



*the* X Ingredient

Roslyn Sinclair



# CHAPTER 1

*Laurie*

SOME DAYS HAVE TOO MUCH riding on them, you know? Days when you wake up and think, *This is it. I have to nail it. No pressure.*

I might, kind of, a little, be having a day like that.

It's not every day you land an interview to be personal assistant to the city's top lawyer, after all. Much less when you're so desperate for a full-time job that you can taste it, a job that will let you balance your schoolwork (to say nothing of your student loans) with something that pays the rent. If I kill it at this interview, then I'll hardly be rolling in cash, but it'll be better than the part-time, no-benefits hell pit I'm currently stuck in.

Like I said—no pressure.

The massive heatwave doesn't help my mood. Why doesn't Atlanta, Georgia, have the decency to cool off by Labor Day? As I trudge to my destiny—I mean, my destination—my blouse begins to stick to my lower back.

I take a deep breath as I reach the imposing Southstar Building that stretches up into the clear blue sky. I walk past the huge sculptures of naked, muscular women frolicking on their pedestals and head for one of Atlanta's most prestigious business centers.

Southstar is a fitting home for Parker, Lee & Rusch, one of the most up-and-coming law firms in the Southeast. Though it's only five years in business, PL&R has another branch in Charlotte. I've heard rumors of a third one opening somewhere in Florida. It's a place for movers and shakers.

I clutch my briefcase tighter. I'll have to ask about that. It's one of my prepared post-interview questions. The kind you're supposed to have ready

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when a prospective employer says, “So! Do you have anything you’d like to ask *us* now?” It’s a chance to prove you’ve done your homework and are ready to be part of the team.

I rehearse silently: *I do have a few questions, actually! This is such a growing firm, is it true you’re opening a new—*

Then I make it through the revolving doors, and all that flies right out of my head.

Photos hadn’t prepared me. This lobby is one of the ritziest places I’ve ever seen—not that there’s much competition. My soon-to-be-former employer rents space in a squat, unprepossessing building in Edgewood. Here, swooping white staircases point up to chandeliers that seem as high overhead as the sun. Abstract sculptures dot the lobby. The couches and chairs look like real leather.

I don’t have time to confirm this. I’m not late, not yet, but the bus was delayed. No way was I going to try and find downtown parking today, and I’m less early than I’d like to be. I shiver; the A/C is turned way up, and it’s chilling the sweat that’s gathered in my armpits and at the small of my back. At the beginning of September, Atlanta’s still hotter than hell, all of us baked alive by the sun reflecting off the asphalt streets. My poly-blend suit does nothing to help me out, but it’s the only suit I’ve got.

I try to keep my head up as I march toward the security desk, ignoring the little voice in my head that whispers, *You don’t fit in here. You don’t belong.*

I don’t have to belong. This is just temporary, something to steady me until I’m back on my feet. Until then, I just have to fit in...enough.

Judging from the look the guy at the security desk gives me, I’m not doing as well at that as I was hoping.

Still, he’s polite when he says, “Can I help you?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes.” I hoist my briefcase strap higher on my shoulder, all too aware of how its edges are frayed. “I’m Laurie Holcombe. I have an appointment at two at Parker, Lee, & Rusch?” Why did I frame that like a question—as if I’m not sure about it? I clear my throat. “Uh, I’m meeting Diana Parker.”

If I was hoping Diana Parker’s name would work magic, I’m let down immediately. Maybe it’s my pronounced Southern accent that makes the

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guard raise his eyebrows in disbelief. Well, why should he be so surprised? This is Atlanta, for goodness' sake.

That's the problem, though. This is Atlanta, not Zebulon. You're supposed to be more cosmopolitan here. Especially when your Southern accent isn't even the elegant, old-money kind, just the "hick town in Southern Georgia" kind.

What I'm saying is, I'm not off to a great start here. And my single stripe of pink hair probably isn't helping my case.

"Do you have ID?" the security guard asks, his voice as neutral as his raised eyebrows are not.

I produce my driver's license and a fake smile while he makes a show of looking at it. Finally, he picks up the phone, pushes some buttons, and tells the person on the other end that "a Laurie Holcombe"—as if there's more than one—is here to see Diana Parker.

A soft voice speaks on the other end of the line. The guard thanks it, hangs up, and gives me a benign smile. "Fifty-second floor."

I summon a smile. "Thank you so much."

He doesn't look all that friendly in return, but at least I tried.

Four other people are waiting for the next elevator, smartly dressed men and women back from a lunch meeting, carrying boxes of leftovers. I slip in after them and push the button for the fifty-second floor.

At the fourteenth floor, one of the two men in the group glances back at me. "Floor fifty-two, huh? PL&R?"

"Um. Yes." They're headed for the thirty-fourth floor. Wonder what that is. "What about y—"

"You suing somebody?" The rest of the group echoes his genial laugh.

"I'm looking for a job," I say. *Keep your head up. Act professional.* "As Diana Parker's personal assistant. It's my second interview," I add. Maybe that will head off their disbelief at the pass.

They don't have to know round one was a phone interview. That can stay my little secret.

There's no disguising their surprise, but at least it's not scornful. I should have told the security guard it's my second interview, too.

"Well, good luck!" the man says. "Better you than me."

He straightens his necktie and gives me a quick look up and down like he's just checking out my suit. I know better. After all, the curse of

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the busty gal is finding a button-up blouse that fits, and I've never quite succeeded, so there's no way this guy is wowed by my tailoring.

My gaze turns into a glare. He seems to take the hint, juts out his jaw, and turns away.

Good Lord, I'm so over men. I've heard Diana Parker's a ballbuster, and right now that sounds fine to me. Anything's better than a boss who treats me like an airhead even though I keep the office running smooth as silk. At the very least, Ms. Parker probably won't call me "sweetie."

Probably.

It's a relief when they exit the elevator, but the rest of the ride gives me plenty more time to get nervous again. By the time I reach the fifty-second floor, my stomach feels full of snakes. But it looks like I was right about one thing: This isn't a place where people call each other "sweetie." This place, as my roommate Kayla would say, is *serious af*.

I try not to let my knees tremble as I push open the glass doors bearing the logo of Parker, Lee & Rusch. Dark hardwood floors stretch before me, leading me into a foyer filled with more leather furniture, thick-pile rugs, and glass-topped coffee tables. Paintings decorate the walls, more abstract works that I don't feel qualified to appreciate.

I'm not alone in the foyer, and I'm getting some pretty curious glances from other people. Clients, lawyers, office workers, all that, I reckon. This is a busy place.

"Can I help you?" a woman's voice says.

I clutch my briefcase strap. The receptionist, a slim black woman about my age, is staring at me from behind her minimalist desk. Like everyone else, she seems to wonder what I'm doing here.

I hurry forward. *Smile*, I tell myself, *don't look terrified, don't look desperate. It's just a job.*

It isn't, though.

"Hi!" I say. "Laurie Holcombe. I'm here to interview with Ms. Parker about the personal assistant job."

"Oh!" The receptionist's reaction is different than the one I got from Security or from the people in the elevator. She looks relieved. "Thank goodness. Come with me. You've just hit the window."

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Accurate, since the sudden sense of urgency has me feeling like a sparrow who smacked into a pane of glass. I look at the clock behind her desk in panic. It's 1:38. Have I misremembered my interview time?

"I-I thought," I stammer, "two o'clock—"

The receptionist stands. Her fabulous blouse and pencil skirt make me think she earns more than a PA does.

"If you get this job," she tells me in a low voice, "you'll learn that Diana is early for everything, and you will be, too. I was told to bring you to her as soon as you arrived. Please follow me."

*Diana.* It ought to sound informal, but somehow the receptionist has made it sound like a royal address.

"What's your name?" I ask as I follow her down the hallway.

"Monica." There are no follow-up pleasantries.

Still, I try. "Nice to meet you, Monica."

"You, too." She sounds like a woman who doesn't want to get too attached yet. I gulp.

