

Chapter One

“You’re breaking up with me? Now?” I need this like a hole in the head with the stress I’m under at work, and Andy knows it. “Great. Nice timing.”

“With all the fights you’ve been picking lately, I can’t see why you’d care.”

And people say women are over-dramatic. “What fights? Come on, so we don’t agree every second of every—”

“Valerie, yesterday you got angry when I put too much cheese on your salad.”

I push myself off his leather couch and loom over him. “Do you know how many calories are in—”

He gets up as I speak, dislodging his black kitten Burgess. Ignoring the meow of annoyance as the tiny beast springs to the floor, he says, “And Friday you corrected me when I called you my girlfriend to my coworkers when we saw them at the bar, and we had the whole ‘I moved your work papers off the coffee table and you lost your mind’ episode on Wednesday, and then last week you—”

“I get the hint.” I could remind him I’m not keen on the term ‘girlfriend’ at my age, and I could justify all the other stuff too, but there’s no point because I know what this is really about. He asked me last weekend whether I planned to have kids, because he wants them soon, and I told him I’d be a terrible mother. Which I would. Which he should have known. So now he’s getting rid of me to find someone who won’t mess up such an important task. “You want to break up. Fine. Two months down the drain. Don’t blame it on me.”

“Actually, I don’t want to break up. I didn’t, anyhow, until the last week or two. I thought we were doing great. But—”

“*We were* doing great.”

“Really.” Andy gives me that assessing look he does so well. Must go over a treat when he’s cross-examining witnesses. “What exactly was so great? What did you like about being with me?”

Well, he’s a great kisser and great in bed, both of which I appreciate, and he knows how to get excellent theatre tickets. Plus, his condo is on a more direct subway route to my office, so staying with him during the week saves me a good ten minutes being stuffed into various Manhattan subway stations and trains like an elegantly dressed sardine in overcrowded body-odor-filled tins. His place is also nicer than mine and overlooks Central Park while mine’s on the wrong side of my building for a view. And his doormen call me “Ms. Malloy” instead of “Valerie” like the ones at my place, and I approve of the formality.

But I have a feeling none of this is what he means. He wants butterflies and rainbows, and I don’t have any to give. “Never mind. Not like it’ll make a difference. And you’re dumping me tonight?”

“What’s wrong with tonight?”

“It’s Sunday so I work tomo...”

I trail off, realizing he knows exactly what’s wrong with tonight. He knows, but he wanted me to say it. Well, I won’t give him the satisfaction.

Not that it matters, because he spells it out anyhow. “And you’ll have to rework your schedule, is that right? Tell me, did you ever care about me at all? Or just about what living here and being with me gets you?”

“Don’t act like I’ve been sponging off you,” I snap. “You know I haven’t. But if being with you made my life easier, what’s so bad about that?”

He presses his hand to his chest and gives an annoying fake sigh. “Ah, romance. Valerie, you’re... if I found out you’re a robot I wouldn’t be surprised. You won’t even lose a minute’s sleep tonight, will you? Us breaking up means nothing to you. Do you care about anyone? I mean, care about *them*, not how they fit into your plans?”

“Of course,” I say, knowing what he’ll ask next and trying to find an answer.

Sure enough, he says, “Who? Name me three... hell, name me one person you actually care about.”

People flash before my eyes. My parents, with whom I’ve had only one phone call while I’ve been with Andy. My sister Gloria, to whom I haven’t spoken at all in those months. The new receptionist at work, whose name I can’t remember. And...

“Jaimi,” I say with triumph.

Andy gives a harsh chuckle. “The one you’re mentoring at work? You honestly think you care about her other than how helping her makes you look? You think you’re friends?”

I don’t. She’s a sweet kid, which will be her downfall since the business world doesn’t exactly reward sweetness, but working with her feels more like training a puppy than having a true friend.

I don’t want true friends anyhow, or closeness with people. Sex, definitely. Someone to go to a play or a bar with, sure. But connecting with other people so I actually need them? Why put myself, or them, at risk like that?

“I’d have thought you’d name Mara,” he says, giving me a look full of what seems like pity though I don’t know why he’d feel that for me. “Don’t you consider her a friend?”

Since my former coworker got engaged a year ago her fiancé has taken up most of her time and I’ve been too busy at work to claim much of the rest, but I won’t admit I haven’t really missed her. “Thought it was too obvious to bother stating. I *am* her maid of honor, so of course we’re friends.”

He grimaces. “I didn’t think of... will you be okay still being in the wedding party with me?”

I shrug. “I’m paired up with Tim, not you, so whatever.” I’d been disappointed at first, since Andy and I had met through our mutual involvement in the wedding and I’d thought it’d be fun to walk back up the aisle with him instead of the best man, but now it’s good news.

