

Chapter 1

Jane Addison was rushing around her bright, modern new West Village apartment, getting ready for her first day at a new job. She had gotten her undergraduate degree from UCLA, worked for two years at *San Francisco Magazine*, and then gone back for her MBA at UC Berkeley, in their entrepreneurial program. She was twenty-eight years old, born and raised in San Francisco. Her father was one of the most successful venture capitalists in Silicon Valley. Her older sister, Margaret, was thirty-five, climbing the ladder at a rival venture capital firm. Margaret was married, with two children. Her husband was the CEO of a successful tech start-up, which was about to go public. Jane's life was very different from Margaret's, and so were her goals. For the moment Jane wasn't interested in marriage, and didn't

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know if she ever would be. Having babies held no particular lure for her. Margaret and her husband had met in business school at Stanford, and they liked their stable, married life and their demanding careers. They seemed comfortable and efficient managing both. It looked like a hard juggling act to Jane, a lot of responsibility and too much work.

Jane's dream was to own a small magazine one day or, even better, a small publishing house, but she was a long way from achieving her goals. She was just beginning her work life. She had flown to New York to interview for jobs at the major publishing houses—Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, Little, Brown—but nothing that interested her and paid decently had turned up. The magazines she had sent her resume to hadn't leapt at the chance to hire her. They told her she was overqualified for the openings they had, and figured she probably wouldn't stay long enough to make hiring her worthwhile.

In the end, the only offer she'd had that excited her came from a friend of her father's, an old classmate of his at Princeton. Bob Benson owned a literary and entertainment agency, Fletcher and Benson, in New York. They represented actors, producers, directors, and screenwriters on the dramatic side, and writers on the literary side. The position she'd been offered was as an assistant to the executive assistant of the number two agent on the literary

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side, a woman named Hailey West. Jane had met her when she was applying for jobs in New York, and she seemed like an intelligent, pleasant, busy woman, committed to the writers she represented. The agency had some very important clients, and it seemed to Jane like a good interim job until the right opportunity turned up, closer to her goals for the future. She still wanted to work at a major publishing house to learn the ropes, but an entry-level job in publishing didn't appeal to her much, and at least a job in a literary and talent agency sounded like fun. Meeting important writers and movie stars would be exciting. The agency was very successful. She'd interviewed with her father's old friend and the heads of both sides of the agency, Francine Rivers for literary and Allie Moore, head of talent. They were both interesting women, and Bob Benson said that if she did well, she could be a literary agent one day.

Jane's mother came from San Francisco to help her find the apartment in a big, modern, efficient building in the West Village, with a view of the Hudson, in what seemed like a friendly neighborhood. The building had a gym, a pool, and a roof garden for the tenants' use. There was good security and plenty of staff, and her parents liked the fact that she'd be safe there. Her mother had been an interior decorator until Margaret was born, and she still enjoyed decorating their homes and doing whatever she could for her girls.

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She helped Jane get her apartment organized and furnished in record time. Jane was thoroughly enjoying it and grateful to her parents for the comforts they provided. She was well aware that she and her sister had enjoyed benefits all their lives that many of their friends hadn't. They were discreet about it, but Jane realized how lucky she was that she could take whatever job she wanted without worrying about whether or not she could pay her rent. Thanks to her mother, she had a comfortable home all set up for her a month after she arrived.

An old boyfriend of hers from UCLA, Benjie Strong, was working for a start-up in New York. He'd been there since grad school. They had reconnected as soon as she got there. They had been dating for a month and had busy, separate lives. He had slept at her apartment the night before, and had his own place with a roommate in SoHo. It had made the transition to New York easier and a lot more agreeable for Jane.

He was making toast in her kitchen when she helped herself to a yogurt from the fridge. She made coffee for both of them with the espresso machine and handed him a cup. He'd been reading *The Wall Street Journal* on his phone and looked up with a smile when she set the coffee down next to him. Benjie Strong was a year older than she was. He was twenty-nine, and looked like he was going to

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a picnic in cutoff jeans, a T-shirt, and running shoes without socks. He had gotten his MBA at Wharton, and was a bright guy. There was no dress code where he worked. Jane had already seen that the dress code was casual at Fletcher and Benson, but not to that degree. The men wore collared shirts and jeans, loafers or running shoes. The women mainly wore skirts and tops of some kind, and looked put together even if they were wearing jeans, which some did. They wore makeup and their hair was neat. Benjie looked like someone who had the day off. He smiled broadly when he glanced at her.

