

her way to her boss's office. This delightful blend of nausea and dread had always accompanied her walk to the starting line of a race. It would last until the starter's pistol blew. She missed the camaraderie of running cross-country in school, but not this feeling.

Gail's message on her machine twelve hours ago had meant she'd spent half the night awake, going over reasons why she shouldn't be worried, and the other half asleep but dreaming disaster scenarios, most of which end with her being fired. One involved having to exit the building in nothing but her underwear.

Rationally, she knew she was doing a good job. She'd only been a junior analyst at the boutique investment firm Rhodes Wähler for nine months, but she was the first person Roland called when he needed research fast. Plus, he regularly added companies to her list to follow and she never failed to deliver. Because she worked until it was done. By the time she headed home most evenings, the cleaning crew were the only ones left in the building.

It was too soon for a yearly evaluation. Had she done something wrong? Said something wrong? Or was it the other extreme? That she was too...standoffish? Since her first week where the sales team boys' club had tormented her with everything from photocopies of their penises left on her desk to a stripper disguised as a delivery guy to an endless variety of personal propositions, she'd basically hidden her body behind boxy suits and avoided solo encounters with her male colleagues. Naturally, 99% of her colleagues were of that persuasion.

"Did you need something? Or are just going to stand there and bite your lip all day?" The silky voice of Rhodes Wähler's executive receptionist broke into Emily's maze of worries. "It's a bad habit, you know. Your lips are in rough enough shape as it is. I mean, I guess you can get away without wearing makeup," Kendra's upper lip curled in distaste, belying her words, "But you could at least use some chapstick."

Emily consciously removed her upper teeth from where they'd clamped down on her lower lip and forced her mouth into a smile. Realizing she was holding her portfolio against her chest like it might escape, she also did her best to relax her