

HOT DESK



HOT DESK

A Novel



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For Bill, of course



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CHAPTER ONE

MONDAY WORK, REBECCA

Rebecca glared at her new shared desk, bare except for a sad cactus in a green plastic pot. How had it come to this? She used to have her own office. Yes, it had been fabricated from a file closet when she first started at Avenue Publishing five years ago. But it had a door she could close. And, after two long years of living in and working from her grandmother's apartment on West Ninety-Third Street, Rebecca had actually looked forward to going back into work, to seeing colleagues without having to parse their Zoom backgrounds, to gossiping in the company kitchen, and to wearing clothes with zippers.

But Leesen, the larger company that owned Avenue, Hawk Mills, and a handful of other publishing divisions, had moved to open plan, which their CEO, Frank French, had tried to pass off as an exciting opportunity for team spirit building. Then, just as she was adjusting to the lack of privacy, Leesen had subleased the fourth floor, capped her in-office days to Mondays and Tuesdays, and moved Hawk Mills to Avenue's floor, where they would be working Wednesdays and Thursdays, at the very same desks she and her colleagues now inhabited. Rebecca's tiny office had been rebranded as the "Synergy Room." She had only ever seen Paul from Production use it to eat his chopped

kale Caesar salads that she knew from sad experience tasted exactly the same as the chopped buffalo chicken salad.

She eased the heavy bag from her shoulder onto the chair, which rolled away as she dropped a box of belongings onto the desk: her blue Marimekko mug; the company laptop; her other mug, which had a croissant for a handle (a beloved, hideous gift from her nephews) into which she dumped her favorite pens; a framed photo of Stella (her best friend from college) and her grandma, Mimi, with champagne glasses held high; a bag of chocolate-covered almonds; a bottle of cherry kombucha to store in the company fridge; her Julia Child mouse pad; and a postcard from the Hungarian Pastry Shop that she propped against the back of the desk.

Seriously, everyone knew the cactus was the worst of plants: an ugly, prickly copout for people who enjoyed sand and heat and Westerns, who had given up on lushness, on green, on life. If she, Monday–Tuesday Desk, had to sweep all her belongings into a locked file cabinet every Tuesday night and haul everything out again on Monday mornings, couldn't Mister Wednesday–Thursday Desk store his pathetic cactus out of sight? Maybe, Rebecca thought churlishly, office life was not the life for her. Dragging the chair back, she collapsed into it to survey the lay of the land in her new, decidedly untenable situation. Working from home, even from her dad's childhood bedroom, was looking pretty good.

Mrs. Singh of Human Resources was lording over everyone from her dedicated Monday–Friday desk, which boasted an electric kettle, her inspirational word-of-the-day calendar, and a veritable jungle of healthy, flowering plants. Chloe, Rebecca's cheerful assistant, motioned wildly to indicate that she was, obviously, on a Zoom call. Rebecca waved, hoping Chloe would keep her cheer away until Rebecca could get more settled into what felt like a demotion. It wasn't a demotion! It was the new world! An "agile seating" world, as Frank French had

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unfortunately called it. She was only twenty-eight and already she felt old, cranky, and out of touch. Was Chloe wearing leopard print Crocs? Why? Were Crocs back? She had fervently hoped they were gone forever. She opened the top desk drawer and pulled out a new package of neon Post-its. Was neon back? What was wrong with the old yellow ones? Had her “hot desking” (seriously, Frank French?) deskmate bought neon Post-its and a cactus? She knew nothing about this person except that his name was Ben and he was a new editor at Hawk Mills, and therefore her enemy: Hawk Mills and Avenue were in direct competition for the same projects, fighting over literary fiction, memoirs, and the occasional \$250 coffee table book about tulips.

“I hear the new guy might be a ginger!” Gabe, who ran the marketing department, gave Rebecca a kiss on the cheek and a donut wrapped in a napkin. Last week there was a great display of welcome to the new desk sharing life, with breakfast burritos in the kitchen and a cheese-cubes-and-cheap-wine reception at 4 p.m. Predictably, the fanfare had dwindled to two dozen donuts this week. Gabe half propped himself on the desk, his long legs crossed at the ankles so that she could admire his brightly striped, no doubt shockingly expensive socks. Gabe was the main reason Rebecca wanted to be in the office at all; they had arrived at Avenue around the same time to become not just work friends but real friends. She had read a Cavafy poem at his wedding last year to his party planner husband, Thanapob, who everyone called Tor.

“A ginger! That tracks.” Rebecca could guess that Gabe’s source was Mrs. Singh, whose interest in office gossip dovetailed serendipitously with Gabe’s. She took a bite of the donut with the optimism of her grandmother Mimi scratching off a lottery ticket. This time it would yield millions! This time it would not be stale! It was stale. Rebecca allowed herself yet another wistful memory of chatting on speaker and using her phone camera to check her teeth, and yes, of also being able

to concentrate on her actual job in peace and quiet behind a closed door. She waved her hand to encompass the desk but also the general unacceptable state of things. “Gingers are the worst.”

“There are hot gingers and problem gingers.” Gabe gave the cactus a pitying glance and moved it pointedly out of his way.

“That is not my cactus,” Rebecca explained. “That is the ginger’s decor. He left it there against all rules.”

“For instance,” Gabe said, ignoring her. “Prince Harry, were he not a prince, might be a problem ginger. But his prince-ness makes him subjectively hot. A hot ginger.”

“Prince-ness?” Rebecca took another disappointing bite of the donut. “Also, I thought you were seeking treatment for your unreasonable rage at our losing out on the Prince Harry book. As if Avenue was going to give anyone untold millions.”

“It wasn’t untold! It was told! It was twenty-five million! Worth every penny, and I could have marketed the fuck out of it with Meghan.”

