

I

Sam stares up at the slowly lightening ceiling and practises her breathing, like the doctor advised her, as she tries to stop her 5 a.m. thoughts congealing into one enormous dark cloud above her head.

In for six, hold for three, out for seven.

I am healthy, she recites silently. My family is healthy. The dog has stopped that weeing-in-the-hall thing. There is food in the fridge and I still have a job. She slightly regrets putting in that *still* because the thought of her job makes her stomach clench again.

In for six, hold for three, out for seven.

Her parents are still alive. Although admittedly it can be hard to justify including that in a mental gratitude diary. Oh, Jesus. Her mother is going to make some pointed comment on Sunday about how they always visit Phil's mother, isn't she? It will come at some point between the small sherry and the over-heavy pudding, as inevitable as death, taxes and these random chin hairs. She imagines fending her off with a polite smile: *Well, Mum, Nancy has just lost her husband of fifty years. She's a bit lonely just now.*

But you visited her all the time when he was still alive, didn't you? she hears her mother's response.

Yes, but her husband was dying. Phil wanted to see his dad as much as possible before he shuffled off this mortal coil. We weren't having a bloody knees-up.

She realizes she is having another imaginary argument with her mother, and pulls it back, trying to put the thought into a

mental box, like she read in an article, and place an imaginary mental lid on it. The lid fails resolutely to shut. She finds she has a lot of imaginary arguments, these days: with Simon at work, with her mother, with that woman who pushed in front of her at the checkout yesterday. None of these arguments ever leave her lips in real life. She just grits her teeth. And tries to breathe.

In for six, hold for three, out for seven.

I am not living in an actual war zone, she thinks. There is clean water in the taps and food on the shelves. No explosions, no guns. No famine. That's got to be something. But thinking about those poor children in war zones makes her eyes prickle with tears. Her eyes are always prickling with tears. Cat keeps telling her to go and get HRT but she still has periods and occasional hormonal spots (how is that fair?) and, anyway, there is no time to book a doctor's appointment. The last time she rang they didn't have a single one available for two weeks. *What if I was dying?* she had thought. And had an imaginary argument with the doctor's receptionist.

In real life, she simply said: 'Oh, that's a bit far off. I'm sure I'll be fine. Thanks anyway.'

She glances to her right. Phil is slumbering, his face troubled even in sleep. She wants to reach over and stroke his hair, but lately when she does that he jumps awake, looking startled and unhappy, as if she has done something cruel.

She folds her hands in front of her instead and tries to adopt a relaxed, even pose. Rest is as good as sleep, someone once told her. Just clear your thoughts, and let your body relax. Let your limbs release any tension they're holding, from the toes up. Let your feet grow heavy. Let that feeling travel slowly up to your ankles, your knees, your hips, your stom—

Ah, fuck it, says the inside of her head. It's a quarter to six. I might as well get up.

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‘There’s no milk,’ says Cat. She is staring accusingly at the interior of the fridge, as if waiting for some to materialize.

‘You could run to the shop?’

‘I haven’t got *time*,’ Cat says. ‘I have to do my hair.’

‘Well, I’m afraid I haven’t got time either.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m going to that gym and spa you bought me a day pass for. Bodyworks. It expires tomorrow.’

‘But I gave you that a year ago! And surely you’ll only get a couple of hours in there if you’re going to work.’

‘I’ve arranged to go in a bit late. At least it’s right near the office. I just haven’t had any time.’ She never has any time. She says it like a mantra, along with ‘I’m so tired’. But nobody has any time. Everybody is tired.

Cat raises her eyebrows. For her, self-care is a necessity, coming before the more prosaic needs of money, housing and nutrition.

‘I keep telling you, Mum, use it or lose it,’ says Cat, who eyes her mother’s increasingly indistinct hip-to-waist ratio with barely concealed horror. She closes the fridge. ‘Ugh. I just don’t know why Dad can’t even buy a carton of milk.’

‘Leave him a note,’ she says, gathering her things. ‘Maybe he’ll be feeling better today.’

‘And maybe monkeys will fly out of my butt.’

Cat stalks out of the kitchen in the way that only a nineteen-year-old young woman can. A few seconds later Sam can hear the furious roar of her hairdryer and knows that it will be left in Cat’s room until she retrieves it.

‘I thought you didn’t drink cow’s milk any more, anyway,’ she shouts up the stairs.

The hairdryer stops briefly. ‘Now you’re just being annoying,’ comes the response.

She locates her swimsuit at the back of the drawer and shoves it into her black kitbag.

She is peeling off her wet swimsuit when the yummy mummies arrive. Glossy and stick thin, they swiftly surround her, talking loudly and across each other, their voices filling the fuggy silence of the changing room, completely oblivious to her presence. Sam feels the brief equilibrium gained by her twenty-length swim evaporating like mist. It has taken her an hour here to remember that she hates these places: the apartheid of hard bodies, the corners where she and the other lumpy people try to hide. She has walked by this place a million times and wondered whether to go in. She realizes that these are the kind of women who leave her feeling worse than if she'd never come in at all.

'Are you going to have time for coffee afterwards, Nina? I thought we could go to that lovely café that opened up behind Space NK. The one with the poke bowls.'

'Love to. Got to be away by eleven, though. I'm taking Leonie to the orthodontist. Ems?'

'Oh, God, yes. I need some girl time!'

These are women with designer athleisure, perfectly cut hair, and time for coffee. These are women whose gym bags bear designer labels, rather than her fake Marc Jacobs knock-off, and have husbands called Rupe or Tris, who carelessly toss envelopes containing hefty bonuses onto shining Conran Shop kitchen tables. These women drive huge off-roaders that never get muddy, double-park their way through their day and demand babyccinos for querulous children from harassed baristas, tutting when they are not made to their exact specification. They do not lie awake until 4 a.m. worrying about electricity bills, or feel sick about greeting their new boss with his shiny suit and his barely disguised disdain each morning.

They do not have husbands who stay in their pyjama bottoms till midday and look hunted whenever their wives mention maybe having another go at that job application.

Sam is at that age, the age where all the wrong things seem somehow to stick, fat, the groove between her eyebrows, anxiety, while everything else – job security, marital happiness, dreams – seems to slip effortlessly away.

