

THE VERY NICE BOX

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PART ONE

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EVEN IF SHE DIDN'T WORK AT STÄDA, AVA SIMON would have furnished her apartment with STÄDA products. They were functional, well-designed household items, free of unnecessary decorations and features. She owned two Simple Dinner Plates, two Pleasing Water Glasses, and two Comforting Mugs, which together fit perfectly on her Dependable Drying Rack, along with her Useful Forks, Spoons, and Knives.

Ava's full-sized Principled Bed was made of pine and supported a Comfortable Mattress, which had a firmness factor of 8—exactly calibrated to her preference. On the other side of her studio was a Dreamy Dog Bed for her boxer mix, Brutus. She owned a Practical Sofa, an Embracing Armchair, and an Appealing Dining Table. In her closet hung seven long-sleeved shirts (three gray, two black, and two white), seven short-sleeved shirts, two pairs of pants (one denim, one cotton), two pairs of sneakers (identical, black), seven pairs of black socks,

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and seven pairs of black underwear. She had one lightweight jacket, one winter coat, and one rain jacket.

She liked to think of each day as a series of efficiently divided thirty-minute units. One unit for showering, dressing, and brushing her teeth. One unit for breakfast and coffee. One unit for walking Brutus along the perimeter of Fort Greene Park. One unit driving to the STÄDA offices in Red Hook.

Ava was an engineer for STÄDA's Storage team. She took care and satisfaction in her work, which she carried out on Floor 12 of STÄDA's Simple Tower. The Simple Tower was a neck-achingly tall architectural feat, made of glass and designed to concentrate and redirect all natural sunshine into the building, so that even overcast days supplied the Simple Tower with powerful, invigorating light. Its interior was expansive and elegant. Polished concrete floors and curved glass walls divided the workspaces from the meeting rooms. Common areas were outfitted with STÄDA's living room collection; Plush Sofas and Cozy Nesting Tables were arranged as if they were in the showroom. The three STÄDA kitchens—the Sweet Kitchen, the Salty Kitchen, and the Wellness Kitchen—were stocked with snacks, coffee, and Wellness Water, spring water infused with a rotating variety of citrus fruits. Small atriums punctuated the space, extending all the way to the roof.

Teams on Floor 12 worked together in pods, their long black desks positioned under dropped birch ceilings. Floor 12 was quiet aside from the soft clacking of keyboards. An outside observer would not suspect the constant current of online chatter happening over S-Chat, the company's in-house instant messenger. STÄDA employees organized chat rooms based on shared interests, and occasionally a handful of people sitting in different areas of the floor would abruptly erupt into laughter.

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Ava, who engaged with S-Chat only when it was abso-

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lutely necessary, sat next to a window overlooking Red Hook's piers. Barges came and went from STÄDA's distribution center, a long commercial wharf with weathered brick and gigantic steel storm shutters. It extended out into the East River, reaching toward the Manhattan skyline. The wakes from the freight barges rolled up in perfect time, churning white against the limestone breakers. Ava considered this rhythm, the business of moving their products from conception out into the world, to be STÄDA's heartbeat.

This week Ava had begun mocking up the lid hardware for the Very Nice Box, a simple but smart design that she hoped would be introduced in the coming year. The Very Nice Box was her Passion Project. It was exactly the kind of work she had come to STÄDA to do: meticulous engineering without frills or gimmicks, just the ideal intersection of geometry and utility, where each component existed for a reason. If all went to plan, the Very Nice Box would be followed by a series of shelves and hanging rails that could be configured in endless arrangements. But its most basic unit, the foundation upon which the entire strategy for the year rested, comprised six large uniform sides assembled with pegs and hinges. Ava was determined to make it perfect. It would take her 150 units to create renderings for the hinges alone, she estimated as she floated upward in STÄDA's giant glass-backed elevator after an Outdoors Break.

The doors opened to Floor 12, where Jaime Rojas, a junior engineer, waited by the hand sanitizers with a stack of hinge sketches. "There you are!" he said, handing them to her. He wore a floral shirt buttoned to his throat. Ava admired Jaime's maximalist spin on the STÄDA brand. His aesthetic was both complex and tidy: tucked-in shirts with bright, busy patterns, clean, short fingernails. A natural streak of white ran through one side of his otherwise dark, carefully combed hair. Jaime was

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not new to STÄDA, but he was new to Ava's team. His specialty was gadgets, watches, small lamps, and clocks, but he had never complained about being relegated to Storage. Originally from El Paso, Jaime had moved to the city to attend NYU. He'd started working at STÄDA as a Customer Bliss associate after a string of service industry jobs, which he liked to joke was the natural next step for him as a comparative literature major. Ava considered Jaime a friend—her only friend—and she quietly appreciated his commitment to their standing Monday lunch.

