepared for a question.

He handed the card back. "Have a good day."

My knees nearly failed.

"Thank you."

We entered.

Claire Whitmore saw me outside the courtroom. She stood with two Maison Sloane attorneys near a marble wall, wearing a navy suit and reading from a tablet. Her hair was pulled into a low knot, and she looked exactly like someone who had never accidentally smeared eyeliner across half her face.

Her eyes lifted.

Recognition took a second.

Then another.

She looked at me.

I stopped.

Benjamin remained beside me.

Claire's expression changed almost imperceptibly before she walked over.

"Mr. Hilton."

"Claire."

Her eyes moved to me.

I waited.

“Mr. Manning.”

The title landed strangely but not cruelly.

I nodded. “Ms. Whitmore.”

Her gaze moved over my clothes, then returned to my face. For one terrible second, I expected a question.

Instead, she said, “Your metadata letter was irritating.”

I blinked. “Thank you?”

“I did not mean it as praise.”

Benjamin said, “He accepts compliments badly.”

Claire looked at him, then at me. I decided before anyone else could.

“I am trying Ari privately.”

The words came quietly.

Claire’s expression remained professional. “All right.”

That was it.

She glanced toward the courtroom. “We will see how irritating your position is inside.”

Then she walked away.

I exhaled.

Benjamin looked at me. “You told her.”

“I know.”

“Are you all right?”

“No.”

His mouth softened. “Good answer.”

I almost smiled.

The hearing lasted three hours. I sat in the gallery directly behind counsel table with Serena beside me while Benjamin argued first. He was different in court.

The anger disappeared because everything sharpened into purpose. Maison Sloane had built its motion around alleged gaps in VeraForm's historical development records and the February email from Molly Chen's personal account.

Benjamin began by acknowledging what we did not know.

That surprised the judge.

Then he attacked what Maison Sloane claimed to know.

"The plaintiff asks the Court to infer access and copying from an email attachment it has not authenticated as the attachment transmitted on the date shown."

Claire objected to the characterization. The judge asked for the record. Benjamin had it. My record. The MIME filename. The hash mismatch. The creation date. The later appearance of the version-seven PDF.

He moved through the chronology without exaggeration, which made the argument stronger because he did not ask the court to believe more than the evidence supported.

Then came Northstar.

Maison Sloane had repeatedly argued that VeraForm's founders gained access to mainstream design concepts and adapted them. Benjamin turned the argument around by showing that before the plaintiff's disputed architecture entered documented development, its own senior innovation executive had attended a presentation by VeraForm's predecessor.

Claire stood. Benjamin continued. The judge asked for dates, and he had them.

The judge asked for documentary support, and Benjamin cited the archived annual report, accelerator records, consultant invoices, Project Helix allocations, and recovered Voss notes.

I sat behind him and watched my work become argument. Not all mine. Never all mine. But enough.

Every archive search, invoice, strange project code, and connection I refused to dismiss as a tangent appeared in the structure of his presentation.

Claire responded well because of course she did. She argued that attendance did not prove copying, consultant observations were not proprietary admissions, and the phrase *broader market* could refer to market strategy rather than technical appropriation.

She was right about those limits, which was precisely why the case remained a case rather than becoming a simple morality play. Even so, Maison Sloane's clean chronology had cracked, and the judge began asking difficult questions about the relationship among Northstar, Voss, Harlan, and Project Helix.

Benjamin answered each one carefully.

At one point, Claire referenced Maison Sloane's 2021 development history, and I saw the inconsistency immediately because her timeline treated the later architecture phase as though Project Helix had no relevance.

I wrote on a legal pad:

Ask whether Helix budget predates claimed architecture freeze. Voss allocation begins 2019. Their chronology skips internal project.

I passed the note to Serena, who read it before leaning forward and handing it to Benjamin. He glanced at the page, then briefly at me, before turning back toward the judge.

"Your Honor, one additional point on chronology."

My pulse accelerated.

Benjamin dismantled the gap without theatrics. Maison Sloane claimed a clean line of internal development beginning later, while its own finance records showed an earlier predecessor project connected to the consultant who had documented VeraForm's architecture.

Claire stood and responded. Benjamin answered. The judge took the matter under advisement. The hearing ended. Outside the courtroom, my body started shaking only after the danger had passed.

Serena noticed and touched my arm lightly. "You okay?"

"Yes."

"That was not convincing."

"I am alive."

"Better."

Claire passed with her team, then stopped and looked at me.

"Good catch on Helix."

I stared because praise from opposing counsel felt almost more destabilizing than criticism.

She continued, "I still think your conclusion is wrong, but the gap is real."

I nodded. "Thank you."

Claire looked at Benjamin. "You are making him unbearable."

Benjamin replied, "He arrived that way."

She left.

I laughed, then realized Benjamin was watching me.

"What?"

He gathered his papers before answering. "You should be sitting at counsel table as an attorney."

The words hit the old wound so quickly that I almost lost my breath. BarMax. The score. The lie to my mother. Nine months of pretending I had postponed the exam. I looked away.

Benjamin continued more carefully. "Not because of today alone."

I swallowed.

He did not soften the truth into something easier. "You should take it again."

The sentence had changed since the first time he said it.

Then, it had sounded like a command from a man who believed failure could be corrected by force.

Now, after watching him use my work in court, it sounded like recognition.

I looked at the courtroom doors, then at the legal pad in my hand. "I am scared."

Benjamin nodded. "I know."

"What if I fail again?"

"Then you decide what comes next."

I looked at him because there was no order in the answer.

No certainty. My choice.

Serena called from several feet away. "The car is waiting."

I wiped carefully at the corner of one eye before any makeup could move, and Benjamin noticed without commenting. We walked toward the elevators together. For the first time, I did not feel like the person carrying the lawyer's files. I felt like someone on the way to becoming one.