‘You have no idea how much they’ve put up the prices at Le Méridien this year,’ one of the women is saying. She is bent over, towelling her expensively tinted hair. Sam has to wiggle sideways to avoid touching her.

‘I know! I tried to book Mauritius for Christmas – our usual villa’s gone up by forty per cent.’

‘It’s a scandal.’

Yes, it’s a scandal, she thinks. How awful for you all. She thinks of the camper-van that Phil bought two years ago to do up. ‘We can spend weekends by the coast,’ he had said cheerfully, eyeing the huge van now blocking their driveway with its giant sunflower on the side. He never got beyond replacing the back bumper. Since his Year of Carnage, it has sat in front of their house, a nagging, daily reminder of what they have lost.

Sam wriggles into her knickers, trying to hide her pale flesh under the towel. Today she has four meetings with important clients. In half an hour she will meet Ted and Joel from Print and Transport, and they will try to win their company some vital business. And she will try to save her job. Maybe all their jobs.

No pressure there, then.

‘I think we’re going to do the Maldives this year. You know, before they sink.’

‘Oh, good idea. We loved it. Such a shame, the whole sinking thing.’

Another woman pushes past Sam to open her locker. She is dark-haired, like Sam, maybe a few years younger, but her body has the toned look of someone for whom hard exercise, moisturizing and buffing are daily occurrences. She smells expensive, like it actually oozes from her pores.

Sam pulls her towel tighter around her pale, dimply skin and disappears around the corner to dry her hair. When she returns, they have all gone. She breathes a sigh of relief and slumps onto the damp wooden bench. She thinks she might just go and lie down on one of the heated marble beds in the corner for half an hour. The thought fills her with sudden pleasure: a half-hour of just lying there in blissful silence.

Her phone buzzes in her jacket, hanging in the locker behind her. She reaches into her pocket and pulls it out.

You ready? We're outside.

What? she types. We're not due at Framptons till this afternoon.

Didn't Simon tell you? It got moved up to 10. Come on – we need to leave.

She glances at her phone in horror. This means she is apparently due at the first meeting in twenty-three minutes. She groans, wriggles into her trousers, sweeps the black kit-bag from the bench, and stomps off towards the car park.

The dirty white van with GRAYSIDE PRINT SOLUTIONS on the side is waiting by the loading doors, engine idling. She half runs, half shuffles towards it in the gym flip-flops. She will return them tomorrow but already feels guilty, as if she's committed some major transgression. Her hair is still damp and she is puffing slightly.

‘I think Simon’s gunning for you, sweetheart,’ says Ted, as she climbs into the van. He shuffles up the front bench seat to make room for her. He smells of cigarette smoke and Old Spice.

‘You think?’

‘You want to watch him. Double-check all the meeting times with Genevieve,’ says Joel, wrenching the steering wheel around. His dreadlocks are pulled back into a neat ponytail, as if in deference to the day ahead.

‘It’s just not the same since they took over, is it?’ says Ted, as they pull onto the main road. ‘Feels like we’re walking on eggshells every day.’

There are two empty, sugar-strewn paper bags on the dashboard, and Ted hands her a third, containing a huge, still-warm jam doughnut.

‘There you go,’ he says. ‘Breakfast of champions.’

She should not eat it. It contains at least twice as many calories as she has just burned off swimming. She can hear Cat’s sigh of disapproval from here. But she hesitates, then stuffs it into her mouth and closes her eyes at the warm, sugary comfort. These days, Sam takes her pleasures where she can.

‘Genevieve heard him talking on the phone about redundancies again,’ says Joel. ‘She says when she walked into his office he changed the subject.’

Every time she hears ‘redundancy’, a word that now flutters around the office like a trapped moth, her stomach clenches. She doesn’t know what they will do if she loses her job too. Phil is refusing to take the anti-depressants the doctor prescribed. He says they make him sleepy, as if he doesn’t sleep most days till eleven anyway.

‘It won’t come to that,’ says Ted, unconvincingly. ‘Sam’s going to bring in the business today, aren’t you?’

She realizes they're both looking at her. 'Yes,' she says. And then, more positively, 'Yes!'

She does her makeup in the small vanity mirror, cursing quietly every time Joel goes over a bump, and rubbing off the resulting smudges with a licked finger. She checks her hair, which has not dried too badly, all things considered. She flicks through the file of paperwork, making sure she has all the figures at her fingertips. She has a vague memory of when she felt confident about all this stuff, when she could walk into a room and know that she was good at her job. *Come on, Sam, just try to be that person again*, she tells herself silently. And then she slips her feet out of the flip-flops and reaches into her kitbag for her shoes.

'Five minutes away,' says Joel.

It is only then she realizes that although the kitbag looks like hers it is not hers. This bag does not contain her comfortable black pumps, suitable for pounding pavements and negotiating print deals. This bag contains a pair of vertiginous red crocodile-skin Christian Louboutin slingbacks.

She pulls out a shoe and stares at it, its strappy, unfamiliar weight dangling in her hand.

'Blimey,' says Ted. 'Is the first meeting at Stringfellows?'

Sam bends down and rifles through the bag, coming up with the other shoe, a pair of jeans and then a neatly folded pale Chanel jacket.

'Oh, my God,' she says. 'This isn't mine. I've picked up the wrong bag. We have to go back.'

'No time,' says Joel, staring straight ahead at the road. 'We're pushing it already.'

'But I need my bag.'

'Sorry, Sam,' he says. 'We'll go back later. Wear what you wore to the gym.'

'I can't wear flip-flops to a business meeting.'

‘Wear the shoes that are in there?’

‘You’re kidding me.’

Ted takes the shoe from her. ‘She has a point, Joel. Those shoes aren’t very . . . Sam.’

‘Why? What’s very “me”?’

‘Well. Plain. You like plain stuff.’ He pauses. ‘Sensible stuff.’

‘You know what they say about shoes like that,’ says Joel.

‘What?’

‘They’re not for standing up in.’

They nudge each other, chuckling.

Sam snatches the shoe back from him. It’s half a size too small. She eases her foot into it and fastens the strap.

‘Great,’ she says, looking at her foot. ‘I get to pitch to Framptons looking like a call-girl.’

