

My
not so
A Perfect
Life

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PART ONE



ONE

First: it could be worse. As commutes go, it could be a lot worse, and I must keep remembering this. Second: it's worth it. I *want* to live in London; I *want* to do this; and commuting is part of the deal. It's part of the London experience, like Tate Modern.

(Actually, it's not much like Tate Modern. Bad example.)

My dad always says: if you can't run with the big dogs, stay under the porch. And I want to run with the big dogs. That's why I'm here.

Anyway, my twenty-minute walk to the station is fine. Enjoyable, even. The grey December air is like iron in my chest, but I feel good. The day's begun. I'm on my way.

My coat's pretty warm, even though it cost £9.99 and came from the market. It had a label in it, 'Christin Bior', but I cut it out as soon as I got home. You can't work where I work and have 'Christin Bior' in your coat. You could have a genuine vintage Christian Dior label. Or something Japanese. Or maybe no label because you make your clothes yourself out of retro fabrics that you source at Alfies Antiques.

But *not* 'Christin Bior'.

It's as I get near to Catford Bridge that I start to feel a knot of tension. I *really* don't want to be late today. My boss has started throwing all sorts of hissy fits about people 'swanning in at all times', so I left an extra twenty minutes early, in case it was a bad day.

I can already see: it's a God-awful day.

They've been having a lot of problems on our line recently, and keep cancelling trains with no warning. Trouble is, in London rush hour, you can't just *cancel trains*. What are all the people who were planning to get on that train supposed to do? Evaporate?

As I pass through the ticket barrier I can already see the answer. They're crowded on the platform, squinting up at the information screen, jostling for position, peering down the line, scowling at each other and ignoring each other, all at the same time.

Oh *God*. They must have cancelled at least two trains, because this looks like three trainloads of people, all waiting for the next one, clustered near the edge of the platform at strategic points. It's mid-December, but there's no Christmas spirit here. Everyone's too tense and cold and Monday-morning-ish. The only festive touch consists of a few miserable-looking fairy lights and a series of warning announcements about holiday transport.

Screwing up my nerve, I join the throng, and exhale in relief as a train pulls into the station. Not that I'll *get on* this train. (Get on the first train? That would be ridiculous.) There are people squashed up against the steamy windows, and as the doors slide open, only one woman gets off, looking pretty crumpled as she tries to extricate herself.

But even so, the crowd surges forward, and somehow a load of people insert themselves inside the train and it pulls away, and I'm that much further forward on the platform. Now I just have to keep my place and *not* let that scrawny guy

with gelled hair edge in front of me. I've taken out my earbuds so I can listen for announcements, and stay poised and vigilant.

Commuting in London is basically warfare. It's a constant campaign of claiming territory, inching forward, never relaxing for a moment. Because if you do, someone will step past you. Or step *on* you.

Exactly eleven minutes later, the next train pulls in. I head forward with the crowd, trying to block out the soundtrack of angry exclamations: 'Can you move down?' 'There's room inside!' 'They just need to move *down!*'

I've noticed that people inside trains have completely different expressions from people on platforms – especially the ones who have managed to get a seat. They're the ones who got over the mountains to Switzerland. They won't even look up. They maintain this guilty, defiant refusal to engage: *I know you're out there, I know it's awful and I'm safe inside, but I suffered too, so let me just read my Kindle without bloody guilt-tripping me, OK?*

People are pushing and pushing, and someone's actually shoving me – I can feel fingers on my back – and suddenly I'm stepping on to the train floor. Now I need to grab on to a pole or a handle – anything – and use it as leverage. Once your foot's on the train, you're in.

A man way behind me seems very angry – I can hear extra-loud shouting and cursing. And suddenly there's a groundswell, like a tsunami of people. I've only experienced this a couple of times, and it's terrifying. I'm being pushed forward without even touching the ground, and as the train doors close I end up squeezed between two guys – one in a suit and one in a tracksuit – and a girl eating a panini.

We're so tightly wedged that she's holding her panini about three inches away from my face. Every time she takes a bite, I

get a waft of pesto. But I studiously ignore it. And the girl. And the men. Even though I can feel the tracksuit guy's warm thigh against mine and count the stubbly hairs on his neck. As the train starts moving we're constantly bumped against each other, but no one even makes eye contact. I think if you make eye contact on the Tube, they call the police or something.

To distract myself, I try to plan the rest of my journey. When I get to Waterloo East, I'll check out which Tube line is running best. I can do Jubilee–District (takes ages) or Jubilee–Central (longer walk at the other end) or Overground (even longer walk the other end).

