

# 1

## *Leena*

'I think we should swap,' I tell Bee, bobbing up into a half-squat so I can talk to her over my computer screen. 'I'm bricking it. You should do the start and I'll do the end and that way by the time it gets to me I'll be less, you know . . .' I wave my hands to convey my mental state.

'You'll be less jazz hands?' Bee says, tilting her head to the side.

'Come on. Please.'

'Leena. My dear friend. My guiding light. My favourite pain in the ass. You are much better than I am at starting presentations and we are not switching the order of things now, ten minutes before our key client stakeholder update, just like we didn't switch at the last programme board, or the one before that, or the one before that, because that would be madness and quite frankly I haven't a bloody clue what's on the opening slides.'

I sag back into my chair. 'Right. Yes.' I bob up again. 'Only this time I am *really* feeling—'

'Mmm,' Bee says, not looking up from her screen. 'Absolutely. Worst ever. Shaking, sweaty palms, the lot. Only as soon as you get in there you'll be as charming and brilliant as you always are and nobody will notice a thing.'

'But what if I . . .'

‘You won’t.’

‘Bee, I really think—’

‘I know you do.’

‘But this time—’

‘Only eight minutes to go, Leena. Try that breathing thing.’

‘What breathing thing?’

Bee pauses. ‘You know. Breathing?’

‘Oh, just normal breathing? I thought you meant some kind of meditative technique.’

She snorts at that. There’s a pause. ‘You’ve coped with way worse than this hundreds of times over, Leena,’ she says.

I wince, cupping my coffee mug between my palms. The fear sits in the hollow at the base of my ribs, so real it feels almost physical – a stone, a knot, something you could cut out with a knife.

‘I know,’ I say. ‘I know I have.’

‘You just need to get your mojo back,’ Bee tells me. ‘And the only way to do that is to stay in the ring. OK? Come on. You are Leena Cotton, youngest senior consultant in the business, Selmount Consulting’s one-to-watch 2020. And . . .’ she lowers her voice, ‘soon – one day – co-director of our own business. Yes?’

Yes. Only I don’t *feel* like that Leena Cotton.

Bee’s watching me now, her pencilled brows drawn tight with concern. I close my eyes and try to will the fear away, and for a moment it works: I feel a flicker of the person I was a year and a half ago, the person who would have flown through a presentation like this without letting it touch her.

‘You ready, Bee, Leena?’ the CEO’s assistant calls as he makes his way across the Upgo office floor.

I stand and my head lurches; a wave of nausea hits. I grab the edge of the desk. Shit. *This* is new.

‘You OK?’ Bee whispers.

I swallow and press my hands into the desk until my wrists start

to ache. For a moment I don't think I can do it – I just don't have it in me, God, I'm so *tired* – but then, at last, the grit kicks in.

'Absolutely,' I say. 'Let's do this.'

Half an hour has passed. That's not an especially long time, really. You can't watch a whole episode of *Buffy* in that time, or . . . or bake a large potato. But you *can* totally destroy your career.

I've been so afraid this was coming. For over a year now I've been fumbling my way through work, making absent-minded slip-ups and oversights, the sort of stuff I just don't *do*. It's like since Carla died I've switched my writing hand, and suddenly I'm doing everything with my left, not my right. But I've been trying so hard and I've been pushing through and I really thought I was getting there.

Evidently not.

I honestly thought I was going to die in that meeting. I've had a panic attack once before, when I was at university, but it wasn't as bad as this one. I have never felt so far out of my own control. It was like the fear got loose: it wasn't a tight knot any more, it had tendrils, and they were tightening at my wrists and ankles and clawing at my throat. My heart was beating so fast – faster and faster – until it didn't feel like part of my body any longer, it felt like a vicious thrashing little bird trapped against my ribcage.

Getting *one* of the revenue numbers wrong would have been forgivable. But once that happened the nausea came, and I got another wrong, and another, and then my breathing started coming too fast and my brain was filled with . . . not fog, more like bright, bright light. Too bright to see anything by.

So when Bee stepped in and said *allow me to* –

Then when someone else said *come on this is laughable* –

And when the CEO of Upgo Finance said *I think we've seen enough here don't you* –

I was already gone. Doubled over, gasping, quite sure I was about to die.

‘You’re OK,’ Bee’s saying now, her hands gripping mine tightly. We’re tucked away in one of the phone-call booths in the corner of the Upgo offices; Bee led me here, still hyperventilating, sweating through my shirt. ‘I’ve got you. You’re OK.’

Each breath is coming in a jagged gasp. ‘I just lost Selmount the Upgo contract, didn’t I?’ I manage.

‘Rebecca’s on a call with the CEO now. I’m sure it’ll be fine. Come on, just breathe.’