‘At least it’s an expensive call-girl,’ says Ted.

‘What?’

‘You know. Rather than the five-quid-no-teeth-blowjob kind . . .?’

Sam waits for Joel’s laughter to die down. ‘Well, thanks, Ted,’ she says, staring out of the window. ‘I feel so much better now.’

The meeting isn’t in an office, as she had expected. There is a problem in Transport, and they will have to pitch in the loading area, where Michael Frampton is going to be overseeing some issue with a botched hydraulic system. Sam tries to walk in the heels, feeling the cold air on her feet. She wishes she had had a pedicure, maybe some time since 2009. Her ankles keep wobbling, as if they’re made of rubber, and she wonders how on earth anyone is expected to walk normally in footwear like this. Joel was right. These are not shoes for standing up in.

‘You okay?’ says Ted, as they draw closer to the group of men.

‘No,’ she mutters. ‘I feel like I’m walking on chopsticks.’

A forklift truck carries a huge bale of paper in front of them, causing them to swerve, and her to stumble, its beep a warning that sounds almost deafening in the cavernous space. She watches as every man around the lorry swivels his head to look at her. And then down at her shoes.

‘Thought you weren’t coming.’

Michael Frampton is a dour Yorkshireman, the kind who will let you know how hard he’s had it, and simultaneously imply that you haven’t, in any conversational exchange.

Sam musters a smile. ‘So sorry,’ she says, her voice bright. ‘We had another meeting which –’

‘Traffic,’ says Joel, simultaneously, and they glance awkwardly at each other.

‘Sam Kemp. We met at –’

‘I remember you,’ he says, and looks down. He spends an uncomfortable two minutes talking through the contents of a clipboard with a young man in overalls, and Sam stands helplessly, conscious of the casual curious glances of the men around him. Her inappropriate shoes glow like radioactive beacons on her feet.

‘Right,’ says Michael, when he finally finishes. ‘I have to tell you before we start that Printex have offered us very competitive terms.’

‘Well, we –’ Sam begins.

‘And they say you won’t have the flexibility now Grayside has been swallowed up by a bigger company.’

‘Well, that’s not entirely true. What we have now is volume, quality and – reliability.’

She feels faintly stupid as she speaks, as if everyone is looking at her, as if it is obvious that she is a middle-aged woman in somebody else’s shoes. She stammers her way through the

meeting, stumbling over her answers and flushing, feeling everyone's eyes on her feet.

Finally she pulls a folder from her bag. It contains the quote she has spent hours refining and laying out. She makes to walk across to hand it to Michael, but her heel catches on something. She stumbles and twists her ankle, sending a sharp pain up her leg. She turns her grimace into a smile, and hands him the file. He glances down at it, flicking through the pages, not looking at her. Eventually she walks away, slowly, trying not to wobble.

Finally, Michael looks up. 'We're looking at serious numbers for this next order. So we need to make sure we're with a firm that can definitely deliver.'

'We've delivered for you before, Mr Frampton. And last month we worked with Greenlight on a similar run of catalogues. They were very impressed with the quality.'

His whole face is an extended frown. 'Can I take a look at what you did for them?'

'Sure.'

She flicks through her folder and remembers suddenly that the Greenlight catalogue is in the blue folder on the dashboard of the van, the one she had thought she wouldn't need. And that that involves walking out of this loading area and across the car park, in full view of all the men. She looks meaningfully at Joel.

'Why don't I go and get it?' says Joel.

'What other samples have you got in the van?' says Frampton.

'Well, we did a similar run for Clarks Office Supplies. In fact, we have quite a few different catalogues from last month. Joel, could you —'

'Nah. I'll take a look myself.' Frampton starts to walk. This

means she has to. She sets off, a little more stiffly, alongside him.

‘What we need,’ he says, thrusting his hands into his pockets, ‘is a print partner who is fast-moving, someone flexible. Fleet-footed, if you like.’

He is striding too briskly. It is at this point that she turns her ankle again on the uneven surface, and lets out a yelp. Joel thrusts out an arm just as her knees buckle and she’s forced to grab it to stay upright. She smiles awkwardly as Frampton looks at them, his face unreadable.

Later, she will recall, her ears hot with embarrassment, his muttered words to Joel. The last words he will utter to Gray-side Print.

Is she drunk?

Nisha Cantor is running furiously on a treadmill. Music pumps in her ears and her legs are pounding like pistons. She always runs furiously. The first mile is the worst, fired by a choleric mix of resentment and lactic acid; the second makes her really, really angry; and the third is where her head finally starts to clear, when she feels suddenly like her body is oiled, like she can run for ever, and then she's angry again because she has to stop and do something else just at the point when she's started to enjoy it. She hates the run, and she needs it for her sanity. She hates visiting this damn city, where there are people all over the sidewalks, meandering slowly, so the only place she can run properly is this crappy gym, to which the hotel has siphoned its guests while its own superior facilities are apparently being renovated.

The machine informs her that it's time for her to cool down, and she turns it off abruptly, unwilling to be told what to do by a freaking machine. *No, I will not cool down*, she thinks. As she pulls out one of her earphones she becomes aware of a ringing sound. Nisha reaches over to pick up her phone. It's Carl.

'Darling –'

'Excuse me.'

Nisha looks up.

'You need to turn your phone off,' says a young woman. 'This is a quiet area.'

'Then stop talking at me. You're very loud. And please don't stand so close. I might be absorbing droplets of your sweat.'

The woman's jaw drops slightly and Nisha presses her phone to her ear.

'Nisha, darling. What are you up to?'

'Just at the gym, my love. Are we still meeting for lunch?'

Carl's voice, as smooth as butter, one of the things she has always loved about him. 'Yes, but perhaps we could have it at the hotel. I have to come back to pick up some papers.'

'Of course,' says Nisha, automatically. 'What would you like me to order for you?'

'Oh, anything.'

She freezes. Carl never says 'anything'.

'You want Michel's special white-truffle omelette? Or the seared tuna?'

'Sure. That will be lovely.'

Nisha swallows. She tries to keep her voice level. 'What time would you like it?'

Carl pauses and she hears the muffled sound of him talking to someone else in the room. Her heart has started to pound.