And yes, if I'd *known* I was going to end up working in Chiswick, I wouldn't have chosen to rent in Catford. But when I first came to London, it was to do an internship in east London. (They called it 'Shoreditch' in the ad. It *so* wasn't Shoreditch.) Catford was cheap and it wasn't too far, and now I just can't face west London prices, and the commute's not *that* bad—

'Aargh!' I shriek as the train jolts and I'm thrown violently forward. The girl has been thrown too, and her hand shoots up towards my face and suddenly, before I know it, my open mouth has landed on the end of her panini.

Wh— *What?*

I'm so shocked, I can't react. My mouth is full of warm, doughy bread and melted mozzarella. How did this even *happen?*

Instinctively my teeth clench shut, a move I immediately regret. Although . . . what else was I supposed to do? Nervously, I raise my eyes to hers, my mouth still full.

'Sorry,' I mumble, but it comes out 'Obble'.

'What the *fuck?*' The girl addresses the carriage incredulously. 'She's stealing my breakfast!'

My head's sweating with stress. This is bad. *Bad*. What do I

do now? Bite off the panini? (Not good.) Just let it fall out of my mouth? (Even worse. Urgh.) There's no good way out of this situation, none.

At last, I bite fully through the panini, my face burning with embarrassment. Now I have to chew my way through a mouthful of someone else's claggy bread, with everyone watching.

'I'm really sorry,' I say awkwardly to the girl as soon as I've managed to swallow. 'I hope you enjoy the rest.'

'I don't want it *now*.' She glares at me. 'It's got your germs on it.'

'Well, I don't want your germs either! It wasn't my fault, I fell on it.'

'You *fell* on it,' she echoes, so sceptically that I stare at her.

'Yes! Of course! I mean, what do you think – that I did that on *purpose*?'

'Who knows?' She puts a protective hand around the rest of her panini, as though I might suddenly launch myself at her and bite another chunk off. 'All kinds of weird people in London.'

'I'm not weird!'

'You can "fall" on me any time, love,' puts in the guy in the tracksuit with a smirk. 'Only don't chew,' he adds, and laughter comes from all around the carriage.

My face flames even redder, but I'm *not* going to react. In fact, this conversation is over.

For the next fifteen minutes I gaze sternly ahead, trying to exist in my own little bubble. At Waterloo East, we all disgorge from the train, and I breathe in the cold, fumey air with relief. I stride as quickly as I can to the Underground, opt for Jubilee–District, and join the crowd on the platform. As I do so, I glance at my watch and quell a sigh. I've been travelling for forty-five minutes already, and I'm not even *nearly* there.

As someone steps on my foot with a stiletto, I have a sudden

flashback to Dad pushing open our kitchen door, stepping outside, spreading his arms wide to take in the view of fields and endless sky, and saying, 'Shortest commute in the world, darling. Shortest commute in the world.' When I was little, I had no idea what he meant, but now—

'Move down! Will you move DOWN?' A man beside me on the platform is yelling so loudly, I flinch. The train has arrived and there's the usual battle between the people inside the carriage, who think it's totally crammed, and the people outside, who are measuring the empty spaces with forensic, practised eyes and reckon you could fit another twenty people in, easy.

Finally I get on the Tube, and fight my way off at Westminster, and wait for the District line, and then chug along to Turnham Green. As I get out of the Tube station, I glance at my watch and start running. Shit. I barely have ten minutes.

Our office is a large pale building called Phillimore House. As I get near, I slow to a walk, my heart still pounding. My left heel has a massive blister on it, but the main thing is, I've made it. I'm on time. Magically, there's a lift waiting, and I step in, trying to smooth down my hair, which flew in all directions as I was pegging it down Chiswick High Road. The whole commute took an hour and twenty minutes in all, which actually could be worse—

'Wait!' An imperious voice makes me freeze. Across the lobby is striding a familiar figure. She has long legs, high-heeled boots, expensive highlights, a biker jacket and a short skirt in an orange textured fabric which makes every other garment in the lift look suddenly old and obvious. Especially my black jersey skirt, £8.99 from the market.

She has amazing eyebrows. Some people are just granted amazing eyebrows, and she's one of them.

