

Katwalk

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Chapter One

Katrina felt cool beads of sweat forming on her palms as she prepared to stand up. She placed her hands lightly on the desk and glanced around her tidy cubicle. As usual, there wasn't so much as a pen or a Post-it note—much less a paper clip—out of place. She quietly opened a drawer and removed her purse, turning her eyes to the calendar mounted on the wall as she reached inside for her makeup kit.

A small black circle was drawn around Wednesday, September 18.
Today.

It was finally here.

She ran a comb through her auburn hair, then checked her face in the mirror of her compact, applying a touch of powder to her fair skin and wishing, as always, that she didn't have quite so many freckles sprinkled across her cheeks and nose. She added a dab of rosy lip gloss, then rubbed hand sanitizer between her palms before putting her purse back in the drawer. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, sitting silently, thinking about how many times she'd practiced this.

Opening greeting.

Main statement and supporting points.

Closing expression of gratitude.

You can do this, she told herself.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and slowly stood up. She stepped away from her chair and carefully tucked it under the desk. Most of her coworkers were at lunch, so the office was quiet save for the chatter of a few account executives on the phone with clients. Every day around noon, especially when the weather was nice like today, the advertising agency emptied out in groups of two or three or four. Katrina usually brought her own sandwich, however. There was always so much work to do, and she had a hard time enjoying a lunch out knowing what was waiting for her when she got back to her desk. Besides, she wasn't exactly friends with her coworkers—not that she didn't want to be. She'd just never quite felt comfortable swapping stories about weekend exploits or gossiping about office politics with the same people who had to take her seriously as an accountant. And being shy certainly didn't help.

Everyone in the office knew Katrina Lynden could be counted on to finish her work on time and with a polite smile, but they didn't know how much she secretly wished someone would ask her to join them for drinks after work. Back when she first started, she had been invited out for happy hour a few times, but she always declined, citing work deadlines, and eventually the invitations stopped coming. It had been years since she'd received one, and she wondered if anyone knew how much she regretted having said no to those early efforts to include her.

She exited her cubicle and began walking down the long hallway. Conscious of her sweaty palms, she wiped them on her pants and forced herself to keep moving. Silently counting each step, she fought to ignore the voice in her head that told her to return to her desk, do what was expected of her, and get back to work.

Just like she'd been doing for years.

But she couldn't do that anymore.

It was too late.

She and Deb had made a pact.

She couldn't break her promise.

She walked gingerly across the hardwood floor leading toward the corner office, as though making less noise would make what was about to happen less real. She glanced at the placard on the open door that read JANICE HARRISON, CFO, then took a look inside at the plush interior, which was bigger than her entire living room. The older woman was alone, studying a sheet of paper, a thick folder of documents before her. Everyone knew Janice Harrison never went to lunch before one o'clock, if she took a break at all.

Katrina knocked gently and cleared her throat. "Janice?"

Janice lifted her head, her narrow face framed by a chic silver bob and expensive horn-rimmed reading glasses. "Katrina, hello." She looked a bit surprised, but not annoyed. "Do you need something?" Katrina rarely stopped by her office.

Katrina swallowed, then began her prepared remarks.

Opening greeting.

"May I speak with you for a moment?"

Janice removed her glasses and set them down. "Of course. Please, have a seat." She gestured to the black leather chair across from her sleek glass desk.

Katrina shut the door behind her, then walked over to the chair and sat down. She crossed her legs, careful to keep her ankles touching. Even though she reported directly to Janice, she'd been alone with her inside this office only a handful of times in her nearly eight years at the agency.

And never under these circumstances.

She reminded herself about the pact.

You can do this.

Now that it was finally happening, she was even more anxious than she'd thought she'd be.

"Are you okay, dear? You look a little pale." Janice gave her a concerned look. Janice was as professional as they came, but she often

showed a warm, almost maternal side toward her team, something Katrina had always appreciated, given her own mother's lack of affection.

Katrina nodded and tried to control her nerves. "I'm fine. Thanks for asking." She tapped her foot lightly on the carpet.

Janice glanced at the stack of papers on her desk. "How can I help you?" The expression in her eyes was kind, but it was clear she was preoccupied. Things at the agency were always busy, and they had recently signed two new clients. It was about to become even more hectic for the entire finance department.

Katrina opened her mouth to speak but hesitated.

Her throat was dry.

Her foot was still tapping.

"Katrina?" Janice said. She picked up the top sheet of paper from the stack and skimmed it, already distracted.

Katrina took a breath.

Main statement.

Finally, she uttered the words she'd practiced in front of her bathroom mirror so many times. "I . . . I would like to give notice."