“So you’ve mentioned before.” Rebecca turned on her computer and pushed the cactus to the far edge of the desk behind the monitor. “Fact: there is no hot ginger in the world who wouldn’t also be just as hot as a non-ginger. What do we know about this Ben?” Ben didn’t seem like a good name for a redhead. Rebecca imagined her deskmate as a freckled Prince Harry but not a prince, therefore bereft of the hotness conferred upon him by prince-ness. “Ben like Benjamin, a strapping preppy blue blood from Boston who wears deck shoes and flies kites. Wait, that’s Benjamin Franklin. He’s ancient and wears Ben Franklin knickers.”

“Not knickers. Breeches,” Gabe corrected her. “Or Ben like Benny, a scrappy kid from Jersey who rolls a pack of cigarettes in his T-shirt sleeve and fixes cars. Or maybe both . . . like scrappy and strapping. Strapping and scrappy.”

Rebecca tore a yellow Post-it from the pack and wrote, “**CACTI ARE THE WORST OF PLANTS.**” Too aggressive? She crumpled it and tore off another. “**IS A CACTUS APPROPRIATE DESK DECOR?**” Too passive-aggressive? Crumpled. “**I HATE YOUR CACTUS.**” Too aggressive-aggressive? Crumpled. She swept the Post-its debris into the gray bin beneath her shared desk. “Come get me later. I have shit to do now.”

Gabe returned to his neat desk across the room. (His deskmate was the inoffensive Carlotta, who worked his mirror job in marketing at Hawk Mills, the imprint interloper now sharing their space two days a week.) Always a diligent rule follower, Gabe had immediately contacted Carlotta with gentle suggestions about a smattering of tasteful desk accessories that she had immediately approved, not a cactus among them. Carlotta knew without asking to remove high school graduation photos of her niece, and on Tuesday nights Gabe locked away his Tizio task lamp from the MoMA Design Store to “protect” Carlotta from accidentally breaking it.

Rebecca checked her email. Should she contact Ben and make it clear the cactus was a no-go? And that she would like to leave her black work sweater neatly folded in the bottom drawer in case the air conditioning was on full blast? She preferred not to cram it in the locker with her mugs. Forget it! She had much more important things to attend to right now. Case in point: an email with the latest edits from Lady Paulette (not really a Lady, not born a Paulette), whose memoir about being a companion to one of the twentieth century’s lesser-known philosophers had inexplicably caught the eye of Rebecca’s boss, Ami, and had subsequently landed on Rebecca’s desk to shepherd through publication. “*Rebecca*”—Lady Paulette used script font in all her correspondence, which was highly annoying—“*it is imperative that these changes make their way into the finished book. I know it’s late, I know it’s beastly of me. But the book would be absolute rubbish without them. If these modifications are not incorporated, I cannot promise*

I shall be able to stand behind The Lady and the Brain *and do the agreed-upon publicity and media. Ta.*” Rebecca opened the attachment. Lady Paulette had changed the spelling of her cat’s name from Catherine to Katherine, which involved a lot of find-and-replace. Rebecca sighed and forwarded it to Richard, the long-suffering managing editor, who would, Rebecca knew, have a tantrum, tell her it wasn’t possible, and then make it happen. She sent Gabe a quick email to see if he thought Liberty London would be interested in swaddling Lady Paulette in scarves for her tour. Perhaps they had a feline print?

Further down in her inbox was an announcement from Frank French himself, welcoming everyone to their second shared desk week with jargon about “home/office flexibility,” “streamlined efficiency,” and a suspicious-sounding “boundaryless workplace.”

There was an all-company email, also from Frank French, about the recent death of literary lion Edward David Adams, the last of the New York cohort of terrible but gifted men who had ruled the writing world—the ones whose exploits had not quite yet overshadowed their brilliant war novels, prize-winning depictions of suburban infidelity, and tome after tome chronicling their privileged white struggle against mortality. EDA, a.k.a. the Lion, had finally gone raging into that dark night, and Rebecca had studied enough of his glittering, flinty sentences in college to grant him a grudging respect. “A singular, towering talent whose lifetime of achievement will, in the record of his written word, live on”—which, to be honest, was laying it on a bit thick. The company had never even published any of the Lion’s many novels, making this heartfelt remembrance superfluous, but Rebecca knew, from having been cornered at a cocktail party by Frank French (back when they had cocktail parties!), that he had once spent a drunken evening with the Lion at the legendary Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, an annual literary-star-studded summer gathering in Vermont that used to be known as “Bed Loaf” but was now more of a networking scene and

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less of a Bacchanalian romp among the Green Mountains. The Lion's death was the end of an era, to be sure. An era, Rebecca thought, whose end was certainly due.

She quickly checked Instagram to see if the menu for her best friend Stella's monthly supper club, *salute!*, had dropped. She had been helping Stella put on the dinner parties and was thrilled with their success. Rebecca had big plans for Stella. She had been researching different media strategies in her goal to rocket Stella to fame and fortune. Pasta primavera, strawberry shortcake. Rebecca flipped her phone face down before she got too distracted, turned back to her computer, took a hopeful bite of donut. Still stale.

She continued going through her emails, the usual mash-up of pitches from agents she was no longer supposed to take out to lunch (her meager travel and expenses budget had been frozen as the company reeled from the post-pandemic economic storm) and requests from the various authors under her care. After the stress of moving the stubbornly old-fashioned business of publishing fully remote, with management calling into meetings from their upstate houses or hastily winterized Maine retreats, and the younger staff tuning in from the basements of their childhood homes or their shared bedrooms in Bushwick, it was shocking when book sales actually increased. Fine, it was mostly adult coloring books, but even literary fiction had seen a bump. Now, though, as people ventured out into the world again, sales were tanking. Hence the sublet of the fourth floor, lack of book parties, fewer agent lunches, and Rebecca's current desk debacle.

