

She counts down the minutes until the work day ends, praying they will somehow squeeze a few extra seconds in the spaces between each changing number. Despite her hoping, the clock turns from 4:59 to 5:00 with the same inevitability it always does.

Slowly, methodically, she packs up her things. Stacks her folders into a neat pile and organizes all the pens into their cup near her computer. She quadruple checks that all her documents are saved before closing them and logging out of her computer. She pushes in her chair and takes a moment to swipe the eraser crumbs into the trash. She glances around her cubicle and finds nothing else, however small, to do so she picks up her bag and her coffee cup and heads out.

Conveniently on her path out of the building is her boss's office. Luckily, said boss is still inside, working late as usual.

She raps gently on the door frame. Her boss turns and smiles at the sight of her.

"Anastasia, come in!"

She carefully makes her way into the office. "Is there anything else I can take care of for you before I head out?"

Her boss laughs and waves a dismissive hand. "Get out of here already! You're already ahead on all your projects and you've stayed late for me every day this week. Take an early Friday evening for once, okay?"

Anastasia laughs, hoping it doesn't sound as stiff as it feels. "Sure. Monday then."

And she leaves, not one step any faster than it needs to be. She waits at the bus stop and hopes the driver will be late. He never is. She stands, one hand on the rail, instead of taking one of the empty seats and hopes each person on the bus will get off at a different stop. As usual, they all get off at one of the major transfer sites.

The bus reaches her stop and she gets off. She thanks the bus driver as she exits, just for the extra few seconds it buys her.

She fumbles with her key at the door, not bothering to try and hurry the key into the lock. The door opens, though, and she enters the apartment. It's silent, but that's more disquieting than comforting.

Carefully, she tiptoes into the bedroom and drops off her bag, so gently it wouldn't disturb even the lightest of sleepers. Then she goes into the bathroom and eases the door closed behind her.

From the cabinet above the toilet, she grabs her makeup wipes and slowly cleans her face.

In the mirror, the truth is revealed. Bruises beaten into the soft skin under her eyes, lines in her forehead that other women her age don't have, the shakiness in her hands that never goes away.

It would be easier if they were real bruises, if there was an angry partner in this empty apartment, if there were fists and bloody wounds etched into her skin for all to see.

But she's alone with the dark-circled, unhappy woman in the mirror and no matter how long Anastasia lingers at work, on the bus, in the supermarket, she is always waiting.