She leads me past glass-walled offices filled with lawyers in tailored suits or sheath dresses. They're all on the phone, looking over stacks of paper or leaning toward computer screens. Phones ring everywhere. Down a corridor, a copier hums. Muffled voices make it through the glass walls, all firm and businesslike. Everything seems dialed up to eleven, and while nobody's panicked or yelling, nobody looks chill either.

The frenetic pace is so different from my sleepy little medical clinic. Nobody here has time to hang out by the water cooler. In fact, I don't even see a water cooler.

That's okay. I like to stay busy.

Monica takes a left and leads me down another corridor. This one only has three doors, one on either side and the last at the end of the hallway. No glass walls here. The office doors are huge, and they have plaques next to them.

I check out the plaques as we walk by. The one by the left door reads "Kasim Lee, J.D." The one opposite reads "Nathan Rusch, J.D." I'm in the senior partners' hall of fame.

Which means that the door at the end of the corridor can only lead to one person. Could this set-up be any more intimidating? Is this how inmates feel when they're marched down death row?

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I'm sweating again as we stop before the door that leads to Diana B. Parker, S.J.D. I know what those letters means: Doctor of Juridical Science, a degree awarded for intensive research beyond the usual J.D. The top of the heap.

Monica doesn't knock on the door before opening it. I'm surprised until I see that the door leads into another, smaller, waiting area with two chairs and a landscape painting on the right wall. An empty desk waits by the door, clearly the territory of the future assistant.

Monica knocks on the second door. After a moment, a voice calls—just loudly enough to be heard through the wood—"It's open."

Monica takes a deep breath as if on my behalf. That's nice of her, since my breaths are coming too shallowly. She mouths, *Good luck*.

The sympathy in her eyes is unmistakable. I grab hold of it like a life raft and mouth back, *Thank you*.

She opens the door and steps inside. "Diana? You asked me to bring you the next assistant candidate. She's here."

"Send her in," a cool voice murmurs. Something about it sends a shiver down my spine.

Monica nods, steps back, and gestures for me to enter.

My legs don't feel steady, but I make it through the door. As soon as I'm in, Monica closes it behind me.

Compared to the other offices, this one looks cavernous. It has hunter-green wallpaper, wine-red curtains half-covering the huge windows, and rich Oriental rugs overlaying more hardwood flooring.

My attention is lured to the reason I'm here: the woman seated behind an imposing mahogany desk. Behind her, built-in shelves burst with books and leather-bound binders. Before her, two armchairs sit on the other side of the desk. They don't look comfy.

The woman in question doesn't even look up from whatever she's reading. "Come in. Have a seat."

I cross the office. The wooden floors don't creak even once beneath my feet, as if they don't dare. Nothing here seems to move or breathe. Finally, I understand what Paul Simon meant by "the sound of silence."

After what seems like forever, I reach the two chairs. I wait for a second to be told which one to sit in before I snap out of it and choose the one on

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the right. I manage to sit down instead of collapse, which seems like a win at the moment.

Diana Parker still doesn't look at me, but I've done my homework. I found photos of her online, and I know she usually keeps her black hair pulled back in a bun. She's slender and never smiles much in the pictures. And she looks younger than her forty-six years. I wonder if she has a hard time being taken seriously, too. If this scary office is meant to compensate.

She looks up at me.

I gasp. Softly, but there's no way she didn't hear it. And oh mercy, if that wasn't the gayest gasp I've ever given.

The pictures hadn't prepared me at all. I can tell right away that Diana Parker doesn't need a big office to be taken seriously. Her eyes are dark, cool, and penetrating, looking at me like she already knows about me and isn't too impressed. Her cheekbones are a work of art, even if her nose is a bit long and her mouth is a little thin. Or maybe that's just the way she has her lips pressed into a line.

Good Lord above, she's gorgeous. Nobody told me that. I wasn't ready.

As I try not to let my jaw hang down all over the place, her gaze settles on my hair.

"It's just temporary!" I blurt out.

She raises her dark, perfectly shaped eyebrows. She must get them done every three weeks like clockwork. She probably never lets anything slip even a smidgen.

"The hair," I add feebly, touching the pale pink streak—what the box called "rose gold"—that runs all the way to where my hair touches my shoulders. "I'm growing it out. It's almost gone."

"I'm glad to hear it." What a voice. It's surprisingly deep, coming from such a delicate frame that's accentuated by a navy blazer. Tasteful diamond stud earrings draw my eyes to her small ears and the slender neck beneath them.

"I've had a look at your qualifications," she says, and I add "authoritative" to my mental list of adjectives about her voice. "You've never been a personal assistant before."

"No, ma'am." I'm holding my briefcase in my lap. *Is that okay? Does it look weird? Would it be weirder to set it down now?* "But I don't know if you read my cover letter—"



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“Of course I read it. And my outgoing assistant said you gave a passable performance on the phone. Your current job is an associate office manager at a medical clinic in Edgewood. Why are you seeking a demotion?”

*Because I'm about to lose my job and rent doesn't pay itself.* Aloud, I say, “Because I want to go into law.” Which is also true.

“So do a lot of other people. They get experience as interns and paralegals. They rarely come from this kind of background, they rarely seek to become PAs, and they rarely have pink hair.”

I try not to sound defensive. “Most paralegals have degrees. I'm still in college. Uh, just part-time.” I can't let her think I won't be committed to the job. “Two classes a semester. I'm almost finished.”

“What school and what degree?” Her exquisite face gives nothing away. They should have put a statue of *her* in the foyer.

“Sociology. West Georgia's online program. I'm always here in town, and I'm hoping to graduate this summer if there aren't any surprises.” At this point, how many surprises are left?

“And then law school? You'd be my assistant for less than a year.”

“Not necessarily!” I say quickly. “In fact, I can imagine not going to law school right away. I'll need to find a program that's friendly to part-time students.”

A thin, displeased line appears between her eyebrows. “Delaying your ambitions isn't the way to achieve them. If you already know what you want, you should go for it.”

“That's why I'm here.”

Her eyebrows and chin all go up in sync.

“I have ambitions. And I'm organized and efficient. I can do this job and make your life a lot easier.” She seems like the kind of woman who appreciates straight talk, which is the only straight thing I know how to do.

Not that that's relevant.

“This job involves running errands, making phone calls, working late nights and many holidays, and burying your ego six feet under,” she says. “I don't coddle people. I need to know they can get the job done.”

“I can do all that. I can do more.” I have done more. “And I get along well with almost everybody.” It's true, though I haven't been around the kind of people in this office very much. “I don't have a problem working with them and getting stuff done.”

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“I’m sure you don’t.” She gives me an up-and-down look, one I find way too familiar: not sleazy, but dismissive. She sees my blonde hair and button nose, hears my accent, and has already written me off as a ditz.

I have to keep my cool. “People like my work ethic,” I say as evenly as I can manage. “They like that I’m efficient and organized and—”

“Why are you leaving your current job?”

Is it legal to ask that? I can’t remember. “The clinic’s had to make some staff cuts. I don’t have seniority. They’re letting me stay on part-time for now, but...” *It’s not enough.*

“They gave you a good recommendation. Not that that’s unusual. Your supervisor did commend you for organizing some...” Contempt flickers in her eyes. “‘Feel-good company get-togethers,’ as I recall.”

“Yes.” Shouldn’t this be a selling point? Why is she looking down her nose at it? “I was in charge of any parties we threw—a Fourth of July barbecue, the Christmas party, that kind of thing. I had the idea that we should do stuff like that, actually. You know...for morale? I did all my admin work while I was also calling caterers and—” *Running back and forth to my father’s hospital bed—*

“And they are in financial trouble,” Diana interrupts. “Not the best management I’ve ever heard of.”

My spine turns to iron. I sit up so straight it hurts. “They didn’t tell us about that. I wasn’t trying to waste money. I always came in under the budget they gave me.”

“I wasn’t blaming you.”

The soft note in her voice catches me by surprise. Her, too, maybe. We look into each other’s eyes. Her expression is as veiled as ever, but something about those dark eyes takes my breath away. That hasn’t happened since my most recent ex, Stacey.

And it is...not good. It’s the last thing I need. I want Diana Parker to be my boss, for goodness’ sake. The longer this moment goes on, the more the air between us seems to electrify until all my hair wants to stand on end. Is lightning about to strike?