'Midday would be wonderful. But take your time. I don't want to rush you.'

'Of course,' says Nisha. 'Love you.'

'You too, darling,' says Carl, and the line goes dead.

Nisha stands very still, her blood pumping in her ears in a way that has nothing to do with running. She thinks briefly that her head may actually explode. She takes two deep breaths. Then she punches another number into the phone. It goes straight to voicemail. She curses the time difference with New York.

'Magda?' she says, her hand raking through her sweaty hair. 'It's Mrs Cantor. You need to get on to your man, NOW.'

When she looks up, a gym attendant, in a polo shirt and cheap shorts, has appeared. 'Ma'am, you cannot use a phone in here, I'm afraid. It's against -'

‘Just back off,’ says Nisha. ‘Go clean a floor or something. This place is a goddamn Petri dish.’ She pushes past him towards the changing room, snatching a towel from another attendant as she goes.

The changing rooms are packed, but she sees nobody. She is running through the telephone conversation in her head, over and over, her heart thumping. So this is it. She needs to clear her head, to be ready to respond, but her body has gone into a weird stasis and nothing is working as it should. She sits down on the bench briefly, staring blankly in front of her. *I can do this*, she tells herself, gazing at her trembling hands. *I have survived worse*. She presses her face into the towel, breathing in until she’s sure she’s got the shakes under control, and straightens, pushing her shoulders back.

Finally she stands and opens her locker, pulling out her Marc Jacobs kitbag. Someone has placed their bag on the bench beside her locker and she shoves it onto the floor, putting her own in its place. Shower. She must shower before she does anything. Appearances are everything. And then her phone rings again. A couple of women look over but she ignores them and picks it up from the bench beside her. Raymond.

‘Mom? Did you see the picture of my eyebrows?’

‘What, darling?’

‘My eyebrows. I sent a picture. Did you look?’

Nisha holds out her phone and flicks through her messages until she finds the picture he has sent. ‘You have beautiful eyebrows, sweetheart,’ she says reassuringly, putting the phone back to her ear.

‘They’re terrible. I just feel really down. I saw this programme on, like, the dolphin trade and there were all these dolphins just being made to do tricks and stuff and I felt so guilty because we went to that place and swam with them in

Mexico, remember? I felt so bad I couldn't leave my room and then I thought I'd tidy up my eyebrows and it was a disaster because now I look like mid-nineties Madonna.'

A woman has started drying her hair nearby and Nisha briefly considers wrenching the hairdryer out of her hand and clubbing her to death with it. 'Sweetheart, I can't hear you in here. Hold on.'

She walks out into the corridor. Takes a deep breath. 'They look perfect,' she says, into the muffled silence. 'Gorgeous. And mid-nineties Madonna is a totally hot look.'

She can picture him, cross-legged on his bed back in Westchester, the way he has sat since he was tiny.

'They don't look gorgeous, Mom. It's a *disaster*.'

A woman comes out of the changing area and passes her, her feet slopping in flip-flops, her head down as she hurries past in her cheap jacket. Why don't women stand up straight? The woman's shoulders are slumped, her head dipped into her neck like a turtle's, and Nisha is immediately irritated. If you look like a victim, why are you surprised when people treat you badly? 'Then we'll get them microbladed when you come home.'

'So they *do* look terrible.'

'No! No, you look gorgeous. But, sweetheart, I really need to go. I'm right in the middle of something. I'll call you.'

'Not until three my time, earliest. I have to sleep and then we have self-care. It's so dumb. They make you do all this mindfulness stuff like it wasn't being stuck in my head that got me here in the first place.'

'I know, darling. I'll call you after that. I love you.'

Nisha ends the call and dials again. 'Magda? Magda? Did you get my message? Call me as soon as you get this. Okay?'

She is ending the call when the door opens. A gym attendant walks in and spies her holding her phone.

‘Ma’am, I’m sorry but –’

‘Don’t. Even,’ she snarls, and he closes his mouth over the words. There are some advantages to being an American woman over forty who no longer has any fucks left on the shelf, and he can see it. It is the first thing she has felt glad about all week.

Nisha showers, moisturizes her limbs with the gym’s inferior products (she will smell like an Amtrak restroom all day), ties her wet hair into a knot and then, her feet safely on a towel (changing-room floors make her nauseous – the skin cells! The verrucas!), checks her phone for the eighteenth time to see if Magda has responded.

Trying to suppress the giant ball of fury and anxiety that is swelling in her chest is getting harder. She takes her silk blouse off the hanger, feeling the liquid fall of it sticking to her warm damp skin as she pulls it over her head. *Where is Magda, for God’s sake?* She sits and glances at her phone again, reaching absent-mindedly into her kitbag for jeans and shoes. She feels around and finally pulls out a very tired, ugly, block-heeled black pump. She turns and blinks at her hand for a moment before dropping the shoe with a little gasp of horror. She wipes her fingers on a towel, then slowly opens the bag with a corner of it, peering inside. It takes her a moment to grasp what she is looking at. This bag is not her bag. This is fake leather, its plastic covering already peeling at the seams, and what should be a brass ‘Marc Jacobs’ tag has tarnished its way to a dull silver.

Nisha peers under the bench. Then behind her. Most of the annoying women have gone now, and there are no other bags, just a few gaping lockers. There are no other bags. This bag looks like her bag – same size, same colour, similar handles – but it definitely isn’t hers.

‘Who took my bag?’ she says aloud, to nobody in particular. ‘*Who the hell took my bag?*’ The few women in the changing room glance over at her but look blank.

‘No,’ she says. ‘*No no no no no*. Not today. Not now.’

The girl at the desk doesn’t blink.

‘Where’s the CCTV?’

‘Madam, there’s no CCTV in the ladies’ changing room. It would be against the law.’

‘So how am I meant to find out who stole my bag?’

‘I don’t think it’s been stolen, madam. From what you said, it seems like an accidental switch, if the bags were so similar –’

‘You really think anyone would “accidentally” pick up my Chanel jacket and custom-made Louboutin heels made by Christian himself when they dress themselves normally in . . .’ she peers into the bag, grimaces ‘. . . *Primark?*’

The receptionist’s face doesn’t shift a muscle.

