

CHAPTER TWO



Ihurry down the busy street toward the subway. It's almost happy hour. A cocktail sounds perfect. But I can't. I pop in my AirPods to drown out the city. My "Feel Good" playlist booms against my eardrums. With the interview still in my head, I recall the moment Mr. Mustache told me how impressed he was with my knowledge of the firm and its dealings before he became mute. I hope it's enough to outshine the Miss-Mrs. mishap. Maybe I'm overthinking it? Then again, how many failed job interviews does one have to suffer through before the paranoia settles in? This vicious cycle of high hopes and deep plunges is ruthless. I'm starting to wonder if I have what it takes to play big. Maybe my dad's right. What if I'm not cut out for this place? What if I can't see myself clearly?

I swear sometimes I look back on my time at Howard Brothers Group and wonder if I made it all up. Was any of it real? Then,

the nearly weightless white box in my hand reminds me that it was, because Eric is real. He's seen firsthand what I'm capable of and he thinks I'd be perfect for Monty Fuhrmann. But will Monty Fuhrmann think I'm perfect for them?

I suck in a deep breath and lift my chin. If they don't hire me, then maybe I'll apply for the analyst job instead. How can they say no to that? The idea of taking a step back just to be hired at the firm spoils in my gut like a bad street vendor hot dog. Gnawing at my lip, I consider my options. The taste of my Fierce Crimson lipstick turns metallic. I wipe the blood from my mouth. It's hard not to stress over every possible conclusion.

As I walk beneath the scaffolding toward the Wall Street station, I watch men in tailored Armani suits walk through the glass revolving doors of the various financial institutions that line the street. I bet none of them have ever had to even consider taking a step backward in their career just to preserve it. I should've known that choosing this life was going to be hard. My first clue was when my dad offered me a position at his firm that was subpar to the opening positions he offered my older brothers. It was as if he wanted to *discourage* me from being an investment banker. I wonder what he would've offered me if I'd been his third son. What would the world offer me if I were a man?

A loud crack thunders overhead and sparkling particles cascade around me. I duck, shielding my head with my free hand, and hurry forward a few feet.

What the hell?

Squinting my eyes, I turn back. A pair of construction workers yells obscenities at each other as they balance on ladders just below

a partially lit deli sign. I increase the volume of my music and shake off the nerves. Inside the subway station, the stench of urine assaults my nose as I step onto the platform. Human, not animal.

Awesome . . .

It's almost comical how piss seems to be my life's theme lately. The universe pissing on my dreams, me pissed off at the world, not to mention scrubbing dried piss off toilets.

Yep, that's the big secret. I'm headed off to spend the next few hours cleaning some rich guy's apartment as a housekeeper for Amanda's Maid Service.

Never let another do Amanda's job.

That's their slogan.

Back in the eighties it was *Never let another woman do A-Man-da's job*. For someone who perpetuated the sexist stereotype for so many years, Amanda no longer cleans houses and she definitely doesn't need a man. That woman must be sitting on millions.

Sure, I could've been a bartender or server like the other dream-chasers do in this city. But I've never been good at mixing drinks, and I doubt I have the strength to balance a tray piled with hot plates or the patience to deal with customers snapping their fingers at me like I'm a house butler. Besides, it's so visible. The chances of waiting on an old business contact, or worse, a potential employer, are too high. This job generally gives me anonymity. I rarely clean the same place twice and the clients are never home. Plus, it's something I do well. I learned how to wash windows before I learned to read. My mother, somewhat of a Stepford wife, never made my two older brothers scrub anything except their own bodies. Instead, she groomed me to be her mini-maid. Who knew one day I'd make a mini-career out of it? Then again, the

more I have to scrub the remnants off someone else's porcelain throne, the more it feels nauseatingly permanent.

The train arrives at my stop. I push my way out of the crowd and hike up to the sunlit street toward the client's apartment, four blocks away. Men sport biceps-hugging polos, and women show off their Pilates-toned legs in sundresses as they pass by. I slip off my blazer and check the weather app on my phone. Seventy-two degrees. I flip to Boca Raton weather. Eighty-nine degrees. Yikes, it's only early May. This day is too nice to be inside doing laundry and scouring bathtubs. Too bad I can't afford to skip this gig.

It hasn't quite been an hour since my interview, but I can't help checking my email.

Stay positive, Delia.

Who knows? Maybe there's an offer from HR asking if I can start tomorrow. Wouldn't that be a miracle? I hold my breath but not for long.

Nothing from Monty Fuhrmann.

Nothing from anyone.

A sigh escapes my lungs, and I change the playlist to something more somber. Only two more blocks to go. Good thing because these heels are starting to piss me off too.

The luxury apartment building casts a towering shadow while the doorman's gloves are blindingly white. He gives me a respectful nod as I step inside. Must be nice having someone there to open doors for you. I need three keys just to get inside my fourth-floor walk-up apartment. Then again, the hike gives me killer calves. The clack of my pinching pumps ricochets off the glittery granite walls as I walk along the marble floor. Every crystal dangling in the chandelier above the reception desk is pristine.