“Yeah, but...”

“But nothing. It’s fine. You want out, so be it. I’ll go pack.”

I turn away from Andy, not wanting to look at him for another second, and head across the hardwood toward the bedroom. After dodging Burgess,

as I've had to do constantly in the two weeks since Andy acquired the cute but aggravating creature, I open the drawers Andy allotted me and begin collecting my perfectly folded things and stacking them in my bag.

He follows me in. "Valerie... people need people, you know, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's okay to care about people, to let them in. It's okay to admit you're sad, or scared, or that you care."

I don't bother responding. Obviously it's okay. I just don't need to.

Once I've gathered everything that's mine, I start my usual exit routine of skimming my eyes over the room to ensure that nothing is out of place then make myself stop. I don't have to do this here. This place isn't my concern any more.

Moving on to the bathroom, I empty my shelves in the medicine cabinet, checking that my nail polish bottles are tightly closed before tucking them into my bag. As I pack, I notice I've chipped my thumb nail and aggravation fills me. I'd usually repair it immediately to avoid having to know it's not right, but if I do that I'll have to keep listening to my now-ex talk like he's on an after-school special. I don't like either option, but getting out of here wins by a narrow margin.

When I turn to leave the bathroom after again stopping myself from checking for tidiness, Andy steps aside to let me out. I go by without a word, heading for the condo's front door, and behind me I hear him clear his throat. Then he says, "You're thirty-four, Valerie. It's been nearly twenty years. It was an accident. I know you'll never forget, but... isn't it maybe time to move on, time to let him go?"

I spin around and glare at him, instantly furious despite his gentle tone. I'd never have told him about the life-shattering mistake I made twenty years ago if he hadn't seen my shock when he wanted to name his stupid kitten Anthony, and now he's using my past against me? "How dare you? That's got nothing to do with— I'm letting *you* go, for sure now, if that's what you mean."

"It's not, and you know it. But I understand. I wish we could have made it work, you know, but..." Andy sighs. "I don't think you do. I don't think you ever really cared about me. Did you?"

HOLDING OUT FOR A ZERO

As answer, I pull his condo keys off my ring and drop them on the floor, then stalk out.

I haul my bags into my building and across the lobby's marble floor toward the elevators, waving off the doorman as he offers to help because I don't feel like having a conversation with him. Answering the few questions the taxi driver forced upon me was bad enough. I don't understand small talk, strangers trying to connect with me. They don't care about me and I don't care about them and that's how it's supposed to be.

I much prefer the subway, since not talking to people is the expected behavior there, but since Andy and I live on opposite sides of Central Park the taxi had been a better option than my other choices of waiting for a bus across the Park, walking the same route in the dark carrying all my stuff, or a convoluted set of subway transfers. At one point I thought it was cute that we both had 86th Street stops, albeit on different lines, as our closest subway stations, but now that feels stupid.

I feel stupid. I keep getting into relationships with men who push me away after a few months, and I should know better by now.

As I ride up in the elevator to the ninth floor, I promise myself I won't try again. Flings, fine, but nothing serious. I don't want that anyhow, so why do I keep letting it get started? New York is supposed to be full of men who won't commit. Time to start finding them.

I unlock both locks on my apartment door then step inside and breathe in the aggressively fresh scent of the disinfectant my cleaners use. Excellent. That smell means home to me, and I like it. Even though it's probably poisoning the air around me.

I go downstairs to the bedroom and office level and poison the air even more in the perfectly cleaned bathroom by filling in the chip on my nail then giving it an overall coat of polish followed by quick-dry topcoat. My manicurist will do a better job tomorrow, but I can't go to work with a chipped nail. Or stay home tonight with one either.

Using only my left hand until I'm sure the nail is dry, I begin unpacking

my clean stuff and putting it away. Once my work clothes are hanging by color and style on their well-spaced wooden hangers and my jeans and t-shirts are back in their perfect color-order stacks and I've put my color-ordered bras and underwear in the appropriate drawers, I sort everything that needs to be washed or dry-cleaned into the correct hamper then replace my toiletries on the bathroom shelves.

The process of getting my world back in order calms me, and so does my apartment itself. When I bought the place the master bedroom was painted a deep emerald green but I quickly had that redone in a soothing silver gray, and the rest of the jewel-toned paint and carpet the previous owner had inflicted on the cute duplex went out too in favor of calm quiet choices on the walls and rich oak flooring, so now the whole place acts like Valium on my nerves.

Not that I know how Valium feels first-hand. I've never taken any of that stuff, and I might be the only fashion-industry employee who's never had therapy either. My parents don't believe in that sort of thing and I don't either.