'Horrendous journey,' she says as she gets into the lift. Her voice is husky, coppery, grown-up-sounding. It's a voice that

knows stuff; that doesn't have time for fools. She jabs the floor number with a manicured finger and we start to rise. 'Absolutely horrendous,' she reiterates. 'The lights would *not* change at the Chiswick Lane junction. It took me twenty-five minutes to get here from home. Twenty-five minutes!'

She gives me one of her swooping, eagle-like gazes, and I realize she's waiting for a response.

'Oh,' I say feebly. 'Poor you.'

The lift doors open and she marches out. A moment later I follow, watching her haircut fall perfectly back into shape with every step and breathing in that distinctive scent she wears (bespoke, created for her at Annick Goutal in Paris on her fifth-wedding-anniversary trip).

This is my boss. This is Demeter. The woman with the perfect life.

I'm not exaggerating. When I say Demeter has the perfect life, believe me, it's true. Everything you could want out of life, she has. Job, family, general coolness. Tick, tick, tick. Even her name. It's so distinctive, she doesn't need to bother with her surname (Farlowe). She's just *Demeter*. Like *Madonna*. 'Hi,' I'll hear her saying on the phone, in that confident, louder-than-average voice of hers. 'It's De-*meeee*-ter.'

She's forty-five and she's been Executive Creative Director at Cooper Clemmow for just over a year. Cooper Clemmow is a branding and strategy agency, and we have some pretty big clients – therefore Demeter's a pretty big deal. Her office is full of awards and framed photos of her with illustrious people, and displays of products she's helped to brand.

She's tall and slim and has shiny brown hair and, as I already mentioned, amazing eyebrows. I don't know what she earns, but she lives in Shepherd's Bush in this stunning house which apparently she paid over two million for – my friend Flora told me.

Flora also told me that Demeter had her sitting-room floor imported from France and it's reclaimed oak parquet and cost a *fortune*. Flora's the closest in rank to me – she's a creative associate – and she's a constant source of gossip about Demeter.

I even went to look at Demeter's house once, not because I'm a sad stalker, but because I happened to be in the area and I knew the address, and, you know, why *not* check out your boss's house if you get the chance? (OK, full disclosure: I only knew the street name. I googled the number of the house when I got there.)

Of course, it's heartachingly tasteful. It looks like a house in a magazine. It *is* a house in a magazine. It's been profiled in *Livingetc*, with Demeter standing in her all-white kitchen, looking elegant and creative in a retro-print top.

I stood and stared at it for a while. Not exactly lusting – it was more wistful than that. *Wisting*. The front door is a gorgeous grey-green – Farrow & Ball or Little Greene, I'm sure – with an old-looking lion's head knocker and elegant pale grey stone steps leading up to it. The rest of the house is pretty impressive too – all painted window frames and slatted blinds and a glimpse of a wooden tree house in the back garden – but it was the front door that mesmerized me. And the steps. Imagine having a set of beautiful stone steps to descend every day, like a princess in a fairy tale. You'd start every day off feeling fabulous.

Two cars on the front forecourt. A grey Audi and a black Volvo people-carrier, all shiny and new. Everything Demeter has is either shiny and new and on-trend (designer juicing machine), or old and authentic and on-trend (huge antique wooden necklace that she got in South Africa). I think 'authentic' might be Demeter's favourite word in the whole world; she uses it about thirty times a day.

Demeter is married, *of course*, and she has two children, *of*

course: a boy called Hal and a girl called Coco. She has zillions of friends she's known 'forever' and is always going to parties and events and design awards. Sometimes she'll sigh and say it's her third night out that week and exclaim, 'Glutton for punishment!' as she changes into her Miu Miu shoes. (I take quite a lot of her Net-A-Porter packaging to recycling for her, so I know what labels she wears. Miu Miu. Marni in the sale. Dries van Noten. Also quite a lot of Zara.) But then, as she's heading out, her eyes will start sparkling, and the next thing, the photos are all over Cooper Clemmow's Facebook page and Twitter account and everywhere: Demeter in a cool black top (probably Helmut Lang, she likes him too), holding a wine glass and beaming with famous designer types and being perfect.

And here's the thing: I'm not *envious*. Not exactly. I don't want to be Demeter. I don't want her things. I mean, I'm only twenty-six, what would I do with a Volvo people-carrier?

But when I look at her, I feel this pinprick of – something, and I think: could that be me? Could that ever be me? When I've earned it, could I have Demeter's life? It's not just the things, but the confidence. The style. The sophistication. The connections. If it took me twenty years I wouldn't mind; in fact, I'd be ecstatic! If you told me: 'Guess what, if you work hard, in twenty years' time you'll be leading that life,' I'd put my head down right now and get to it.