Janice looked up, her eyebrows raised.

"You're resigning?"

"Yes." Katrina felt her head nodding involuntarily in agreement. She couldn't believe she was going through with this.

"May I ask why?" Janice looked genuinely taken aback.

She had known her boss would be startled by the news. Why wouldn't she be? Anyone would. For years Katrina had carefully projected an image, however inaccurate, of professional satisfaction. She had a good job, an established career path, and the respect of her colleagues, if not exactly their friendship.

She forced herself to continue, just as she'd practiced.

Supporting points.

“I just . . . feel like it’s time for me to move on, to begin a new chapter in my life.” She spoke quietly and knew she didn’t sound all that convinced of what she was saying.

“A new chapter? Why? You’re doing so well here.”

“Well . . .” She struggled to find an appropriate response to the question. She wondered what would happen if she told the truth.

I can’t pretend I like my job anymore.

I never wanted to be an accountant.

I don’t want to spend my life like this.

How had she let so many years slip by?

“Katrina?” Janice asked.

“It’s, well, it’s hard to explain,” she said. Her foot was still tapping on the carpet.

Janice tilted her head to one side. “Do you have another job lined up?” The *Have you been interviewing on the side?* was implied. Talented accountants were hard to come by in the world of advertising agencies, especially so in tech-heavy Silicon Valley, where everyone wanted to work at a start-up in hopes of striking it rich.

Katrina shook her head. “Oh, no, it’s nothing like that. Actually, I’m planning to take some time off.” Saying it out loud made her decision feel suddenly real, as if she’d just jumped out of an airplane. Or off a building.

Janice didn’t look convinced. “Are you sure you want to leave?” She knew how good Katrina was at her job. Janice’s sincere appreciation for Katrina’s ability with numbers was one of the things that made it so hard for Katrina to quit. Most people just thought she was boring. At least that’s what she assumed they thought.

Katrina sat up straight and nodded with a confidence she wished were genuine. “Yes, I’m sure.” She recited the line she’d practiced over and over. “I’ve given it quite a bit of thought, and I know this is the right thing for me to do right now.”

She’d made her usual list of pros and cons about the decision, and to say it was lopsided would be an understatement. She hadn’t

wanted to face the reality of how unhappy she was, but once she'd seen it written in ink, it was hard to ignore.

Confident was hardly how she felt about the decision, however.

At the moment *queasy* came closer to the truth.

"There's nothing I can do to change your mind?" Janice said.

Katrina squeezed the sides of the chair and glanced briefly at the ceiling, then willed herself to regain eye contact.

She shook her head. "Unfortunately, no." She knew Janice was referring to a salary increase, but she also knew that even a raise wouldn't help. This was more important than money. "I appreciate that you want me to stay, I really do. But I just . . . I need to try something new."

The look in Janice's eyes changed slightly. "Try something new?"

"Yes."

"You're getting out of accounting?"

"Temporarily, yes."

Katrina could tell Janice was waiting for her to elaborate, but when it became clear that she wasn't going to, Janice put her glasses back on and sighed. "Well, Katrina, I have to say I'm really sorry to see you go. You're an excellent accountant and a very nice person, and we've been lucky to have you here for this long."

Katrina smiled. Why couldn't her mother be more like that?

Closing expression of gratitude.

"Thank you, Janice. I've enjoyed working here. Oh, and just so you know, I've already finished my reports and e-mailed them to Erica." Erica was an admin who acted as a paperwork liaison between Janice and the accounting team.

Janice gave her a grateful look. "I'm not surprised, but thank you for doing that. I appreciate it and know the rest of the team will too." She picked up her phone. "I'll have Sheila from HR sort out the paperwork." Katrina knew that *giving notice* was just an expression. Due to the sensitive nature of the financial data she worked with, she would be leaving today—for good.

Katrina stood up. “Okay, well, thanks. I’ll . . . get my things together.” She turned to go as Janice dialed Sheila’s extension.

She was nearly out the door when she heard Janice’s voice.

“Katrina, dear?”

She turned around. “Yes?”

Janice covered the receiver with one hand and lowered her voice. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Katrina smiled, trying to quell the rising panic at what she’d just done. “Thanks, Janice. I do too.”

* * *

That evening Katrina sat at a high table at her favorite bar, Stephens Green on Castro Street, the main drag a few blocks from her apartment in downtown Mountain View. She nursed a Sprite and waited for Deb to arrive so they could swap stories.

She placed the round cardboard coasters in front of her in a tidy stack.

I can’t believe I really quit my job.