But being in my home, in the peaceful place I've created for myself to block out the noise and agitation of the city, makes me feel good. At least, it does until I go to pull a fresh towel from the linen shelf and knock the spare fitted bedsheet to the floor undoing the precise fold the laundry service gave it. I don't have their knack, but I can't put it back only half folded either, so I fight with it for a few minutes until I manage to make it look right again.

Once order has been restored, I go to my home office in the second bedroom and fire up my laptop. As it boots, I enter the cost of the taxi ride into my phone's budget app, noting as I do that with Friday's payroll deposit I've managed to get my savings back above three months' salary after my last shoe-shopping spree, then redownload the calorie counting app I used to use. I'll weigh myself tomorrow morning but I know I've gone up, and I can't let that continue. Not when my job security depends on my size.

Once the computer's ready for me I get into my planning documents and my task list and set to work getting my next week organized. I skim through my 'areas of chaos' list, and take pleasure in drawing an electronic line through

Andy's name, in knowing I'm one step closer to having nothing in my life unmastered, but seeing George Slattery as the last remaining item on the list wipes the smile from my face.

How that man got to be chief financial officer I cannot understand, and how he keeps the job... I have to assume he's got pictures of all the board members in a group orgy or something. He changes his mind on policy as often as I change nail polish, which leaves me as financial controller looking stupid on a regular basis, and he takes so long to approve departmental budgets that this year we almost didn't get our February Fashion Week ads out on time. I was sure that mess would get him fired, but no luck. He's still around, still making my life miserable.

I would be so much better as CFO.

I *will* be so much better.

In two years.

I glare at his name on my screen, wishing he were sixty-five already, then take a few deep breaths to calm myself. In two years he'll have to retire, and in one year I will start planning to ensure I replace him when that happens. That's all I can do.

Once I've gone through my weekly planning checklist so I know exactly what I will accomplish each day this week, I delete Andy's numbers from my phone and unfriend him on all social networks, wondering as I do how people managed to get closure before the Internet.

Not that I need any. We had some fun and now it's over. I'm hardly devastated enough to need closure. Or at all.

I shut down the computer and look around to make sure everything is neat and tidy. The cleaners appear to have moved the peppermint candle I keep on the corner of the desk a little closer to the middle, and I sigh and move it back. I keep asking them not to shift anything but they don't seem to be able to remember what goes where. Peppermint is energizing so I burn the candle when I have a lot of work to do at home, but repositioning the stupid thing all the time is the opposite of energizing.

After another room check, which now doesn't find anything out of place, I return to my bathroom to prepare for bed. Makeup off and a facial massage

with cleansing oil, then foaming cleanser, toner, serum, moisturizer, and eye cream. Leave-in conditioner brushed through my hair and left to dry. Floss, brush, rinse with mouthwash, put on moisturizing lip balm. Hands and feet slathered with rich night cream and slipped into cotton gloves and socks. It takes about thirty minutes, and halfway through I find myself exhausted, but I keep going and eventually finish the routine and get everything I've used put away so the bathroom is perfectly ordered again.

Then I pad to the bedroom, slip between the cool cotton sheets the cleaning service changed for me, and review tomorrow's task list in my mind until I fall asleep.

Chapter Two

As Andy predicted I sleep well, and when my phone's alarm wakes me the next morning I wonder why he thought I wouldn't. Nobody likes being dumped, obviously, but we hadn't been more than a diversion to each other so losing him doesn't much matter.

What does matter is when I step onto my bathroom scale for the first time in a month and almost pass out.

One hundred and twenty-seven pounds? No wonder I've been feeling squished in my work clothes.

If I don't fix this right now I won't even need my work clothes. Elle Warhol, my hugely successful designer boss, has made a career of never making a dress larger than a size six and since she requires her female staff to wear her clothes our office is full of skinny women. I'm usually a four, which makes me one of the biggest employees, and now I'm more like a six. If I gain even a few more pounds, I'll be pushed out of my job. It won't be the official reason, of course, but everyone will know the truth. I've seen it happen to others and I can't let it happen to me. George Slattery aside, I love my job and I'm perfect for it.

I shower and blow-dry my hair to sleek glossy perfection over my shoulders and moisturize my body and do my morning skin-care and my makeup, then after putting on my bra and underwear and wriggling into my Spanx I go to my closet and run a doubtful eye along my dresses and jackets and skirts.

Which of you, I ask them silently, will allow my bulk into you today?