Chapter Nineteen



The case reached trial four months after the hearing, which was both faster than I expected and slow enough for my life to become almost unrecognizable between one court appearance and the next. The judge narrowed several claims during pretrial motions, Maison Sloane abandoned one damages theory it could no longer support, and VeraForm's counterclaims survived long enough to become genuinely dangerous. What remained was still substantial: allegations that VeraForm had copied protected design elements and trade dress, accusations that its campaign had improperly borrowed from Maison Sloane's visual identity, and a competing record suggesting Maison Sloane had encountered VeraForm's early architecture years before the chronology described in its complaint.

By then, I no longer wore the wig every day because my own hair had grown enough to style into a soft, layered cut that brushed the top of my neck. The change was modest compared with everything else, but it mattered to me precisely because it was mine. I had also registered for the next New York bar examination, although I had told only Serena and Nadia because announcing it to Benjamin felt too much like placing a live explosive on his desk.

The morning Rebecca Harlan took the stand, I arrived at the courthouse wearing a charcoal skirt suit, an ivory blouse, and the same black heels I had once considered dangerously feminine because they were two inches high. Months earlier, I had needed almost an entire night to decide whether I could enter a courthouse dressed as myself. Now the fear remained, but it had changed from a wall into weather. I could move through it.

Serena sat beside me in the trial-team row directly behind counsel table, surrounded by exhibit binders, laptops, and the elaborate system of tabs I had designed because Benjamin's idea of organization still relied too heavily on other

people anticipating his needs. He had objected to my system exactly once, then used it for three weeks without apology.

“You are checking the same folder again,” Serena murmured as the courtroom deputy called the morning session to order. She kept her eyes forward while speaking, which gave the observation the dignity of professional concern rather than personal criticism.

“I am verifying.”

“You verified two minutes ago.”

“I am verifying the verification.”

Serena’s mouth moved slightly. “You have become him.”

I looked toward counsel table, where Benjamin was arranging a yellow legal pad beside the witness outline. “That is the cruelest thing you have ever said to me.”

He turned his head at exactly that moment, as though arrogance had developed auditory range.

I immediately looked down at my laptop.

Rebecca Harlan entered with Maison Sloane’s trial team and took a seat behind Claire Whitmore. She was fifty-one, silver-blond, elegantly dressed, and so controlled that I understood why the company had trusted her with strategic product development. Months of discovery had given me access to thousands of her emails, calendar entries, approvals, and comments, yet the person walking into court looked almost nothing like the executive assembled from search results and document hits.

Claire called her shortly after ten.

The direct examination lasted almost two hours.

She was good.

That was the problem.

Harlan described Maison Sloane's development process as methodical and independent. She spoke about consumer research, iterative fit testing, market pressure, and the company's long history of working with compression architecture. When Claire asked about Northstar, Harlan did not deny attending.

"I attended many industry events during that period," she said. Her tone remained calm enough that the jury could reasonably believe the answer was boring.

Claire stood several feet from the witness box. "Do you recall receiving confidential VeraForm design materials at the Northstar showcase?"

"No, I do not."

"Did Ms. Vale provide you with proprietary technical drawings?"

"No."

"Did you copy a VeraForm prototype?"

"Absolutely not."

Claire moved to the next subject without hesitation.

I watched Benjamin write something.

Harlan explained that Graham Voss had been one of several outside consultants used by Maison Sloane and that his work involved broad market analysis rather than appropriation of competitor designs. She described Project Helix as an exploratory initiative that preceded the final S-Curve program but insisted the company's disputed architecture arose from its own internal work.

Then Claire asked about the campaign.

Maison Sloane had alleged that VeraForm copied the visual identity of its silver-mirror campaign, including reflective surfaces, body-focused framing, and a model whose styling supposedly evoked Maison Sloane's lead campaign figure. Harlan testified that the similarity had concerned her immediately because Maison Sloane had invested heavily in developing a recognizable visual language.

Claire displayed the campaign images side by side.

From a distance, the argument looked better than I wanted it to. Silver garments. Mirrored backgrounds. Similar poses. The jury watched.

I felt my stomach tighten. Claire finished shortly before lunch. The judge called a recess. Benjamin remained at counsel table while the courtroom emptied around him. I approached only after most of the jury had gone.

“How bad?” I asked.

He looked at the witness outline. “She is credible.”

“That is not what I asked.”

“It is the relevant answer.”

I folded my arms. “You enjoy making comfort impossible.”

“Comfort is rarely useful at trial.”

Serena joined us carrying two binders. “The good news is that Rebecca gave us three clean denials.”

Benjamin nodded. “Meaningful access, technical use, and campaign derivation.”

I looked toward the witness box. “She also made Project Helix sound like a brainstorming club.”

“That is why we have invoices.”

“And Voss.”

“And Harlan’s comment.”

Benjamin’s gaze moved briefly to mine. “And whatever else you notice.”

The sentence landed differently now.

Months earlier, I might have survived an entire day on it.

Now I simply nodded.

“Try not to waste the opportunity.”

His mouth shifted. “There she is.”

Serena looked between us. “I regret knowing both of you.”

Benjamin began cross-examination after lunch.

I had watched him prepare for it for weeks and still was not ready for the difference between preparation and execution.

He did not begin with Northstar.

That surprised Harlan.

It surprised me too.

He started with Maison Sloane’s corporate structure, her authority, and the extent of her control over strategic product development. His tone remained courteous while he established that she supervised teams, approved consultants, reviewed market research, and participated in decisions regarding emerging product architecture.

He asked short, disciplined questions, each one narrowing the witness’s room to maneuver until every answer closed another possible escape. Each one closed a door.

“You had authority to retain outside consultants?”

“Yes.”

“You approved work performed by Graham Voss?”

“Some of it.”