Lunch at STÄDA was free and catered on a rotating basis by nearby restaurants. The restaurant changed every quarter based on a popular vote. But long lunch lines—or, more precisely, the company's failure to implement an effective design solution to solve the line problem—deterred Ava. So she prepared her own lunches, which were simple and vegetarian—equal parts protein, fat, and carbohydrates—and divided into three compartments in her Sensible Bento Box, which was one of her most enduring designs. She didn't vote for a restaurant, and no one tried to lobby her.

Jaime walked alongside Ava as she made her way to her desk. "Maybe we can discuss those hinges after the conference room thing?"

"The conference room thing," Ava repeated. "I almost forgot about that. What are they making us do this time?"

"No clue," Jaime said. "Maybe they're announcing the arrival of the Gay Tree."

Ava shuddered. STÄDA's new Spirit team—part of the recent corporate expansion—had just erected a tall paper tree with rainbow-colored leaves made from tissue paper. The design was terrible. The word PRIDE had been traced in black marker on the trunk. Ava knew that as queer employees, she and Jaime were supposed to appreciate the gesture. She had

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even received an email from a junior Spirit staffer asking for her feedback on the tree. But the tree hurt her eyes and its leaves crinkled noisily whenever anyone walked by it, so the only thing it did was provide an aesthetically offensive distraction from her work.

Ava sighed. “How do they expect us to do our jobs with mandatory orientations happening all the time?”

“Don’t ask me,” Jaime said. “I’m just the messenger.”

A reminder email about the conference room event waited, unopened, in Ava’s inbox. The subject line was a smiley face. The Spirit team hadn’t even booked an end time. Whatever this was, Ava dreaded it. The meeting or training or experimental team-building activity would come barreling through her well-organized Friday, she would be pressured to eat something sugary at a strange time of day, and she would have to interact with her colleagues, most of whom she didn’t know.

That was also by design. She had worked hard to strike a balance between pleasant and unapproachable without appearing totally joyless like Judith Ball from the People Office did. Judith Ball’s title had recently been rebranded to chief people officer. She had the warmth of disinfectant spray. She was older than most at STÄDA and was one of the company’s founding members, which meant that along with overseeing hiring and workplace policies, she had a seat on STÄDA’s board, where she was the only Black member and only woman.

Judith would often remark that she never understood why the workplace had become so casual. With more and more employees showing up in designer flip-flops and hoodies, she loved to remind them that she could remember a time when people dressed up to travel. “One must dress for success,” she would say matter-of-factly. She wore a self-assigned work uniform: a cream-colored top tucked into a skirt suit, low-heeled

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pumps, and a string of pearls, her hair pulled into a neat bun. She sent frequent memos about Boundless Vacation Days, Suggested Attire, and the proper protocol for leaving for an Unlimited Outdoors Break. (*Feel free to take Unlimited Outdoors Breaks*, she had written in a recent email, *but do remember to notify your manager on S-Chat and include me on the exchange.*) Judith had no apparent interests outside of obstructing everyone's fun.

*Am I like that?* Ava would sometimes wonder.

But no. Unlike Judith, Ava had no interest in keeping tabs on her colleagues' Boundless Vacation Days or Unlimited Outdoors Breaks. So instead of being resented, Ava was simply ignored, which was for the best. She didn't invite interactions. She didn't ask anyone about their weekends, and she didn't particularly like it when anyone asked about hers. Her answer never changed, because her weekends, like her weekdays, were beautifully organized, uniform, and solitary. When she described them, whoever was listening would glaze over. Eventually her colleagues left her to do what she did best, which was to create useful household boxes from the six essential STÄDA materials: wood, metal, MDF, plastic, linen, and pulp board.

But a new employee had arrived at the Simple Tower and appeared to be disrupting this social contract. According to what Ava had overheard the day before in the Wellness Kitchen, he was fresh out of grad school, having earned some sort of double degree that Ava couldn't bring herself to care about, and would be settling into STÄDA's Marketing Department that week.