Rebecca's phone vibrated. It was her mom, Jane, calling from Rebecca's childhood home in Philadelphia. "Good morning," Rebecca whispered, so her mother would understand that she was hard at work and also so that Mrs. Singh wouldn't notice she was on a personal call. On the one hand, working at a not-only-hers desk out in the open was terrible. On the other hand, being under Mrs. Singh's gaze

and wanting to prove she was not the kind of person perusing Hinge, making an appointment for eyebrow threading, or researching hot new restaurants in Brooklyn, Rebecca found she got more work done more quickly. Was it sustainable? Who knew? It helped to retreat into one of the numerous space-age-looking phone booths positioned around the perimeter of the office when necessary. Every single person who saw them for the first time said exactly the same thing with no exception: “Beam me up, Scotty.” People who had never seen *Star Trek*. People who didn’t know that “Beam me up, Scotty” was a reference to *Star Trek*. Rebecca (she could kick herself) had said it. She clambered in and closed the spaceship door.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” her mom said briskly. “I was just checking in to see if you had wrapped up the final edits for Lady Paulette. I’m taking a walk this afternoon with Peggy from the library, and you know what an Anglophile she is.”

“First of all, you know Lady Paulette’s not really English, right?” Rebecca couldn’t help but think that her mom used the ancient royal watcher Peggy as an excuse to keep tabs on Rebecca’s work projects. Her mother started every day with a call, “just checking in” with her. She had always taken what Rebecca felt was an inordinate interest in Rebecca’s job, which was ironic, since Jane herself had never had a career. Having sacrificed the best years of her life to raising twin boys (Rebecca’s brothers, Ethan and Andrew, ten years older, both now happily married and gainfully employed, had spent their childhood hurling balls, falling from trees, dragging each other in headlocks from room to room, and leaving muddy cleats on every surface), Rebecca’s mother turned her attention to Rebecca. Professor (as the boys called their father) was a distracted, gentle man, bemused by and removed from both the chaos of the boys and his wife’s project that was Rebecca.

“She enjoys any details at all, you know,” Jane chided.

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“Fine! Their cat has been renamed Katherine with a *K*.”

“Thank you. Have you followed up with Alice Gottlieb about her next book?”

“Oh my god, Mom! I already have a boss. Also, I have to get to work. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later,” Jane said, unperturbed. “When you speak to Alice, let her know that our book club is starting the trilogy this month.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “Love you. Bye!” She left the pod, stored her phone out of sight, and made a big show of returning emails.

A few hours later, Chloe, who had been cheerfully working away, no doubt making Rebecca’s life easier, popped up in her leopard Crocs, about which Rebecca was determined not to speak. “Ami wants to see you in her office!”

“Do you know why?” Being summoned by Ami still gave her the anxiety and defensiveness of being caught breaking school rules involving cigarettes or a plaid skirt hiked too high.

Chloe, ever obtuse to Rebecca’s moods, unloaded a pile of bound manuscripts onto her desk. “I adore your cactus! So Southwest chic! I just thrifted this presh poncho and I’m making it into a minidress!” As usual, Rebecca had no response to Chloe’s relentless positivity. Would the no doubt so-ugly-it-was-fabulous repurposed poncho that Chloe would wear to work next week be ironic? Or worn earnestly? Would she wear it with Crocs? Was Chloe judging her for wearing expensive jeans? Did Chloe adore the cactus, or did “adore” mean she hated it? How was twenty-eight already old? “Don’t forget the marketing meeting later, and Ami is waiting.” Chloe vanished in a waft of dewberry lotion.

Ami Ito, editorial director, Rebecca’s boss, had, like Frank French, hung on to an actual office, though she made a big show of leaving the door open as an egalitarian gesture. Whenever Rebecca passed by, gazing covetously inside, Ami was clacking the keyboard one hundred

miles an hour, speaking softly into her headset, her shiny swoop of black hair obscuring one perfectly mascaraed eye, her impossibly high heel swinging from the toes of her crossed foot. Ami had a beautiful wife, a ceramicist whose vases sold at galleries, and a small dog, Trinket, whom they dressed in seasonal outfits. Rebecca knew this because Ami had a large digital frame facing outward so all who peered in could see the often-updated photos of Trinket and remember it was almost Valentine's Day (pink heart sweater) or had just been Mardi Gras (purple-and-green top hat and gold bead necklace). Ami continued murmuring into her headset, all the while typing furiously, but she gave Rebecca a quick nod and motioned her into the cream leather Barcelona chair, a vestige from another, richer time in the company's history. Rebecca sank nervously into the seat, gazing at the latest photo. Was it okay for dogs to celebrate Cinco de Mayo? Rebecca wondered. Could a half-Japanese, half-Venezuelan dog with its paw on festive-looking maracas be accused of cultural appropriation?

"Rebecca. I received the oddest call this morning. About you." Ami affixed her gaze on Rebecca. It didn't happen often, but Rebecca was speechless. Words flew out of her head, leaving only guilt and sorrow for whatever crime she had unknowingly committed. She was sorry. She was sorry she had complained bitterly to all who would listen about the shared desk. A shared desk was better than no desk, she thought sadly, as she imagined piling all her belongings back into the box and leaving everything in accordance with the Clean Desk Policy, which she would absolutely, positively read for real this time before schlepping her fired ass out of the office for good. "What connection do you have to Edward David Adams?" Ami continued as Rebecca's brain sputtered to keep up.