“You reviewed his strategic recommendations?”

“At times.”

“You were assigned to Project Helix?”

“Yes.”

“You attended Northstar in 2018?”

“Yes.”

Benjamin walked toward the evidence screen. “Let us talk about that.”

The archived annual report appeared.

He established the date. The attendee list. Her title. Then he displayed a photograph from the showcase.

Nadia stood beside an early prototype board. Harlan sat in the second row.

Benjamin asked, “That is you?”

“Yes.”

“You were present during Ms. Vale’s presentation?”

“I was present at the event.”

“That was not my question.”

Claire stood. “Argumentative.”

The judge looked at Benjamin. “Counsel.”

He nodded once. “Ms. Harlan, did you attend Ms. Vale’s presentation?”

Harlan paused.

“Yes.”

I felt the courtroom change slightly.

Benjamin did not celebrate the admission. He moved forward as though he had expected nothing else.

He displayed Graham Voss’s mentor listing and asked whether she knew him at Northstar. Harlan said she remembered meeting several consultants but could not specifically recall the first time she encountered Voss.

Benjamin showed the Maison Sloane invoice.

Then another.

Then the Project Helix allocation.

His voice never rose.

That was what made him frightening.

“You hired Mr. Voss after Northstar?”

“Maison Sloane retained his company.”

“You approved his work?”

“Some work.”

“His invoices were allocated to Project Helix?”

“Some were.”

“Project Helix concerned contour architecture?”

“It concerned a broad range of concepts.”

“Including compression architecture?”

“Yes.”

“Then let us look at one of Mr. Voss’s notes.”

The recovered document appeared.

I watched Harlan’s face.

She remained composed.

Benjamin moved through foundation questions first because the exhibit had already been admitted after days of pretrial fighting. He established the archive, Voss’s production, the date, and the references to Nadia’s predecessor company.

Then he enlarged the sentence:

Strong architecture. Current positioning too narrow for mainstream adoption.

Benjamin turned toward the witness. "You received this document?"

Harlan looked at the screen. "I would need to see the full chain."

"You have seen the full chain in discovery."

"I do not remember every document."

Benjamin nodded. "Of course."

He moved to the later comment.

Can we make this commercially acceptable for the broader market?

The courtroom became quieter.

Benjamin asked, "Those are your words?"

Harlan looked at the exhibit. "They appear to be."

"Appear to be?"

"I do not specifically remember typing the comment."

"Do you deny typing it?"

"No."

Benjamin stepped closer to the witness box, although he remained several feet away. "You attended a presentation by VeraForm's predecessor, received notes from a Northstar mentor discussing its architecture, asked whether that architecture could be made commercially acceptable for a broader market, and later supervised a Maison Sloane project involving contour architecture. Is that your testimony?"

Claire stood immediately. "Compound and argumentative."

The judge sustained the objection. Benjamin did not react. He separated the questions. Harlan admitted attendance. She admitted receiving Voss's work in the ordinary course of her responsibilities. She admitted the comment was associated

with her account. She admitted involvement in Project Helix. Then she denied the conclusion.

“We did not copy VeraForm,” she said. “The industry uses common engineering approaches, and the company’s later products came from extensive internal development.”

Benjamin looked almost bored. I knew better. He moved to the timeline. The Helix budget. The consultant invoices. The internal architecture workshop. The later S-Curve records.

He built the chronology one date at a time until the jury could see the gap Maison Sloane had spent months describing as independent development.

Harlan survived.

Barely.

Then Benjamin changed subjects.

“Ms. Harlan, you testified on direct examination that you did not have meaningful access to VeraForm’s prototype architecture.”

“That is correct.”

“You said the Northstar presentation did not provide technical materials.”

“That is correct.”

“You also said Mr. Voss’s work involved general market analysis.”

“Yes.”

Benjamin displayed a development email.

“Do you recognize the phrase ‘lower diagonal transfer architecture’?”

My attention sharpened.

Harlan looked at the screen. “It is one of many descriptions used during development.”

Benjamin nodded. “Was that phrase proprietary to Maison Sloane?”

“I would not characterize it that way.”

“Did you use it before Project Helix?”

“I do not know.”

Something bothered me.

Not the answer.

The phrase.

Lower diagonal transfer architecture.

I had seen similar language. I searched my notes. Then the database. Serena glanced at me. I kept typing. The phrase did not appear in Maison Sloane’s earliest records. I searched VeraForm. Too many hits.

Then I narrowed by date. My breath changed. An unpublished prototype deck from Nadia’s predecessor company used the phrase:

diagonal transfer zone

Not identical. Close. I searched related terminology.

Another slide:

lower diagonal transfer path

My pulse accelerated. The deck had never been public. At least, that was our position. I opened the access log. The document had been shown at Northstar only in a closed mentor session, not the public showcase.

Graham Voss attended. Rebecca Harlan had denied meaningful access.

I looked at the witness. She was answering another question. Then she said it again.

“Lower diagonal transfer was a concept discussed broadly in the field.”

I froze for only a moment before forcing myself to work.

I pulled the unpublished prototype deck.

Checked the date.

Confirmed the restricted session.

Then I wrote a note:

She used “lower diagonal transfer.” Phrase appears in unpublished VF mentor deck, slide 17: “lower diagonal transfer path.” Not in public materials. Voss attended closed mentor session. Ask source of terminology.

I passed the note to Serena, who read it quickly and looked at me with sudden understanding. She leaned forward, handed it to Benjamin, and returned to her seat without drawing attention.

Benjamin read the note while Harlan answered another question.

His face did not change.

Then he altered course.

“Ms. Harlan, you have now used the phrase ‘lower diagonal transfer’ twice.”

Harlan looked at him. “It is descriptive terminology.”

“Descriptive of what?”

“Compression forces.”