She replayed the day’s events, trying to wrap her head around the fact that she’d actually gone through with it. Her memory of the specifics of how it had all unfolded was somewhat blurred by nerves, but the end result was the same: she was no longer employed.

Katrina found changing brands of shampoo difficult. Quitting the only full-time job she’d ever had? Unfathomable. She knew her mother wasn’t going to be happy when she heard the news, but she didn’t want to think about that just yet.

Right now she just wanted to enjoy the moment.

She took a sip of her drink and tried to appreciate the emotions she was experiencing about what lay ahead. She was anxious, there was no denying that, but for the first time in a long time, maybe years, she also felt a stirring of something else.

Excitement.

She was *excited*, and the sensation, while pleasant, was striking in its unfamiliarity.

How had she become so . . . numb?

She continued to stack and restack the coasters as she examined her innermost thoughts.

She was apprehensive, for sure.

But she wasn't *terrified*, which she had expected to be, and for her, that in and of itself was a victory.

What she felt more than anything was . . . relief.

She had done it.

She was making a change.

It wasn't too late for her.

She and Deb had a few days to get ready. All she had to do was pack.

She sipped her drink and looked at her watch, then turned toward the entrance. Deb should have been here by now. Maybe her exit strategy hadn't gone as smoothly. While Katrina had chosen to resign at lunchtime, Deb had planned to break the news later in the afternoon, when she thought it would cause the least drama. Deb hated drama even more than she hated her boss.

Katrina pulled her phone out of her purse to see if there was a text or a missed call.

Nothing.

She's probably just caught in traffic. She'll be here soon.

"You need anything else to drink?" the waiter asked.

Katrina smiled. "I'm good for now. Just waiting for a friend."

As the waiter walked away, Katrina thought about the day, three weeks earlier, when she and Deb had made the joint decision to quit their jobs. Or, more accurately, the day Deb had convinced Katrina to quit her job. They had met up at their favorite sushi bar, Sushitomi, one evening after work.

Over a bowl of edamame, Deb complained about her unappreciative boss, and Katrina wondered out loud what would have happened if she'd had the nerve to stand up to her parents and pursue her love of art. As the waiter brought them a plate of California

rolls and a sashimi platter, he smiled sympathetically and set down two steaming cups of sake.

“Sake’s on the house. Sounds like you two need something stronger than sushi tonight,” he said with a wink.

They both laughed and thanked him, but the moment he turned his back to walk away, Katrina pushed her cup toward Deb. As soon as she released her hand, Deb caught it and gave it a squeeze.

“He’s right, you know.”

Katrina nodded. “I’m not disagreeing with him. I just don’t drink sake.”

“I know, I know, you and your low alcohol tolerance. But I’m not talking about sake. I’m talking about us.”

“What?”

“Us. We need to mix it up.”

Katrina picked up a pod of edamame. “Mix up what?”

“Life. Our lives. We need to mix up our *lives*.”

“And how would we do that?”

“Let’s quit.”

“Quit what?”

“Our jobs.”

Katrina gave her a look. “Quit our jobs? Are you crazy?”

Deb squeezed her hand again. “I’m serious, Katrina. Let’s do it. What are we waiting for? Look at us. All we do is come here and complain about work, right?”

“Right.”

“But we never do anything about it, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, maybe it’s time. Maybe we should quit.”

“You’re really serious?”

“Yes. I mean, why not? We’re not married. We don’t have kids. Neither one of us is even dating anyone right now. What are we waiting for? Let’s quit and go do something adventurous before it’s too late.”

Katrina opened up another pod and thought about what her friend was proposing.

Quit and go do something adventurous before it's too late.

She wondered what her parents would think of that idea. As the only daughter of two overachievers who valued a person's work ethic above all else, the importance of getting a practical education had been ingrained in her since her days in a crib.

You need to be able to support yourself, Katrina.

Majoring in art history isn't going to pay the bills, Katrina.

You need to get your head out of the clouds, Katrina.

You can't expect a man to come along and rescue you, Katrina.

So getting a practical education was exactly what she'd done. She'd chosen a major that would lead to a steady job, a predictable career path, a growing nest egg, and, eventually, a mortgage. She'd done everything the right way.

The safe way.

The responsible way.

The *boring* way.

Until that moment.

She looked at Deb. "You really think we should do it?"

"I do."

"What would we do?"

Deb shrugged. "I don't know. We could go somewhere."

"Could you be more specific?"

Deb downed her sake. "I don't care. The beach. The mountains. The moon. Anywhere but Mountain View. I've had enough of Mountain View." She set down the cup and tapped her palms against the table. "Wait. I've got it! Let's go live in New York for a while."