Somebody’s got to say something.

Say something.

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She must be having the same thought. Her brain is obviously better at sending signals to her mouth than mine is, because she says hoarsely, “Thank you for coming.”

My blood freezes. The moment breaks. That’s it? She’s sending me away? “Um,” I say. “Thanks for... I, I actually had some questions—”

“I’m interviewing another candidate for the position in thirty minutes.” She doesn’t even look at the two-tone watch gracing her wrist. “We’ll be in touch.”

And that’s that. She doesn’t say it, but she doesn’t have to.

I’m not getting the job.

I hadn’t realized until now how hard I was hoping. My chest feels crushed in, like somebody planted their boot there. I stand up, fighting the urge to ask her what I did wrong. Should I not have mentioned school? Was it the hair? Does my suit really look all that bad?

She’s already looking away, her graceful neck turning to the side as she reaches for her closed laptop. She’s dismissed me, just like that. I’m not worth another second of her time, which she could be spending on billable hours.

“I kept up a 3.85 GPA while my daddy was in the hospital,” I hear myself say. “*And* while I was doing that admin job and organizing social events. I might not have grown up with much, but I learned to do what needs doing, and that’s worth more than a Versace blouse.”

She snaps back to look at me, her eyes widening with astonishment. Her lips part around words that don’t come out.

“You’d be lucky to have me, Ms. Parker,” I tell her. “Thank you for your time.” Without another word, I turn on my heel and march toward that huge door, my head held high. I shouldn’t have said that, but it felt good, and it’s not like I had anything to lose. Still, though, a part of me hopes Diana Parker will call after me, tell me to wait, say she’s changed her mind.

She doesn’t.

Soon enough I find myself back down on Peachtree Street, trudging toward the bus stop and wondering what on God’s green earth I’m going to do now.

## CHAPTER 2

*Diana*

WELL, THAT WAS A NICE little disaster.

Laurie Holcombe was the second interview of three. My outgoing assistant, Stephanie, has so far shown little insight into what will make an effective replacement. True, she's moved on to the Charlotte office and can't meet them in person, but that's no excuse. Not when it leaves me feeling the way I do now—more shaken than I've been in a long while.

And all by a so-called Southern belle with pink hair.

I must be tired if she got to me. God knows I have reason to be, now that Kasim's down with the flu, Nate's in Tallahassee, and Eileen seems prepared to lose one of our biggest clients. They'll need my personal attention to placate them, to show that the firm values their business.

I look at my watch. 2:05. I've been here since 6:30 a.m., and my day shows no signs of slowing down. I'll probably have to cancel dinner with John...again. He'll be furious and will probably spend the evening in a bar. Increasingly, I wonder if I might not be the marrying kind. My second time through isn't faring much better than my first. Perhaps I should admit I'm married to my job and be done with it.

No. I sit up straight. I don't quit. Diana Parker has never quit. Besides, a woman my age is supposed to have a husband. If she doesn't, the whispers start. Is something wrong with her? How good can she be if she can't juggle a personal and a professional life? What looks like "career dedication" in a man looks only like incapability in a woman. It's bad enough that I have no children to balance on another spinning plate. *How can she truly be fulfilled?* they say.

They're wrong. I'm fulfilled. I've got a job I love, and a husband who plays his role. Everything's fine.

I rub my temples to banish my impending headache. Time to get off this train of thought. At least I get to *choose* to be this kind of woman, to project the image I need to reach my goals.

And that image is *not* that of a cute-as-a-button Georgia peach. Thirty years ago, I would have envied her those curves, even if she was nearly bursting out of that blouse. But now...

Something about the thought sends a tiny shiver through me. The back of my neck tingles, as do my fingertips.

Ridiculous.

Still, though, beneath that musical voice with its absurd accent...there had been something. A trace of steel, and I recognized that ambition, too. She'd said she had some. She wasn't lying, not about that, at least.

She could have been bullshitting me about other things. The sob story about her father, for example. Who brings that up in a job interview, especially when you're desperately trying to appear professional, as she clearly was? I could practically taste her hunger.

God. Where's my head? The girl is unsuitable. She doesn't fit the firm's image at all; she doesn't belong here. Certainly not at my side around the clock.

I squirm in my chair for a second—sitting in here for so long must have made me restless—and open my laptop. In the last twenty minutes, I've amassed thirty-two new e-mails. I'm running on coffee and I haven't had lunch.

I really need an assistant. Luckily, the next candidate arrives in fifteen minutes. Hopefully this time, Stephanie's sent me a winner.

Because Laurie Holcombe certainly is not.



"Honey," John says with an ominous note in his voice, "are you serious?"

I grit my teeth as I look at my watch. It's 5:45, and I'm not even close to being done for the day. I spent a good forty-five minutes on the phone with Eileen's client. I know I can bring them back into the fold, but I shouldn't have to do an associate's job for her. "I'm sorry. I know it's last minute, but..."

"Dammit, Diana, this is the second time in as many weeks! I've hardly laid eyes on you in days."

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*Do you really mind?* I manage not to ask. *I wasn't the one who spent our honeymoon at the blackjack table.* "Can't we reschedule for Saturday night, like a normal couple? You know Mondays are always hectic for me."

"Even on a holiday weekend? Come on. And since when do 'normal couples' have to schedule time to meet face-to-face? Besides, I'm leaving for New York on Friday."

Once, he'd admired my "drive." If only I'd known how good we'd become at driving each other crazy. Still, though, he's not wrong about this one thing: I forgot his business trip. "Oh, that's right. I'm sorry, darling. Well...tomorrow? Or Thursday," I correct myself. "I know I can carve out a space—"

"That's big of you. Look, I can't have this conversation right now. When will you be home tonight?"

I look up at the white ceiling. *Is that a stain? Water damage? I'll have to get maintenance in here when I leave for the night.* "I'm not sure. After nine. No, nine-thirty."

"We'll see." He hangs up without a farewell.

I bare my teeth at my phone. He never used to be like a child. Is my mother right—do *all* men expect to be nursed and babied once they get a wife? We've only been married three years, for Christ's sake. Isn't this still supposed to be the honeymoon period? It worked that way for Henry and me, even if it all went wrong later.

I text John.

*That was immature and disrespectful.*

After all, the marriage counselor told us to be straightforward, back when we were making an effort. At least, when I was.

No reply.

For no reason, Laurie Holcombe's face fills my mind again, its look of resolve incongruous with its soft lines. Her eyes had looked at me with apprehension but with courage...and like an equal's. Not immature or disrespectful at all, for all that she must be over twenty years John's junior.

I shake my head. Why am I comparing Laur...*her* to my husband when I should be comparing her to the day's third candidate? To the suitable, qualified Clarissa. She's got style, the kind of elegance most girls her age only dream of, and she wasn't desperate. She was professional and polished, said nothing about school or dying fathers. Her résumé is perfect, her

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references impeccable. Even if I didn't need an assistant ASAP, she'd be a good choice.

That settles it, then. I'll have Monica give her a call. I reach for the intercom button.

Even as I do, my laptop chimes with yet another e-mail. I glance at the screen to see a new message from "lauriehol234[at]gmail.com." Laurie Holcombe. Must be.

At least that's a reasonably professional address. I might have expected southernbelle\_69 or someth...

Or something. My cheeks heat as I open her e-mail, even though I have a hundred other things to do.

*Dear Ms. Parker,*

*Thank you for taking the time to meet me today regarding the position of your personal assistant at Parker, Lee & Rusch. Our interview confirmed my belief that my skillset and experience could be an asset to you and the firm. Please feel free to contact me if I can provide you with any further information you might want.*

Standard boilerplate. I'm almost impressed. This is basic business etiquette, but I wouldn't have expected it from her, especially mere hours after our interview ended. Maybe she's as efficient as she claims. The thank-you e-mail shows all the usual stuff that's meaningless but isn't, that shows she understands the way things are done, until I get to:

*I also want to say, if I was inappropriate when we parted, I apologize. No, that's not right. I know I was inappropriate, and I do apologize. I still hope you will consider me for the position. I really would be effective in it. Thank you again for your time.*

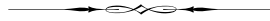
*Sincerely,  
Laurie Holcombe*

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The first paragraph might be standard, but I can practically hear her saying the second one aloud in her Southern accent. I'm almost breathless. How in the world do you manage to be both sincere and insincere at once? She absolutely believed what she was saying to me about Versace blouses, work ethics, and so on. I could see it in her eyes. She's not apologizing for what she said, just for what it might have done to her chances.