None of them seem likely to comply, but the third thing I try on, a size six short-sleeved navy dress I bought with my first paycheck from Elle to remind me never to get bigger than a six, looks sleek enough over my Spanx so I decide it'll have to do although I'd far rather be in a four. After adding my favorite classic silver hoop earrings and matching necklace I scan my neatly racked work shoes before choosing the leopard-print pumps Elle complimented last week. They're only three inch heels, which still leaves me one inch shorter than my 5'8" boss, but at least I'll be close to looking her in the eye if I see her today.

Which, frankly, I hope I do not. Not until I've lost some weight.

I leave the room once I've checked that it's spotless, pick up my touch-up nail polish in case I chip again and the materials I need for Mara's wedding-food tasting later today, and go upstairs to pack my work bag and head out.

I check each pocket of the bag, and though I'm worried about my extra pounds I have to smile when everything is exactly where it's supposed to be: the paperwork I finished on Saturday in its folder, my three pens clipped to their spot on the inside flap, my office ID card in the front left pocket, my wallet in the middle one, and my subway MetroCard in the right one. I don't remember transferring those last two things from my purse when I got home yesterday, but apparently I did, and I love that I'm organized even when I don't realize I am.

I wish, as I stand on the crowded platform waiting for the subway, that the transit system were half as organized. As always, it seems to take forever for my train to arrive, then another forever once I reach Grand Central to wait for the 7 shuttle across to Times Square, and then several forevers to make my way down Seventh Avenue through the crowds of tourists to the office. For the first time I really do regret letting Andy dump me; it was so much easier to get to work from his place.

While I stand at my smoothie shop watching my second-favorite breakfast smoothie being prepared since they're out of strawberries for my favorite orange-strawberry-banana one, I pull out my phone and begin entering its ingredients into my diet app as they're dropped into the blender. One banana, one cup pineapple, one cup spinach, one cup kale, half a cup mango, half a

cup pineapple juice. I'm fast with the app, after years of practice, so I have it all entered and a total of 343 calories calculated by the time the worker, a new one as far as I can tell, pours the drink into its cup.

"Here you go," she says, holding it out to me.

My eyes flick to the blender, which still holds some smoothie. An incalculable amount of smoothie. "I need all of it, please."

"All? But..." She looks down the shop, clearly trying to get help, but every other worker is distracted by the morning rush.

"Yes," I say firmly, waving my phone at her. "I tracked it all, so I need it all. In a second cup, please."

She frowns at me, then at the cup, then back at me. "But..."

"It's fine, they always do it," I say, though they don't. I've usually not worried about the extra bits, but inaccurate tracking is part of how I got to be so overweight so I will be completely accurate from now on. I should have known better than to slack off at all, but Andy and his relaxed attitude toward life were a bad influence on me. I glance behind me at the waiting line. "Besides, you'd just have to throw it out anyhow. Right?"

She nods slowly, also looking at the crowd behind me, then her hand shoots out and she grabs a second cup.

Out on the street, a smoothie in each hand, I have a moment of feeling guilty for harassing the new employee, but it passes quickly. I was right that she would just have to throw out the leftovers, and this way I will drink them and maybe even not need lunch later as a result.

A win-win.

I drink the smaller smoothie on the sidewalk a few doors down from my building, not wanting my coworkers to see me with two breakfasts and snicker to each other about my weight, then take the other one inside. A woman I don't know stands in the lobby frantically digging through her bag, no doubt seeking her ID card for the turnstile, and I feel safe and secure as I easily pluck my card from its assigned place and stride past her.

I have to wait a bit for an elevator, because I haven't trusted the first one

since it malfunctioned a year ago and trapped our former receptionist for an hour, but I do arrive at the fourth floor on time, where I find half my coworkers half-dressed.

“Already?” I look around at the clothes Elle must have sent, trying to hide my horror. I can’t take part in our monthly fashion show for her at this weight. “It isn’t Friday.”

Our advertising manager and payroll specialist pull their own dresses back on and depart each clutching a new one, and Jaimi peeks around a corner. “Yeah, but... hold on a sec.” She disappears, then reappears wearing a sleek kelly green sheath dress that fits like it was designed for her alone. The receptionist oohs at her, and she smiles with more happiness than the small compliment seems to deserve and says, “Great color, isn’t it?”

It is. And it’s also at least a size smaller than I could wear today, probably two. “That green is different,” I say, not able to bring myself to compliment my tiny pretty protégée. “Didn’t her last email talk about a leaf green?”

Jaimi nods. “But she decided she didn’t like it so she’s trying other greens. That’s why the stuff’s here early,” she says, turning from side to side before the full-length mirror I was surprised to see in our common area during my interview four years ago. “She wants to test them on us before she announces them next Monday. I do like this one, though.” She points at the closet by the mirror. “Go check out the rest.”