“Going to a party?” he asked her, and she laughed.

“Compared to you, I look like I’m going to dinner at a fancy restaurant. Going to the beach?” she teased him back.

“I’m a lot more dressed up than most of the guys I work with. Some of them come to work in shorts and flip-flops, if the weather is decent. No one cares what we wear to work.” It was the nature of start-ups, they both knew, and most of the employees were younger than Jane and Benjie, fresh out of college, looking like they had just rolled out of bed. No one shaved, or not frequently, and they barely brushed their hair. Games were provided in common areas, vintage pinball machines or video games, a candy bar, and board games to play on their breaks. The whole atmosphere was keyed to the very young. Many of them worked from

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home several days a week. And in start-ups or companies like Amazon, they often brought their dogs to work. Amazon, Facebook, and others like them had set the trend years before, and made the work environment highly desirable to the “millennials,” mostly in their twenties, who worked there. The surroundings at Fletcher and Benson were more polished, since their clients were adults, and the employees were older than those at most start-ups.

The women she had seen there dressed well and she noticed that most of them wore heels to work. She was wearing a short black denim skirt, a striped Chanel T-shirt she had “borrowed” from her mother to bring to New York, and a pair of high-heeled black Manolo Blahnik pumps. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail, and she was going to wear a white Levi’s jacket and carry a black-and-white tote. She looked fashionable, but not too much so. She was slim and had a good figure and long legs. There was nothing suggestive about what she was wearing. The skirt wasn’t too short, and the heels weren’t too high. Her perfume was a light fresh scent one barely noticed. She looked clean and young and pretty, and she was eager to do a good day’s work and learn about her new job and coworkers at the agency.

She and Benjie left the apartment together. Benjie was taking the subway to work in Brooklyn, and Jane had called

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an Uber to take her to Midtown, where the agency was, on Fifty-Seventh Street between Madison and Park Avenue in the heart of the luxury shopping district. It would be hell getting there in bad winter weather, with all the traffic, but it was warm now and a nice area to walk around in during her lunch hour. There were plenty of places to eat or to order food nearby. And there was a kitchen and dining room for employees who brought their own lunch. Many of the employees ate at their desks while they continued to work. The working conditions were extremely pleasant at Fletcher and Benson, even if they didn't provide all the games and snacks offered by start-ups. None of that mattered to Jane.

“Have a good day,” Benjie called out to her as she got into her Uber and he headed for the subway. She wasn't madly in love with him, but they had a good time together and shared some of the same interests. They didn't want to live together but saw each other a few times a week on an exclusive basis, which meant that neither of them was dating anyone else. It suited both of them. They had dated briefly in college at UCLA and were enjoying a replay of it now. It made being in New York more enjoyable, having someone to share it with. Benjie had had a serious relationship in business school, but they broke up when he graduated and moved to New York. Jane had never been

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seriously in love, and she didn't regret it. She wanted to get her career off the ground first and stay focused on that. Her work was important to her, more so than romance at the moment.

It took her half an hour to get uptown in morning traffic, while she read *The New York Times* online in the back seat of the Uber. They arrived right on time, and she followed a mass of people into the building where Fletcher and Benson occupied two floors. She went straight to the executive floor, gave her name to the receptionist, as she'd been told to do, and was about to head for a seating area, when a tall, heavysset man with white hair nearly collided with her, and then looked her over appreciatively. She didn't know who he was but felt instantly uncomfortable at the way he stared at her. His eyes went straight to her chest, and then took in the moderately short skirt, and glanced past her legs and then back to her face again. He stood in her path like a boulder in a stream, and she had to walk around him to get away from him. He didn't step aside and continued staring at her.