What kind of law does she want to practice, anyway? I neglected to ask. But why should I have? She's not getting the job. Little Miss Blue Eyes will just have to keep pounding the pavement while she tries to sell her life's story to someone willing to buy it.

I definitely need to hire Clarissa. I glance at the intercom button again. I do not press it.



John's car is not in the garage when I arrive home. If only I could summon some surprise.

I park my Lexus in one of three empty spaces. Someday soon, I'll have a driver. My commute isn't terrible, but those are still precious minutes I could use. If I'm going to think obsessively about the day's work during the drive, I might as well be doing it, too.

*Slow down*, I tell myself as I head through the garage and into my house with a sigh. *You're home*.

It doesn't feel like it. I hate my house. Well, it's John's house, really. He argued it was perfect for us. Paces is the most prestigious neighborhood in Atlanta. Cars slow down to a crawl when they pass so the passengers can gape at the magnificent houses. Paces bursts with wealth but not with decadence: In fact, it screams restraint at the top of its lungs. It's the sort of place I should love. I did feel a real sense of triumph when John and I popped the cork on a bottle of Bollinger our first night here.

Triumph's no match for affection, though. As I pass through the kitchen with its marble countertops and stainless-steel appliances, I can't help thinking of my childhood home in Miami. The cramped kitchen there would fill with the smell of my mother's pho bo, as well as the chattering voices of my three siblings. I'd loved it when I was little, before I'd learned to dream of bigger things. I'd loved the closeness and the warmth. How did I lose all that?



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In the foyer, I pause to kick off my high heels from my aching feet. If Laurie Holcombe looks down her nose at Versace blouses, imagine what she'd have to say about my Manolos.

I need a drink.

In my study, I make myself a dry martini, collapse in my favorite armchair, and put my feet up on the ottoman. The study, at least, feels like mine. It's got several of my law books from school, plus my personal favorites: Jhumpa Lahiri, Thomas Hobbes, Agatha Christie. Nobody can say I don't enjoy variety, can they? Nobody can pigeonhole me.

I'm too tired to read anything tonight, but I can still turn on my Tiffany lamp and bask in my sanctuary for a few minutes.

Only for a few minutes, though. Then my mind's up and running again. *Take the rest of the night off*, I tell myself. *There's hardly anything left of it.*

It won't hurt to check my phone. Just to see if John's texted or called and I missed it, that's all.

But in spite of my intentions, I open my e-mail. Laurie Holcombe's message stares at me again. Why haven't I deleted it?

*Because she's hungry*, the little voice whispers, *hungry just like you.*

Hungry like I was, that is. Past tense. What do I have to hunger for now? Nevertheless, an unmistakable jolt runs through me, and the next thought to cross my mind is: *How dare she?* How dare Laurie Holcombe intrude on my evening with its precious few quiet moments?

My martini glass is empty. So is my stomach. That must account for why I dial the phone number listed after her name.

On the first ring, I regret it. By the second ring, I'm ordering myself to hang up. Just hang up—

"Hello?"

Her voice is politely inquisitive. I almost don't recognize it, not without the steel spine she gave it at the end of our interview. It's the voice of someone used to answering phones all day. She'd be doing that if she worked for me.

"Hello?" she repeats, a touch of impatience in her voice now. I either need to say something or hang up.

"This is Diana Parker," I hear myself say, and it's too late to take it back. There's the strange but definite feeling of having set something in motion. Must be the vodka talking.

## THE X INGREDIENT

After a surprised pause, she says, “Oh! Uh, hello, Ms. Park—”

“You *were* inappropriate.”

Silence. I wonder what her face looks like. Are those pink cheeks even pinker? Are those sky-blue eyes wide with astonishment? Or might they be wincing at being called on her behavior?

After another moment, she says, “I’m aware, ma’am. That’s why I apologized. Do you need me to do it again?”

For no reason I can name, except maybe that my nervous system goes on the fritz for a second, I drop my martini glass. Good thing it’s empty. Good thing it lands harmlessly on the Berber rug.

*I don’t need you to do anything*, I almost say. *I don’t need you, or anyone, or anything but a good night’s sleep.*

“That won’t be necessary,” I say stiffly. I should have taken off my blazer. It’s too warm in here. “That’s not why I called.”

*Oh God, why did I say that? What am I even doing?* Because now she’ll ask—she’s *got* to ask—

“Then why did you?” It’s the most reasonable question on earth. “I kinda got the impression I wasn’t getting the job. Are you...” Her voice catches. “Are you calling to tell me so?”

Is she out of her mind? Why would a senior partner call her after ten p.m. to give her a personal rejection? That’s why God created HR departments. Still, though, I’ve got her on the phone. I might as well tell her she doesn’t fit the needs of Parker, Lee & Rusch at this time.

Then, within twenty-four hours, I’ll have perfect Clarissa at my side, someone who will do what she’s told and never challenge me. I’ll never see Laurie Holcombe again. I’ll never know if she could keep those promises and fulfill that potential I hear in her voice. If she’ll manage to feed that hunger.

If I really would be lucky to have her.

“Tell me about your plans for the future,” I say. “Yours seem rather vague at the moment.”

“Uh, well, that’s true. I haven’t been able to plan much in the last couple of years, with my dad—” Her voice catches again, either with emotion or because she knows she shouldn’t go down this road again. “But I’ve kept my head above water, you know? I’m ready to think about it.”

ROSLYN SINCLAIR

I purse my lips. “So start thinking. You need a plan. If you wander without a destination in mind, you’ll never get anywhere.”

“Or I could get somewhere I never thought of,” she fires back. “That doesn’t have to be a bad thing. I used to have plans, but life doesn’t always work out that way. You adapt.”

She doesn’t have to tell me that. My life has been a process of adaptation and evolution, and I’m right where I planned to be anyway. “You’re studying sociology. Why?”

“Because school’s important.” A canned answer. “I’ve already got my associate’s, and—”

“I’ve seen your résumé. That’s not what I asked. Why sociology?”

“It’s the science of human behavior. Why not?” There’s a noise in the background, and she makes a *tsking* sound. “I took an intro class my freshman year and got into it. I think it can work well with the law.”

“And what kind of law do you want to practice?” This should be good. I can’t imagine her in the conference room, trying to cut the million-dollar deals I do.

“Environmental.” She sounds almost sheepish, as well she should. It’s hardly in keeping with her prospective employer’s interests.

“So, no plans to make money,” I say. “At least, not at the level corporate can get you.”

“I’m used to not rolling around in Benjamins,” she says dryly. “I’ll settle for health insurance and feeling like I’m making a difference.” Then there’s a clatter, and she mutters, “Son of a... Sorry.”

I blink. “What are you doing?”

“Making dinner. The day kind of got away from me. Maybe it did for you, too. That’s the kind of thing I’d do, you know,” she adds, sounding inspired. “As your assistant. I’d fetch you lunch and stuff.”

How could she have known I didn’t eat today? I manage not to ask what she’s cooking. On an empty stomach, anything would sound delicious. “Assistants do that, yes.”

“And get coffee and make phone calls. I can do all that, you know. More, too. I can be on call day or night.” The lift in her voice comes just short of anxiety. “As you can see. Ms. Parker, you could ask me right now and I’d be there in a heartbeat.”

## THE X INGREDIENT

“I—” Now it’s my breath that catches. It refuses to come back for a moment. Laurie Holcombe, at my disposal any time I want. I hadn’t expected her to say that. I didn’t know I’d feel this warm rush throughout my whole bod...

It’s cold in this house. It’s cold in my office. Sometimes I think it’s cold everywhere I go. Wherever she is, I bet her kitchen is small, warm from the heat of the stove, and smelling like her favorite food. Maybe the food she grew up with, that her mother made.