It's impossible, though. It could never happen. People talk about 'ladders' and 'career structures' and 'rising through the ranks', but I can't see any ladder leading me to Demeter's life, however hard I work.

I mean, two million pounds for a house?

Two *million*?

I worked it out, once. Just suppose a bank ever lent me that kind of money – which they wouldn't – on my current salary it would take me 193.4 years to pay it off (and, you know, live).

When that number appeared on my calculator screen I actually laughed out loud a bit hysterically. People talk about the generation gap. Generation chasm, more like. Generation Grand Canyon. There isn't any ladder big enough to stretch from my place in life to Demeter's place in life, not without something extraordinary happening, like the lottery, or rich parents, or some genius website idea that makes my fortune. (Don't think I'm not trying. I spend every night attempting to invent a new kind of bra, or low-calorie caramel. No joy yet.)

So anyway. I can't aim for Demeter's life, not exactly. But I can aim for some of it. The achievable bits. I can watch her, study her. I can learn how to be like her.

And also, crucially, I can learn how to be *not* like her.

Because, didn't I mention? She's a nightmare. She's perfect *and* she's a nightmare. Both.

I'm just powering up my computer when Demeter comes striding into our open-plan office, sipping her soy latte. 'People,' she says. 'People, listen up.'

This is another of Demeter's favourite words: 'people'. She comes into our space and says 'People' in that drama-school voice, and we all have to stop what we're doing as though there's going to be an important group announcement. When *in fact* what she wants is something very specific that only one person knows how to do, but since she can barely remember which of us does what, or even what our names are, she has to ask everyone.

All right, this is a slight exaggeration. But only slight. I've never met anyone as terrible at remembering names as Demeter. Flora told me once that Demeter actually has a real visual problem, some facial-recognition thing, but she won't admit it, because she reckons it doesn't affect her ability to do her job.

Well, newsflash: it does.

And second newsflash: what does facial recognition have to do with remembering a name properly? I've been here seven months, and I swear she's still not sure whether I'm Cath or Cat.

I'm Cat, in fact. Cat short for Catherine. Because . . . well. It's a cool nickname. It's short and punchy. It's modern. It's London. It's me. Cat. Cat Brenner.

Hi, I'm Cat.

Hi, I'm Catherine, but call me Cat.

OK, full disclosure: it's not *absolutely* me. Not yet. I'm still part Katie. I've been calling myself 'Cat' since I started this job, but for some reason it hasn't fully taken. Sometimes I don't respond as quickly as I should when people call out 'Cat'. I hesitate before I sign it, and one hideous time I had to scrub out a 'K' I'd started writing on one of those big office birthday cards. Luckily no one saw. I mean, who doesn't know their own *name*?

But I'm determined to be Cat. I *will* be Cat. It's my all-new London name. I've had three jobs in my life (OK, two were internships) and at each new step I've reinvented myself a bit more. Changing from Katie to Cat is just the latest stage.

Katie is the home me. The Somerset me. A rosy-cheeked, curly-haired country girl who lives in jeans and wellies and a fleece which came free with a delivery of sheep food. A girl whose entire social life is the local pub or maybe the Ritzy in Warreton. A girl I've left behind.

As long as I can remember, I've wanted out of Somerset. I've wanted London. I never had boy bands on my bedroom wall, I had the Tube map. Posters of the London Eye and the Gherkin.

The first internship I managed to scrape was in Birmingham, and that's a big city too. It's got the shops, the glamour, the buzz . . . but it's not *London*. It doesn't have that *London-ness* that makes my heart soar. The skyline. The history. Walking

past Big Ben and hearing it chime, in real life. Standing in the same Tube stations that you've seen in a million films about the Blitz. Feeling that you're in one of the best cities in the world, no question, hands down. Living in London is like living in a movie set, from the Dickensian backstreets to the glinting tower blocks to the secret garden squares. You can be anyone you want to be.

There's not much in my life that would score in the top ten of any global survey. I don't have a top-ten job or wardrobe or flat. But I live in a top-ten city. Living in London is something that people all over the world would love to do, and now I'm here. And that's why I don't care if my commute is the journey from hell and my bedroom is about three feet square. *I'm here.*

I couldn't get here straight away. The only offer I had after uni was in a tiny marketing firm in Birmingham. So I moved up there and immediately started creating a new personality. I had a fringe cut. I started straightening my hair every day and putting it in a smart knot. I bought myself a pair of black glasses with clear lenses. I looked different. I felt different. I even started doing my make-up differently, with super-defined lipliner every day and black liquid eyeliner in flicky curves.