“Where did you learn the phrase?”

Claire stood. “Foundation.”

Benjamin looked toward the judge. “I can establish it.”

The judge nodded. “Proceed.”

Benjamin displayed the VeraForm mentor deck.

Harlan's face changed.

Only slightly.

Enough.

Benjamin asked, "Have you seen this document before?"

"I do not recall."

"This was not a public presentation, was it?"

"I do not know."

Benjamin looked at the jury, then back at the witness. "The deck was presented during a closed Northstar mentor session attended by Graham Voss."

Claire rose again. "Counsel is testifying."

The judge sustained the objection and instructed Benjamin to ask a question.

He did.

"Did Mr. Voss discuss materials from the closed mentor session with you?"

"I do not remember."

"Did he use the phrase 'lower diagonal transfer'?"

"I do not remember."

"Did you?"

"I may have."

"Before Northstar?"

"I do not know."

Benjamin displayed Maison Sloane's pre-Northstar development records. No phrase. Then post-Northstar records. The terminology appeared. Not immediately. Gradually.

Harlan's composure began to fracture.

Benjamin's voice remained calm.

"You told this jury you had no meaningful access to VeraForm's prototype architecture."

"That is correct."

"You attended the presentation."

"Yes."

"Your consultant attended the closed mentor session."

"I cannot speak to everything Mr. Voss attended."

"You received his notes."

"Yes."

"You commented on commercializing the architecture for a broader market."

"I commented on market positioning."

"You later used terminology appearing in a nonpublic VeraForm deck."

"I said the terminology was descriptive."

Benjamin paused.

Then he asked the question that turned the case.

"If the terminology was merely descriptive and broadly used, Ms. Harlan, can you identify a single Maison Sloane document using it before the Northstar session?"

Harlan opened her mouth.

Nothing came.

The silence lasted perhaps three seconds.

It felt like a minute.

“I would need to review the records.”

Benjamin nodded. “You have had months to review them.”

Claire stood. “Argumentative.”

The judge looked at Benjamin.

He said, “Withdrawn.”

But it was already done.

The jury had seen the hesitation. Benjamin returned to counsel table. He did not look at me immediately. Then, while organizing his papers, he turned slightly. Our eyes met.

The acknowledgment lasted only a moment, but it contained more than praise. He had trusted the note. He had changed course. And the witness had broken.

The likeness claim began collapsing before the day ended.

The turning point came from evidence Claire herself introduced while attempting to rehabilitate Harlan. Maison Sloane displayed its campaign-development chronology, including mood boards and internal creative approvals intended to prove the silver-mirror concept predated VeraForm’s campaign.

I recognized one of the dates.

So did Serena.

The supposedly early Maison Sloane board had been assembled after VeraForm’s creative agency circulated a private preliminary deck to a shared industry production vendor. That alone did not prove access, but the timeline was no longer what Maison Sloane had represented.

Then VeraForm’s earlier boards came in.

They showed mirrored surfaces.

Silver fabric.

Body-focused framing.

Months before Maison Sloane's final campaign concept.

The model-likeness allegation weakened too because the supposedly copied styling elements had originated in VeraForm's own casting and creative notes. Hair, jewelry, and pose references appeared in dated boards preceding Maison Sloane's campaign.

Claire requested a sidebar. The attorneys approached the bench. I could not hear everything. I saw enough.

Claire looked at Harlan. Harlan would not meet her eyes. The expression on Claire's face changed. Not dramatically. She simply understood. When the sidebar ended, Claire did something I respected more than any courtroom performance I had seen from her.

She stopped protecting the part of the story she could no longer defend.

Her next questions became narrower. She did not repeat the exaggerated chronology, did not ask Harlan to reaffirm claims contradicted by the record, and did not attempt to turn uncertainty into certainty.

At the end of the day, the jury left.

The courtroom emptied slowly.

Claire approached counsel table while Benjamin gathered his notes.

"You found the terminology," she said.

He looked toward me.

I stood behind Serena.

Claire followed his gaze.

Her expression settled on me.

"I should have noticed it."

I swallowed. "There were thousands of pages."

"That is not a defense I allow other people."

I almost smiled.

Claire looked back at Benjamin. "We need to talk before tomorrow."

He nodded. "About settlement?"

"About whether my client has told me the truth."

The words changed everything.

She walked away.

Benjamin remained still for several seconds.

Then he turned toward me.

I expected praise.

Instead, he asked, "When did you see it?"

"The second time she used the phrase."

"You checked the deck from memory?"

"I remembered the language."

His expression became unreadable.

I folded my arms. "What?"

Benjamin walked closer but stopped at a professional distance because we were still in court.

"You should be terrifying people from counsel table."

My throat tightened.

I looked down at the legal pad in my hand.

“You already told me that.”

“I was right then too.”

“That must be comforting.”

“It usually is.”

I smiled. Then the courtroom deputy reminded us that the building was closing. Benjamin collected his files. I picked up mine. For years, I had watched him become the most dangerous person in a room by noticing exactly where a witness's story weakened.

That afternoon, I had given him the question. And for the first time, I understood that the legal mind he believed in was not some future version of me waiting beyond the bar exam. She was already here.

Chapter Twenty



The trial continued for two more days. The remaining witnesses added detail but did not restore Maison Sloane's damaged chronology, and by the time Benjamin and Claire delivered closing arguments, the case no longer resembled the one described in the original complaint. The jury began deliberating that afternoon and returned three days later. By then, everyone had stopped pretending to work normally. Hilton Pierce became a collection of people opening email without reading it, carrying coffee they forgot to drink, and checking phones whenever the courtroom clerk's number appeared. Nadia spent most of the morning at the office because she said waiting alone at VeraForm would turn her into a felony.

At 11:27, the call came. The jury had reached a verdict. We were downtown within forty minutes.