“Good afternoon, miss,” the clerk says.

He knows I’m a *miss*.

I set last season’s Versace sunglasses on the granite counter. “Hi, I’m from Amanda’s Cleaning Service, here for apartment 29A.”

He does a double take. “*You’re the cleaning lady?*”

This guy has no idea how much I share his incredulity. Still, I hold my head high, clenching my jaw to the point of a toothache. “I prefer the term *cleaning professional*.”

“My apologies,” he says. “Most women I see going up to that apartment look more street professional and less Wall Street *professional*.”

“I was a Wall Street professional and I’d like to be one again soon,” I say, frowning.

His gaze drifts as he shakes his head. “I know the feeling. I used to run a gallery. Now I’m lucky if I make it to an art show.”

“Sorry to hear that.” And I am sorry. People like us come to New York to live out our dreams of grandeur. Has every person in the service field arrived there by default?

“Can I see your ID, please?” he asks. I hand him my New York driver’s license, which I use more for drinking than driving. While he checks the card against his computer screen, my eyes wander back up to the glistening chandelier. Its light dims and amplifies like a slow pulse, struggling to regain its full glow.

“Elevators are on the left.”

I return my attention to the man behind the desk as he slides a set of keys across the cold stone counter and motions down the hall. “Thanks. Good luck with the art gallery thing.”

His dimples appear, but there seems to be little hope in his eyes. “Stay positive, right?”

I give him a thumbs-up with a matching smile, managing to delay my eye roll until only the elevator doors bear witness.

The twenty-ninth floor has only two apartment doors: 29A and 29B. Each must be enormous. I knock before entering the space, just in case. Light from the massive windows fills the airy apartment. I squint through the glare of the late-afternoon sun, taking in the view of the tall mirrored buildings; the Freedom Tower stands out above them all. With so much sky, this view is even better than Mr. Mustache’s. Whoever lives here doesn’t share my worries. I make my way into the kitchen, where it reeks like the breath of a drunk. The island bar top is littered with empty bottles of tequila. The rims of the margarita and shot glasses are garnished with smudged lipstick. Looks like Siren Red and Malibu Barbie Pink. Hmm, a brunette and a blonde. How nice.

I wipe my hand along the countertop. Tacky. Just like this filthy-rich display of excess.

“Must’ve been a wild night,” I grumble, searching for somewhere else to place my Gucci briefcase. That sticky shit would definitely lower the resale value. The living room couch looks more like a hamper than an expensive piece of leather. A damp towel, boxer briefs, a guy’s tank top. Bikini one, bikini two.

Who the hell is this guy?

Not knowing what other sticky shit might be lurking, I park my Gucci safely at the front door. I pull out an oversized shirt, leggings, and a pair of tennis shoes and change in the hall bathroom. Holding my breath, I lift the toilet seat. Luckily, no leftovers in the

basin. Just dried pee splatters. Typical. You'd think an adult American male would have enough practice to make a clean shot.

Guess they can't all be marksmen. Then again, why would they be if they never have to clean it up?

Time to save the Gucci from eBay.

I slip in my earbuds and blast my dance mix. That's the one thing I like about this gig. I can cut a rug and vacuum it at the same time. Not to mention, shakin' off all the rejection by shakin' my thang is way better stress relief than drowning in cocktails. I bust out my best Beyoncé booty quake as I shake my way to the sofa, grabbing the stray garments and following the trail of dirty laundry into the bedroom. Bopping around with a mound of clothes piled high in my arms, I almost miss the familiar face in the carefully arranged photographs on the bookcase.

I gasp, letting the laundry fall at my feet.

It can't be. Can it?

I pull out one of the heavy frames for a closer look. That thick dark hair, that big toothy smile, and those coffee-brown eyes could only belong to Todd-freaking-Fairbanks, the founder and CEO of Ezeus. Either he has a twin that no one's ever heard of or I'm cleaning the tech millionaire's apartment.

Holy shit.

My hands tremble as I replace the photo exactly where I found it. I retrieve my phone from my pocket. Eric's never going to believe this. Wait! Shit. He knows nothing about Delia the maid.

I mean Cleaning Professional.

I tug out my wireless earbuds and listen for Fairbanks in case he snuck in. Nothing but the sound of my own breath. I scoop up the fallen clothes and tiptoe around on the pale maple flooring.

No sign of him. Or anyone else.

I exhale a sigh of relief and a little prayer that he doesn't return before I leave. I've dreamed of meeting Todd Fairbanks. Introducing myself as his housekeeper is not what I had in mind. When I close my eyes I can see it—me working for Monty Fuhrmann, dressed in an expensive tailored suit and shaking Todd Fairbanks's hand from across a conference room table, both of us congratulating ourselves on a successful deal. It's like a clear memory. Everything about it, from the fluorescent lights to the smell of freshly printed pitchbooks to the touch of a firm hand against my own. But his underwear, six inches beneath my nose, brings me back to reality.