(It took me a whole weekend to learn how to do that flicky eyeliner. It's an actual skill, like trigonometry – so what I wonder is, why don't they teach *that* at school? If I ran the country there'd be GCSEs in things that you'd actually use your whole life. Like: How To Do Eyeliner. How To Fill In A Tax Return. What To Do When Your Loo Blocks And Your Dad Isn't Answering The Phone And You're About To Have A Party.)

It was in Birmingham that I decided to lose my West Country accent. I was in the loo, minding my own business, when I heard a couple of girls taking the piss out of me.

Farrmer Katie, they were calling me. And yes, I was shocked, and yes, it stung. I could have burst out of my cubicle and exclaimed, 'Well, I don't think your Brummie accent's any better!'

But I didn't. I just sat there and thought hard. It was a reality check. By the time I got my second internship – the one in east London – I was a different person. I'd wised up. I didn't look *or* sound like Katie Brenner from Ansters Farm.

And now I'm totally Cat Brenner from London. Cat Brenner who works in a cool office with distressed-brick walls and white shiny desks and funky chairs and a coat stand in the shape of a naked man. (It gives everyone a real shock, the first time they come to visit.)

I mean, *I am* Cat. I will be. I just have to nail the not-signing-the-wrong-name thing.

'People,' Demeter says for a third time, and the office becomes quiet. There are ten of us in here, all with different titles and job descriptions. On the next floor up, there's an events team, and a digital team, and the planning lot. There's also some other group of creatives called the 'vision team' who work directly with Adrian, the CEO. Plus other offices for Talent Management and finance or whatever. But this floor is my world, and I'm at the bottom of the pile. I earn by far the least and my desk is the smallest, but you have to start somewhere. This is my first-ever paid job, and I thank my lucky stars for it every day. And, you know, my work *is* interesting. In a way.

Kind of.

I mean, I suppose it depends how you define 'interesting'. I'm currently working on this really exciting project to launch a new self-foaming 'cappuccino-style' creamer from Coffeewite. I'm on the research side. And what that *actually* comes down to, in terms of my day-to-day work, is . . .

Well. Here's the thing. You have to be realistic. You can't go

straight in at the fun, glam stuff. Dad just doesn't get that. He's always asking do I come up with all the ideas? Or have I met lots of important people? Or do I go for swanky business lunches every day? Which is ridiculous.

And yes, I'm probably being defensive, but he doesn't understand, and it *really* doesn't help when he starts wincing and shaking his head and saying, 'And you're really happy in the Big Smoke, Katie, my love?' I *am* happy. But that doesn't mean it's not hard. Dad doesn't know anything about jobs, or London, or the economy, or, I don't know, the price of a glass of wine in a London bar. I haven't even told him exactly how much my rent is, because I know what he'd say; he'd say—

Oh God. Deep breath. Sorry. I didn't mean to launch into some off-topic rant about my dad. Things haven't been great between us, ever since I moved away after uni. He doesn't understand why I moved here and he never will. And I can try to explain it all I like, but if you can't *feel* London, all you see are traffic and fumes and expense and your daughter choosing to move over a hundred and fifty miles away.

I had a choice: follow my heart or not break his. I think in the end I broke a bit of both our hearts. Which the rest of the world doesn't understand, because they think it's normal to move out and away from home. But they aren't my dad and me, who lived together, just us, for all those years.

Anyway. Back to my work. People at my level don't meet the clients – Demeter does that. And Rosa. They go out for the lunches and come back with pink cheeks and free samples and excitement. Then they put together a pitch, which usually involves Mark and Liz too, and someone from the digital team, and sometimes Adrian. He's not just CEO but also the co-founder of Cooper Clemmow and has an office downstairs. (There was another co-founder, called Max, but he retired early to the south of France.)

Adrian's quite amazing, actually. He's about fifty and has a

shock of iron-grey wavy hair and wears a lot of denim shirts and looks like he comes from the seventies. Which I suppose, in a way, he does. He's also properly famous. Like, there's a display of alumni outside King's College, London, on the Strand and Adrian's picture is up there.

Anyway, so that's all the main players. But I'm not at that level, nothing like. As I said, I'm involved in the research side, which means what I'm *actually* doing this week is . . .