Holding the smoothie cup in one hand I search the closet, in vain, for a size six, then take a stunning red skirt and jacket in a four that I hope I’ll be able to squeeze into to my office. By leaving the skirt zipper mostly down I manage it, then suck in my gut hard as Jaimi opens my door a crack and says, “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” I say without releasing my stomach muscles, and she slips that perfect body into my office and closes the door behind her.

“Nice suit! That red with your dark hair is awesome. I wish I weren’t a blonde.”

I don’t believe that for a second, but I can’t find a comeback before she goes on with, “Have you heard?”

I shake my head. “Just got here, you know that. Heard what?”

She blinks. “I guess I thought they’d call you at home but— never mind. Anyhow, there’s a company-wide email from Elle saying George Slattery is retiring.”

My turn to blink. I spoke to George the useless chief financial officer last week and he didn’t say anything about leaving early.

“Wants to spend more time with his family, apparently, so they’re looking for his successor. You have to apply by May 8th, and by the end of the month they’ll decide who goes on to do a ‘where I see the company going’ presentation for Elle and the board sometime in June.”

Two weeks to have my application perfect. Not a ton of time depending on what it requires, especially with my maid-of-honor duties, but doable. I take a breath to thank her for the heads-up then she clears her throat and says nervously, “I’m going to start preparing my presentation at lunch,” and the words freeze in my throat.

“Yours?”

She nods, and that bright happiness I saw in her earlier reappears and wipes away most of the nervousness. “I know, it’s earlier than we planned for me to get promoted—”

“By about ten years,” I put in, shocked that she’d think she has a chance.

“—but I just have to go for it.” She gives me a grin and an embarrassed shrug. “I might not get it, probably won’t actually, but it’s too good an opportunity to pass up.”

Probably won’t? More like definitely won’t, because I will. Jaimi’s come a long way in the two years I’ve been mentoring her at Elle’s request, moving from the receptionist pool to financial controller, but I’m still ahead of her. True, she’s younger and prettier and thinner, but I have experience she can only dream of and I *will* get the promotion. Unlike her, I’ll follow my plan, and this is the perfect time for me to move up.

A tap on my door ends our conversation, which is good because I can feel Jaimi expecting me to wish her good luck but I can’t find the words to lie like that, and that receptionist whose name I can’t remember sticks her head into my office. “Ms. Malloy? Ms. Phillips? I’m off to get coffee. Would you like anything?”

“Skinny latte please.” Feeling the waistband of the skirt digging into me, I add, “Just a small, okay? And make sure it’s skinny. Watch them make it. Sometimes they screw around.”

“Got it,” she says. “Anything to eat?”

I shake my head and point to my fruit smoothie. “I’m good.”

She nods and turns to Jaimi.

“First off, Andrea, I keep telling you it’s Jaimi not Ms. Phillips,” Jaimi says, smiling. “And I’d love a skinny latte too. Elle topped up that payment card, right? I’d hate for you to get dinged for it like last time.”

Andrea grins back. “She did, but thanks.”

They leave, and I close the door behind them and thankfully get out of my too-tight suit and back into my dress even though I’ll have to change back when Elle comes down to see us, thinking as I do that Jaimi is too nice for her own good. No need to be cruel to the staff, of course, and you can even gift them occasionally, like Elle, who makes up for barely-adequate-in-Manhattan salaries with free clothes and caffeine. But being friends is a mistake. As bitter experience has taught me, getting too close to people is never a good idea.

Elle arrives about an hour later, and when I hear her low but commanding voice in our common area I cram myself back into the red suit then walk out to see her because I know I have to.

Her sharp green eyes take me in with one quick scan then she says, “Valerie, doesn’t Jaimi look nice?”

Jaimi, almost vibrating with excitement, says, “Aw, thank you. It’s the dress.”

“Nonsense.” Elle tweaks the dress’s hem then catches the side seams at the waist and pulls it tighter. “If anything, it’s making you look bad. Should be more fitted. And I don’t think this green is quite right. But you’re making it work somehow.” She fiddles with the dress some more, then says, “You’re aware of the CFO job opening, right?”

I take a breath to answer, but realize just before I speak that she’s actually talking to Jaimi so fortunately do not humiliate myself.

“I am,” Jaimi says, almost in a whisper. Then she clears her throat and adds, “I’ve applied already, and I’ll be starting to work on my presentation today.”

“Excellent. I look forward to reviewing your application.”

She does? Why would she? She asked me just a few weeks ago how Jaimi was doing and I said she had a long way to go to be a great controller, so why would Elle think she’d be ready to be CFO?