After hours of dusting and scrubbing and loathing, I take in an exhausted breath. A mix of lemon-scented cleaner and bleach lingers in the air. I pack my earbuds neatly in their plastic case and tuck them into my briefcase. Wouldn't it be great if this were the last apartment I ever cleaned besides my own? I chew my lip as I open my email, hoping to find that the answer to that question is a resounding yes, yes, oh, hell yes! Just imagine, cleaning Todd Fairbanks's apartment on Wednesday then working on his company's IPO on Friday.

Still nothing from Monty Fuhrmann.

I pick up my briefcase and spot the little white cupcake box on the floor. It's as if it was hiding behind the leather bag, not wanting to admit that tomorrow I'll be another year older and worse off than I could've imagined at this point in my life. I grab the box and peek inside. My mouth waters at just the sight of the deep dark chocolate frosting swirl and specks of crumbled cake.

How did Eric remember my birthday, let alone my favorite

Brooklyn blackout cupcake? I spot the unlit birthday candle lying inside and blush at the idea of him singing “Happy Birthday” to me in front of his coworkers. I should’ve let him do it. Only a guy who likes a girl would do something like that, right? Maybe Eric’s onto something and my luck is about to change. Maybe this is the year I’ll get everything I want.

I pull at the door handle but then let it go. This is Todd Fairbanks’s apartment. If I don’t get the job at Monty Fuhrmann, this may be the closest I ever get to him. I shift my glance between the cupcake box and the gorgeous apartment.

Why not? I deserve a break.

I walk back into the kitchen, setting aside my phone to ready the cupcake. Pulling open drawer after kitchen drawer, I finally find a lighter.

Aha!

With a flick of the spark wheel, I light my little birthday candle, knowing exactly what to wish for. Not that birthday cake wishes ever come true. If they did, I would’ve married Lance Bass before I got my first period.

But seriously, why should I have to *wish* for what I want, anyway? Especially when I’ve done the work. I’ve shown up fierce. Haven’t I proven myself? Is it too much to ask to get what I’ve earned? Deflated, I look out the window at what seems to be an arrangement of glittering stars. The cityscape of lit windows and buildings comes into focus. And if I don’t get a real job soon, I might just throw myself off one of them.

Too dark, Delia. Get some perspective.

I shake away the thought and remind myself to be *positive*. This is New York after all. Anything can happen.

Melted wax bubbles over the edge of the candle as the wick burns in a mesmerizing flame. With a slow, deep inhale, I wish from the bottom of my heart that somehow I can get a job at Monty Fuhrmann tomorrow. Not just any job but a job I truly deserve. I force a gusty exhale and the lights go out.

Not just the candlelight. All the lights.

“Huh?”

I blink a few times and focus on the window. The entire city is just as dark as the apartment. Pitch. Black.

It’s a blackout.

My palms grow sweaty and my heart begins to race as if I’m being suffocated by the city’s shadow. I scramble to find the lighter, but instantaneously the room is bright again. The city’s awake, barely skipped a beat.

Okay. Definitely time to call it a night.

I grab my cupcake and chuck the box in the garbage before heading out the door. I walk toward the elevator but then stop short. It could’ve been a fluke power outage, but who wants to risk getting stuck in an elevator, even a Class A model? Glancing around the hallway, I spot the entrance for the stairs. At least I won’t be going *up* twenty-nine flights. My Gucci and I make it all the way down without incident and trek the well-lit journey down to the street. Heading uptown, pedestrians pass by, seemingly unconcerned about the momentary blackness. Probably all natives, such a steel-nerved bunch. I pass by the subway entrance. Don’t want to get trapped in that tube either. The walk will do me good. Thank God I’m wearing sneakers.

What a weird day. It’s like there are all these elements in my life that are the right ones, but for some reason, they’re all mis-

placed. What would it take to sort them out? A bold gust of wind stirs the litter on the pavement and ripples through my T-shirt, sending a chill through my body. I pick up the pace and swipe my finger across the dark frosting. The sugary cream ignites a rich sensation on my tongue, instantly easing the tensions of the day. Maybe I just need more chocolate in my life.

I take the last bite as I approach my small apartment building. My keys jangle in my hand and I unlock the first door, and the second, then trudge the three flights of stairs up to my floor. The chatter of the evening news seeps through a neighboring door. Across the hall, laughter bellows from a live-audience sitcom. A dog yips and growls as I pass the unit next to mine. I slip the third and final key in the dated brass doorknob and step inside. My roommates, Regina and Frankie, are sprawled out on the living room rug. Accompanying them is a half-empty bottle of cheap red wine.

Perfect. I can use a glass.