‘We can go through the CCTV at the entrance but we’ll have to get clearance from head office.’

‘I haven’t got time. Who was the last person out of here?’

‘We don’t hold those records, madam. It’s all automated. If you hold on I’ll call the manager and he can come over.’

‘Finally! Where is he?’

‘He’s staff training in Pinner.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake. Give me some track shoes. Do you have track shoes here? I just need to get to my car.’

Nisha peers out of the window. ‘Where is my car? Where’s the car?’

She turns away from the desk and punches a number into her phone. No answer. The receptionist pulls out a plastic packet from under the counter. She looks as bored as if she has just had to listen to a two-hour TED talk on the Drying of Paint. She plonks them on the counter. ‘We have flip-flops.’

Nisha looks at the girl, then at the shoes, then at the girl again. The girl's face is a blank. Finally, she snatches them off the counter and, with a low growl of frustration, wrenches them onto her feet. She hears the muttered '*Americans!*' as she leaves.

‘Never mind, love. Still three to go,’ says Ted, kindly.

They have driven in silence to the next meeting. Sam has spent the past twenty minutes in the van under a cloud of crushing misery, guilt seeping into every cell that once contained what remained of her confidence. What must they have thought of her? She could still feel the disbelieving stares of those men, the barely concealed smirks as she wobbled back into the van. Joel had clapped her on the shoulder and told her Frampton was a wanker and everyone knew he was a late payer anyway so it was probably the best thing all round, but even as he spoke all she could see was the distant curl of Simon’s lip as she had to tell him that she had lost a valuable contract.

In for six, hold for three, out for seven.

Joel pulls up in the car park and switches off the ignition. They sit for a moment, listening to the engine tick down and looking up at the glossy-fronted building. Her stomach is somewhere in the footwell of the van.

‘Would it be really bad to go into this meeting in flip-flops?’ she says, finally.

‘Yes,’ say Ted and Joel, at the same time.

‘But –’

‘Babe.’ Joel leans forward over the steering wheel and turns to face her. ‘You wear those shoes, you’ve got to style it out.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you looked . . . embarrassed back there. You still look embarrassed. You’ve got to look like you own them.’

'I don't own them.'

'You've got to look confident. Like you just threw them on, you know, while you were thinking about all those big-bucks deals you already signed today.'

Ted compresses his mouth into a fleshy line and nods. He nudges her with a ham-like arm. 'He's right. Come on, sweetheart. Chin up, tits out, big smile. You can do it.'

Sam reaches for her bag. 'You wouldn't say that to Simon.'

Ted shrugs. 'I would if he was wearing those shoes.'

'So the lowest we can do on that job is . . . forty-two thousand. But if you switch the page numbers and change the title page to mono, we could shave eight hundred off that price.'

She is outlining their print strategy when she observes that the managing director is not listening to her. For a minute she feels the flush of embarrassment again, and stammers the rest of her words. 'So – so how do those figures sound?'

He doesn't say anything. He rubs a spot on his forehead and makes a noncommittal *mmm* sound, like she used to when Cat was little and she was listening to her endless babble with only half an ear.

Oh, God, I'm losing him. She looks up from her notes, and realizes the managing director is staring at her foot. Mortified, she almost loses the thread of what she is saying. But then she looks again, registers his glazed expression: it is him who is distracted. 'And, of course, we could do that on an eight-day turnaround, as discussed,' she says.

'Good!' he exclaims, as if hauled from a daydream. 'Yes. Good.'

He is still staring at her foot. She watches, then tilts it slightly to the left and extends her ankle. He gazes at it, rapt. She glances across the table and sees Joel and Ted exchange a look.

‘So would those terms be acceptable to you?’

The managing director steepled his fingers, briefly meets her eye. She smiles encouragingly.

‘Uh . . . yes. Sounds good.’ He can’t stop looking. His gaze slides from her face downwards, back to the shoe.

She pulls a contract from her briefcase. She tilts her foot and lets the heel strap slide slowly down her heel. ‘So, shall we agree terms?’

‘Sure,’ he says. He takes the pen and signs the document without looking at it.

‘Don’t say anything,’ she tells Ted, her gaze fixed straight ahead, as they walk out through Reception.

‘I’m saying nothing. You get us another deal like that, you can wear a pair of flippers for all I care.’

At the next meeting she makes sure her feet are on display the whole time. Although John Edgmont doesn’t stare, she sees that the mere fact of the shoes makes him reassess his version of who she is. Weirdly, it makes her reassess her version of herself. She walks into his office with her head high. She charms. She stands firm on terms. She wins another contract.

‘You’re on it, Sam,’ says Joel, as they climb back into the van.

They take an actual lunch break – something they haven’t dared do since Simon was put in charge – and sit outside at a coffee shop. The sun comes out. Joel tells them about a date he went on the previous week where the woman asked him what he thought of a wedding-dress picture she had cut from a magazine – ‘She said, “It’s okay, I only show people I really like”’ – and Ted spits his coffee through his nostrils and she laughs until her sides hurt and realizes she has no idea when she last laughed at anything.

Nisha is pacing up and down the chilly sidewalk outside the gym, the bathrobe over her blouse and flip-flops. She has left nine messages on Peter's cellphone and he is not picking up. This is not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

'Peter? Peter? Where are you? I told you to be outside by eleven fifteen! I need you here *right now!*'

The final time she calls, a tinny, automated voice tells her this number is unobtainable. She checks the time, curses loudly, reaches into her pocket and pulls out her room-key card. She stares at it for a moment then stomps back into the gym.

The bag outside her locker is still sitting on the bench. Of course it is. Who would want that? She rifles through it, grimacing at the thought of touching clothes that aren't hers. She pulls out a damp swimsuit in a plastic bag, winces, and dumps it on the bench. Then she reaches tentatively into the side pockets, emerging with three damp ten-pound notes, which she holds up. She can't remember the last time she held actual money in her hand. It's the most unsanitary thing, worse than lavatory brushes, if some article she read was right. She shudders and puts them into her pocket. She rips one of the plastic bags from the dispenser above the costume spinner and wraps it around her hand. Then she picks up the kitbag by its handles and walks out through Reception.