"The Lion? EDA? Edward David Adams?" Ami waited patiently while Rebecca listed all his monikers. "Edward David Adams, the writer who just died?" she added for good measure. "Um. Well, I took

a class on him, Philip Roth, and Norman Mailer that was required for my major?” Rebecca stopped herself from explaining that she would have gotten an A and not an A– had her professor (in her opinion, a wannabe disciple of the very writers he taught) not been put off by her application of post-structural feminist theory to examine the role of housewives in their novels. Distracted, Rebecca thought fondly of her rousing conclusion in which she took the Lion and the others to task for their reinforcement of gendered roles and how white women were both oppressed by and benefited from the system upheld in the books. Yes, it was seven years after graduation, and she could almost recite that unjustly underappreciated essay from memory. She was that proud.

“I don’t think that solves the mystery,” Ami stated dryly. She was often bracingly dry, and Rebecca wished they could be friends and that Ami and Elena would invite her over to their fabulous loft and feed her canapés, smiling indulgently at her charming tales of dating and amusing nightlife while she cuddled Trinket in her lap. But she knew better. Ami existed in a world of unwrinkled linen, dainty gold jewelry, and season tickets to Lincoln Center. “I had a call from Rose Adams this morning. The Lion’s widow. I’m sure you’re aware that the Lion died without a literary agent. He worked directly with his editor, Maury Kantor?”

Rebecca knew who Maury Kantor was, the *K* of PK Publishing, last seen a few years ago shuffling around the National Book Awards ceremony in a tuxedo that reeked of mothballs and a forbidden lit pipe clenched between his khaki-colored teeth. Aside from his relationship with the Lion, he was famous for chastising women editors for not wearing lipstick.

“PK Publishing handled everything connected to the Lion’s work, an arrangement that, I’m sure you know, is highly unusual. So, as you can imagine, his estate is complicated. You might say a mess. And Mrs. Adams intimated there might be unpublished short stories and

the like. She told me she wants younger, fresher eyes on the Lion's work, both old and new."

Rebecca uttered what she hoped was an appropriate murmur to convey polite interest. How was any of this connected to her?

"Maury Kantor is no longer able to continue his, shall we say, 'unorthodox shepherding' of the estate." Ami used delicate finger quotes to make "unorthodox shepherding" sound like the name of a hipster band of which she disapproved. "And now that the Lion has died, there will be an inevitable frenzy of lawyers, agents, and publishers circling it. It's a very unusual situation. PK Publishing is neither young nor fresh, and it seems Mrs. Adams shares her late husband's aversion to agents, so we're in the running for control of the estate. I think you understand how huge this could be for us." Ami crossed her barre-toned arms and leaned forward. "Rebecca. Can you think of any reason why Mrs. Adams would specifically ask for you, by name, to meet with her to discuss the estate?"

Rebecca could not.

"I would, of course, usually suggest a more senior editor to meet with Mrs. Adams, but she was very clear about her desire to meet with you. You, Rebecca. She insisted. The only other division at Leesen that makes sense is Hawk Mills, so you can be sure they will be trying to land the estate too. It might not matter to Frank French who brings it in, as long as it doesn't end up at Random House. But I don't have to tell you how much it matters to me, do I?" Ami's gaze was as steely as her arms. "Do you have any connection to Rose Adams?"

Rebecca racked her brain. She considered the phrase and substituted "rake" for "rack." She imagined raking the folds of her brain but with a soft rake so it wouldn't hurt, like one of those tiny ones that came with the soothing Japanese sand gardens that fancy people used to keep on their desks. Their private, personal desks. Into a pile of Edward David Adams knowledge went her undeniably brilliant

essay that had pulled her grade down; a controversial short story he had written in *The New Yorker* a few years ago that had gone viral, something people had read as a covert defense of Roman Polanski; the bright spines of the literary magazine the Lion had started, the *East River Review*, packed into the guest room bookcase of her childhood home in Philadelphia. Rebecca halted and backed up, tiny rake in hand. Why did they have those old copies of the *East River Review*? “My mom was an intern or an assistant at the *East River Review* when she was young? I think she was in the city for a year or two, a really long time ago. She never mentioned the Lion or talked about any of it. But that’s it.”

“So no connection that you know of to his widow, Rose Adams? And no reason to think your mother had any relationship to the family? To the estate?” Ami was tapping one pearly nail on her desk, the only outward sign of agitation she betrayed.

“Absolutely not,” Rebecca declared, with a certainty she might later regret but seemed necessary to the occasion. *Was* there something to her mother’s connection with the magazine? Why hadn’t they ever talked about it beyond the bare minimum? “I mean, I can ask my mom, but, honestly, it was way before I was born.” Ami gazed at her impassively, but Rebecca was sure she was considering a demand for a DNA test to determine if Rebecca was the unclaimed child of the most famous no-longer-living lascivious writer in America. She was 100 percent her father’s daughter: thick hair unwieldy, check; statement nose, check; pond water–green eyes, but fitted with contact lenses instead of the wire-rimmed glasses her father had sported since the early ’60s, check; and his mother Mimi’s large breasts and wide feet. Not a trace of the Lion!

“Curious.” Ami and Rebecca looked at each other, the only sound Ami’s manicure testing itself on the desk, *tap tap tap*. Ami abruptly clapped her hands, startling Rebecca and signaling her decision to

move forward. “Well, Rebecca, you’re a talented editor. Your writers trust you. You did do impressive work on the Alice Gottlieb trilogy,” Ami mused aloud, trying, it seemed, to convince herself. Rebecca wished she were wearing her recently purchased Theory blazer, bought under her mother’s insistent supervision to look more “polished.” She was somewhere between Ami’s impeccable sleeveless pussy bow top and Chloe’s Crocs and clashing plaids, neither sophisticated chic nor confidently outrageous. The most she could hope for was casually cool, and that was only if Gabe took pity on her and steered her around vintage boutiques.