I wore the charcoal trousers, ivory blouse, and fitted blazer from my first public court appearance because I had become superstitious enough to believe clothing could influence federal litigation. My hands shook in the car, so Serena gave me a binder to hold.

"You know this does not require review," I said.

"I know."

"You are using office supplies as emotional regulation."

"I learned from you."

Across from us, Benjamin looked toward the window.

I watched him.

He appeared calm.

That meant nothing.

His thumb tapped once against the edge of his legal pad every several seconds.

I smiled slightly.

He noticed.

“What?”

“You are nervous.”

“No.”

I looked at his hand.

He stopped tapping.

Serena laughed.

Benjamin glared at both of us. “This team has become unmanageable.”

“You built it,” I said.

“That is my greatest professional regret.”

The courthouse appeared through the windshield.

Nobody laughed after that.

The courtroom filled quickly.

Nadia sat behind us with Leila and VeraForm’s general counsel. Maison Sloane’s team entered from the opposite aisle, and Claire gave Benjamin a brief nod before taking her seat.

Rebecca Harlan was not there.

I noticed.

So did Nadia.

The judge entered. Everyone stood. My pulse became so loud that I barely heard the first instructions. The jury filed in. The foreperson held the verdict form.

I gripped the edge of the bench. The clerk began reading.

On Maison Sloane's principal design-infringement theory, the jury found insufficient proof that VeraForm had unlawfully copied protected elements rather than independently developing functionally driven architecture.

My breath stopped. Nadia made a sound behind me. The clerk continued. On the principal trade-dress claim, the jury found for VeraForm. On the campaign-misappropriation theory, the jury rejected Maison Sloane's claim. On the remaining narrow claim concerning one disputed product presentation, the jury found partial overlap but awarded no substantial damages because Maison Sloane had not proven the causal and ownership theories it presented.

Then came the questions related to VeraForm's counterclaims.

The jury found that Maison Sloane had made certain materially misleading representations during the dispute and that evidence existed supporting improper use of VeraForm-derived market and development information, although remaining equitable issues would require further court proceedings.

The legal language continued. I barely heard it. VeraForm had survived. More than survived. The central accusation that threatened the company had failed. The judge thanked the jury. People began moving. Nadia stood. I turned. She covered her mouth with one hand. Then she grabbed me. The hug nearly knocked the binder from my arms.

"We won," she whispered.

I laughed because I could not speak.

Behind her, Leila was crying openly.

Serena embraced me next.

Then everyone seemed to move at once.

Benjamin remained at counsel table.

I looked at him. He looked back. No smile. Not immediately. Then his face changed.

The expression was small, exhausted, and real.

I crossed the distance.

He said, "Do not kiss me in federal court."

I stopped. "I was going to congratulate you."

"You were moving suspiciously."

"You think very highly of yourself."

"I have evidence."

I laughed.

Then I hugged him.

That surprised him.

His arms came around me a second later. Brief. Careful. Enough.

The courtroom continued around us. For once, I did not care who saw. The public win changed the settlement posture immediately.

Maison Sloane still faced VeraForm's surviving counterclaims, the unresolved consequences of the Voss evidence, and the possibility of additional findings regarding discovery representations. Claire requested a conference before the court could schedule the next stage.

Negotiations lasted nine days.

I knew only part of what happened because Benjamin correctly refused to discuss every privileged detail outside the formal team, which I considered progress.

The final settlement was confidential.

The public terms were not.

Maison Sloane abandoned the remaining claims, withdrew several contested assertions, and agreed to a public statement clarifying that the trial had not established copying by VeraForm. The financial terms remained sealed, but Nadia's reaction after signing told me enough.

She entered Conference Room A holding a bottle of champagne and announced, "Nobody is allowed to bill the next thirty minutes."

Benjamin looked horrified.

"That is not how time works."

"Today it is."

The entire VeraForm team gathered. Olivia found glasses. Someone ordered food. Nadia stood at the head of the table with champagne in one hand. I remained near Serena because celebration still made me uncomfortable when I did not know where to put my hands.

Nadia raised her glass.

"I am supposed to thank counsel first."

Benjamin nodded. "Correct."

She looked at him. "I have changed my mind."

Everyone laughed.

Benjamin looked offended.

Nadia continued. "I want to thank the person who found the first date discrepancy, the accelerator connection, the consultant trail, the Helix project code, the attachment mismatch, and the phrase that changed the cross-examination."

My face heated.

People turned toward me.

I looked at the floor.

Nadia said, “Ari Manning.”

The name entered the room publicly. Not everyone had used it yet. Some people knew. Some did not. Nobody interrupted. My eyes burned.

Nadia raised her glass toward me. “VeraForm exists after this case because a very stubborn woman refused to accept a bad chronology.”

I laughed through the pressure in my throat. “That is not legally precise.”

Benjamin said, “She has been spending too much time with me.”

Nadia looked at him. “That is your fault.”

The room laughed again.

I lifted my glass.

For once, I let people look.

Benjamin offered me a promotion the following Monday.

Naturally, he did it badly.

I was at my desk reviewing a new commercial dispute when he appeared beside me and placed a folder on the keyboard.

“Read this.”

I looked up. “Good morning.”

“Good morning. Read this.”

“Your interpersonal growth has plateaued.”

“Manning.”

I opened the folder.

The first page contained a proposed title:

Director of Litigation Strategy and Senior Paralegal Operations

I read it twice.

The next pages described responsibilities involving case chronology systems, discovery strategy coordination, litigation analytics, team supervision, and cross-matter research support. The salary increase was substantial enough that I stopped reading.

I closed the folder.

“No.”

Benjamin’s expression hardened. “You have not finished.”

“I do not need to.”

“You should.”

“This looks like you are rewarding your girlfriend after a big case.”

His face changed.

