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The Undomestic Goddess

Sophie Kinsella

ONE

Would you consider yourself stressed?

No. I'm not stressed.

I'm . . . busy. Plenty of people are busy. It's the way the world is. I have a high-powered job, my career is important to me and I enjoy it.

OK. So sometimes I do feel a bit tense. Kind of pressured. But I'm a lawyer in the City, for God's sake. What do you expect?

My handwriting is pressing so hard into the page, I've torn the paper. Dammit. Never mind. Let's move on to the next question.

On average, how many hours do you spend in the office every day?

14
12
8
It depends.

Do you exercise regularly?

I regularly go swimming
I occasionally go swim
I am intending to begin a regular regime of swimming. When I have time. Work's been busy lately, it's a blip.

Do you drink 8 glasses of water a day?

Yes
Someti
No.

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I put down my pen and clear my throat. Across the room, Maya looks up from where she's rearranging all her little pots of wax and nail varnish. Maya is my beauty therapist for the day. She has long dark hair in a plait with one white streak woven through it, and a tiny silver stud in her nose.

'Everything all right with the questionnaire?' she says in her soft voice.

'I did mention that I'm in a bit of a hurry,' I say politely. 'Are all these questions absolutely necessary?'

'We like to have as much information as possible to assess your beauty and health needs,' she says in soothing yet implacable tones.

I glance at my watch. Nine forty-five.

I don't have time for this. I really do not have the time. But it's my birthday treat and I promised Aunt Patsy.

To be more accurate, it's last year's birthday treat. Aunt Patsy gave me the gift voucher for an 'Ultimate De-stress Experience' just over a year ago. She's my mother's sister and has major worries about women with careers. Every time I see her she grasps my shoulders and peers at my face with an anxious frown, and in the card that came with the voucher she wrote 'Make Some Time For Yourself, Samantha!!!'

Which I did fully intend to do. But we had a couple of busy patches at work and somehow a year went by without my finding a spare moment. I'm a lawyer with Carter Spink, and just at the moment things are pretty hectic. It's a blip. It'll get better. I just have to get through the next couple of weeks.

Anyway, then Aunt Patsy sent me this year's birthday card - and I suddenly realized the voucher was about to expire. So here I am, on my twenty-ninth birthday. Sitting on a couch in a white towelling robe and surreal paper knickers. With a halfday window. Max.

Do you smoke?

No.

Do you drink alcohol?

Yes.

Do you eat regular home-cooked meals?

I look up, a bit defensive. What does that have to do with anything? What makes home-cooked meals superior?

I eat a nutritious, varied diet, I write at last.

Which is absolutely true.

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Anyway, everyone knows the Chinese live longer than we do - so what could be more healthy than to eat their food? And pizza is Mediterranean. It's probably more healthy than a home-cooked meal.

Do you feel your life is balanced?

Yes.
N
Yes.

'I'm done,' I announce, and hand the pages back to Maya, who starts reading through my answers. Her finger is travelling down the paper at a snail's pace. Like we've got all the time in the world.

Which she may well have. But I seriously have to be back in the office by one.

'I've read your answers carefully,' Maya gives me a thoughtful look, 'and you're obviously quite a stressed-out woman.'

What? Where does she get that from? I specifically put on the form, I am not stressed out.

'No I'm not.' I give her a relaxed, see-how-unstressed-I-am smile.

Maya looks unconvinced. 'Your job is obviously very pressured.'

'I thrive under pressure,' I explain. Which is true. I've known that about myself ever since . . .

Well, ever since my mother told me, when I was about eight. You thrive under pressure, Samantha. Our whole family thrives under pressure. It's like our family motto or something.

Apart from my brother Peter, of course. He had a nervous breakdown. But the rest of us.

I love my job. I love the satisfaction of spotting the loophole in a contract. I love the adrenaline rush of closing a deal. I love the thrill of negotiation, and arguing, and making the best point in the room.

I suppose, just occasionally, I do feel as though someone's piling heavy weights on me. Like big concrete blocks, one on top of the other, and I have to keep holding them up, no matter how exhausted I am . . .

But then everyone probably feels like that. It's normal.

'Your skin's very dehydrated.' Maya is shaking her head. She runs an expert hand across my cheek and rests her fingers underneath my jaw, looking concerned. 'Your heart rate's very high. That's not healthy. Are you feeling particularly tense at the moment?'

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'Work's pretty busy right now,' I shrug. 'It's just a blip. I'm fine.' Can we get on with it?

'Well.' Maya gets up. She presses a button set in the wall and gentle pan-pipe music fills the air. 'All I can say is, you've come to the right place, Samantha. Our aim here is to de-stress, revitalize and detoxify.'

'Lovely,' I say, only half listening. I've just remembered, I never got back to David Elldridge about that Ukrainian oil contract. I meant to call him yesterday. Shit.

'The aim of the Green Tree Centre is to provide a haven of tranquillity, away from all your day-to-day worries.' Maya presses another button in the wall, and the light dims to a muted glow. 'Before we start,' she says softly, 'do you have any questions?'

'Actually, I do.' I lean forward.

'Good!' She beams. 'Are you curious about today's treatments, or is it something more general?'

'Could I possibly send a quick email?' I say politely.

Maya's smile freezes on her face.

'Just quickly,' I add. 'It won't take two secs-'

'Samantha, Samantha . . .' Maya shakes her head. 'You're here to relax. To take a moment for yourself. Not to send emails. It's an obsession! An addiction! As evil as alcohol. Or caffeine.'

For goodness' sake, I'm not obsessed. I mean, that's ridiculous. I check my emails about once every . . . thirty seconds, maybe.

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