“A trial basis,” I whisper, glancing down to see my fallen martini glass. It was rolling back and forth on its rim, but inertia has finally brought it to a stop. “I’m hiring you on a trial basis.”

“You—ow! Sorry, I just whacked my elbow on the... You *are*?” She sounds breathless, too.

This is a mistake. I’m making a mistake. But what’s the harm? It’s not as if I’m hiring a partner. She’s an assistant. She’ll be gone in a week if she doesn’t work out, and I’ll get another one.

“You start tomorrow,” I tell her. “Be there at seven-thirty a.m. sharp. And lose the pink hair.”

“I—oh wow, yes, ma’am, thank y—”

I hang up. My heart is racing, and I need to take some deep breaths. I need to eat something and go to bed.

I look at my bare feet perched on the ottoman. Red lines form a crescent beneath my toes from where my shoes pressed against my feet all day. My toenail polish has chipped, and my heels are starting to get rough. Scheduling pedicures: That’s something else an assistant can do.

*You’d be lucky to have me.*

Only time will tell. Maybe I’ve made a mistake and maybe I haven’t, but one thing’s for sure: My life’s about to get a little more interesting.

We’ll see what Laurie Holcombe is made of.

## CHAPTER 3

*Laurie*

I SPENT HALF THE NIGHT trying to get the pink dye out of my hair with the “secret formula” Kayla swears by: a combination of shampoo, dish soap, and vitamin C powder. It didn’t get rid of the pink completely, but I’ve done the best I can do for now. I’ll have another go tonight if Ms. Parker gives me a dirty look.

In the meantime, I’d prefer to show up for my first day at work feeling well-rested, but we can’t have everything we want.

At least today I get to drive. It’s half past six in the morning, and traffic isn’t bad at this hour. I can change lanes two at a time and not get cussed out. I won’t have trouble finding a space in the parking deck. It’s like driving heaven, for Atlanta.

Sort of. Real driving heaven would involve a nicer car than my 1992 Honda Civic. Ms. Parker was right: Practicing environmental law’s not going to get me close to that dream. But that’s okay. I’ve landed a full-time job, my first step toward getting the life I want.

*You need a plan.*

Diana Parker had said that to me last night. The woman who’d looked at me like I was a scuff mark on her shoe was talking to me about my plans for the future like they mattered to her, like I mattered.

“Down, girl,” I mutter to myself as I spot the parking deck for Southstar. “She’s your boss. And married,” I add, as it occurs to me for the first time. I’d read that online when I was researching her. Why hadn’t I remembered it when I was trying not to drool all over her desk yesterday? Had she been wearing a wedding ring?

## THE X INGREDIENT

I squint as I try to imagine her with a man. It's not working. Then again, my gaydar's been way off before, as evidenced by two ex-girlfriends who left me for guys. Maybe it's that I can't imagine her with anyone at all. She seems so self-contained, sealed off from the world. Even if she did call me after ten o'clock at night for a weird little chat before she offered me a job.

Well, whether Diana Parker is my boss or not, whether she's married or not—it still doesn't matter. Whenever I think about Stacey, I still feel like my guts are tearing up. If I've learned anything in the past couple of years, it's not to rely on people to be there for me, much less open my heart to love or some other dumb notion.

Time to go to work.

The sleepy-looking guy inside the ticket booth just buzzes me in when I say I've been recently hired and haven't gotten my pass yet. I decide to take it as a good sign. Today's probably going to involve a lot of paperwork and forms, the sort of stuff that's tedious to people who aren't ecstatic about getting a job.

*Ecstatic*, I remind myself as I park. *Remember, you're ecstatic. It only feels like exhaustion.* Besides, I'm ready. I've armored myself for my first day in a sweater set and pencil skirt, plus sensible black heels. It's a little more sedate than my usual, even for office wear, but not so much that I feel like I'm wearing a costume.

I'm still me underneath all this. Still the woman who wants to make a difference, once I'm in better shape to do so.

My phone chimes with a text. The display shows Ms. Parker's name, which I programmed in there the second she hung up. Here it is: my first ever message from my new boss. What will she want from me at this hour, to get the day jump-started?

*On my way. Have breakfast on my desk by 7. Dynamite Veggie White Omelet from Egg Harbor Café.*

I check Google Maps. The café is three and a half miles away, a ten-minute drive each way in current traffic conditions. How far away is Ms. Parker from the office? There's no way I can get to the café, wait for the food, and return here in less than thirty minutes.

"Not with that attitude," I mutter, and turn the key.

ROSLYN SINCLAIR

It's amazing what you can get done with determination and the understanding that traffic lights are more like suggestions. I told Diana Parker I can do anything, and that damn well includes getting her an omelet she could get from somewhere closer.

Luckily, there aren't a lot of starving Atlanteans at 6:46 a.m., and there's a short line. The employees seem a little startled when I babble out Ms. Parker's breakfast order like I'm delivering top-secret information to the CIA at the end of a dangerous mission.

They move pretty fast, but it's still too long before I escape the café. My apartment is closer to the office than this place is. I'd save time by making Ms. Parker's breakfast myself.

Probably shouldn't suggest that.

I make it back to Southstar by 7:10, feeling that I've already failed. I cuss under my breath when I get in the elevator and see that it will only take me to the main lobby unless I have a key card. It's not that I don't appreciate the security, but I'd appreciate getting to my boss's side even more.

Deep breaths. It's possible I'm overreacting.

I reach the main lobby. If the security guard is surprised to see me again, he restricts it to a deniable lift of his eyebrows.

"Morning," I puff as I hurry forward, plastic bag in one hand, my other trying to keep my bag strap on my shoulder. "I got the job! At PL&R," I add, just to emphasize that the impossible sometimes becomes possible. "But I don't have a key card or ID yet or anything."

"The office doesn't open until eight."

"Well, I know, but..." I plunk the plastic bag on the desk. We both look at it as the savory smell of the omelet drifts from the box. I try to brush off the remaining crumbs of the muffin I gulped down in the car. "Ms. Parker told me to be here at seven with her breakfast. I'm a little late. Can you—"

He sighs at the word "late" as if he doesn't want to get attached to me, same as Monica. "I'll call and see if anybody answers."

Call! I'm an idiot, so focused on getting here that I hadn't even thought about my phone. I whip it out and text Ms. Parker.

*In lobby w/ breakfast, waiting on security to let me up.*

## THE X INGREDIENT

I consider and decide against adding a smiley-face emoji to show a good attitude. I don't think she'd like that.

"You got rid of some of the pink?" the guard asks while he holds the receiver to his ear.

Well, I'd certainly tried. "Um—"

The desk phone beeps with an incoming call and the guard looks down at it, frowning. Then his eyebrows raise, he pushes a button, and says, "Good morning, Ms. Parker. How may we—" A voice says something on the other end, faint but cool. The guard swallows. "Oh. Yes, she's right h... Okay. Yes, ma'am. I'll be happy—" He purses his lips. Seems like she hung up on him, as she did me last night. Must be her style.

"She says the office door will be open for you," he says. "After today, you'll need a key card from HR—"

"Got it. Thanks!" I find myself longing to ask him for reassurance. "Got any, uh, tips for my first day here?"

The look he gives me seems almost compassionate. "Live it like it's your last. Good luck."

In the elevator, I mutter, "What the fuck, dude."

True to Diana's word, the front door to the PL&R office is unlocked. Monica's chair is empty, but I hear other people stirring. They barely give me a glance as I pass their offices.

Ms. Parker's door is cracked open this morning. I take a deep breath and slow myself to a normal pace. It won't do to burst into her office panting and red-faced.

She's got her back to me today while she scrutinizes her bookshelves. From here, I can see that she's about my height, 5'6". Her nude high heels look less sensible than my shoes. They're on display beneath the hems of a pair of charcoal dress pants that match her blazer. Gosh, she's slender. Her clothes aren't cut tightly or anything; nobody could call them unprofessional. But she's not shy about being in good shape.

At the clatter of my arrival, she turns around. Her hair's scraped back into the bun again, and I see the flash of the same diamond studs on her ears.