'Madam, you can't take the bathrobe —'

'Yeah, well, this country is freezing and you've lost my clothes.' Nisha pulls the robe tighter around her, knots the belt, and walks out.

They can moan incessantly about how much trade Uber has cost them but it turns out no fewer than six taxi drivers will still ignore a woman in a bathrobe trying to hail a cab before one stops. He winds down his window and opens his

mouth to say something about what she is wearing but she holds up a hand. ‘The Bentley Hotel,’ she says. ‘And just don’t. Thank you.’

The taxi journey costs £9.80, even though it took barely five minutes. She walks into the hotel, without acknowledging the perplexed glance of the doorman, and straight across the foyer to the elevator, ignoring the swivelled heads of the guests around her. A couple, middle-aged, him in a suit jacket and slacks, her in a badly cut dress that reveals two oysters of armpit fat – probably down from somewhere provincial for a ‘treat’ – are already inside as she sticks out an arm and stops the door closing. She walks in, stands in front of them and turns to face the doors. Nothing happens. She glances behind her.

‘Penthouse,’ she says.

When they stare at her, she flicks a hand at them. Then flicks it again.

‘Penthouse. The button,’ she says, finally adding, ‘please,’ and the woman reaches over tentatively to push it. The lift hums upwards, and Nisha feels the tension clawing at her stomach. *Come on, Nisha*, she tells herself. *You can fix this*. And then the lift shudders to a halt and the doors slide open.

She is about to step out into the penthouse suite but collides instead with a broad chest. Three men are standing in her way. She recoils, disbelieving. Ari, who is in the middle, is holding out an A5-sized envelope.

‘What –’ she begins, making to push past him, but he steps sideways, blocking her.

‘I have instructions not to let you in.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Ari,’ she says, batting at him. ‘I need to get my clothes.’

His face wears an expression she has never seen before. ‘Mr Cantor says you are not to enter.’

She tries a smile. ‘Don’t be silly. I need my things. Look at me.’

He’s like someone she’s never met. Nothing in his expression registers that he has known her, protected her for fifteen years. This is a man she has shared jokes with. Jesus Christ, she’s even remembered to ask about his annoying wife occasionally.

‘I’m sorry.’

He stoops and places the envelope on the floor of the elevator behind her, then steps back to press the button to send her down again. She feels the world tilting around her, and wonders briefly if she might pass out.

‘Ari! Ari! You can’t do this. Ari! This is insane! What am I supposed to do?’

The lift doors begin to close. She sees him turn and exchange a look with the man beside him. It is a look he has never before allowed himself to use in front of her, a look she has been familiar with her whole life: *Women*.

‘Just give me my handbag . . . for God’s sake!’ she yells, as the doors close against her.

‘I *cannot* get over the way you nailed that, babe,’ Joel says, banging the steering wheel for emphasis. ‘Absolutely nailed it. The way you walked in there, like a *boss*. Edgmont was going to sign before you even sat down.’

‘He couldn’t stop staring at your legs,’ says Ted, slurping at a can of Coke, then belching discreetly. ‘Didn’t hear a word I said about batch production.’

‘He would have signed over his missus if you’d said the word.’ Joel shakes his head. ‘His firstborn. Anything.’

‘You know, I could have sworn you said we were going to do that job for eighty-two,’ says Ted.

‘I did,’ says Sam. ‘But when I saw how it was going I just had this sudden urge to push it to ninety.’

‘And he just nodded!’ Joel exclaims. ‘He just nodded! Didn’t even look at the small print! Wait till Simon sees that!’

‘Brenda’s been going on about getting a new Peugeot for months. If we bag this last one, I’m going to put down a deposit.’ Ted takes a last swig from his can and crushes it in a fat hand.

‘Sam’ll get it. She’s *en fuego*, man.’

‘You what?’

‘On fire.’

‘She’s that, all right. Who have we got next?’ Ted scans the folder. ‘Oh. It’s the new one. A – uh – a Mr Price. This is the big one, sweetheart. This is the big bucks. This is the missus’s new 205.’

Sam is reapplying her makeup. She purses her lips in the mirror, then thinks for a minute. She reaches down into the kitbag and carefully pulls out the Chanel jacket. She holds it up, admiring the cream wool, the immaculate silk lining, breathing in the distant smell of some expensive scent. Then, briefly releasing herself from the seatbelt, she slides into it. It’s a little tight but the weight and feel of it are delicious. Who knew expensive clothes could actually feel different? She adjusts the mirror so she can see the way it hugs her shoulders, the way the structured collar frames her neck.

‘Too much?’ she says, turning to the men.

Joel glances over. ‘Never too much. You’re freaking owning it. You look good, Sam.’

‘He’s not going to know what hit him,’ says Ted. ‘Do that thing where you dangle the strap off your heel again. They totally lose focus when you do that.’

Sam gazes at her reflection and preens a little. It’s an unfamiliar feeling and she is warming to it. She looks like

someone she doesn't even recognize. Then, abruptly, she stops and turns to the others, her smile suddenly fading. 'Am I . . . letting down the sisterhood?'

'What?'

'By out-negotiating a bunch of men in suits?' says Ted.

'By – you know – using sex as a weapon. They are basically sex, these shoes, right?'

'My sister says she has period pains to cut short staff meetings that go on too long. Says the men can't get out of there fast enough.'

'My wife once showed a bouncer her bra to get into a club,' says Ted. 'I was actually quite proud.'

Joel shrugs. 'Far as I can see, you use the weapons at your disposal.'

'Forget the sisterhood,' says Ted. 'Think of my new car.'

They have arrived. Sam steps out of the van one leg at a time. She stands a little straighter. She is more confident in the shoes now, has worked out a more deliberate way of walking so that her ankles don't wobble. She checks her hair in the wing mirror. Then gazes down at her feet.

'Do I look okay?'

The two men beam at her. Ted gives her a wink. 'Like a boss. Mr Price doesn't stand a ruddy chance.'

Sam enjoys the brisk click of the heels on the marble floor as they walk to the reception desk. She sees the girl check out her jacket and shoes and observes the way she tilts her chin, as if she is about to be just that little bit more receptive to whatever Sam wants. Imagine being the kind of woman who wears these shoes every day, she thinks. Imagine living the kind of life where you only ever walk short distances across marble floors. Imagine having nothing to

worry about except whether your pedicure matches your expensive shoes.