And listen, before I say it, it doesn't *sound* glamorous, OK? But it's not as bad as it sounds, really.

I'm inputting data. To be specific, the results of this big customer survey we did for Coffeewite about coffee, creamers, cappuccinos and, well, everything. Two thousand handwritten surveys, each eight pages long. I know, right? Paper? *No one* does paper surveys any more. But Demeter wanted to go 'old-school' because she read some research that said people are 25 per cent more honest when they're writing with a pen than they are online. Or something.

So here we are. Or rather, here I am, with five boxfuls of questionnaires still to go.

It can get a *bit* tiring, because it's the same old questions and the participants all scribbled their answers in biro and they aren't always clear. But on the plus side, this research will shape the whole project! Flora was all, 'My God, poor you, Cat, what a bloody nightmare!' but actually it's fascinating.

Well. I mean, you have to *make* it fascinating. I've taken to guessing people's income brackets based on what they said in the question about 'foam density'. And you know what? I'm usually right. It's like mind reading. The more I'm inputting these answers, the more I'm learning about consumers. At least I hope so—

'People. What the *fuck* is up with Trekbix?'

Demeter's voice breaks into my thoughts again. She's

standing in her spiky heels, thrusting a hand through her hair with that impatient, frustrated, *what-is-wrong-with-the-world?* expression she gets.

'I wrote myself a set of notes about this.' She's scrolling through her phone, ignoring us all again. 'I know I did.'

'I haven't seen any notes,' says Sarah from behind her desk, using her customary low, discreet voice. *St Sarah*, as Flora calls her. Sarah is Demeter's assistant. She has luscious red hair which she ties into a ponytail and very white, pretty teeth. She's the one who makes her own clothes: gorgeous retro fifties-style outfits with circular skirts. And how she keeps sane, I have no idea.

Demeter has got to be the scattiest person in the universe. Every day, it seems, she misplaces a document or gets the time of an appointment wrong. Sarah is always very patient and polite to Demeter, but you can see her frustration in her mouth. It goes all tight and one corner disappears into her cheek. She's apparently the master of sending emails out from Demeter's account, in Demeter's voice, saving the situation, apologizing and generally smoothing things over.

I know it's a big job that Demeter does. Plus she has her family to think about, and school concerts or whatever. But how can you be *this* flaky?

'Right. Found it. Why was it in my *personal* folder?' Demeter looks up from her phone with that confused, eye-darting look she sometimes gets, like the entire world confounds her.

'You just need to save it under—' Sarah tries to take Demeter's phone, but she swipes it away.

'I know how to use my phone. *That's* not the point. The point is—' She stops dead, and we all wait breathlessly. This is another Demeter habit: she starts a really arresting sentence and then stops halfway through, as though her batteries have been turned off. I glance at Flora and she does a little eye-roll to the ceiling.

'Yes. Yes,' Demeter resumes. 'What's going on with Trekbix? Because I thought Liz was going to write a response to their email, but I've just had a further email from Rob Kincaid asking why he's heard nothing. So?' She swivels round to Liz, finally focusing on the person she needs to, finally coming alive. 'Liz? Where is it? You promised me a draft by this morning.' She taps her phone. 'It's in my notes from last Monday's meeting. *Liz to write draft*. First rule of client care, Liz?'

Hold the client's hand, I think to myself, although I don't say it out loud. That would be too geeky.

'Hold the client's hand,' declaims Demeter. 'Hold it *throughout*. Make them feel secure every minute of the process. *Then* you'll have a happy customer. You're not holding Rob Kincaid's hand, Liz. His hand's dangling and he's not a happy bunny.'

Liz colours. 'I'm still working on it.'

'Still?'

'There's a lot to put in.'

'Well, work faster.' Demeter frowns at her. 'And send it to me for approval first. Don't just ping it off to Rob. By lunchtime, OK?'

'OK,' mumbles Liz, looking pissed off. She doesn't often put a foot wrong, Liz. She's Project Manager and has a very tidy desk and straight fair hair which she washes every day with apple-scented shampoo. She eats a lot of apples, too. Actually, I've never connected those two facts before. Weird.

'Where *is* that email from Rob Kincaid?' Demeter is scrolling back and forth, peering at her phone. 'It's disappeared from my inbox.'

'Have you deleted it by mistake?' says Sarah patiently. 'I'll forward it to you again.'