‘Leena?’ someone calls. ‘Leena, are you all right?’

I keep my eyes closed. Maybe, if I stay like this, that will not be the voice of my boss’s assistant.

‘Leena? It’s Ceci, Rebecca’s assistant?’

Gah. How did she get here so fast? The Upgo offices are at least a twenty-minute tube ride from Selmount headquarters.

‘Oh, Leena, what a mess!’ Ceci says. She joins us in the booth and rubs my shoulder in nagging circles. ‘You poor little thing. That’s right, cry it out.’

I’m not crying, actually. I breathe out slowly and look at Ceci, who is wearing a couture dress and a particularly gleeful smile, and remind myself for the hundredth time how important it is to support other women in business. I really, fully believe that. It’s a code I live by, and it’s how I plan to make it to the top.

But women are still, you know, people. And some people are just awful.

‘What can we do you for, Ceci?’ Bee asks, through gritted teeth.

‘Rebecca sent me to check you’re all right,’ she says. ‘You know. After your . . .’ She waggles her fingers. ‘Your *little wobble*.’ Her iPhone buzzes. ‘Oh! There’s an email from her now.’

Bee and I wait, shoulders tensed. Ceci reads the email inhumanely slowly.

'Well?' Bee says.

'Hmm?' says Ceci.

'Rebecca. What did she say? Has she . . . Did I lose us the contract?'  
I manage.

Ceci tilts her head, eyes still on her phone. We wait. I can feel the tide of panic waiting too, ready to drag me back under.

'Rebecca's sorted it – isn't she a marvel? They're retaining Selmount on this project and have been *very* understanding, considering,' Ceci says eventually, with a little smile. 'She wants to see you now, so you'd better hotfoot it back over to the office, don't you think?'

'Where?' I manage. 'Where does she want to meet me?'

'Hmm? Oh, Room 5c, in HR.'

Of course. Where else would she go to fire me?

Rebecca and I are sitting opposite each other. Judy from HR is beside her. I am not taking it as a good sign that Judy is on her side of the table, not mine.

Rebecca pushes her hair back from her face and looks at me with pained sympathy, which can only be a very bad sign. This is Rebecca, queen of tough love, master of the mid-meeting put-down. She once told me that expecting the impossible is the only real route to the best results.

Basically, if she's being nice to me, that means she's given up.

'Leena,' Rebecca begins. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, of course, I'm absolutely fine,' I say. 'Please, Rebecca, let me explain. What happened in that meeting was . . .' I trail off, because Rebecca is waving her hand and frowning.

'Look, Leena, I know you play the part very well, and God knows I love you for it.' She glances at Judy. 'I mean, Selmount values your . . . gritty, can-do attitude. But let's cut the crap. You look fucking terrible.'

Judy coughs quietly.

‘That is, we wonder if you are a little run-down,’ Rebecca says, without missing a beat. ‘We’ve just checked your records – do you know when you last took a holiday?’

‘Is that a . . . trick question?’

‘Yes, yes it is, Leena, because for the last year you have not taken *any annual leave*.’ Rebecca glares at Judy. ‘Something which, by the way, should not be possible.’

‘I told you,’ Judy hisses, ‘I don’t know how she slipped through the net!’

I know how I slipped through the net. Human Resources talk the talk about making sure staff take their allotted annual leave, but all they actually do is send you an email twice a year telling you how many days you have left and saying something encouraging about ‘wellness’ and ‘our holistic approach’ and ‘taking things offline to maximise your potential’.

‘Really, Rebecca, I’m absolutely fine. I’m very sorry that my – that I disrupted the meeting this morning, but if you’ll let me . . .’

More frowning and hand-waving.

‘Leena, I’m sorry. I know it’s been an impossibly tough time for you. This project is an incredibly high-stress one, and I’ve been feeling for a while that we didn’t do right by you when we staffed you on it. I know I’m usually taking the piss when I say this sort of thing, but your well-being genuinely matters to me, all right? So I’ve talked to the partners, and we’re taking you off the Upgo project.’

I shiver all of a sudden, a ridiculous, over-the-top shake, my body reminding me that I am still not in control. I open my mouth to speak, but Rebecca gets there first.

‘And we’ve decided not to staff you on any projects for the next two months,’ she goes on. ‘Treat it as a sabbatical. Two months’ holiday. You are not allowed back in Selmount headquarters until you are rested and relaxed and look less like someone who’s spent a year in a war zone. OK?’

'That's not necessary,' I say. 'Rebecca, please. Give me a chance to prove that I—'

'This is a fucking gift, Leena,' Rebecca says with exasperation. 'Paid leave! Two months!'

'I don't want it. I want to work.'

'Really? Because your face is saying you want to *sleep*. Do you think I don't know you've been working until two in the morning every day this week?'