‘Hello,’ she says, and she registers distantly that her voice has a new tone, a confidence and ease that she didn’t have at the beginning of the day. ‘Grayside Print Solutions to meet Mr M. Price. Thank you.’ She is that woman. She is going to nail this.

The receptionist scans a screen. She taps at her keyboard, expertly slips three name cards into see-through plastic fobs and hands them over. ‘If you could just wait over there, I’ll call upstairs.’

‘Thank you so much.’

Thank you so much. Like she’s royalty or something. Sam sits, carefully, on the lobby sofa, her ankles together, then quickly checks her lipstick and smooths her hair. She is going to get this deal, she can feel it. Joel and Ted exchange smiles behind her.

She hears footsteps on the marble. She looks up to see a petite, brown-skinned woman in her fifties approaching the sofa. Her black hair is shaped into a neat bob and she is wearing an unflamboyant, beautifully cut navy suit with a cream silk T-shirt and flat pumps. Sam looks up and glances behind her. The woman holds out a hand.

‘Hello – Grayside Print? I’m Miriam Price. Shall we go up?’

It takes a second before she realizes her mistake. She glances behind her at Ted and Joel, whose expressions have frozen. Then they all stand abruptly with smiles and gabbled hellos. And follow Miriam Price across the lobby to the lifts.

It takes ten minutes to discover Miriam Price plays hardball, and an hour to discover quite how hard those balls are. If they go ahead with what she’s insisting on, their margins will be sliced to almost nothing. Miriam is small, serene, implacable.

Sam feels hope draining away as Joel and Ted slump in their chairs.

‘If you want the fourteen-day turnaround I can’t go higher than six sixty,’ Miriam says again. ‘Our transport costs get higher the closer we are to deadline.’

‘I explained earlier why six sixty makes it very difficult for us. If you want the high-gloss finish, it takes longer because we have to use a separate press.’

‘Whether or not you have all the presses you need shouldn’t be my problem.’

‘It’s not a problem. Just a question of logistics.’

Miriam Price smiles every time she entrenches. A small, not unfriendly smile. But one that says she is in complete control of this negotiation. ‘And, as I said, my logistics require a more expensive transport because of the reduced travel time. Look, if this job is problematic for you I’d rather know now while we have the time to find alternative providers.’

‘It’s not problematic. I’m just explaining that the print processes of that size of order require a longer lead time.’

‘And I’m just explaining why I need that reflected in the price.’

It feels impossible. They have hit a wall. Sam is sweating inside the Chanel jacket and feels a faint anxiety that she will leave marks in that beautiful pale lining.

‘I just need a word with my team,’ she says, rising from the table.

‘Take your time,’ says Miriam, leaning back in her chair. She smiles.

Ted has lit a cigarette and is smoking it in short, hungry drags. Sam folds her arms in front of her, unfolds them, and folds them again, staring at a Renault van that is reversing repeatedly and pointlessly into a too-small space.

‘If I go back with margins that small Simon is going to blow his top,’ she says.

Ted grinds the cigarette butt with his heel. ‘If you don’t go back with a deal Simon is going to blow his top.’

‘This is impossible.’ Sam shifts her weight. ‘Ugh. These shoes are killing me.’

They stand in silence for a moment. Nobody seems to know what to say. Nobody wants to be responsible for either course of action. The Renault van finally turns off the engine and they watch as the driver discovers he has no space to open the driver’s door. Finally Sam says, ‘I really need a wee. I’ll meet you back in there.’

In the Ladies, Sam sits in the cubicle and takes out her phone. She texts:

Hey love. How’s your day? Have you been outside yet?

She waits, and after a moment a response comes back.

Not yet. Bit tired. X

She can picture him in a T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, barely rousing himself from the sofa to pick up his phone. Sometimes, she hates to admit it, it’s almost a relief when he isn’t in the house, as if someone has suddenly opened all the curtains, letting in the light.

She wipes, and flushes, and adjusts her clothes, feeling suddenly guilty and stupid for using the shoes and the jacket. Could you be prosecuted for wearing someone else’s clothes? She washes her hands and gazes at her reflection. All the confidence of earlier seems to have drained away. She sees a woman of forty-five, the past year’s sadness, anxieties and

sleeplessness etched onto her face. *Come on, old girl*, she tells herself, after a minute. *Push on through*. She wonders when she started calling herself *old girl*.

The door of one of the cubicles opens and Miriam Price steps out behind her. They nod politely at each other's reflection while washing their hands, Sam trying not to betray her sudden feeling of awkwardness. Miriam Price smooths imaginary stray hairs from her face, and Sam reapplies her lipstick, mostly just for something to do. She keeps trying to think of something to say, something that will convince Miriam Price to work with them, some magic few words that will casually betray what a great and professional company they are, and stretch those tiny price margins. Miriam smiles that small, serene smile. She is clearly not trying to think of something to say. Sam wonders if she has ever felt so inadequate in a Ladies loo before.

And then Miriam Price looks down. 'Oh, my God, I love your shoes,' she exclaims.

Sam follows Miriam's gaze down to her feet.

'They are absolutely gorgeous.'

'Actually they're n--' Sam stops. 'They're great, aren't they?'

'Can I see?' Miriam points at them. She holds the shoe that Sam removes, lifts it up under the lights and examines it from all angles with the reverence one would apply to a work of art, or a fine bottle of wine. 'Louboutin, right?'

'Y-yes.'

'Is it vintage? He's made nothing like this for at least five years. In fact, I'm not sure I've seen anything like it at all.'

'Uh . . . uh, yes. Yes, it is.'

Miriam runs her finger down the heel. 'He's such a craftsman. You know, I once queued for four hours just to buy a pair of his shoes. How crazy is that?'

'Oh . . . not crazy at all,' says Sam. 'Not where I'm concerned.'

Miriam weighs it in her hands, examines it a moment longer, then hands it back almost reluctantly. 'You can always tell a proper shoe. My daughter doesn't believe me, but you can tell so much about someone from what they wear on their feet. I always dress from the ground up. These old things are Prada. I just felt like I needed an on-the-ground kind of a day so I'm wearing flats but, honestly, looking at those I'm overcome with heel envy.'