“Thank you.” Jaimi does whisper this time, then she gives a squeak of surprise as Elle tightens the dress even more so it matches how her own dress clings to her tiny figure. Though Elle is in her fifties she’s in spectacular shape.

“Yes,” Elle says, studying Jaimi’s waist. “That’s what I want. Sleek and clean and a close fit. I’ll adjust it. Thank you, Jaimi. You’re the perfect Elle Warhol woman.”

Jaimi mumbles something, clearly overwhelmed, and Elle goes on to check how the new clothes fit everyone else. I listen to her criticisms, while the fruit smoothie and latte turn unpleasant somersaults in my grossly oversized belly, until she comes to me.

“Hmm,” she says, like a doctor seeing something horrific on an x-ray. “Hmm. That’s not right, is it?”

I pull in my stomach harder, though it makes me feel even more sick, but she’s actually looking at my arms. “The sleeves are... well, are they too skinny or are you...”

She doesn’t finish, but she doesn’t have to. “I think I’d be more comfortable in a six,” I have to say, though it hurts.

“Comfortable,” she echoes. “Why not buy a muumuu and give up entirely?”

I can’t look at the others. They’re either amused by my embarrassment, which would be awful to see, or feeling sorry for me, which would be worse. I don’t take well to sympathy.

“I’ll fix it,” I say softly, looking up into her cold eyes and wishing I’d worn higher heels so I wouldn’t feel like a child begging for forgiveness. “When we try on clothes for you next month I will be a four again. A four at worst.”

“I hope so,” she says, equally softly. “I’d hate to have doubts about your commitment to your job.”

Chapter Three

I don't eat anything for lunch, of course. The smoothie did fill me up fairly well but even if it hadn't I still wouldn't be able to put food into my mouth knowing how each calorie puts my job more at risk.

Instead, I spend my 'break' on my application for the CFO job. It's pretty simple so I'm able to do it all in one go and send it off. Unlike Jaimi, though, I am not going to start my presentation yet. Once Elle lets me know I've moved on to the next stage I'll give it my full attention, but doing it now before I'm sure it's needed is just tempting fate and I have no interest in doing that. Fate and I have historically not gotten along.

Application complete and submitted, I get back to work but am soon interrupted by a tentative knock on my office door.

"Yes?" I call, annoyed both because of the interruption and because reviewing last month's financial statements, which George has only gotten around to sending to me today even though *this* month is now almost over, makes me crazy since I'd have handled the whole thing so much better if I were CFO.

My door opens a crack. "Valerie?"

"Yes?" I say again, somehow biting back the 'who else would it be?' I so want to say.

The door opens enough that my fellow controller Pilar can peer in. "Are you busy?"

My whole body tightens as fury explodes through me. I hate when people

ask me that. I am always busy. I am defined by being busy. “I am, actually,” I manage to say through the sudden rage. “Is it important?”

“I’ll come back later,” she says, starting to pull the door shut.

“I’ll be busy then too. Might as well tell me now.”

She reappears. “I was just... do you know when I’ll get the March financials for my review?”

George insists that two controllers review everything, which aggravates me because I do not make mistakes and therefore don’t need to have my review checked. I check everything three times myself, and in four years nobody has caught an error I’ve missed. “I just got them today, so tomorrow.”

She licks her lips. “But George wants them back tomorrow.”

“Then you’ll have to work fast, I guess. Not that it matters. You know I won’t miss anything. The second review is pointless.”

“But George—”

“George is retiring,” I say, “and besides—” I cut myself off before I say that I’ll be replacing him. I do think I’m going to get it, but I never jinx myself. I clear my throat. “Besides, I’ll be done faster if you let me work now. So, if there isn’t anything else...”

She shakes her head and starts to withdraw, then raises her chin and says, “Are you applying? For George’s job?”

My job. “Already have.”

She pauses. I let my eyes drift down to the statements, since we’re done here, but they flick back to her when she says, “Me too. May the best woman win, huh?”

“She will,” I say, making myself smile.

Pilar leaves, but I hear her mutter something that sounds like, “Bitch,” as she goes.

I could not possibly care less.

I’ve been called a bitch ever since I got my first real job eighteen years ago, and I’ve long stopped worrying about people who can’t cope with my drive and determination. Not my problem.

What is my problem, unfortunately, is the phone call I need to make. I don’t want to do it so I keep reviewing the statements, but my phone’s

calendar eventually signals that it's time so I sigh, set the papers aside, and hit the speed dial button.

"What's up?"

My sister's breezy tone, as always, sets me on edge. She drifts like dandelion fluff through life, leaving me to handle everything, and I hate it. Aren't firstborns supposed to be the responsible ones, not us middle children?