"New York?"

"Yes. Why not? You know what they say, right? *Everyone should live in New York at least once.*"

"Who says that?"

"I don't know. People."

“For how long?”

Deb picked up Katrina’s sake and downed it too, then set the cup on the table and tapped her chin with her finger. “I don’t know . . . a month? Maybe two? Two months sounds good. Yes, let’s do two.”

Katrina’s eyes got big. “Two months? Are you joking?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“No.”

“So there’s your answer.” She pointed to herself and shook her head. “Me. Not joking.”

“Two months is a long time, Deb.”

Deb waved a hand in front of her. “Please. It will fly by. If you want, you can sublet your place here to cover the rent.” Deb never seemed to worry about money the way Katrina did. But then again, she didn’t really need to. Her grandparents had made sure of that.

Katrina took a sip of water and considered the idea. Scary as it sounded, maybe Deb was right; maybe she *could* break out of her shell. Plus she hadn’t had an extended vacation in ages. She’d started her job at the agency immediately after graduating from college, when most of her peers had gone traveling or at least taken the summer off to unwind after four years of books and exams. *Why wait to begin working?* her dad had said. *You’ve got to start supporting yourself,* her mother had agreed.

Katrina had listened to her parents, albeit reluctantly, and as a result, outside of one family trip to Washington, DC—which, frankly, had felt more like school than a vacation, given how structured it had been—she had never even left California. She’d gone to college just down the road from home, earned a degree in accounting—with honors—then had taken the job with the advertising agency and become a full-time number cruncher barely one week after graduation.

“Are you with me?” Deb extended her hand.

Katrina hesitated.

“Well?” Deb kept her hand out.

Katrina stared at the edamame bowl and thought about the pit she felt in her stomach whenever someone asked her what she did for a living. She'd been unhappy in her job for a long time, but for some reason it had never occurred to her to quit.

Not even once.

Quitting would be so . . . *unlike* her.

Deb was staring at her, her hand still extended. "You can do it, Katrina. I know you can. It would be good for you to take a chance for once, to try something outside of that safe little bubble you live in."

Katrina knew her friend was right, but she hesitated.

"Come on, you know I'm right," Deb said. "And I say that thing about your bubble with love, by the way."

"I know you do."

Deb raised one eyebrow. "So what do you think? Are you in?"

Katrina took a deep breath.

Maybe this is just what I need.

She sat up straight and shook her best friend's hand.

"Okay, I'm in."

* * *

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." Deb finally came rushing up to the table nearly thirty minutes late. "Things got a little crazy at the office." She took off her jacket and sat down, then looked around for the waiter. "I'm dying for a stiff drink."

Katrina took a sip of Sprite and held up her guidebook. "No worries. I've been reading about all sorts of cool things we could do in New York. Did you know that in Central Park there's a—"

Deb put her hand on Katrina's shoulder. "I need to talk to you."

Katrina froze, then squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh no. Don't tell me."

Deb kept her hand on Katrina's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

Katrina was silent for a few moments, then opened her eyes and looked at her friend with a sigh. "Okay, let's hear it."

Deb stood up. “Let me get that drink first.” She hurried over to the bar.

Flush with panic, Katrina’s mind began to race.

Is this really happening?

Is the rug really being pulled out from under me?

I just quit my job.

Her foot began to tap as one thought leaped in front of all the others.

What am I supposed to do now?

Deb returned, then pressed her palms against her temples for a moment before speaking. “Okay, here’s what went down. When I told my boss I was quitting, he offered me a big raise, right then and there. He didn’t even hesitate.”

Katrina raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yes, along with that promotion I’ve been wanting for like a year. He said he’d been planning to promote me at my next review anyway. Then he told me how he and all the other higher-ups expect me to be running my department one day.”

“But I thought he didn’t like you.”

“I did too, which is why I was so surprised. I thought he had it in for me, but you should have heard him when I told him I was quitting. He went on and on about how good I am at my job, finally showing me the respect and appreciation I’ve wanted for so long. He sounded so sincere I couldn’t help but believe him. He was close to *groveling*, Katrina.”

“Why didn’t he ever tell you any of that before?”

Deb lifted up her hands. “I know! Typical man. They never appreciate what they’ve got until they’re about to lose it, just like most of my ex-boyfriends. Anyhow, after he said all that, I couldn’t turn him down. I just couldn’t. I’m so sorry.” She made a pained face.

Just then the waiter appeared with Deb’s drink, a vodka martini. She immediately took an enormous sip—or gulp. “So do you hate me? If I were you, I think I might hate me.”