"I have your omelet." I meant to say *good morning*. But something about this moment forbids small talk.

"You're late."



ROSLYN SINCLAIR

Are my legs always going to feel like jelly when I walk into this room? I remind myself that I was able to stick up for myself when I had to yesterday. Evidently, Ms. Parker had respected it, right up until I was “inappropriate.”

My shoulders hunch like I’m waiting for a scolding. I straighten them as I walk toward her. “Actually, I was early. I was just parking in the garage when you texted.” I try a smile. “You, uh, should have seen the lights I ran to get here when I did. Would you like me to warm this u—”

“One encounter with the police and you’re fired. And yes, I would. The break room is down the hallway and to the right.” She turns back to her bookshelves without another word.

*Okay, I think as the microwave hums and I pour myself a cup of decent, free coffee, that could have been worse.*

By the time I get the omelet back to her office, she’s found her book and is paging through it, making notes on a legal pad. I have one of those too, in my bag, along with four pens, three highlighters, a stack of Post-It notes, and a stress ball you can squeeze. I might need them all.

Ms. Parker has her own cup of coffee at her elbow, poured into what looks like a fine china mug, delicate with a gold rim. For the first time, I see the Keurig coffeemaker in the corner and the tray of pods next to it.

“You’re running low on pods.” I deposit the omelet in front of her, looking decent on a real plate with silverware I found in a break-room drawer. My clinic was lucky to stock plastic forks out of a box.

Speaking of the clinic, one of the best feelings I’ve ever had was e-mailing my old supervisor at 11 p.m. to tell him I quit. Once, I would have felt guilty. Now, I’ve learned that when someone says *Starting tomorrow you’re part time, sorry about those benefits*, you don’t owe them jack.

Ms. Parker glances over at her coffeemaker. “It seems so. You’ll need to pick some up today. I predict I’ll finish them off by...” Her berry-lipsticked lips purse. “2:30 this afternoon.”

I chuckle.

She frowns at me.

*Oh.*

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I thought that was a... What can I do for you now, Ms. Parker? I know I’ll need to talk to HR about—”

“Diana,” she says in a clipped voice. “That’s how we do things around here. Though don’t think I don’t appreciate the Southern courtesy.”

## THE X INGREDIENT

My cheeks heat. I didn't miss the little drawl she used with "courtesy." From what I read, she's from Florida, for goodness' sake, so where does she get off? Then again, Florida's always been a little bit different.

Surely there are polite people everywhere, though, even if I haven't been much of anywhere yet.

"Yes, ma'am," I say, and regret it at once. I hadn't meant to be provoking. "I mean, yes, Diana."

I meant to follow that up with something. Ask her again what else I could do for her. For some reason, once her name passes my lips, I'm struck dumb. All I can think is, *It felt good in my mouth; it felt beautiful to say.*

She blinks up at me, and oh mercy, did she notice? Is that why her cheeks seem a little pinker?

"What's Laurie short for?" Am I imagining that catch in her voice? "Laura, I suppose."

"Laurel." My voice comes out in a mortifying croak.

She raises her eyebrows and sounds entirely self-possessed. "As in, 'crown of'? For victory?"

I wish. "For my grandmother."

"I hope she was a winner." Ms...Diana...picks up her utensils.

"I thought she was." She was there for me when Mom wasn't.

"Sit down with HR and do the necessary paperwork to get what you need. Monica can help. Also make sure to e-mail Stephanie, tell her you got the job, and ask her for whatever little lists she's compiled over the last few years on how to be useful." Now the look she gives me is almost baleful. "You have some big stilettos to fill."

I look for a suitable response and blurt out, "Are you going to want breakfast at the same time every day?" When she stares at me, I add weakly, "Just so I can be prepared. I can have it waiting when you get here."

"Laurie," Diana Parker murmurs, "when I want something, I'll tell you. In the meantime, be ready to think on your feet, and let me get to my breakfast and back to work. Monica will be here soon, if she's not already."

I wonder if she felt a shiver when she said my name. I doubt it. I doubt anything could make this woman shiver at all, since she already seems to be made of ice and snow.

*Ice and snow melt*, that wicked little voice reminds me as I leave, and I'm gonna shut it up if it's the last thing I do.

I'm not used to HR departments getting stuff done at lightning speed, but nobody has time to waste at PL&R. I spend my morning filling out forms, signing confidentiality agreements, and getting my picture taken.

"The pink's just temporary," I tell the photographer.

By lunchtime, I'm fully in the system and I have an ID card and a parking pass. Oddly, I feel a twinge in my heart as I look at it. My dad used to say in Atlanta there's no such thing as a parking pass, just a hunting license.

I wish I could tell him about my new job. He was never very fond of lawyers, and he said environmental law sounded "way too liberal," but he was glad I wanted to make something of myself. Later, he was upset that he made me a nursemaid, though I begrudged him not a second of my time.

I never came out to him. He would never have accepted it when I was young, and I told myself I couldn't lay it on him when he was sick. Just an excuse, I guess, and now I'll never have the chance.

No. Now's not the time for grief. I've had over a year of bursting into tears, although so far I've been able to contain myself on the job. The regrets can wait.

As soon as my parking pass is in hand and my ID card is clipped to my sweater, I go in search of Diana. *Diana*, I think, *like Wonder Woman*.

My name had been so pretty in her mouth. Most people pronounce it either *Lorry* or *Lawry*, depending on where they're from, but Diana said it like *Loh-ree*. It had sounded classy, like I've always dreamed of hearing it.

*Has she eaten lunch yet?* It's one o'clock, and I haven't been there to fetch and carry. I duck into the break room so I can bolt down my PB&J, squished in its plastic wrapping, before I go to Diana. What's she been doing in my absence?

I find out when I walk by the glass walls and see her seated next to a man at a conference table. Three people sit opposite them: a woman and two men. The woman looks pissed. The men are stone-faced. Diana seems very calm.

She glances over, sees me hovering, and gestures for me to enter. For some reason, that reminds me that I haven't e-mailed Stephanie for all those little lists yet. Making a mental note, I enter the conference room and take

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the empty seat to Diana's left. Everyone has sweating glasses of ice water they seem not to have drunk from. A tray of delicious-looking pastries sits at the end of the table, also untouched. Binders, documents, and legal pads cover the table.

I dig into my bag for my own legal pad right away, suddenly self-conscious although nobody seems to be looking at me. Not until Diana says, "This is my new assistant."

The man next to Diana, a white guy in his mid-forties, gives me a friendly smile. I assume at some point I'll find out who on earth he is. Another lawyer? Somebody who's getting sued? The other people mumble sounds of acknowledgment but barely glance my way.

I fumble my pen and paper onto the table and longingly eye the water. Bread crumbs and peanut butter seem to coat the inside of my mouth. My tongue feels sticky.

Diana says, "Laurie, take notes. Ms. Kayce, as I was saying, I regret that you're unsatisfied with Eileen's work. I've spoken to her about this, and she understands the problems for which she is responsible."

The words give me a chill. Eileen, whoever she is, had to go through a lot worse than *understanding* something.

Diana continues, "We're grateful that you're willing to sit down with us today."

Ms. Kayce scowls. She's a block of scarlet: bright-red hair, bright-red suit, bright-red fingernails, and bright-red lipstick. It's all matched with chunky gold jewelry. I fight not to squint when I look at her.

Oh, hell. I should be writing this down, though maybe I'll leave out the vitriol. I write down: *Eileen understands. Grateful you are willing to sit down.*

"You're lucky, too," Ms. Kayce says. "I want to work with a senior partner from now on. And I want to do it at Eileen's rates, not a penny more."

"We can make that happen," the man next to Diana says.

"No, we can't," Diana says coolly.

Ms. Kayce glares but doesn't look surprised. Her red-painted lips pucker like a dog's ass. "No?"

Diana's profile looks serene, her upright posture betraying no tension. I don't think she's bluffing, but that poker face is so good it's hard to tell. "Due to Eileen's mismanagement, I'm willing to take on your case myself.

You can trust me to win it. I think you know that. But I cannot value my time for less than it's worth."