Yes, she was a talented editor! But maybe it wasn’t just her lack of seniority Ami was pondering. She liked her job. Really liked it, was grateful for her successes, for her connection to her writers (Lady Paulette not included), for sharing her office (not her desk!) with people who cared so deeply about books, who believed in reading. Did she absolutely love it? The way Gabe loved marketing, how he sang his perfect taglines or pressed an excellent debut novel into Ann Patchett’s hands to feature at her Nashville bookstore? Did she love it with the fierce competitive passion of Ami, even now pinning her to the Barcelona chair with the intensity of her gaze? Maybe not—though, if pushed, she couldn’t really say why. Was it, as her mother suggested, a lack of ambition? No “fire in the belly,” as was unfortunately the phrase she often repeated about Rebecca’s career? “I’ll call my mother to check,” Rebecca said, and Ami nodded.

“We need to get you over there as soon as possible. But you’ll need a briefing. I can get that set up once I talk to Frank French.”

“‘Over there’?”

“Mrs. Adams wants to meet you at the East End Avenue town house.”

Rebecca was again at a loss for words. Ami hadn’t even bothered to add *I’m sure you’ve heard of it*. Every culturally literate person in

New York knew that the Lion had founded the *East River Review* out of his parents' palatial town house in the 1960s when he graduated from Columbia and had inherited money to invest in both the literary magazine and the raucous parties that celebrated every issue. After a few wives, a son whose name Rebecca had on the tip of her tongue (Huck? Holden?), and great literary success, the Lion had turned over the daily running of the magazine to a succession of editors, who still worked out of his town house, and focused on writing novels, spending more time in old age at his Hamptons estate, where, recently, he had died, apparently leaving Rebecca (Rebecca!) somehow (how?) entangled in the aftermath.

"We'll get to the bottom of this mystery," Ami said briskly as an old photo of Trinket flashed before Rebecca. Easter bonnet. "I'll let you know what comes next. But you should expect to head over there soon. We need to get you up to speed: as I said, there will be extreme interest, both in our publishing house and from all over town. Rose Adams's peculiar interest in you might give us an advantage, but I don't doubt the competition will be fierce. I want this for Avenue, Rebecca. No pressure."

Was Ami making a joke? "No pressure," Rebecca repeated weakly. "Peculiar interest" didn't sound promising. Backing out of the office, Rebecca gave Ami a regrettable little wave, but Ami was already in a hushed conversation with her headset. Rebecca went directly to Gabe's spotless desk. "You. Will. Never. Believe. What. Just. Happened."

Gabe looked up from his computer. "You broke it off with Max?"

"What?" Rebecca had to search around to remember who Max was: the perfectly fine guy she was seeing.

"What?" Gabe asked innocently.

"Seriously? Why do you hate Max?" Rebecca liked Max; she did! She found that she doubled down on liking him in direct proportion to everyone else disliking him.

“I don’t hate him! I don’t have any feelings about him whatsoever,” Gabe claimed dramatically.

Rebecca lowered her voice to a stage whisper as she caught sight of Mrs. Singh staring at them over her oversize reading glasses. “Come to the kitchen.” She bared her teeth in what she hoped was a calming smile at Mrs. Singh and strode to the kitchen, assuming Gabe would follow her—which, of course, he did.

There were no donuts left, just a box of crumbs, a small mercy. Out of habit, Rebecca opened the fridge and examined the contents: everyone’s labeled salads and yogurts; one sad person had even written their initials, in black Sharpie, on three hard-boiled eggs. She took out her cherry kombucha and held it over the sink to open gingerly, recalling, even in her excitement to tell all to Gabe, the one time she had sprayed kombucha all over herself and reeked of vinegar the rest of the day. Fine, two times. “Okay, so Ami just told me that the Lion’s widow, Rose Adams, called her to ask that I, Rebecca, me, go over to the East End town house to talk to her about the estate.”

Gabe raised one dark eyebrow and cocked his head. “To talk to her about the estate.”

“Correct.” She swigged the kombucha a little too enthusiastically and coughed.

“You, Rebecca.”

“I, Rebecca.”

“The title of your memoir, naturally.” Gabe couldn’t resist.

“Naturally.”

“Curious.”

“That’s exactly what Ami said!”

“Rose Adams asked for you by name.”

Rebecca could sense a subtle shift in her internal narrative as Gabe expressed his admittedly warranted disbelief. Really, was it so unthinkable that she would be in the running? Alice Gottlieb’s

trilogy—years of painstaking editing and coaxing—had won the National Book Critics Circle Award. But now she, Rebecca, was in competition with probably every editor in town. Fine, it *was* unthinkable. She would be eaten alive. Worse, she would disappoint Ami and never enjoy canapés in her (Rebecca imagined) warm-walnut-and-cool-steel kitchen. “I don’t even like the Lion! He’s problematic. He’s like *The Merchant of Venice*. Yes, it’s Shakespeare and he tries with the mercy, but still, at the end of the day: antisemitic. Or Picasso. And Hemingway was a dick!”

“D. H. Lawrence was a homophobe,” Gabe added sympathetically. “And maybe closeted? The wrestling in *Women in Love* was a seminal scene for teenage me. Literally.”

“Focus!” Rebecca reminded them both.

“Hold the fuck up. What in god’s name will you wear?”

“All hands on deck, obviously.” Rebecca tossed her empty kombucha bottle into the recycling bin, where it clanked loudly. Just then Mrs. Singh strolled in, casually opening the cupboard where all the tea was stored, as if she didn’t have an entire setup fit for the queen of England on her own desk.