"Are you here for an interview?" he asked her in a deep, gravelly voice. "You can come and work for me if you like." As he said it, the receptionist met Jane's eyes with a knowing look and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"I'm starting a job today," Jane said in a subdued voice.

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She didn't want to be rude, not knowing who he was, although she thought his behavior was crass and unacceptable.

"Receptionist?" he asked, making a very broad assumption that if she was a woman, she must have a low-level job. He was out of step with the times.

"In Ms. West's office," she said quietly.

"That's good news," he said. "Well, welcome aboard." And with that, he headed down a long hallway, and Jane took a seat to wait for Hailey West's executive assistant, who appeared a moment later. Julia Benning smiled at her warmly in welcome. She was a pleasant-looking woman in her late forties or early fifties. She took Jane first to the office of Francine Rivers, the head of the literary department. She explained on the way that the heads of both the literary and dramatic departments wanted to see Jane again to welcome her. Julia said that it was customary for them to see the new hires who were going to be working in the executive offices. She left Jane outside Francine's door, and told her she'd come and get her after Jane met with Francine and Allie Moore, the head of talent. Jane had met both women previously during her interview.

Standing there alone a minute later, Jane felt a rising wave of panic seize her as she knocked on Francine Rivers's door. Jane could see her through a wide glass panel: a stern-faced woman in black slacks, a black blazer, and

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running shoes, with her dark hair pulled back in a messy bun. She was frowning as she concentrated on her computer. She turned when she heard Jane knock and signaled for her to come in, then waved her to a chair. Jane realized then that Francine was speaking to someone on speakerphone and looking at a book cover on her screen.

“It looks all right to me, Elliott. If they make your name any bigger, there won’t be room for the title on the cover. And I think the red foil makes your name really pop. I like it.”

“The whole thing looks off-balance to me,” a disembodied voice came from the speakerphone. “The British cover was much better.”

Francine Rivers looked irritated but tried not to sound it when she responded. “Do you want them to make the title smaller?” she asked, only half in jest, and the male voice at the other end answered immediately.

“Yes, I do. Tell them to try that.”

“I’ll take care of it right away,” she assured him, and ended the call and then turned her full attention to Jane.

“I’m sorry. One of my badly behaved ‘children.’” She smiled a wintry smile at her. “Hell hath no ego like a narcissistic author. He won’t be happy till his name fills the whole cover.” She looked closely at Jane then, as Jane noticed that Francine had dark, serious eyes and a slightly sour,

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jaded expression when she wasn't smiling. "I get all the problem ones. Some of our big authors are challenging. They can be very insecure, like children, and jealous of their competitors. Don't worry. Hailey gets all the nice ones. But she's friendlier than I am, and has more patience," she said, almost smiling. "So welcome to the mother ship. We're delighted to have you join us."

She had seen Jane's grades from business school and was duly impressed. Bob Benson had already told her that Jane was the daughter of an old friend of his from Princeton. And he had told Francine who Jane's father was. She recognized the name, of course. Jane was obviously bright and had a good education, so there was justification for hiring her, and not just because of a college friendship between her father and the head of the agency. She had gotten the job on her own merits. Her contacts had merely gotten the door open, not landed her the job. "What made you want to work for a literary agency? Do you write?" Francine asked her. That was frequently the reason bright young people applied for jobs at the agency. They somehow thought that if they worked for an agent, their own writing would be discovered, which wasn't how it worked. And most aspiring writers never made a career of it anyway. They didn't have the persistence or the talent. Even after all these years as an agent, it still amazed

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Francine how hard it was to find a good new writer, especially one who had more than one book in them.

“No, I don’t write,” Jane answered her. “I want to learn more about publishing,” she said naïvely, still feeling nervous and sensing the tension around her. Francine was her big boss and seemed very serious to her, as the head of the literary department at the agency. “And being an agent is part of it,” Jane said as an afterthought.