"Outrageous," Ms. Kayce splutters. "This customer service—"

"You're a client, not a customer. *Our* client. And if you see fit to stay with us, you'll find that your investment will continue to be rewarded."

I've never seen this kind of pure confidence. It's not cocky or aiming for bragging rights. It's absolute as Diana states her excellence as a simple fact.

Diana darts me the briefest of glances, and for some reason I go on high alert.

"You'll be lucky to have me, Ms. Kayce," she says. "I assure you of that."

Did I just get dunked into a hot bath? My whole body must be flushing pink. My nipples sure just took an interest in the proceedings. They go stiff when I hear my words tossed back to me by the most elegant, polished woman I've ever seen.

Ms. Kayce sniffs. I can see Diana's won her over. Does that mean I won Diana over with those words, too? Are they that powerful? Or do you just have to say them in the right way?

Diana seems to have said them in the right way, for Ms. Kayce tugs down her blazer sleeves and says, "Your reputation precedes you. All right, Diana. We'll give this a shot. But may I trust you to give Eileen a hard slap on the ass?"

Wow. The words worked. I can't help looking back at Diana. I realize I'm smiling. She glances at me again before I can wipe the look off my face, and the sudden, deadly look in her eyes shows me it's too late.

It works, though. I stop smiling in a hurry.

The meeting continues. I scribble my notes, and soon enough figure out that the guys' names are Matt and Jeffrey and that they're eerily quiet props for Jenny Kayce, who runs a cosmetics company being sued by an animal-rights group for testing their products in "substandard facilities." Or, as Ms. Kayce puts it, "The bleeding hearts are up in arms about bunny rabbits again."

Diana's defending them. Or at least helping them settle outside a courtroom.

By the end of the meeting, I have a bad taste in my mouth that makes me think wistfully of the peanut butter. Animal testing? Less than twenty-

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four hours and I've sold my soul. How can I tell Kayla about this? She works for an environmental nonprofit. It's how we met.

"Animal testing isn't illegal," Marcus reminds everyone as the binders and pens and notepads are tucked away. By now, I've worked out that he's an associate. Probably hopes to make partner soon. "Some spit and polish, and we'll get this cleared up for Miss Kiss Cosmetics."

Ms. Kayce stands up. "Please do. That godforsaken Havelin Beauty Group is breathing down my neck. They want to acquire me. I mean, who wouldn't, but this is the last thing I need while I try to keep my board in line."

Diana caps her pen. "We'll file a motion to dismiss, which I doubt will be accepted, and move on from there. Jenny, you'll certainly get a slap on the wrist."

Ms. Kayce rolls her eyes. "Then I'll get another bracelet to cover it up. Just keep these tree huggers away from me while I deal with the sharks myself."

"You should consult us for that, too."

"We'll see." For a moment, Ms. Kayce looks discomfited. "It'll be okay, won't it?"

"It will be," Diana says with such certainty that I fear for bunny rabbits everywhere.

"Good. Good. Diana, tell me, what do *you* think about animal testing? Does it matter to you?"

Diana lifts her eyebrows, and her tone makes it clear she finds the question irrelevant. "I can't say I love the idea, but it's not something I think about."

"So, like most women," Ms. Kayce says with a little smile.

At that, Diana bristles. I bet she doesn't get compared to "most" anyone and she must not enjoy it. But she merely tilts her head in brief acknowledgment.

"What about you?" Ms. Kayce asks me.

For the first time, all eyes in the room are on me. Diana's and Ms. Kayce's are the only ones I care about. Diana's gaze is impassive, but there's a warning in it somewhere. Ms. Kayce seems expectant as she looks, inevitably, at the pink streak in my hair.

“You seem like a bit of a rebel,” she says. “But the right age for my target market. Do you ever buy Miss Kiss products?”

I’ve seen Miss Kiss in the drugstore aisles. They seem like they have a much younger target market, with bright colors and names that reference candy and fruit. How old does this woman think I am?

“No, ma’am,” I say. “I don’t buy products that are tested on animals, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Millennials,” Ms. Kayce snorts, because that’s exactly what she was asking. How come nobody over forty seems to know I’m Gen Z? “Guess I won’t be sending you a sample kit. Diana, I’ll look forward to hearing from you soon.”

She and her entourage sweep from the room without a look back at either Diana or me. Ms. Kayce’s jewelry clicks and clacks as she goes, and when her bright red fades from sight, I feel the need to blink away sunspots.

Diana immediately rounds on Marcus. “Don’t presume to volunteer my services at bargain rates. Or any other rates.”

Marcus bows his shoulders and sighs. “Right, right. Sorry, Diana. I didn’t mean to undermine you.”

“Don’t do it again. And as for you...” Diana turns her glower on me.

I’d been about to get out of my seat, but now I find myself frozen stiff.

“Learn to lie,” she says. “Of *course* you’d love a sample kit from Miss Kiss. Of *course* you don’t pay attention to animal testing when you buy something. Do you think she wanted your honest opinion?”

“Well...yes? I mean, she said ‘target mar’—”

I shut up at once when Diana holds up her hand. “You’re not. Her target market is teenagers. Though maybe she thought you were one. Didn’t I tell you to get rid of...” She gestures at the side of my head with the streak.

I touch my hair protectively. What was I supposed to do? Did she want me to shave it off or something? “It takes a couple of tries. I’ll have it almost all gone by tomorrow. Um—”

“Get my lunch. I’m starving.” She doesn’t glance at the pastries at the end of the table. Maybe she’s afraid even looking at carbs will mean disaster for her willowy figure. “Type up those notes and get them to me by three. I’ll be in my office.” Diana leaves without clarifying what she wants to eat or what I’m supposed to use to type up my notes, since nobody’s dropped a computer into my lap or anything.

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I look at my phone in panic. It's 2:22 p.m. I have eight pages of notes because I wasn't sure what she'd need, so I wrote everything down. I have to find something to type all that up on, then type it, plus get her lunch from somewhere or other, in a time frame that makes today's breakfast run seem like a turtle crawl.

"She likes the kale chicken salad at the deli across the street," Marcus says with unexpected kindness. "If you don't have a laptop or anything, ask Monica to get you set up."

I have a laptop, a wheezy old thing that barely lets me get online and do my coursework. I dread the day it dies. Making it do double duty for work would finally topple it into its grave.

"Th-thanks." I stand up and extend my hand. "I mean, thank you, Marcus."

Marcus takes it in a warm grip. "My pleasure, Laurie. First day? Good luck."

He offers nothing else, but I've got time for nothing else. I stuff my supplies in my bag and practically take flight in my efforts to get to the deli across the street. The elevator ride seems even longer now, especially because the car stops twice to let people off and on.

When I finally reach the deli, waiting in line seems like another eternity. I have to remember that I'll be doing this all day, every day, for as long as I have this job. It's bound to get less stressful eventually. Right?

It's 2:36 when I make it back to the front desk, sweating through my clothes since Atlanta is still hotter than hell. Monica's busy fielding calls. When she pauses long enough for me to gasp out my request, she gives me an impatient look to rival Diana's. "Borrow my tablet. Bring it back the second you're done, and we'll see about getting you your own hardware."

"Oh, thank you," I say as if she's saved me and my entire family from an invading army. "Thank you so much!"

Minutes later, I skid into Diana's office—literally skid. I almost slip and land on my ass. She looks up from her laptop. It might be real greed in her eyes when she sees the plastic bag in my hand.

I hold it up, feeling absurdly triumphant. "Marcus said you like the kale chicken salad across the street. Is that okay?"

For answer, she points at her desk. I hurry over to place the salad in front of her, but she takes the bag from my hands. "You'll need a company



card so we don't keep having to reimburse you. Tell Monica to get on that. Where are your notes?"

Seriously? When does she think I had time to type them up? "Er, I'm about to transcribe them. Monica loaned me her tablet."

"Hmm. You'll need your own." Diana looks at my bag while she pops open the plastic top of her salad tub. "Let me see the notes before you type them up. I might as well make sure they're not completely inadequate."