'I tell my daughter the exact same thing!' The words are out of Sam's mouth before she even knows what she's saying.

'Mine just wears trainers the whole time. I don't think they understand the totemic power of shoes.'

'Oh, mine too. Enormous Dr Marten's boots. And they really don't,' says Sam, who is not sure she understands the meaning of 'totemic'.

'I tell you what, Sam. Can I call you Sam? I hate negotiating like this. Shall we speak next week? Let's the two of us thrash something out away from the boys. I'm sure we can reach a deal that works for both of us.'

'That would be great,' Sam says. She wrestles the shoe back onto her foot, and takes a breath. 'So . . . can I say we have an agreement in principle?'

'Oh, I think so.' Miriam's smile is warm, conspiratorial. 'I have to ask . . . is that jacket Chanel?'

Nisha sits in the depths of a plush rose-coloured sofa in the foyer of the Bentley Hotel, a towering arrangement of birds of paradise in a torso-sized vase beside her, her cellphone pressed to her ear. Around her a few guests cast glances at the woman in the dressing-gown when her voice lifts over the sound of the chatter.

‘Carl, this is ridiculous. I’m in the foyer. Come down and let’s talk.’ The message ends. She redials immediately. ‘Carl, I’m going to keep calling until you pick up. This is not the way to treat your wife of eighteen years.’ The message ends and she redials again.

‘Nisha?’

‘Carl! I – Charlotte? Charlotte? No. He’s forwarding his calls. I want to talk to Carl. Please put him on.’

‘I’m so sorry, but I can’t do that, Nisha.’

Charlotte’s voice is as calm as if she featured on a meditation app. There is something new in her tone that makes Nisha bristle too, a faint air of superiority. And then she registers: *Oh, my God, she called me Nisha.*

‘Mr Cantor is in a meeting and has issued direct instructions that he can’t be disturbed.’

‘No. You get him out of the meeting. I don’t care if he doesn’t want to be disturbed. I’m his *wife*. Do you hear me? Charlotte? . . . Charlotte?’

The line has gone dead. The girl actually put the phone down on her.

When she looks up, the people on nearby sofas are staring at her. She stares back, until their heads swivel away, in a flurry of raised eyebrows and murmurs. Her whole body is suddenly flooded with cortisol, and she might actually want to kill someone, or run somewhere, or scream. She is not entirely sure which. Nisha looks down and realizes she cannot get through this wearing a cheap robe and flip-flops. She thinks of her clothes upstairs in the penthouse and feels an almost maternal anxiety that she cannot get to them. *Her clothes.*

She glances around and sees a concession store across the foyer. She shoves her phone into her pocket and walks over. The clothes are predictably awful and hideously overpriced. Nisha rifles quickly through the rails, pulling off the least gaudy jacket and shoes she can find, trying to ignore the awful muzak being piped through the tiny store. She looks at the shoes in their size-delineated boxes and grabs a pair of plain beige pumps in a size seven. She piles them onto the checkout desk where a young woman is watching her with a faint air of anxiety.

‘Charge those to the penthouse, please,’ she says.

‘Certainly, Mrs Cantor,’ the girl says, and starts ringing them up.

‘I need to try the shoes. With a stocking. A new one.’

‘I’ll just check if we’ve got –’ She stops abruptly. Nisha glances up at her, then follows her gaze and turns. Frederik, the hotel manager, has entered the concession. He smiles at her and stops, several feet away.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Cantor. We have instructions not to charge anything to Mr Cantor’s account.’

‘What?’

‘Mr Cantor says you are no longer authorized to charge anything to his account.’

‘Our account,’ she says, icily. ‘It’s *our* account.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Frederik stands completely still, his eyes never leaving her face. His manner is unruffled, his tone completely implacable. It is as if everything is crumbling around her. An unfamiliar feeling of panic is rising in her chest.

‘We are married, as you know. That means his account is my account.’

He says nothing.

‘Frederik, how long have I been coming here?’ She takes two steps towards him, resists the urge to grab his sleeve. ‘My husband is clearly in the grip of some kind of episode. He won’t even let me get my clothes. My clothes! Look at me! The least you can do is let me get something to wear, surely.’

The manager’s expression softens very slightly. There is a faint wince when he speaks, as if it pains him to do so. ‘He has given very . . . emphatic instructions. I’m so sorry. It’s not up to me.’

Nisha lifts her hands to her face. ‘I don’t believe this is happening.’

‘And I’m afraid . . .’ he says ‘. . . I’m also going to have to ask you to leave. The bathrobe, it’s . . . The other guests are . . .’

They stare at each other. Some distant part of Nisha registers that the checkout girl takes advantage of this moment to sweep everything swiftly off the counter. ‘Eighteen years, Frederik,’ she says slowly. ‘Eighteen years we’ve known each other.’

There is a long silence. It is the first time he has looked properly embarrassed. ‘Look,’ he says finally. ‘I’ll organize a car for you. Where do you want to go?’

Nisha looks at him, opens her mouth a little, then gives a small shake of her head. She feels suddenly swamped by an unfamiliar sensation, something huge and dark and ominous,

like quicksand sucking at her feet. 'I don't . . . I don't have anywhere *to* go.'

And then it is gone. She will not have this. She will not tolerate it. She crosses her arms and sits down firmly on a small wicker chair beside the shoe area.

'No, Frederik. I'm not going anywhere. I'm sure you'll understand, but I'm just going to sit here until Carl comes down to talk to me. Please go and fetch him. This whole thing is ridiculous.'

Nobody speaks.

'I'll stay here all night if I have to. Please go and get him, we'll sort this out, and then we'll work out where – or *if* – I go anywhere.'

Frederik gazes at her for a moment, then lets out a small sigh. He looks behind him and, as he does, two security men walk into the concession and stand there, waiting. All eyes are on her. 'I'd really rather there wasn't a scene, Mrs Cantor.'

Nisha stares. The two security men move forward. One step each. The neat choreography of it is almost impressive.

'As I said,' Frederik continues, 'Mr Cantor was very emphatic.'