“We’re problem solvers,” Francine explained. “Most writers want a mother or a nanny, and need one. That’s basically what we do—we nurture them, in addition to getting them book contracts and negotiating for them. We’re their advocates and translators and liaisons between the writers and their publishers. Some of the problems are ridiculously small, and others are enormous and harder to solve. You’ll see it all firsthand in Hailey’s office. She’s gentler with her writers than I am. Occasionally I lose my temper and scare the hell out of them. It whips them into shape, though.” She smiled a tired smile. “I do that with the publishers too. Being an agent is like being a referee at times. At other times, you need a gentle touch to close a deal, or so I’m told. I prefer threats, leverage, and force, myself. It always works for me,” she said, and laughed. She looked as strict as she said she was, and as dedicated to her job. Jane readily believed her. “This is not a playground.

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It's hard work," Francine added for emphasis. She seemed like a take-no-prisoners kind of person. Jane wouldn't have called her bitter, but there was something cold and unhappy about her.

As they were talking, the heavysset white-haired man whom she had seen earlier in the reception area appeared in the doorway. He opened the door without knocking, ignored Jane this time, and looked straight at Francine.

"Seven? The usual?" he asked, and Francine nodded, looking irritated. Jane noticed that her new boss's eyes went dead after he spoke. Francine nodded assent again and he left her office, leaving the door half open. He didn't bother to close it, although it had been closed when he arrived.

"That's Dan Fletcher, one of the two heads of the agency," she explained to Jane without further comment.

Jane nodded. "I saw him this morning when I arrived." She didn't comment either.

"I hope he behaved. He doesn't always when attractive young women are involved. No one has explained the Me Too movement to him. I hope he didn't say anything inappropriate," she said, still looking annoyed.

"No, not really. He just looked me over and assumed I was here to interview for a receptionist's job."

"He thinks that's what I do too." Francine smiled. And

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then she told Jane how to find Alabama Moore's office, the head of the talent side of the agency. Francine said she had work to do. Jane stood up and thanked her for her time.

They shook hands and Jane left Francine's office and made her way down the long hallway, with countless offices on each side, and people busy at desks inside them, looking at computer screens or talking on the phone.

Jane's only worry was that Dan Fletcher would appear again and harass her, or invite her into his office, an invitation she had no intention of accepting.

She found Alabama Moore's office after a few wrong turns. She had to double back once, but she finally found the office with her name on the door. As the head of the dramatic department, she had a huge office. Allie Moore was on an exercise bike when Jane knocked and walked in. She was wearing a white Chanel jogging suit and listening to something on headphones. She smiled and stopped pedaling as soon as Jane entered the room, feeling awkward.

Alabama Moore had a dazzling smile, and Jane thought she was very beautiful. She had met Allie in her initial interview and was impressed by her then. She had a mane of blonde hair and big blue eyes. She was wearing no make-up and her face looked young and smooth. Jane wasn't experienced enough to recognize the work of a great

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dermatologist combined with an expert plastic surgeon or to realize that Allie Moore had had “work” done, along with Botox shots and fillers. She looked as if she were around Jane’s age. Jane would have guessed her to be about thirty, when in fact she was forty-three. Her figure was slim and lithe in the white velour jogging suit that molded her flawless body. She got up at four on weekdays so she could be at the gym religiously at five A.M. She owned a loft apartment in Tribeca. She hopped off the bike and invited Jane to join her in the seating area in her office, which consisted of a comfortable couch, two big easy chairs, and an oval coffee table. There was expensive contemporary art on the walls, and her smile was warm as Jane observed her and the effect she created in the outfit she was wearing. It had been a good choice.

“It’s great to have you here,” Allie said enthusiastically. “You’ll like Hailey a lot. She works incredibly hard and is the consummate professional. I’m the official renegade, the rebellious child of the Fletcher and Benson family. I have to be, to deal with the actors, writers, and producers I represent. Some of them are barely more than kids, and they act it. Others should have grown up years ago and never will. They all get spoiled working on movies where people cater to their every whim. But some of them really deserve praise and attention because they have such huge talent. The badly

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behaved ones get away with it, and will never realize how spoiled they are, until it's all over for them.