'I'm sorry. I know I should be able to keep to regular working hours – there have just been a few—'

'I'm not criticising you for how you manage your workload, I'm asking *when you ever bloody rest, woman*.'

Judy lets out a little string of quiet coughs at that. Rebecca shoots her an irritated look.

'A week,' I say desperately. 'I'll take a week off, get some rest, then when I come back I'll—'

'Two. Months. Off. That's it. This isn't a negotiation, Leena. You need this. Don't make me set HR on you to prove it.' This is said with a dismissive head-jerk in Judy's direction. Judy draws her chin in as though someone's clapped loudly in her face, perhaps, or flicked her on the forehead.

I can feel my breathing speeding up again. Yes, I've been struggling a little, but I can't take two months off. I can't. Selmount is all about reputation – if I step out of the game for eight whole weeks after that Upgo meeting, I'll be a laughing stock.

'Nothing is going to change in eight weeks,' Rebecca tells me. 'OK? We'll still be here when you get back. And you'll still be Leena Cotton, youngest senior, hardest worker, smartest cookie.' Rebecca looks at me intently. 'We all need a break sometimes. Even you.'

I walk out of the meeting feeling sick. I thought they'd try to fire me – I had all these lines prepared about unfair dismissal. But . . . a sabbatical?

‘Well?’ Bee says, appearing so close in front of me I have to stumble to a stop. ‘I was lurking,’ she explains. ‘What did Rebecca say?’  
 ‘She said I . . . have to go on holiday.’  
 Bee blinks at me for a moment. ‘Let’s take an early lunch.’

As we dodge tourists and businessmen on our way down Commercial Street, my phone rings in my hand. I look at the screen and falter, almost running into a man with an e-cig hanging out of his mouth like a pipe.

Bee glances at the phone screen over my shoulder. ‘You don’t have to answer right now. You can let it ring out.’

My finger hovers over the green icon on the screen. I bash shoulders with a passing man in a suit; he tuts as I go buffeting across the pavement, and Bee has to steady me.

‘What would you tell me to do if I was in this position right now?’  
 Bee tries.

I answer the call. Bee sighs and pulls open the door to Watson’s Café, our usual haunt for the rare, special occasions when we leave the Selmount offices for a meal.

‘Hi, Mum,’ I say.

‘Leena, hi!’

I wince. She’s all breezy and faux casual, like she’s practised the greeting before making the call.

‘I want to talk to you about hypnotherapy,’ she says.

I sit down opposite Bee. ‘What?’

‘Hypnotherapy,’ Mum repeats, with slightly less confidence this time. ‘Have you heard of it? There’s someone who does it over in Leeds, and I think it could be really good for us, Leena, and I thought perhaps we could go together, next time you’re up visiting?’

‘I don’t need hypnotherapy, Mum.’

‘It’s not hypnotising people like Derren Brown does or anything, it’s . . .’



'I don't need hypnotherapy, Mum.' It comes out sharply; I can hear her smarting in the silence that follows. I close my eyes, steadying my breathing again. 'You're welcome to try it, but I'm fine.'

'I just think – maybe, maybe it'd be good for us to do something together, not necessarily therapy, but . . .'

I notice she's dropped the 'hypno'. I smooth back my hair, the familiar stiff stickiness of hairspray under my fingers, and avoid Bee's gaze across the table.

'I think we should try talking maybe somewhere where . . . hurtful things can't be said. Positive dialogue only.'

Behind the conversation I can feel the presence of Mum's latest self-help book. It's in the careful use of the passive voice, the measured tone, the *positive dialogue* and *hurtful things*. But when it makes me waver, when it makes me want to say, *Yes, Mum, whatever would make you feel better*, I think of the choice my mother helped Carla to make. How she let my sister choose to end treatment, to – to give up.

I'm not sure even the Derren Brown kind of hypnotherapy could help me deal with that.

'I'll think about it,' I say. 'Goodbye, Mum.'

'Bye, Leena.'

Bee watches me across the table, letting me regroup. 'OK?' she says eventually. Bee's been on the Upgo project with me for the last year – she's seen me through every day since Carla died. She knows as much about my relationship with my mum as my boyfriend does, if not more – I only get to see Ethan at the weekends and the odd midweek evening if we can both get away from work on time, whereas Bee and I are together about sixteen hours a day.

I rub my eyes hard; my hands come away grainy with mascara. I must look an absolute state. 'You were right. I shouldn't have taken the call. I handled that all wrong.'

'Sounded like you did pretty well to me,' Bee says.

'Please, talk to me about something else. Something that isn't my

family. Or work. Or anything else similarly disastrous. Tell me about your date last night.’

‘If you want non-disastrous, you’re going to need to pick another topic,’ Bee says, settling back in her chair.

‘Oh no, not good?’ I ask.