S  
R His name was Mathew Putnam, and he had gripped the attention of Floor 12, not because of his fancy degree, Ava suspected, but because he was categorically handsome. According to his STÄDA employee photo, which had been circulating around the S-Chat backchannels, he looked young—*younger*

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than Ava, who was thirty-one. Today she had noticed feverish typing when he showed up for a tour of Floor 12. S-Chat notifications dinged with higher frequency. Workers across all teams arranged their hair differently. Several men spoke more loudly. Even Jaime had messaged her on S-Chat: *Um . . . it appears that a literal Adonis will be working here.*

Ava saw that Mathew Putnam was making his way in her general direction, and she braced herself. A young Spirit staffer was delighting in bringing him around to every desk, as if they were the bride and groom at a wedding reception. She watched as Mathew greeted her colleagues as though he'd known them since childhood and was now enjoying a much-awaited reunion. His charisma was palpable. Around him, her colleagues smiled and laughed more. Eventually the pair made their way to Ava's desk. She busied herself with Jaime's hinge sketches for the Very Nice Box, slipped on her Peaceful Headphones, and tuned in to her favorite podcast, *Thirty-Minute Machine*, hoping that her focus would drive them away.

"Mat Putnam," he said, sticking out his hand. "It's awesome to finally meet you." His voice cut through Ava's Peaceful Headphones. She pulled them off and quickly shook his hand, which was large and warm. He clearly had not yet learned the unofficial STADA greeting, which was simply a hand raised, shoulder-level, as though an oath were being taken. This was to prevent unwanted touch and the spread of flus and colds.

"The badass box boss, Lexi tells me." Mat smiled at Ava eagerly, then turned to the Spirit staffer, who blushed violently at the mention of her name.

Ava looked up at him. He had a puppyish energy that alarmed her. He was extraordinarily tall, with a well-structured jaw, a clean-shaven face, and a prominent Adam's apple. He wore heeled leather boots, dark-wash jeans, and a thick white T-shirt whose sleeves hugged his biceps. He was the type of

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man who could accidentally drop a baby and immediately be forgiven.

“Excited for the big bash?” he said, drumming his fingers on her desk.

“No,” Ava said. “It’s a party?” She’d been trying to ignore the steady line of people making their way into the conference room.

“Come on!” Mat said. “I looked in the Imagination Room and I can report that there are streamers. And a gluten-free cake! It’ll be great.”

“The Imagination Room?”

“Oh, sorry,” Mat said. “You probably knew it as the conference room.”

Ava adjusted a framed photo of Brutus on her desk. She had only one photo of her dog, so as not to appear to be singularly obsessed with him, or lonely. “I disagree that it will be great,” she said.

“Well, I’m going to be there, and you’re going to be there, and cake will be there,” Mat said. “And Lexi will be there!” He beamed at Lexi, who beamed back at him. “So it’s guaranteed to be great.”

His smile had fallen, and Ava felt responsible. But she had wanted at least the details of this office “bash” ahead of time so she could know how much time it would take up and whether she would be home to Brutus later than usual. She had sent an email to this effect to the Spirit team, whose rep simply responded, *Where’s the fire you little work horse . . . !* She’d hated this email because it hadn’t answered her question, because the rep had mixed metaphors, because the punctuation was chaotic, and because *workhorse* was one word.

Mat patted down the hair on the back of his head. “There’s something I should probably tell you,” he said. “Lexi, go ahead.”

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Ava glanced around the room in case he was talking to

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someone else. There were, after all, at least two dozen other senior engineers across the floor. Lexi headed toward the conference room, running a hand through her long hair. What could Mat Putnam possibly have to tell Ava? He had just learned her name. She felt his attention on her, and wondered if he expected her to speak.

To her relief, he broke the silence. “It’s about a shift in STADA’s marketing plan for Q4—”

“Marketing? I’m an engineer,” Ava said. “So whatever it is probably doesn’t concern me.” She didn’t want to hear about his marketing plan for Q4. She was sure he would discuss it with unnecessary flare. Marketing reps always took too long to make their point, and she couldn’t lose any more time to this conversation. She had one more hinge sketch to consider. It would take four units, exactly the amount of time left in her workday. Now she would have to bump that work to Monday and recalibrate the entire week. She sighed and looked at her Precise Wristwatch. “Let’s get whatever this is over with.”

Mat’s smile faltered. “Awesome,” he said.

Ava stood.

Inbox zero. Tightening a bolt. Folding a shirt. Sweeping a floor. Tracing a circle. These were the things that soothed her. She thought about each of them as Mat Putnam swung open the door to what was now, she would have to accept, the Imagination Room.

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SINCE STÄDA'S EXPANSION, AVA HADN'T SEEN much of her boss, Karl. But now here he was in the conference room, setting out wedges of cake and Useful Utensils. The last few years had worked on his appearance. When he'd recruited her, many years before, when the company was made of a half-dozen woodworkers, Karl had been strapping and bright-eyed. Now his tall, thin frame slumped. His shoulders were rounded, and his mop of blond hair had begun to thin.