“I grew up with Hollywood parents, so I'm used to it. My mother is a well-known actress, you'd know the movies she's been in, and my father produces hit TV shows. My parents' lives were enough to convince me that I never wanted to be on stage myself. I went to USC film school, but I decided I wanted to be an agent.

“My mother trained me to deal with divas from the time I was two. I worked for CAA, Creative Artists, in L.A. for a few years after I graduated, and then I came to New York to work at William Morris Endeavor. Then I met Bob Benson and he made me an offer I couldn't refuse, so now here I am, thirteen years later, and we represent some wonderful talent.

“I'm proud to be here, and I love what I do.” She beamed at Jane and was all innocence. “Are you interested in the dramatic side? Maybe you can do some projects for me sometime before they lock you away forever in the literary world. The talent side is much more fun,” she said mischievously as Jane thought about it for an instant. She had never considered being an actor's agent or even a writer's agent. This was kind of a sidetrack for her, to learn more about the business, and had been her father's idea when she didn't find a job in publishing at first. She was in love

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with books, much more than film. But Allie made the dramatic side sound appealing too.

Jane also suspected that there was a lot more to Alabama Moore than she was admitting. She was obviously very bright, her face was smooth and guileless, but her eyes said something different. She was a keen observer and noticed everything, and her welcome was much warmer than Francine Rivers's. Francine seemed tougher. There was something bitter about Francine that came through her pores. Allie seemed to love her job and Jane had the feeling that she lived and breathed for her career and would have killed anyone who interfered with it in any way. They were both highly successful professional women, who seemed competitive while trying to appear as though they weren't. She had a sense that either woman would attack if she felt threatened. This was the big leagues, and they were playing for high stakes, for their clients and themselves. The women who worked at the agency were pros in every way. They had fought hard to get where they were, and it showed in an intensity about their jobs.

Julia Benning, Hailey West's executive assistant, appeared while they were still in the seating area in Allie's office, and a moment later she whisked Jane away to Hailey's office, which immediately felt like a safe haven to Jane when she got there. The atmosphere was different

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in Hailey's office than in Allie's or Francine's, and Julia was a gentle guide. There was a desk for Jane near Julia's, which she could consider home base, and an office just messy enough to feel human but not chaotic. Julia showed Jane the closet where she could leave her things, and then the espresso machine. They had their own. Julia felt like a fellow student and upperclassman, showing Jane around her new school.

Hailey was in a meeting in the conference room with a major author when Jane got there, and she returned to her office an hour later. She was smooth and professional and slightly younger than the two department heads Jane had seen that morning.

Hailey was thirty-eight years old, and had an extremely responsible position as the number two agent in the literary department. She was wearing a white blouse, a well-cut, straight navy blue skirt, and high-heeled sandals. She had dark hair and wore it loosely pinned up on top of her head. It gave her a softer, more feminine look than the other two. Jane had noticed photographs of three young children on her desk, but Hailey made no mention of them when they spoke. She was entirely professional and all about business. It was obvious that Julia liked her and respected her, and when Hailey went into her own office and closed the door, Julia filled Jane in on the rest.

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“She has three kids,” Julia said as they each had a cup of coffee during a brief break.

“Divorced?” Jane asked her, curious, and Julia shook her head.

“Widowed. And her kids are young, a girl, eleven, and two boys, six and nine. The little one was just a baby when her husband died five years ago, at forty-three. He had an aneurysm and died while he was jogging. He was a publisher. She was an editor and used to work for him, and she quit when she had her kids. I think she stopped working for about six or seven years after she got married, and then he died, with no money and no insurance, so she had to go back to work. She couldn’t get a job that paid enough as an editor, so she came to work here. Bob Benson knew her husband, so he gave her a job, and now she’s number two on the literary side. She needs the job to support her kids. She’s totally professional and never misses a day, even when they get sick. A lot of people who work here don’t have kids. Employers are always afraid that people with young children won’t be reliable, but she is totally committed to her work. She never talks about her kids. It’s all about the writers she represents. Francine Rivers has two teenagers and works hard anyway. Allie Moore doesn’t have kids. You have to be dedicated to your job here, and willing to work long hours and drop everything when one of our

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clients has a problem or a crisis. People with kids can't do that, especially single mothers. Hailey is as dedicated to her writers as she is to her kids. She's all about business when she's here. She doesn't stay home with sitter problems. I don't know how she manages, but she shows up no matter what goes on at home. She's good to work for, you'll see. She's very fair." Julia showed Jane around the rest of the office then, and pointed to a project she was working on, and a slew of foreign book covers she had to send to Phillip White to approve. He was Hailey's biggest author, a huge bestselling success. "He hits one out of the park every time," Julia said, describing him. Jane knew who he was and liked his books.