I’m blinking back tears, but Bee kindly ploughs on, pretending not to notice.

‘Nope. Odious. I knew it was a no as soon as he leaned in to kiss me on the cheek and all I could smell was the foisty, mouldy man-towel he must’ve used to wash his face.’

That works – it’s gross enough to startle me back to the present. ‘Eww,’ I say.

‘He had this massive globule of sleepy dust in the corner of his eye too. Like eye snot.’

‘Oh, Bee . . .’ I’m trying to find the right way to tell her to stop giving up on people so quickly, but my powers of pep-talking seem to have deserted me, and in any case, that towel thing really is quite disgusting.

‘I am on the brink of giving up and facing an eternity as a single mother,’ Bee says, trying to catch the waiter’s eye. ‘I’ve come to the decision that dating is genuinely worse than loneliness. At least when you’re alone there’s no hope, right?’

‘No hope?’

‘Yeah. No hope. Lovely. We all know where we stand – alone, as we entered the world, so we shall leave it, et cetera, et cetera . . . Whereas dating, dating is *full* of hope. In fact, dating is really one long, painful exercise in discovering how disappointing other humans are. Every time you start to believe you’ve found a good, kind man . . .’ She wiggles her fingers. ‘Out come the mummy issues and the fragile egos and the weird cheese fetishes.’

The waiter finally looks our way. ‘The usual?’ he calls across the café.

'Yup! Extra syrup on her pancakes,' Bee calls back, pointing at me.

'Did you say *cheese* fetishes?' I ask.

'Let's just say I've seen some photos that've really put me off brie.'

'Brie?' I say, horrified. 'But – oh, God, brie is so delicious! How could anyone corrupt brie?'

Bee pats my hand. 'I suspect you'll never have to find out, my friend. In fact, yes, if I'm supposed to be cheering you up, why aren't we talking about *your* ever-so-perfect love life? Surely the count-down's on for Ethan to pop the question.' She catches my expression. 'No? Don't want to talk about that either?'

'I've just got . . .' I flap my hand, eyes pricking again. 'A big wave of the horror. Oh, God. Oh God, oh God.'

'Which life crisis are you oh-godding about, just so I know?' Bee asks.

'Work.' I press my knuckles against my eyes until it hurts. 'I can't believe they're not staffing me for two whole months. It's like a . . . like a mini firing.'

'Actually,' Bee says, and her tone makes me move my hands and open my eyes, 'it's a two-month holiday.'

'Yes, but . . .'

'Leena, I love you, and I know you've got a lot of shit going on right now, but please try to see that this could be a good thing? Because it's going to be quite hard to continue loving you if you're going to spend the next eight weeks complaining about getting two months' paid leave.'

'Oh, I . . .'

'You could go to Bali! Or explore the Amazon rainforest! Or sail around the world!' She raises her eyebrows. 'Do you know what I'd give to have that kind of freedom?'

I swallow. 'Yes. Right. Sorry, Bee.'

'You're all right. I know this is about more than time off work for

you. Just spare a thought for those of us who spend our allotted holiday at dinosaur museums full of nine-year-olds, yeah?’

I breathe in and out slowly, trying to let that sink in. ‘Thank you,’ I say, as the waiter approaches our table. ‘I needed to hear that.’

Bee smiles at me, then looks down at her plate. ‘You know,’ she says casually, ‘you *could* use the time off to get back to our business plan.’

I wince. Bee and I have been planning on setting up our own consultancy firm for a couple of years – we were almost ready to go when Carla got sick. Now, things have kind of . . . stalled a little.

‘Yes!’ I say, as cheerily as I can manage. ‘Absolutely.’

Bee raises an eyebrow. I sag.

‘I’m so sorry, Bee. I want to, I really do, it just feels . . . impossible, now. How are we going to launch our own business when I’m finding it so hard just holding down my job at Selmount?’

Bee chews a mouthful of pancake and looks thoughtful. ‘OK,’ she says. ‘Your confidence has taken a hit lately, I get it. I can wait. But even if you don’t use this time to work on the business plan, you should use it to work on *you*. My Leena Cotton doesn’t talk about “holding down a job” like that’s the best she can do, and she definitely doesn’t use the word “impossible”. And I want my Leena Cotton back. So,’ she points her fork at me, ‘you’ve got two months to find her for me.’

‘And how am I doing that?’

Bee shrugs. “Finding yourself” isn’t really my forte. I’m just doing strategy here – you’re on deliverables.’

That gets a laugh out of me. ‘Thank you, Bee,’ I say suddenly, reaching to clutch her hand. ‘You’re so great. Really. You’re phenomenal.’

‘Mmm, well. Tell that to the single men of London, my friend,’ she says, giving my hand a pat and then picking up her fork again.