This is Sarah's other pet annoyance: Demeter is always carelessly deleting emails and then needing them urgently and getting in a tizz. Sarah says she spends half her life

forwarding emails to Demeter, and thank God *one* of them has an efficient filing system.

‘There you are.’ Sarah clicks briskly. ‘I’ve forwarded Rob’s email to you. In fact, I’ve forwarded all his emails to you, just in case.’

‘Thanks, Sarah.’ Demeter subsides. ‘I don’t know *where* that email went . . .’ She’s peering at her phone, but Sarah doesn’t seem interested.

‘So, Demeter, I’m going off to my first-aid training now,’ she says, reaching for her bag. ‘I told you about it? Because I’m the first-aid officer?’

‘Right.’ Demeter looks bemused, and it’s clear she’d totally forgotten. ‘Great! Well done you. So, Sarah, before you go, let’s touch base . . .’ She scrolls through her phone. ‘It’s the London Food Awards tonight. I need to get to the hairdresser’s this afternoon—’

‘You can’t,’ Sarah interrupts. ‘This afternoon is solid.’

‘*What?*’ Demeter looks up from her phone. ‘But I booked the hairdresser’s.’

‘For tomorrow.’

‘*Tomorrow?*’ Demeter sounds aghast and her eyes are swivelling again. ‘No. I booked it for Monday.’

‘Look at your calendar.’ Sarah sounds barely able to control her patience. ‘It was Tuesday, Demeter, always *Tuesday*.’

‘But I need my roots done, urgently. Can I cancel anyone this afternoon?’

‘It’s those polenta people. And then it’s the team from Green Teen.’

‘Shit.’ Demeter screws up her face in agony. ‘*Shit*.’

‘And you’ve got a conference call in fifteen minutes. Can I go?’ says Sarah in long-suffering tones.

‘Yes. Yes. You go.’ Demeter waves a hand. ‘Thanks, Sarah.’ She heads back into her office, exhaling sharply. ‘Shit, *shit*. Oh.’ She reappears. ‘Rosa. The Sensiquo logo? We should try

it in a bigger point size. It came to me on my way in. And try the roundel in aquamarine. Can you talk to Mark? Where *is* Mark?' She glances querulously at his desk.

'Working from home today,' says Jon, a junior creative.

'Oh,' says Demeter mistrustfully. 'OK.'

Demeter doesn't really believe in working from home. She says you lose the flow with people disappearing the whole time. But Mark had it negotiated into his contract before Demeter arrived, so there's nothing she can do about it.

'Don't worry, I'll tell him,' says Rosa, scribbling furiously on her notepad. 'Point size, aquamarine.'

'Great. Oh, and Rosa?' She pops her head out yet again. 'I want to discuss Python training. Everyone in this office should be able to code.'

'What?'

'Coding!' says Demeter impatiently. 'I read a piece about it in the *Huffington Post*. Put it on the agenda for the next group meeting.'

'OK.' Rosa looks baffled. 'Coding. Fine.'

As Demeter closes her door, everyone breathes out. This is Demeter. Totally random. Keeping up with her is exhausting.

Rosa is tapping frantically at her phone, and I know she's sending a bitchy text about Demeter to Liz. Sure enough, a moment later Liz's phone pings, and she nods vociferously at Rosa.

I haven't totally fathomed the office politics of this place – it's like trying to catch up on a TV soap opera mid-flow. But I do know that Rosa applied for Demeter's job and didn't get it. I also know that they had a massive row, just before I arrived. Rosa wanted to get on some big one-off special project that the Mayor of London spearheaded. It was branding a new London athletics event and he put together a team seconded from creative agencies all over London. The *Evening Standard*

called it 'a showcase for London's best and brightest'. But Demeter wouldn't let Rosa do it. She said she needed Rosa on her team 24/7, which was bullshit. Since then, Rosa has hated Demeter with a passion.

Flora's theory is that Demeter's so paranoid about being overtaken by her young staff that she won't help anyone. If you even *try* to climb the ladder, she stamps on your fingers with her Miu Miu shoes. Apparently Rosa's desperate to leave Cooper Clemmow now, but there's not a lot out there in this market. So here poor Rosa stays, stuck with a boss she hates, basically loathing every moment of her work. You can see it in her hunched shoulders and frowning brow.

Mark also loathes Demeter, and I know the story there, too. Demeter's supposed to oversee the design team. *Oversee*, not do it all herself. But she can't stop herself. Design is Demeter's thing – design and packaging. She knows the names of more typefaces than you can imagine, and sometimes she interrupts a meeting just to show us all some packaging design that she thinks really works. Which is, you know, great. But it's also a problem, because she's always wading in.