By the time Hailey came back from her next meeting in the conference room, which Julia had set up for her the way she liked it, Jane had been shown where everything was in the office. Julia was neat, efficient, and organized, and anticipated Hailey's every need, after having worked for her for several years.

"I have to be a mind reader sometimes, although not often, and hope I guess right. I try to anticipate what she'll want so she never has to ask for anything. If she does, I've failed."

"She's lucky to have you," Jane said with genuine admiration for her. "I don't know how you keep it all straight."

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“You’ll get used to it. I’ve been doing this for a long time, it seems like a lot at first, but you’ll get into a routine once you know her. She’s very clear and straightforward in her requests. She’ll tell you what she needs. Just do what she says. Don’t put a spin on it or try to improve it. Listen, and follow her directions. That’s what matters most. Don’t decide you know a better way or a better system. You’ll guess wrong and screw it up that way. And if you don’t hear or don’t remember something, ask her. That’s what she wants. Don’t be afraid to ask her questions. Better that than to guess wrong, especially if you don’t know her well. Your asking her questions just saves time in the end.” It made sense. Hailey sounded like a practical person from everything Julia said. “You’re the first assistant I’ve had,” Julia said with a smile. Bob Benson had created a job for Jane after Hailey had told him that her assistant could use some help. She was swamped.

“What about you?” Jane asked her. “Are you married? Do you have kids?”

Julia laughed in answer.

“Hell, no. Being an assistant is like being married. I’m married to her life and my job. I love it. I don’t have time for a husband and kids. That boat sailed without me years ago. I’m fifty-one. I used to want to be an agent, but decided I’d rather be an assistant. Fewer headaches. And Hailey

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deals with the really crazy writers herself, so I don't have to. It's a perfect job, and there's a lot of satisfaction in it, if you do it right." Jane knew she wanted more than that in the long run. She didn't want to be an assistant forever. She either wanted to be an important agent one day, like Francine and Allie, or Hailey, or own a magazine or a small publishing house. That was still her dream. She wanted to run her own business and be her own boss, not work for someone else. "No guts, no glory," her favorite business school professor had said, and she liked the concept. She saw this job as a stepping-stone to bigger things, and she intended to learn all she could while she was here. She had big dreams. This was just the beginning to her. If she was going to make sacrifices in a job, like long hours, hard work, and a lot of stress, she wanted to do it for herself. She didn't want to still be an assistant at fifty-one. With her father's help to get her started, once they agreed that she was ready, Jane was sure she could go far. That was why she had gone to business school. She wanted to be Bob Benson or Dan Fletcher, not just a member of someone's staff. But this was fine for now, and it sounded like fun, even if stressful at times. They were all busy, and the nature of the business included pressure.

Hailey kept Julia occupied until lunchtime, and Julia gave Jane several projects she could handle on her own. At lunchtime, Jane ordered a salad from one of the restaurants

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they used to have lunches sent in. She went to the kitchen to get a fork and a soda out of the fridge, and was about to go back to her office to eat while she worked, when Dan Fletcher appeared. He caught her when she had the refrigerator door open, and scraped past her so he could rub up against her. She wanted to turn around and slap him but resisted the urge. Instead she turned around and looked him in the eye. For a second, he looked like he was going to grab her. There was no one else around.

“Is there a problem?” she asked him, momentarily oblivious to the fact that he was her boss and one of the two owners of the agency.