“Hello, dears,” she said, fake rummaging in the canister of sugars and NutraSweet packages. Of course, Rebecca liked Mrs. Singh, and understood it wasn’t her fault that Rebecca had shared-desk rage. Everyone knew you befriended HR, and Mrs. Singh, with her homey desk and passion for veganism and knitting, was not difficult to like. She had offered to help reimburse Rebecca for her mostly unused Pilates studio pass. But Mrs. Singh knew too much about everyone, Rebecca thought, and absolute power could corrupt even a lady who crafted her own tea cozies. And besides, sometimes she and Gabe went out to lunch and didn’t invite Rebecca.

“Sahila,” Gabe said fondly, like the traitor he was. “You’ll never guess what’s going on with Rebecca.”

“She has decided to end things with Max?” Mrs. Singh stopped pretending that she was in the kitchen for any other reason than to gossip.

“Come on!” Rebecca glared at Gabe, who busied himself wiping down the counter and tossing the empty donut box away. “Why does everyone hate Max?”

“He’s just not the right one for you, dear.” Rebecca considered reporting Mrs. Singh to HR for her flagrant and inappropriate use of endearments, but of course Mrs. Singh *was* HR. Rebecca and Max had only been dating for three months, but he had met Gabe, her grandmother, and Stella, and now Rebecca was going to invite him to Stella’s dinner club, *salute!*, next week. After there was a mention of it in *Eater*, the tickets were a hot commodity and sold out in minutes, but since Stella threw the dinner parties at Mimi’s apartment, Rebecca always had a seat at the table. She had actually been hesitating about inviting Max, who tragically didn’t seem as interested in food as he should be, but Mrs. Singh and Gabe’s disapproval had pushed her over the edge. She would invite him! He was perfectly fine.

“The Lion’s widow wants Rebecca to go to East End to discuss the estate and no one knows why,” Gabe blurted. He avoided Rebecca’s accusatory eyes.

“Yessss,” Mrs. Singh said slowly. “I am aware. Perplexing.” So Mrs. Singh already knew (how?) but had no helpful further information. “I have some extra vegan lasagna that I made last night. Right in the refrigerator. Please take and reheat for about sixty seconds.”

Rebecca felt herself wavering but stayed strong. “Thank you but no,” she said frostily. “I already had a donut.” With that, resisting the lure of Mrs. Singh’s homemade and obviously delicious vegan lasagna, she marched out of the kitchen, leaving Gabe and Mrs. Singh no doubt with their heads together, plotting. She sat down at her desk and texted Max to spite them.

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Rebecca:hey *salute!* next week would love you to come

stella's strawberry shortcake!

english peas and garlic chives in season very exciting

ok lmk whenever

Max:

Granted, Max was a lazy texter, and that was good, right? He preferred FaceTime so they could see each other, he had once explained, which was kind of romantic. Emojis, unless used with a tinge of irony or the necessary heart/broken heart shorthand, were a pale substitute for writing. Max was a lawyer who had grown up outside Chicago; he got along with his parents and wore sneakily stylish glasses. Gabe's annoying resistance notwithstanding, Rebecca had high hopes that Max would continue to grow on her. Max was mature and good at explaining international law treaties. She had taught him how to use a semicolon on bar napkins with a Clinique Chubby Stick and that had been good drunk fun.

"Rebecca?" Chloe materialized so suddenly that Rebecca's phone clattered to her desk before she could grill her mother about why Rose Adams had summoned her to the town house. "Don't forget the marketing meeting. I sent the agenda on Blabber." She smiled. She knew full well that Rebecca had deleted Blabber, the interoffice communication tool that no one had asked for. Rebecca found it particularly offensive that a publishing company that prided itself on elevating language would welcome Blabber into its fold. Last she checked, "blabber" meant witless prattle. "I know what you need now." Chloe paused with

significance, and Rebecca hoped that perhaps somehow Chloe knew why the Lion's widow had summoned her. After all, Chloe knew the password for an underground club reachable only by descending into the Twenty-Third Street subway station. Chloe knew how to authenticate vintage Dior. She knew that Crocs were back. "Ta-da!" Chloe pulled a paper bag from behind her back and placed it on Rebecca's desk. Not quite the answer Rebecca wanted, but she knew without looking that it was a piece of house-made focaccia, burrata added, from Eataly. Honestly, she loved Chloe.

"Thank you! Thank you!" Rebecca gushed, and stuck her nose in the bag, inhaling deeply enough to mask the enticing smell of Mrs. Singh's lasagna being reheated in the kitchen.

"I got your back, girl!" Chloe handed Rebecca a wad of napkins and tapped her enormous white plastic Swatch. "Ten minutes till go time. And here's your seltzer, duh!" Chloe, the only person who truly understood and cared for Rebecca, put a sweaty bottle of lemon seltzer on the desk like the angel she was and flitted away. Rebecca Venmoed her twenty dollars. Then she left a message for her mom, who was probably walking or reading in her blue chair with her phone annoyingly off.

Rebecca was almost on time for the marketing meeting, still clutching a napkin in one hand and her seltzer in the other. Chloe was already at the conference table. Ami entered, laptop in hand, with Richard, the managing editor. Everything Richard said sounded smart and sarcastic because he was British. His patience for Lady Paulette had worn dangerously thin and her wavering posh accent irked him beyond measure. He and Ami, usually quite collegial, circled each other warily on this book, and Rebecca, who had, in her opinion, suffered the most by her almost daily acquaintance with Lady Paulette, was left trying to please all three of them.