Am I still the middle child, or did my status change on that day nearly twenty years ago when I messed up putting away a packet of balloons and our little brother Anthony choked to death?

I try to force that thought, the question I've never considered before, away and I do it well enough that I can get out, "It's Valerie."

"Yeah, so call display told me," she says, laughter in her voice. "And so I say again, what's up?"

I can't answer her. Thoughts of Anthony are still overwhelming me. Anthony, and the day he died. The images flash through my mind like the most horrible slideshow ever.

Mom instructing Gloria and me to decorate the living and dining rooms with red balloons and blue streamers while she puts the finishing touches on Anthony's third birthday cake and Dad sets up the obstacle course in the back yard for the party.

Me whining about how Gloria should do the decorating alone so I'd have more time for lunch with my first-ever boyfriend before the party at two.

Gloria refusing, as any big sister would, but racing through the decorating with me while also chatting on the phone making post-party plans, then following me out of the room to get herself a drink.

Me again, up in my bedroom brushing my Rachel-from-'Friends' hair after pulling on the little slip dress my boyfriend loves, my hand freezing when I hear Gloria scream in terror, then scream a second time in pain.

My mom and I arriving in the living room at almost the same time to find Gloria, blood streaming down her cheek, pulling herself from the wreckage of the glass curio cabinet she'd fallen into and gasping, "Anthony!"

Anthony, the half-empty packet of balloons I'd been using on the carpet beside him, clutching his throat and gasping too as he—

“Valerie?”

The one thing I can never, never, see in those images is me putting that packet of balloons away properly. I meant to put it on the fireplace mantel, I did, but I was rushing because my mind was off with my boyfriend and the kisses I knew he’d give me. I was careless, I left the balloons in Anthony’s reach, and my baby brother—

“Hey, are you still there?”

I clear my throat, then dig my nails into my palm until the pain forces away the awful memories. I usually only let myself, make myself, remember once a year, on the anniversary of Anthony’s death, but talking to Andy about naming that stupid kitten has stirred everything up too soon. I clear my throat again. “Yeah, I’m here. Sorry. Just— never mind. Look, it’s Mom and Dad’s anniversary at the end of May, and we need to plan their party.”

A pause. “Really? You want to have that party? This year? Twenty years after... well, you know.”

“It’s their fortieth anniversary,” I say, surprised she remembers how long ago Anthony died, “so yes. Obviously. You know Mom wants a ruby anniversary party because she loves rubies.”

She clears her throat. “Okay, fine. She did always say that.”

“Exactly, so we have to.”

“Okay,” she says, sounding like it’s not. “What are you thinking of?”

“I can’t talk about it now,” I say, “I’m at work. We need to meet.”

“I’m having dinner with my friend Leah tonight, but I could meet you after if that works.”

“I’ve got to work after.”

“At like nine? You’ll be working then?”

“Of course. I’m getting my weekly manicure at five and then I’m going to a friend’s wedding-food tasting, so I need to put in more time later.” I grimace, though she can’t see me, thinking of all the calories I’ll take in at the tasting. At least Andy won’t be there, since it’s just the happy couple and me and the best man. I don’t want the drama of seeing him.

“Okay, how about tomorrow? We could have lunch.”

“No can do,” I say. Whether or not I eat lunch, I always work through it.

Somehow she never seems to remember that.

“Oh, right. Breakfast? I lost five pounds and I’d like to celebrate. We could meet at nine or so.”

Gloria has been gaining and losing that same five pounds forever, probably because she keeps celebrating with food whenever she loses weight. She’s got to be a size eight or maybe even a ten by now. Whatever she is, she can’t fit Elle’s clothes, and she complains about that when I see her at Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving. Complains, of course, while eating enough to keep a mid-sized elephant alive. She claims she wants to get to size zero, to see what it feels like to be that thin, and since she’s built small like me she probably could, but either she doesn’t have the willpower or she doesn’t really care. Not that it matters to me. “I have to be at work at eight. Seven?”

“Ick. Since I quit that stupid coffee shop job I haven’t even been up before eight. That’s the only good thing about working the lunch rush at the restaurant, sleeping in. But... tomorrow night?”

“Work,” I say, “and the rest of the week’s no good either. It’s month-end so I have insane amounts of stuff to do.”

She sighs. “Fine. I will meet you at seven tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” I say quickly, realizing I should have set my terms earlier, “but not at—”

“Yes at Union Square,” she says, that laughter back in her voice. “My reward for being up so early. Either that or you come out to my place here in Brooklyn, and I know you don’t want to do that. Union Square’s my favorite place in the city and I’m going to make you like it some day too. Meet me by the main subway exit. We can grab some street bagels and smoothies then sit and talk.”