Katrina didn't reply. Instead, she straightened up the coaster stack, which didn't need straightening.

"Will you please say something? Even *I hate you* would be better than nothing right now."

"Of course I don't hate you. I could *never* hate you. I'm just disappointed that our big plan has sort of . . . imploded." The truth was, Katrina was devastated, but she didn't want Deb to know that. She didn't want her to know that she was paralyzed with fear. At least before, she'd had a plan. Now she had . . . nothing.

But what was done was done, and she didn't want her friend to feel any worse than she already did, so she maintained her polite exterior.

"I'm so sorry, Katrina. I truly thought they were never going to promote me. If I'd suspected there was even a baby chance they would counteroffer like that, I wouldn't have let you quit your job. I never imagined it would turn out like this."

"It's okay. I know how much you wanted that promotion." She also knew that despite Deb's occasional gripe about not being appreciated by her boss, she enjoyed her event-planning job and was generally happy with her career choice. Katrina, on the other hand, couldn't remember the last time she'd actually looked forward to going to work. Had she ever?

She certainly wouldn't be going to work tomorrow. She'd already cleaned out her cubicle and said good-bye to her coworkers—neither of which had taken very long—and turned in her security badge.

Plus she didn't want to go back anyway. On that she was clear.

The question was, what would she do now? She knew she could probably find another accounting job in no time if she put her mind to it, but she had already sublet her place to a friend of a friend of Deb's, a freelance writer from San Diego who was all set to move in on Monday. Plus she and Deb had already paid for the apartment they'd rented in Manhattan, beginning Tuesday, and it hadn't been

cheap. Rearranging everything at the last minute was going to be not only complicated but expensive.

“Katrina? Are you there? What’s going on inside that smart head of yours?” Deb snapped her fingers in the air between them.

Katrina blinked and realized she was tapping her foot again.

“I hope you’re not thinking of ways to poison me,” Deb said.

Katrina tried not to laugh as she took another sip of her Sprite. “I’m not exactly thrilled with you at the moment, but I’ll get over it. I guess I’ll just need to find a new job a little faster than I’d planned to. And a place to live until Thanksgiving.”

“Why don’t you go without me?”

“Go live in New York for two months *alone*?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Are you crazy? Do you even know me?”

“Do I look like I’m crazy? People go traveling by themselves all the time. Why can’t you?”

“Sure, *other people* go traveling by themselves. I can’t even go to the movies by myself. You know that.”

“Well, maybe it’s time to shake things up a little bit. You’re almost thirty years old. Time to spread those wings.”

Katrina stirred the ice in her drink with the straw. “I’ve never gone anywhere alone for even a weekend. There’s no way I could spend two months in New York City by myself.”

“Yes, you could.”

“I don’t know anyone there.”

“You’d meet people.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not overcome with panic every time you walk into a roomful of strangers.”

“You’re not as shy as you think you are.”

Katrina felt herself stiffen. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that for whatever reason you *tell* yourself that you’re shy, and then, unfortunately, you actually listen to yourself. You don’t *have* to listen to that, you know.”

“Again, easy for you to say. You’re not me. And besides, going across the country by myself isn’t quite what I had in mind when I signed up for this little adventure.”

Deb picked up her drink. “I know going without me is light-years out of your comfort zone, but I’m just saying that you should think about it. You’ve already taken such a huge step by quitting your job. Wouldn’t it be a shame to get another one right away instead of using this time off to do . . . *something*?”

Katrina shrugged. “Probably.”

“Probably?”

She smiled weakly. “Okay, definitely.”

“There you go. And it’s not like you wanted to stay at your job anyway, right? I mean, would you want to go back there tomorrow if you could? Even if they offered you a promotion?”

Katrina answered without hesitation. “No.”

“See? So this is for the best, no matter what happens next.”

“I know, I know. All of this is just . . . scary.”

“Life is scary. But that’s what makes it so exciting, right? And for the record, I’m still paying for my half of the apartment, so if you decide to go, don’t worry about that. I may be ditching you, but I’m not screwing you.”

Katrina laughed. “You always have a way of making yourself come out of every situation smelling like a rose, did you know that?”

Deb bowed her head in thanks. “What can I say? It’s from all those country-club lunches my grandparents used to drag me to. The ability to schmooze comes in handy in a pinch. So you’ll think about it? And if you do it, I’ll try to come visit you for a weekend.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“And you don’t hate me?”

“I don’t hate you.”

“Promise?”

Katrina shook her head, then picked up a menu and whapped Deb lightly on the back of the head with it. “I promise. I could never hate you. But you’re definitely buying me dinner tonight.”