Behind him, the word IMAGINE was projected onto the wall in STÄDA's signature sans serif font, the letters dissipating and gathering again in a flashy loop of transition effects. Ava wasn't surprised that she hadn't noticed this particular addition until now; the rebranding of the company was occurring constantly, all around her, at a dizzying speed. She would be unfazed to return to her desk to find that her Encouraging Desk Chair had

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Ava liked Karl. He wasn't shy, but he was quiet. His voice

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was flat and gentle, and higher than one might expect from a man of his height. When he spoke in front of an audience, his calm energy blanketed the room. His public speaking style was the opposite of what STÄDA's Powerful Presentation Training recommended now, which was to strive for the vocal equivalent of light pyrotechnics, but Ava found him incredibly pleasing to listen to. This was in part because of his dry humor, which he served with a tight, playful smile, and in part because his Nordic accent placed emphasis on unexpected syllables, building a cadence that was quietly riveting.

He stood at the head of the room as Ava's colleagues—there were dozens now—milled around the edges. The walls were flanked with half-erased notes from the Manager Training that had taken place before the party.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Be aware of Defensive Pessimism.

Climb the Ladder of Perception.

Practice Radical Compassion.

*Am I in a cult?* Ava wondered vaguely. She had been through a few of these trainings herself over the past several months. They were part of STÄDA's expansion, and although they weren't required, she wondered whether her attendance—or lack of attendance—was noticed. Once, after dodging three consecutive Self-Care Seminars, she had been notified by an email from Spirit that she was “missed,” and she was provided with a link to view the workshops virtually.

The Personality Test—a daylong workshop to determine your leadership color—was especially popular. It was STÄDA's version of the Myers-Briggs test. You could be assigned red, yellow, green, or blue based on whether you were naturally direct, outgoing, empathetic, or analytical. Ava's colleagues had

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been excited to find out their colors. Some employees included their color in their email signatures. Others bought color-coded knickknacks for their desks, or wore clothing and accessories that corresponded to their colors. Floor 7 had been recently converted to the Swag Lounge, where a limitless variety of colorwear was available.

Ava had taken the test at the request of the Spirit team, after avoiding it for months. The questions had been bewildering, but the result was predictable: blue. Analytical. She could have told anyone that, without a test. But she wondered if an earlier version of herself might have been assigned green—empathetic—and part of her was disappointed by the result. The results packet she received after taking the test included a series of backhanded compliments: *You compensate for your social deficit by demonstrating a raw talent with numbers. Although your colleagues do not enjoy your company, they trust your work. Your time-management skills surpass, and therefore irritate, those around you.*

If there was one thing Ava liked about the Personality Test, it was that it made small talk easier. She understood that every conversation was a different configuration of the same components. The Personality Test made it easier to find common ground, and in turn allowed her to make jokes when one would otherwise be difficult to muster. Some mornings in the Wellness Kitchen she could get away with simply saying, “Oh, I can see your red is showing,” as someone reached for the coffee first.

Karl tapped the side of his Festive Plastic Plate with a Useful Fork. “All right, everyone, if I could have your attention.” The din settled and everyone turned to face him. For a moment he didn’t appear to have anything else to say, and Ava felt a light panic on his behalf. “We’re here in part,” he continued, “to celebrate Ava Simon. It’s her ten-year anniversary today with STÄDA. Ava, please join me.”

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A man from the Spirit team hit a button and a blast of electronic music erupted from the room's speakers. Ava's stomach was a hard pit. She tried to make herself small. She hadn't realized it was the exact date of her ten-year anniversary at STÄDA. Maybe if she didn't look up at Karl—at anyone—this could be over quickly. But no. She could not disappear. She walked to the front of the room, awkwardly maneuvering around the Sturdy Tables while the music blasted. She stood next to Karl and faced her colleagues with a closed smile. She thought of a screwdriver fitting into the head of a screw and slowly turning.

The Spirit staffer fumbled with the button and the music stopped. Karl leaned in to whisper to her. "I dislike this sort of thing too. It will be over shortly." He shifted on his feet and cleared his throat. Judith Ball was standing in the back of the room with her head tilted to one side, as though she were considering a painting. "Ava and I have worked together for ten years," Karl said. "This company wouldn't be the same without Ava's contributions. She's consistent and thorough and has worked tirelessly to design some of STÄDA's most popular household boxes to date, including, but not limited to, the Singular Shoe Box, the Genuine Storage Box, the Delightful Storage Box, the Purposeful Loose Ends Box, the Sensible Bento Box, and the Memorable Archives Box."