HOT DESK

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Ami's spindly assistant Greg, one foot already out the door on his way to graduate school, fiddled with the conference room's AV pad, trying to link up the giant monitor that dominated the entire back wall. After several fumbles (Greg) and a few high-pitched squeaks (the equipment), the squares of people calling in remotely sharpened into view. There was a mix of salespeople and assistants, mid-level marketing and publicity associates who were, for whatever reason, still working from home. Some had their cameras off, and Rebecca analyzed the choices. Not having your camera on immediately made you suspect. Were you answering work emails, thereby signaling your lack of commitment to this particular project (Rebecca's)? Were you sexting while your coworkers saw nothing but your awkward professional headshot? Were you folding laundry or eating an enchilada? There was the true story from Simon & Schuster early in the pandemic in which a clueless assistant had actually left her camera on as she began a nearly naked (and impressively acrobatic) yoga practice in full view of her slack-jawed and paralyzed colleagues. What about the blurred background people? What were they hiding? And then there were the people who had, from the very first day, simply never put their cameras on at all, their surroundings remaining completely, maddeningly mysterious. Rebecca admired these people most of all. She would have never dared, and instead welcomed her coworkers to what she hoped was the effortlessly attractive background of her bedroom bookcase, painstakingly staged for hours with input from Gabe and Stella regarding book titles, photographs, tasteful vases, and flattering light.

And how was it humanly possible that in the year 2022 people still didn't remember to unmute? Yet somehow, at every meeting, someone would forget to turn their microphone on. And that someone was usually Susan from Corporate Sales. Years in and Rebecca suspected that maybe Susan was performing some kind of experimental art piece.

When Rebecca joined from home, she kept her finger hovering anxiously over the unmute button in case someone asked her a question. It was stressful, yes, but didn't human beings adapt? Didn't they learn from their mistakes? And Rebecca had seen more cat buttholes than a person could bear. Cats rubbing their butts on the computer, their owners tsk-tsking in a "He's incorrigible!" singsong and everyone else shielding their eyes in horror while yet another cat butthole presented itself ON. A. WORK. CALL. Sometimes Ami logged on remotely while she was physically *at* the meeting, so that she was both virtual and present, a kind of time travel physics voodoo that freaked out Rebecca so much she almost preferred cat buttholes.

The thunk of Ami's laptop on the table signaled the start of the meeting, and Gabe began in his most full-throated movie trailer voice: "*The Lady and the Brain* offers a unique perspective on philosophy, love, and fame as seen by a woman who shared her life with the brilliant Chester Wineskin." He paused for emphasis and started again: "Or: Discover the insightful and thought-provoking musings of a renowned philosopher through the eyes of his droll lover in this season's must-read memoir, *The Lady and the Brain*. Think *A Brief History of Time* crossed with *The Saga of the Mitford Sisters*. If you liked *The Genius and the Goddess* about Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe . . ."

Lady Paulette would very much like the sound of being compared to Marilyn Monroe. She was probably more akin to a Mitford sister, and most likely a Nazi sympathizer one. Sadly, Chester Wineskin was dead and gone, so his lofty theories were being strained through the shallow celebrity gossip of an expat from Iowa with long legs, an iron will, and a shameless propensity to say "rubbish" at least once in every conversation. Lady Paulette treated Rebecca as she might a slightly dim-witted nanny: she could be trusted with the children but needed to be corrected, instructed, and expected at every turn to do tasks not agreed upon in the original contract.

Ami was laser focused on Gabe. “How much of the salon aspect will we stress? And I think her almost childlike grasp of his most complex doctrine will endear her to readers more fascinated by social mores than theoretics.”

“Come for the ethics, stay for the aesthetics,” Gabe enthused.

“Would love to do a tie-in with the Schopenhauer festival in Poland,” someone said from the screen, and everyone ignored the comment. Lady Paulette would certainly not approve travel to Poland. Rebecca caught sight of Susan talking animatedly, silently. “Mother of God, woman, unmute yourself,” Richard muttered under his breath, while Ami patiently pointed to her ear and Gabe yelled, “Susan! You’re on mute!” Everyone was treated to the familiar sight of Susan’s face looming into the foreground while she adjusted her glasses in order to find the unmute button. Her voice burst into the room, mid-sentence with no apology, no starting back at the beginning. Susan, that provocateur, that character from a lost Beckett play; the only certainty here was that she would remember to mute herself with emphasis after a diatribe about not forgetting about independent bookstores, and that she would begin the charade all over again at least once more. Rebecca was already exhausted. But she had to look perky so as not to give Ami any reason to doubt her ability to edit newly discovered work by the Lion. Perhaps she was not quite the obvious choice to handle his considerable and complex estate. But maybe she could establish herself and make Ami proud. She could make her mother proud.

“I said: Rebecca, would you take the lead when Lady Paulette joins the call?” Ami asked, apparently not for the first time.

“Of course!” Rebecca could make Ami proud right now. Granted, she would have to draw on every reserve of patience to balance standing firm in the face of Lady Paulette’s ultimatums with coddling her enough so that she didn’t hang up in a huff or, worse, weep into

a handkerchief ostentatiously embroidered with Chester Wineskin's initials.

"Rebecca? Rebecca?" The plaintive yet pitiless voice of Lady Paulette, forged in the tornadoes of Iowa, honed in the regional theaters of Milwaukee, and refined in the graceful streets of Kensington, pierced the conference room. "Ah, there you are! How marvelous!" Not unlike Rebecca's own grandmother, Lady Paulette felt compelled to comment on the magic of technology during each video call. Though Mimi didn't say "And all the way across the pond!" every single time. Greg tentatively pushed another button on the AV pad, and Lady Paulette's face suddenly filled the entire screen.

"Hallo, hallo!" Lady Paulette was in an excellent mood, buoyed by having a larger audience than usual. She lifted a teacup from its saucer and took a reverberating slurp. "Cheers from all the way across the pond!"