Good.

“I am not.”

“Then the timing is terrible.”

“The timing is dictated by annual compensation review.”

“You kissed me before changing my reporting structure and now you are handing me a promotion.”

“I did not approve your compensation alone.”

“That does not fix the appearance.”

Benjamin folded his arms. “Read the folder.”

“I read enough.”

“No, you reacted enough.”

My anger rose. “Do not turn this into an argument I lose because you prepared documents.”

His jaw tightened. “The documents matter.”

“Of course you think that.”

I stood.

Several people nearby became very interested in their screens.

Benjamin lowered his voice. “Conference room.”

I laughed. “Absolutely not.”

“Ari.”

That stopped me.

He used the name publicly now only when he knew I was comfortable.

His expression remained hard, but not angry.

“Read the dates.”

I looked at the folder again. Then I opened it. The proposal memorandum was dated before our reconciliation. Before the trial. Before the verdict. I kept reading.

The initial performance recommendation had been submitted by the managing partner and Serena. The salary band matched a firmwide role classification. The responsibilities were tied to work I had already performed across multiple matters, not only VeraForm.

Partner approval appeared at the bottom. Dated before Benjamin apologized in Brooklyn.

I looked up. He waited. I turned another page.

There was a performance summary. Specific. Detailed. My work on three unrelated cases. Systems I built. Issues I caught. Associates I trained. Client feedback. Nothing about our relationship.

I sat down.

Benjamin said, "You were being underpaid for the work you were already doing."

I looked at him.

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"And you let it happen?"

His expression became cautious. "That is not the direction I expected."

I laughed despite myself.

Benjamin continued. "The promotion process began before the case ended. I removed myself from final compensation approval after the reporting change."

I looked at the folder.

Then at him.

"I still hate the title."

His brows lifted. "Why?"

"It sounds like I supervise robots."

"We can revise it."

"Really?"

"No."

I glared.

He almost smiled.

I returned to the memorandum.

The salary increase remained obscene.

I said, "I need time."

"Take it."

"That was suspiciously reasonable."

"I am learning."

I closed the folder.

Then I looked at him. "There is something you should know."

His expression sharpened immediately. "What?"

I enjoyed the fear for half a second.

"I registered."

"For what?"

I smiled.

Benjamin understood.

His face changed.

"The bar."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Three weeks ago."

"You did not tell me."

"I am telling you now."

He stared at me.

I prepared for congratulations.

Instead, he said, "Good."

I laughed so loudly that Olivia looked over.

Benjamin frowned. "What?"

"Nothing."

"That is not nothing."

I stood and kissed his cheek before he could object.

Then I whispered, "That word used to ruin my entire day."

His expression softened.

"Now?"

"Now it is acceptable."

"High praise."

"I learned from you."

We walked near Central Park that evening.

The weather had turned cold enough for coats but not snow, and the city moved around us in the strange ordinary way it always did after something enormous happened. Taxis passed, runners ignored traffic signals, and someone sold roasted nuts from a cart as though a jury had not recently determined the future of a company I cared about.

I wore the dark women's jeans, low heels, a fitted sweater, and the perfume I once walked away from before returning twenty minutes later.

My own hair moved in the wind. No wig. No disguise.

Benjamin walked beside me carrying nothing because apparently victory had not convinced him to hold his own files permanently.

He said, "Come home with me."

I looked at him. "Was that a request?"

“No.”

I stopped walking. Benjamin took three more steps before noticing. He turned. I folded my arms. He stared at me. I waited.

“Ari.”

“Yes?”

His jaw tightened because he understood the trap and hated that he had built it himself.

I smiled. “You wanted something?”

Benjamin looked toward the sky as though requesting patience from a God he had never previously consulted.

Then he faced me again.

“Will you come home with me?”

I considered making him suffer longer.

The old Aaron would have obeyed.

The newer version of me enjoyed options.

I stepped closer.

“Yes.”

Benjamin’s hand settled at my back. We continued walking. Central Park opened beside us, dark trees against the city lights. I thought of the first box. The first bodysuit. The first time I stood in front of a mirror and felt quieter without understanding why.

I was not finished.

I had no idea whether I wanted hormones, surgery, legal changes, or any of the other decisions people treated as proof that a transgender life had become real. I knew only that I had started telling more people the name Ari, had registered for

the bar, and no longer changed into masculine clothes merely because I stepped outside.

The uncertainty remained.

So did the woman carrying it.

Benjamin looked at me. "You are smiling."

"I know."

"Why?"

I considered the question.

Then I took his hand.

"Nothing."

He frowned. "That word again."

I laughed and pulled him toward the next block.

For once, I let him wonder.

Epilogue



One year later, I woke in Brooklyn with Benjamin's arm across my waist and the New York bar-results portal scheduled to open in twenty-three minutes. This was not how I had planned the morning.

For one thing, Benjamin was supposed to be in Manhattan. We still maintained separate homes because I had refused to let falling in love become a real-estate merger, although he kept enough clothes in my apartment to undermine the distinction and I spent enough nights at his place for his doorman to greet me by name.

For another, I had intended to check the result alone.

That plan had failed the night before when Benjamin arrived at my apartment with an overnight bag, coffee, and enough food to suggest he expected a siege.

Now he slept beside me because we had spent the night arguing about whether refreshing the result page every seven minutes could influence the outcome.

I looked at the clock.

Twenty-one minutes.

My hair had grown past my shoulders over the previous year, although I wore it shorter around the face because the stylist Nadia recommended claimed I had spent too long hiding behind hair and refused to assist further. The wig still existed in a box at the back of my closet, carefully stored rather than discarded because I could not bring myself to throw away the first feminine face I had recognized.

My wardrobe had changed more than my apartment.

Dresses hung beside suits.

Women's trousers occupied half the closet.