“Not for me. I understand Bob and your father were classmates at Princeton. We’ll have lunch and you can tell me about it sometime.” He pretended not to see the look of fury in her eyes, and his hand brushed her bottom as she walked past him. He was bold to a shocking degree, and apparently got away with it. No one dared call him on his behavior because of who he was. She went back to her office, shaking with rage. Julia saw the look on her face and was worried.

“Something wrong?”

“How the hell does that lech get away with it? First he squeezed by me, so he could rub up against me, and then he put his hand on my ass.”

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“Oh. Dan. He does it to everyone. Just ignore him,” Julia said with a shrug.

“I’m not going to ignore him,” Jane warned her. “I’m going to call him on it if he does it again.”

“He’s harmless. He’s married with kids,” Julia said, as though that made a difference.

“I don’t care. That’s sexual harassment,” Jane reminded her.

“He’s the boss.” She said it as though that absolved him of everything.

“That’s my point,” Jane said, and dug into her salad. “I’ll call a lawyer about it if I have to.” She was still seething, remembering his rubbing past her in the kitchen, his body pressed against hers. He was disgusting.

“You’ll never get another job if you call a lawyer,” Julia said practically.

“I’m not going to put up with it,” Jane said, and ate her salad in silence after that. She wondered how many women in the office he’d done that to, who kept their mouths shut to keep their jobs. She couldn’t imagine him doing something like that to Francine Rivers. She was tougher than that, and looked like she wouldn’t tolerate it for a minute. There was an undercurrent of anger in Francine, which Jane suspected would cause her to erupt with very little provocation. Jane couldn’t guess if Francine’s anger came

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from her job or her personal life, but she didn't seem like a happy woman. She had a fabulous career and was highly respected, but Jane could sense that something was amiss somewhere in her life.

Jane had no way of knowing that Francine's husband had walked out on her with the nanny, divorced Francine, and married the nanny as soon as their divorce was final. Fortunately, she had never given up her job as an editor at a major publisher. But she could no longer afford to keep it after the divorce. She had taken the job at the agency and was promoted with astounding speed. She was a very talented editor and had a real ability to discover promising young writers who blossomed with her direction and guidance. Several of them were writing bestsellers now. The pay as an agent was better, but the child support her ex-husband gave her was meager. He'd had two more children, so she got nothing from him anymore. She made a very healthy salary, but supporting two children on her own ate up what she made very quickly. At forty-five now, she had dealt with ten years of financial struggles, trying to provide the best she could for her kids and save for college, without taking loans. It took a heavy toll on her. She hadn't cared about her looks for years. Her daughter, Thalia, was seventeen, and next year Francine would have college to pay for. She wanted her to go to an Ivy League college if she could

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get in, which cost a fortune. Her son, Tommy, was thirteen, and would be entering high school the same year that his sister started college, and they were applying to the best private prep schools. Francine lay awake every night, trying to figure out how to pay for everything. She always found a way, but she had nightmares about what would happen if she ever lost her job. And even with it, and a highly respected position, she spent everything on her kids. There was never anything left for her.

She had moved out of the city to a respectable area of Queens after the divorce, to save money. She missed living in the city, but sent both her kids to private schools, and wished she could do more for them and put aside money for their future. She made too much to qualify for a scholarship for Thalia in college. Bitterness over not having anyone to help her and having a deadbeat ex-husband had been a way of life for Francine for so long that she no longer remembered what it was like to live without it. Constant struggles and financial problems after the divorce had toughened her, and she set the bar high for anyone who worked for her. She tried to be gentle with her authors at the agency, but she found it hard to be sympathetic at times.

Her children complained that she was never home, stayed at the office too late, and never got back early enough to make a decent dinner. She rushed home as soon as she

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could, put a frozen pizza in the oven, and helped with homework, but most of the time she was too tired to spend much quality time with them. She wanted to be outstanding at her job so she would never lose it. It was her greatest fear, that she'd get fired and wouldn't be able to support her kids in their fancy schools. She made a healthy salary, but her ex-husband had proven to her how uncertain the future could be. Her work was draining, and her life a constant vicious circle of too much work, a lot of stress and pressure, and supporting her kids. It tainted the way she saw the world around her. She knew only too well how competitive the agency was. If you slipped for a minute, someone else would have your job. And she was willing to fight anyone to the death to make sure that didn't happen to her. Worrying about it didn't make her pleasant to be around, and she hadn't had a man in her life in years.