"Good evening, Lady Paulette. Thank you for joining us and welcome stateside! I think you know everyone here? We're so excited to discuss our plans for *The Lady and the Brain*. I'm going to let Gabe Tatlock from Marketing take it away. You're in good hands," Rebecca said. The rest of the meeting passed with only one more unmuting routine from Susan, who inquired about how many copies they expected to sell during Lady Paulette's high tea reception at Liberty London; Gabe's unflagging enthusiasm as he outlined the specifics of how Avenue would transform Lady Paulette's story from that of a snob with a suspect genesis to that of a starry-eyed muse whose innocent-American-abroad take on the brilliant man was as resonant as his take on ethical procreation; and one brief, hideous moment when it appeared that Catherine—strike that—Katherine with a *K* would indeed present her ancient hindquarters to the group.

After debriefing with Gabe in the kitchen, Rebecca couldn't wait

HOT DESK

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to get home after this strange day. She went to retrieve her bag, much lighter on Monday nights than it was on Monday mornings or Tuesday nights. It was her one time to leave her belongings freely scattered on the desk—the desk that would be hers all the livelong night. Even one incongruous cactus couldn't mar her mood.

CHAPTER TWO

MONDAY HOME, REBECCA

After it became clear that the pandemic was not a two-week staycation inside her cozy Cobble Hill apartment with her roommates (one of whom was a paranoid germophobe who wore a face shield in their shared space, and the other an old high school acquaintance who acquired a lot of dubious medical “expertise” on the internet), Rebecca packed up and moved into her grandmother Mimi’s rent-controlled apartment on the Upper West Side.

It was not at all weird that she had commandeered her father’s childhood bedroom (all vestiges of him scrubbed and painted away), nor was it social suicide to live with an eighty-two-year-old who kept two pet budgies (Noodle and Pookie), and it was certainly not an issue that it had been over two years and Rebecca had made no serious effort to find her own place. She was saving a lot of money! She had her own “wing”: a hallway, a full bath, and a bedroom flooded with natural light. Mimi was, considerably, hard of hearing. The kitchen had a full-size refrigerator. There was a separate dining room with a long table around which her friend Stella squeezed twelve happy people once a month for her supper club. There were original herringbone floors and crown molding. No matter that there was no central air, the lobby

smelled of cabbage, and Tibor, the part-time doorman, never stopped talking. Rebecca had always been close to Mimi, but quarantine, in all its horror and beauty, had truly bonded them. It would be really hard to leave, but she must at some point. Before she turned thirty, definitely. Because living with your grandmother at thirty? Now, that might be a problem.

Rebecca knew she should call her mom again, but first there was the subway; the deli stop for tonic water, a lottery ticket, and kale (Mimi's list); Tibor's predictions for the NBA playoffs; and Mimi's daily 6 p.m. cocktail hour. Turning the key in the lock, turning another key in another lock, jolting the door against the chain that Mimi often forgot to undo, leaning on the doorbell long enough to enrage the Yorkshire terrier in the apartment across the way and to alert Mimi, Rebecca pushed away thoughts of the day. For now. Until she had an olive, a Ritz cracker with a thick slice of extra-sharp cheddar, a handful of lightly salted peanuts, and a few sips of Sapphire gin and tonic in a tiny etched glass, she would empty her mind. Mimi sorted out the chain lock and offered her soft, papery cheek for a kiss. "And how was your day, my darling? Come, come, I've put out provisions, but I'm misting the boys before dinner."

"Good! I'll tell you." Rebecca draped her sweater over the hat rack. "Just let me wash my hands and change." Once you had seen one bird bath, you had seen them all, and there was always the chance that Noodle, who had bonded with Mimi long before Rebecca had arrived and who disapproved of any other human, would bite her. Pookie was definitely the brighter bird and liked to perch on Rebecca's finger during their hour of supervised exercise. He had two words—"Hello, Pookie"—which was two more than Noodle did. All in all, Rebecca preferred the cage covered and the constant peeping silenced. Mimi had always had parakeets, always two budgies, always named Pookie and Noodle; some Noodles and Pookies lived a mere year or so; and

the next Noodle or Pookie might live a decade. It was a flawed system whereby occasionally there were two Noodles or two Pookies in the cage at the same time, but Mimi seemed unbothered.

After Rebecca “freshened up,” as Mimi called it, she joined her grandmother in the living room, where they had their cocktail hour, Rebecca on the uncomfortable, high-backed sofa and Mimi in her blue toile chair, its seat cushion worn shiny. Mimi Katz, daughter of a wealthy haberdasher, had married a poor medical student for love: Rebecca’s grandfather, Nathan Blume. Rebecca had only snatches of memory of her grandfather, who sang “Wake Up Little Susie,” and let her listen through the stethoscope that dangled out of his overcoat pocket. Mimi was still in mourning, Rebecca thought, twenty-five years later. Dr. Blume, as Mimi sometimes referred to him, had been known to enjoy a home-cooked meal, and although she had come to the marriage not knowing how to boil water (as she liked to say), she had modeled herself on Julia Child, also a tall lady who adored her husband and could manhandle a chicken into a perfect coq au vin.

It had done Mimi a world of good to have someone to cook for (she said it herself!), and in that way Rebecca was a generous, altruistic soul. These days Mimi was good for at least two meals a week. Stella had been working for a wealthy family on the Upper East Side, and her perks included a room that she crashed in whenever she wasn’t staying with her boyfriend Miles and a crazy budget to grocery shop with when the family was in town. Stella came over to pick up Mimi’s slack every Sunday. Mondays were the leftovers, and Rebecca filled in where she could, following Stella’s recipes or ordering take-out Thai, because they were, after all, New Yorkers.

Rebecca lifted her tiny etched glass and made a “Cheers” motion at Mimi, who did the same. She had a blissful swallow of the stiff drink. (Mimi’s mixology skills skewed heavy on the alcohol and light on the mixer, though her antique glasses meant that Rebecca would need to