She could have put that in a nicer way, but at least she's saving me some time if it turns out I did it all wrong. It would be even worse to type everything up and *then* be told how much I suck. I get out my legal pad. "Here."

Diana frowns at my hand when she takes the legal pad from it. "You keep very short fingernails."

What the hell did she say that for? Sure, it's an innocuous enough statement, but there's one reason a lesbian keeps minimalist fingernails. It's not a reason she'd want to discuss with her boss. She definitely, definitely does not want to do that.

This answers a question I hadn't realized I was asking myself, though. Diana Parker doesn't seem to have guessed that I'm gay.

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "It's more practical."

I wasn't trying to sound either reproving *or* seductive. But for some reason, Diana looks up at me like she's taken aback. She shakes her head a little and looks at the legal pad. "Sit down."

I do. I sit and wait while Diana eats her salad more daintily than any human being should be able to do with something tossed in dressing. She looks over my notes like I'm not even here.

While she eats and reads, my phone chimes. Diana doesn't seem to notice. I risk taking a look.

It's Kayla.

*How's the 1st day?*

Oh boy. I won't even know how to answer that in person when I get home. But her text does remind me of something I should do, and I open my e-mail app.

"Please restrict your texting to business matters when we're like this," Diana says without looking up.

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*When we're like this?* That's an odd way to put it, but it's no reason for me to blush. "I'm not texting. I'm going to e-mail Stephanie, like you said. I haven't had a chance yet."

"Are your e-mails as entertaining as your notes?" she asks dryly. "I'm enjoying the saga of 'Guy On the Right.'"

I flush. "I didn't know their names at first." Okay, so there are some debits to her seeing my first, unedited note-taking attempt. "But in general, is—"

"It'll do." Her faint sigh makes me wonder how something so obviously subpar could "do" anything. "E-mail Stephanie, and then transcribe these. Then e-mail them to me. Make sure there are no mistakes of spelling, grammar, or punctuation. Just because they're private doesn't mean they can be sloppy."

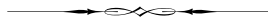
"Yes, ma'am." I wasn't exactly planning to give her something that looked like a third grader's book report. I check my inbox. "Oh! Stephanie's already e-mailed me." There are a bunch of attachments. I can only assume these are the "little lists" Diana mentioned.

"I'm not surprised. She was always proactive. It got her promoted." Something in her tone makes me look back at her. I wish I hadn't, since she's glaring again, like she's two seconds from firing me just because I dare not to be Stephanie.

Diana hands the notes back to me. "Type." She nods toward her office door beyond which the empty assistant's desk awaits.

I turn to go, but I can't resist giving one last look behind me when I reach the door. Diana's looking at me. Her eyes widen, and she immediately turns back to her laptop, but the glance lasted long enough to make my face catch fire.

Maybe it'll take me longer to get used to this job than I thought.



"Cool," Kayla breathes as she looks over my new-to-me, company-issued, featherweight laptop. "If you're selling your soul, at least you're getting shiny new toys."

"It's a couple of years old. I don't think they're trusting me with the top-of-the-line stuff."

"Boo hoo." Kayla hands me a beer. "What's the rest of your setup like?"

“Oh, it’s...fine? Pretty cool, actually. Private.” TV had prepared me to work in a cubicle all my life if I’d ever had an office job, but it wasn’t like that. “All the senior partners are on one corridor, and each of their offices has a tiny little anteroom that’s off the hallway. It makes them look really important. Anywhere, that’s where my desk is—Diana’s anteroom.”

“So, you’re like that three-headed dog, huh? Guarding the gates of the underworld.”

When I roll my eyes, she flops down on the couch next to me. I shut the laptop so I can’t spill anything on it and place it on the coffee table, which Kayla made from an old wooden door somebody left on the sidewalk. She’s handy that way.

I like our apartment, even if it’s not the lap of luxury Diana Parker’s undoubtedly used to. It’s nearly nine hundred square feet of hominess in Grant Park, and we’re renting it for eight hundred bucks a month, split two ways. We might not be living in the ritziest neighborhood, but we have such crappy cars and belongings that nobody’s bothered to break in.

There’s a nudge at my elbow. I sip my beer and turn to stroke Triscuit, Kayla’s seventeen-year-old cat. He’s in pretty good shape for an old guy, but his green eyes are rheumy, and he no longer leaps and bounds from place to place.

“Hey, buddy,” I tell him as I pat his head, and he purrs.

“He’s been a real asshole today,” Kayla says like that’s not like every other day. He’s a cat. “So, your boss. Hot or not?”

“That doesn’t matter. She’s my boss.”

“Hot, then.” Kayla takes a pull of her beer and puts her feet, clad in patterned knee-high socks, up on the coffee table. She nearly knocks off my sociology textbook. “Are we talking a seven? A ten? Somewhere between?”

*An eleven.* “I wouldn’t know. She’s, um, compelling. But cold.”

“Ooh.” Kayla’s eyes light up. “The sexy, buttoned-up type.”

“The straight type,” I say firmly. “She’s got a husband, and she didn’t know what my short fingernails were all about.” I wave my fingertips in the air.

Kayla boggles. “How the hell did you two get to talking about your fingernails?”

That’s...a good question. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned it. “She just noticed them and asked. She’s around people with professional manicures

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all day, so she probably thinks my nails look like crap. She ran me ragged, Kayla, seriously. It's not like that."

Kayla's look tells me that she knows it's exactly like that. My face flames. Oh, great, I might as well have put a sign around my neck reading *My boss gets me hot and bothered*.

"If it was," Kayla says, "that doesn't mean it's a bad thing. It's not like you have to do anything about it." She waves a hand. Her fingernails are painted purple and not minimalist at all. "I'm just saying, nobody's lit your fire since Stacey, and that was—what? Two years ago?"

"I've been kinda preoccupied," I snap. My tone makes Triscuit recoil, and I give him an apologetic look.

"Whoa, whoa!" Kayla holds up both hands. Her beer bottle catches the dim light of the lamp in the corner, letting me see the silhouette of the liquid inside the bottle. "I wasn't dumping on you. I'm only trying to say that it's a good sign you're noticing somebody. Anybody. Life goes on, you know? Even if it takes a while."

Life goes on? For the past two years, my life's done nothing but move, hurtling down like an avalanche. All I want right now is for it finally to slow down while I find a way to breathe again. My attraction to Diana Parker, to *anyone*, is hardly a "good sign" of that.

"I've got a new job," I say. "I've got school. Fuck, I've got homework I haven't even looked at yet. I don't have time for... whatever." I stand up and glance at my bedroom door. I got no sleep last night, and tonight doesn't look to be any different. Today's adrenaline has worn off, and my eyelids are sagging, but I'll have to power through.

"Okay." Normally Kayla's gentle tone makes me feel warm inside, like somebody cares for me. Right now, it grates against the raw spots on my skin that remind me life flayed me pretty bad for a while. "You eaten yet? Barry and I ordered Chinese, and there's plenty of General Tso's left over."

Say what you will about Kayla's boyfriend—and I do, under my breath—but he's generous with the leftovers. My stomach growls at once. At the same time, I notice how much my feet hurt and how faint I feel. It's almost ten o'clock, and I know for sure that sometimes I'll be working later hours than this.

The little voice, so tired now, wails, *What have you done? You won't be able to keep this up for long.*

ROSLYN SINCLAIR

I tell it to shut up. “That would be awesome. I’m starving.”

The words remind me of what Diana said earlier today. Absurdly, I wonder if she’s eaten dinner. She didn’t call for it today, and I didn’t feel like it was my place to ask. I’m not her mother.

Ten minutes later, when I’m in my bedroom with a plate of Chinese food in my lap and looking blearily at my unfinished sociology essay on my new laptop, I remind myself that I’m not Diana Parker’s anything. Except for her assistant. She doesn’t need anything more, and God knows neither do I. Not now.

After all, I’m doing just fine taking care of myself, Chinese takeout notwithstanding. Diana Parker doesn’t need anyone to fuss over her or boss her around.

The thought makes the back of my head prickle, and I shrug it off. I’ve got work to do, and miles to go before I sleep.

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# THE X INGREDIENT

BY ROSLYN SINCLAIR

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