So last year Cooper Clemmow refreshed the branding of a big moisturizer called Drench, and it was Demeter's idea to go pale orange with white type. Well, it's been this massive hit, and we've won all sorts of prizes. All good – except for Mark, who's Head of Design. Apparently he'd already created this whole *other* design package. But Demeter came up with the orange idea, mocked it up herself and flung it out there at a client meeting. And Mark felt totally belittled.

The worst thing is, Demeter didn't even notice that Mark was pissed off. She doesn't pick up on things like that. She's all: 'High five – great work, team, move on, next project.' And then it was such a huge success that Mark could hardly complain. I mean, in some ways, he's lucky: he got a load of credit for that redesign. He can put it on his CV and everything. But

still. He's all bristly and has this sarcastic way of talking to Demeter which makes me wince.

The sad thing is, everyone else in the office knows Mark is really talented. Like, he's just won the Stylesign Award for Innovation. (Apparently it's some really prestigious thing.) But it's as if Demeter doesn't even *realize* what a great Head of Design she has.

Liz isn't that happy here either, but she puts up with it. Flora, on the other hand, bitches about Demeter all the time, but I think that's because she loves bitching. I'm not sure about the others.

As for me, I'm still the new girl. I've only been here seven months and I keep my head down and don't venture my opinion too much. But I do have ambition; I do have ideas. I'm all about design, too, especially typography – in fact that's what Demeter and I talked about in my interview.

Whenever a new project comes into the office, my brain fires up. I've put together *so* many bits of spec work in my spare time on my laptop. Logos, design concepts, strategy documents . . . I keep emailing them to Demeter, for feedback, and she keeps promising she *will* look at them, when she has a moment.

Everyone says you mustn't chivvy Demeter, or she flies off the handle. So I'm biding my time, like a surfer waiting for a wave. I'm pretty good at surfing, as it happens, and I know the wave will come. When the moment is right, I'll get Demeter's attention. She'll look at my stuff, everything will click and I'll start riding my life. Not paddling, paddling, paddling, as I am right now.

I'm just picking up my next survey from the pile when Hannah, another of our designers, enters the office. There's a general gasp and Flora turns to raise her eyebrows at me. Poor Hannah had to go home on Friday. She really wasn't well. She's had about five miscarriages over the last two years,

and it's left her a bit vulnerable, and just occasionally she has a panic attack. It happened yesterday, so Rosa told her to go home and have a rest. The truth is, Hannah works probably the hardest in the office. I've seen emails from her at 2 a.m. She deserves a bit of a break.

'Hannah!' Rosa exclaims. 'Are you OK? Take it really easy today.'

'I'm fine,' says Hannah, slipping into her seat, avoiding everyone's eye. 'I'm fine.' She instantly opens up a document and starts work, sipping from a bottle of filtered tap water. (Cooper Clemmow launched the brand, so we all have these freebie neon bottles on our desks.)

'Hannah!' Demeter appears at the door of her office. 'You're back. Well done.'

'I'm fine,' says Hannah, yet again. I can tell she doesn't want any fuss made, but Demeter comes right over to her desk.

'Now, please don't worry, Hannah,' she says in her ringing, authoritative tones. '*No one* thinks you're a drama queen or anything like that. So don't worry about it at all.'

She gives Hannah a friendly nod, and then strides back into her office and shuts her door. The rest of us are watching, dumbstruck, and poor Hannah looks absolutely stricken. As soon as Demeter is back in her office, she turns to Rosa.

'Do you all think I'm a drama queen?' she gulps.

'No!' exclaims Rosa at once, and I can hear Liz muttering, '*Bloody Demeter.*'

'Listen, Hannah,' Rosa continues, heading to Hannah's desk, crouching down and looking her straight in the eye. 'You've just been Demetered.'

'That's right,' agrees Liz. 'You've been Demetered.'

'It happens to us all. She's an insensitive cow and she says stupid stuff and you just have to *not listen*, OK? You've done really well, coming in today, and we all really appreciate the effort you've made. Don't we?' She looks around and a spatter

of applause breaks out, whereupon Hannah's cheeks flush with pleasure.

'Fuck Demeter,' ends Rosa succinctly, and she heads back to her own desk, amid even more applause.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Demeter glancing out of her glass-walled office, as though wondering what's going on. And I almost feel sorry for her. She really has no idea.