The old T-shirts remained because transition had not suddenly made laundry glamorous.

Six months earlier, after several appointments and more uncertainty than any online story had prepared me for, I had begun working with a doctor on a medically supervised transition plan that included hormone therapy. The decision had been mine, slow and private at first, and I had discovered that beginning treatment did not produce immediate certainty or transform fear into wisdom.

It simply felt right enough to continue. My body had changed subtly. My skin felt different. My face had softened in ways I noticed more in photographs than mirrors. There were mornings when the changes delighted me and others when I panicked because time had become visible on my body.

Benjamin never told me what I should do. That remained one of the most important things he had learned. I looked at the clock again. Nineteen minutes. His arm tightened around me.

"You are awake," he murmured.

"So are you."

"No."

"You spoke."

"I can do that asleep."

"You probably argue motions unconscious."

Benjamin opened one eye. "What time?"

"Too early."

He reached for the phone.

I grabbed it first.

“No.”

“Ari.”

“You said you would not check.”

“I said I would not refresh.”

“That distinction is fraudulent.”

He sat up.

His hair looked terrible.

I loved this more than I should have.

Benjamin looked at the clock.

“Seventeen minutes.”

“I know.”

“You are breathing strangely.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you want coffee?”

“No.”

“You always want coffee.”

“I want a different life.”

“That seems disproportionate.”

I laughed despite myself.

Benjamin got out of bed and walked toward the kitchen in sweatpants and an old shirt he claimed he had not deliberately left at my apartment.

I watched him go. Then I opened the results portal. Sixteen minutes early. Nothing. Of course. I closed it. Opened it again. Still nothing. My stomach hurt. I got out of bed.

The apartment looked different in morning light than it had during the first year of my transformation. The bar books still occupied a shelf, but the stack had multiplied. Flashcards sat in boxes labeled by subject. Practice essays remained in a folder thick enough to stop a door.

I had studied for six months. Not perfectly. Not bravely. I had cried over practice scores. Skipped weekends. Fought with Benjamin when he attempted to optimize my study schedule. Threatened to ban him from Brooklyn after he created a spreadsheet comparing my weak subject areas. Then I used the spreadsheet. I hated that part.

The portal refreshed. My heart stopped. A result appeared. For several seconds, I could not understand the screen because my eyes found words without meaning.

Then one word separated itself from everything else.

PASS

I sat down. The chair caught me because I had not consciously decided to move. Benjamin entered from the kitchen carrying coffee. He saw my face. The cup stopped halfway to the table.

“Ari?”

I looked at him. No sound came. His expression changed. He put the coffee down and came closer.

“What happened?”

I turned the laptop.

Benjamin read the screen. Then he looked at me. I started crying. Not beautifully. There was no single tear. My face collapsed, and I covered it with both hands while every month of fear arrived at once.

Benjamin knelt beside the chair. He did not say *I told you so*. That may have been the greatest proof of love I ever received. I lowered my hands.

"I passed."

His eyes looked different.

"I know."

"I passed."

"Yes."

"I actually passed."

Benjamin pulled me into his arms. I cried against his shoulder.

For years, I had imagined that passing would erase the first failure. It did not. The old score remained. The lie to my mother remained. The shame remained part of my history.

Passing did something better. It made the failure survivable. I told my mother first. That conversation lasted forty minutes. I finally admitted everything about the first exam, including the lie, and she became angry in exactly the wrong order.

"You told me you postponed?"

"Yes."

"For a year?"

"Yes."

"You let me tell people you were too busy?"

"I know."

"Ari Manning."

I froze.

She had been trying the name for several months. Sometimes awkwardly. Sometimes perfectly. Hearing it while being scolded nearly made me laugh.

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

Then her voice broke.

“I’m proud of you.”

I cried again. The morning became structurally unsound.

Six weeks later, after character and fitness, paperwork, formal admission steps, and a ceremony that made me more emotional than I intended, I walked into Hilton Pierce as an attorney.

Not senior litigation paralegal. Not director of strategy. Attorney.

I had accepted the promotion months earlier with a revised title after three meetings and one argument about why the word *operations* made me sound like a warehouse. The firm then amended the role again after I passed, creating a path for me to transition into an associate position while preserving the litigation-strategy responsibilities I had built.

I wore a navy suit. Women’s cut. Silk blouse. Low heels. My own hair. The office looked ordinary. That was suspicious. Olivia greeted me too brightly. Serena did not look up when I passed.

Benjamin’s door was closed. I stopped near my desk.

“Why is everyone weird?”

Nobody answered.

I narrowed my eyes.

“Serena.”

She continued typing. “Busy.”

“You are terrible at this.”

“At what?”

“Whatever this is.”

The conference-room doors opened.

Everyone was inside.

I stared.

Serena stood and took my arm.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I hate office surprises.”

“I know.”

“This is harassment.”

“File a complaint.”

She pulled me toward the room. The team applauded. I stopped. My throat tightened instantly. Nadia stood near the back with Leila. Olivia had champagne. The managing partner held a small plaque.

Benjamin stood beside the conference table with an expression that suggested none of this had been his idea. That meant it absolutely had.

I looked at him.

“You did this.”

“No.”

Everyone laughed.

The managing partner cleared his throat and gave a short speech about my work, the bar, and my admission. I heard perhaps half. Then he turned the plaque.

ARI MANNING, ESQ.

I covered my mouth.

Serena whispered, “Do not ruin your mascara.”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

Benjamin watched me. His eyes softened. For once, he did not hide it. VeraForm sent the box that afternoon.

Of course. It arrived on a cart. Not a normal box. An enormous one. Olivia wheeled it into the conference room. Benjamin looked at it. Then at me. My stomach dropped.

“No.”

He folded his arms. “Take it home.”

Everyone laughed.

I pointed at him. “Absolutely not.”