Later that afternoon, Jane met Merriwether Jones, the CFO at the agency. Her life, as Julia described it, was a perfect example of total success. She was beautiful, a Harvard MBA, nice to everyone, friendly and charming. She was married to a writer, who stayed home to take care of their five-year-old daughter, Annabelle, while Merriwether made a huge salary at the agency. According to Julia, her husband Jeff was a handsome hunk, and they were crazy about each

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other. She was warm and encouraging to Jane when Bob Benson introduced them. She was one of those women who proved that you could have it all: a family, a happy marriage, and a great career. She reminded Jane of her sister, who was a high achiever who had it all too. Merriwether lived in a townhouse she had bought in the East Eighties. She had grown up in Boston, and her family expected her to get a great education and use it to become successful and make a lot of money, and she had.

Jane's father's old friend, Bob Benson, seemed to have it all too. He was married to a famous entertainment lawyer, had three sons, two in college and one still in high school. They lived in Greenwich, Connecticut, in a beautiful house, and he and his wife both had successful careers. He seemed like an all-around nice person, and everyone said he was a pleasure to work for.

By the time Jane got home that night, after a long Uber ride back to the West Village, her head was swimming with all the people she had met and the information Julia and Hailey had shared with her. Every one of the women who had important jobs, including Julia, was fully focused on her career. And Jane had the feeling that all of them would have been willing to kill to protect their jobs, if anyone tried to interfere with them. Their work ethic appeared to be excellent, and they set the bar high for themselves and

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everyone around them. The one who appeared to be having the most fun was Alabama, with all the actors she represented. Francine was the toughest and hardest. Hailey seemed to be on an even keel, and Merriwether appeared to be the happiest, with the most well-rounded life. Meeting their expectations was going to be a lot to live up to, and Jane just hoped she didn't disappoint them.

"So how was it?" Benjie asked when he showed up with dinner for them that night. She was grateful to see him. She was too tired to cook and would have gone to bed without dinner.

"Interesting. Action-packed. And my head is exploding with all the information," she told him over couscous and fragrant Moroccan chicken ordered from a favorite restaurant of theirs. He was thoughtful that way, and he had brought a half bottle of champagne so they could celebrate. He was on a tight budget, but always generous with her. "I've never met so many smart, interesting, successful women all in one place. They're all focused on their careers, and are a lot to live up to."

"You don't know them that well yet, who they really are. All you saw today is what they wanted to show you."

"They're divorced, widowed, single, and one is happily married. They're juggling kids, their jobs, and their clients. I don't know how anyone can do all that and get it right,

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but they seem to. All I want to focus on is my job. The head of the literary department is very tough and seems angry. I guess they're all tough in one way or another, or they wouldn't have their jobs."

"Just make sure you don't end up like that. There's more to life than work," he reminded her, then kissed her and cleared the remains of dinner away, while she went to take a shower.

It didn't sound like fun to him, but he also knew that Jane was more ambitious than he was, and her family expected a lot from her. It was a vast difference between them. Her father had driven both of his daughters hard to become high achievers, and her sister Margaret's success in finance was a lot to compete with. He didn't envy Jane, despite everything her parents had provided for her. They expected a lot in exchange, and she didn't want to disappoint them. His parents just said they wanted him to be happy, whatever route he followed. He wasn't sure the Addisons ever thought that was important. Neither did Jane. All she thought about was what she was going to accomplish in the coming years.

It was a race she was going to run every single day. And the race had started in earnest now with her first serious job. He didn't envy her at all. In fact, when he thought about it, he felt sorry for her. She was going to miss out on

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a lot in life if she continued on the path she was on. She was driven by a force he didn't really understand. It was a white-hot fire within her. She had to meet her parents' high expectations and her own. It was a tall order for anyone. And dating her wasn't easy either.