I shudder. I don’t eat “street bagels and smoothies” or anything else from sidewalk food carts, I eat things from restaurants that have posters in their windows showing they’ve passed their health inspections. But I can bring an approved smoothie with me, and that’s easier than arguing with Gloria and also easier than carting myself to Brooklyn, so I say, “Fine, see you then. And have fun with Leah.”

“What— oh, right. Yeah, I will. You have a good evening too.”

I hang up wondering whether Gloria was lying about meeting a friend. There's no reason for her to bother; I don't care what she's doing. We're tied together by blood but that's it. Her life is her own business, like it's been since she was sixteen and moved out to Brooklyn the day after Anthony's funeral leaving me and our parents in Queens. We didn't see her for over a year, until the second Christmas after Anthony's death, and had no contact except her brief phone calls to reassure our panicked mother she was all right. She didn't care about fourteen-year-old me, didn't care that she was leaving me alone with my guilt and our grieving parents, and I don't particularly care about her either. But I *will* make sure we do this party right for our parents. Though we haven't been a real family for twenty years, it's the least they deserve, after everything.

"Nice color," Mara says as we take our seats that night.

I hold out a freshly manicured hand to give her a better look at my rich gold polish. "Thanks, I like it."

"I'd love that for the wedding."

I reach into the nail polish pocket of my work bag for the bottle. She holds it against her engagement ring then says, "Yeah, that's perfect. I'm going to get it." She snaps a picture of the bottle with her phone, then grins at me. "I'm glad you're obsessive about never having chips. Means I can always find out what color you're wearing."

"Hardly obsessive. I just want to look good." I put the nail polish away then unfold my napkin and settle it on my lap. "And I have to, with my job."

"I think you look great," Tim the best man says, his eyes flickering over me. "You were too skinny before but you look awesome now."

Mara smacks his arm and I say, "You think that's a compliment, don't you, you poor sad clueless loser?"

Mara's fiancé Jed says, "It should be, but it's not."

"No, it's not," Mara and I echo in unison. I might be a little more forceful, since my size matters so much for my job, but since Mara's been dieting to look good in her wedding dress she isn't far behind.

“Yikes, got it,” Tim says. “I’ll behave. Just don’t tell Andy. He’ll think I was hitting on you.”

“He wouldn’t care, we broke up,” I say, reaching into the appropriate pocket of my bag under the table to retrieve my notebook and the list of questions I prepared to ensure the wedding food is right.

I come up to find all three of them staring at me. “What?”

“When did you plan to tell me?” Mara says.

I shrug. “Now? It’s no big deal.”

“No big... you’re both in the wedding party!”

Jed lays his hand lightly on her shoulder, and I say, “Seriously, it’s nothing. We’re both adults, it’ll be fine.”

Mara looks unconvinced.

“Come on, have you ever seen me get upset after a breakup?”

She gives a surprised laugh. “Hardly.”

“So there you go. No problem. The wedding’s four weeks away anyhow. It’ll all be forgotten by then.”

She takes a breath to speak but the waiter’s arrival with our bowls of tomato-tarragon soup cuts her off.

“Nice,” Jed says after taking a spoonful of his. “I like it.”

Mara and Tim agree, but I say, “The soup’s fine. The presentation, though... those big tarragon leaves on top?” I scribble in my notebook.

Jed laughs. “As long as it tastes good, I don’t care.”

I look up from the notebook and raise my eyebrows at Mara. “You care, though, right?”

She squirms. “I do,” she admits. “Maybe not as much as you, but I do.”

“Then I’ll make it right,” I say. “I’ll make everything perfect.”

That’s why she picked me as maid of honor, I know. Her bridesmaids are her younger sister and two friends she’s known longer than me, but all three of them are flakes like Gloria. I’m the only one who can be trusted to make sure Mara’s day goes exactly as she wants it to, and I will do just that.

Thinking of Mara’s wants reminds me of her upcoming bachelorette and I said, “Everything’s set for next Saturday, by the way.”

She grinned. “You got the others to agree?”

HOLDING OUT FOR A ZERO

I gave her a ‘you know it’ smile. Mara’s bridesmaids had been pushing for a spa weekend but Mara had always expected to go see strippers for the first time right before she got married and I simply informed the others that we would be doing things Mara’s way and they’d backed down. The fact that I’m not opposed to seeing hot naked men myself had nothing to do with my insistence on taking care of ‘our bride’, of course.

She shakes her head, still grinning. “You’re a monster, Valerie. A maid of honor monster. You’re just in control every second, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” I say, grinning back. I can’t remember the last time someone said something so nice to me.