“That was not a request.”

The callback hit me so hard that I laughed before I could stop.

Nadia appeared on video call from the screen.

“I have waited a year for this.”

I looked at her. “You planned this?”

“Obviously.”

I opened the box. Inside were products from VeraForm’s new collection. Shapewear. Lingerie. A bodysuit. Sleepwear. Several pieces designed around

different stages of transition and body shape. On top sat an envelope. My name was written across it.

Ari

I opened the card.

Inside, Nadia had written:

For the girl who finally ran out of excuses.

My eyes burned.

I looked at the screen.

“You are horrible.”

Nadia smiled. “And expensive.”

Benjamin picked up one of the packages.

I slapped his hand.

“Evidence.”

“It is retail.”

“Chain of custody.”

“You are no longer funny.”

“I am an attorney now. My humor is billable.”

The room laughed. For once, I joined without wondering whether anyone was looking at me differently. They were. Of course they were. I was different. That no longer meant wrong.

That evening, I went home with Benjamin. His home. Not because he ordered me. Mostly.

The VeraForm box sat in the bedroom because he had insisted on transporting it and then complained about the size for the entire drive. I opened it after dinner.

Benjamin remained near the windows reading an email. I chose the bodysuit. Black. Of course. The design reminded me of the first one without copying it exactly. More refined structure, softer edges, subtle shaping through the waist and lower torso. I took it into the bathroom.

Then I stopped.

For years, doors had mattered. Bathroom doors. Bedroom doors. Apartment doors. Closet doors. Everything feminine happened behind one.

I looked toward Benjamin. He had returned to the email. I smiled. Then I changed without closing the door. The bodysuit slid upward more easily than the first had. I remembered fighting with fabric in my Brooklyn apartment, nearly falling into a table, and telling an empty room that shapewear was medical.

I adjusted the straps. The garment settled. My waist looked different. My body looked different too. A year of choices had changed it. Not into perfection. Into mine. I stepped out.

Benjamin looked up. Then he stopped. The reaction remained. I loved that.

“Language problem?” I asked.

His eyes moved over me. “Possibly.”

I walked closer.

“You have had a year.”

“I am still evaluating.”

“That excuse is old.”

He set the phone down.

I stopped in front of him.

Benjamin placed both hands at my waist.

The same place he had touched the hidden shapewear beneath my office shirt.

This time, nothing was hidden.

His thumbs moved slowly over the fabric.

I looked at him.

“Do you remember the first one?”

“Yes.”

“You pretended not to notice.”

“I failed.”

“You stared.”

“I was evaluating.”

I laughed.

Benjamin kissed my waist through the fabric.

The callback struck so deeply that I closed my eyes.

His voice was quiet.

“Still yes?”

I touched his hair.

“Yes.”

He stood.

The kiss that followed was warm, familiar, and still capable of making every rational thought leave the room. His hands remained at my waist while I moved closer, no longer ashamed of what shaped me beneath them.

Eventually, he pulled back.

“Ari.”

I looked at him. There it was. The name. Mine.

For a long time, I had believed Benjamin started everything by ordering me to carry a box home. That story was easier because it gave me someone to blame for the lingerie in my drawers, the dresses in my closet, the perfume on my wrists, the name on my office door, and the woman staring back at me from the mirror.

The truth was less dramatic and much harder to escape. Benjamin had not made me into anyone. Neither had Nadia. Neither had VeraForm. They had only made it impossible for me to keep looking away.

Benjamin touched my face.

“Ari?”

I smiled.

Then I answered.

“Yes.”

Acknowledgments



To my readers, especially those who have stayed with my stories through every transformation, every impossible romance, every pair of heels, every secret dress, and every character who insisted they were “definitely not a woman” for approximately three chapters longer than anyone believed them, thank you. You have allowed me to keep writing about femininity, gender discovery, trans love, crossdressing, becoming, and all the strange, tender places where identity and desire meet.

I am especially grateful to the readers who have trusted me with pieces of their own lives. Over the years, some of you have told me that a story made you feel less alone, gave you language for something you had been hiding, or simply let you imagine a version of yourself who could be loved without first becoming easier to explain. I never take that trust lightly. These books may be romantic, funny, dramatic, sensual, and occasionally ridiculous, but the emotions beneath them are real to many people, including me.

Thank you as well to everyone who continues supporting trans-centered romance and stories where femininity is not treated as punishment, humiliation, or a tragic ending. I believe transformation can be joyful. I believe softness can be powerful. I believe a person can discover herself at any age, in any order, and with far more confusion than a perfect inspirational quote would ever admit.

Most of all, thank you for reading *Always Girly*. Ari’s story means a great deal to me, and I am very happy she found her way to you.

Lilly

About The Author



Lilly Lustwood is a transgender author known for romance and transformation fiction centered on femininity, gender discovery, crossdressing, transgender lives, and the complicated joy of becoming more honestly yourself.

Her stories often follow characters who begin with certainty about who they are, only to discover that certainty can become surprisingly fragile around the right person, the right dress, or one extremely inconvenient mirror. Blending romance, humor, emotional transformation, sensuality, and unapologetically feminine fantasy, Lilly writes for readers who believe becoming yourself can be tender, messy, frightening, funny, and deeply romantic.

Beyond her books, Lilly is the founder of Find Femboys, an online community created for femboys, crossdressers, transgender women, gender-nonconforming people, and the people who admire and support them.

She enjoys connecting directly with her readers through social media pages, WordPress blog, and newsletter, where she shares updates, new releases, and more of the world behind her books.

Also by Lilly



More romance, femininity, transformation, and gender discovery from Lilly
Lustwood:

Too Pretty to Be a Guy

Woke Up Super Girly

Crossdressing in the Backroom

The Femme Contract

The Night I Became a Girl

Not Another Gender Swap