Had Karl's voice cracked at the word *tirelessly*? Ava was moved. *Consistent*, she thought, and *thorough*. These were some of the highest compliments her work could receive. Her colleagues clapped halfheartedly, hand to wrist, still holding their Festive Plastic Plates, and Ava made her way to the back corner of the room, her face hot from the unexpected attention.

"At the same time," Karl continued, "we are happy to boast our strongest ever Marketing team in STÄDA's history. I don't think we need the assistance of any charts to know how well

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STÄDA has performed these last eight quarters, thanks to our friends in Marketing.” There was a louder burst of applause this time, mostly from the corner where the STÄDA Marketing team stood, many of them wearing red (direct) and yellow (outgoing) clothing and accessories—bracelets, T-shirts, wristbands, and headbands. “I can feel that STÄDA is growing stronger, and I believe that morale will only continue to soar,” Karl said, his voice straining. Ava wondered if he believed what he said. She could recall the era when STÄDA offered only tables, boxes, and clocks and took up only a quarter of a floor. “That is,” he continued, his tone more lighthearted, “as long as the Red Hook Vandals retire their efforts.”

There were a few polite chuckles. The Red Hook Vandals were a recent nuisance to the company. STÄDA was preparing to build a second tower—the Vision Tower—which would house all of Marketing, over an adjacent lot. To develop the property, STÄDA had ordered the demolition of a community garden along the south side of the lot, and the early construction had angered a small but vocal group of young activists. Executives at STÄDA had begun calling them the Vandals because of their clever small-scale actions to disrupt the Vision Tower’s construction. They’d begun by protesting with signs, but that had garnered little press, so they had moved on to more retaliatory stunts. The backlash had escalated over the past several months, but it had had little effect on the construction timeline. Response to the escalating tension was polarized within the small group that discussed it in the Security and Corporate Social Responsibility S-Chatrooms. Some were sympathetic to their cause, others felt concerned and unsafe, but to the majority of the office, including Ava, the Vandals’ presence was felt only to the extent that they occasionally provided new fodder for small talk.

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“And so,” Karl continued, “given our fantastic standing, I

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would like to announce my retirement from my position as head of product.”

Ava’s heart skipped. She wondered if she had misheard him. The room had become quiet. Karl cleared his throat. “STÄDA has never been in a better position,” he said. “We have become a household name. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine this for my small furniture company ten years ago.” He clasped his hands in front of him and smiled politely. Ava could sense the restrained emotion behind this gesture. “I’ll be happy to spend time with my wife and my beautiful Siamese cat, Leonard. He is a retired show cat. We will be living in Hudson, building chairs from wood. That is my passion.”

Ava saw a few Marketing staffers exchange glances.

“I’m also happy to announce,” Karl said, “that Mathew Putnam, who graduated at the top of his MBA class at the Wharton School, has relocated from Philadelphia to take over my role of STÄDA’s head of product. Marketing, Engineering, Spirit, and Technical will now be reporting to Mr. Putnam, who will now share a few words about this reorganization.” Karl paused for a moment. “Thank you,” he said.

The room buzzed with confusion. Ava glanced around the room and saw a look of bewilderment on Jaime’s face. Mat made his way to the front of the room. “We are so excited about this,” he announced over the murmuring. He clapped his hands together.

*We?* Ava thought.

“It’s my honest belief,” Mat said, “that our home goods can only be as powerful as our hearts and minds. The way we feel at work affects the products we make and the message we send to customers about STÄDA. I see myself as the guardian of this profoundly delicate flywheel of mind and matter, and you can expect to see a lot more positive changes around the office that I hope will help us bring our whole hearts to work. There is

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so much opportunity to help the STÄDA family get the most value out of what we offer. I can't wait to report back on Engineering's and Marketing's next big campaigns."

Engineers didn't *have* big campaigns, Ava thought. Her team designed products, then built them, then tested them, then rebuilt them, then explained how to assemble them. That was it. They had no dealings whatsoever with Marketing. And now she'd have to work with Mat. No—*for* him. They would have to make presentations together. For a terrible moment she allowed herself to contemplate the slideshow transition effects he would try to use.

"I have a question," someone called out. It was Owen Lloyd, a relatively new addition to the Marketing team. He had transferred from Float-Home, the vacation rental app. Ava knew this because he was the loudest person on Floor 12. He typed loudly, spoke loudly, walked loudly, made coffee loudly, and demonstrated that there was a loud way to open a refrigerator. He was dressed in a tight yellow polo tucked into blue jeans. "So we really leaned into positive psychology at my last job, at Float-Home. I don't know if anyone else here knows what I'm talking about," he said, glancing around, "but like . . . it's such an awesome philosophy." His ears had turned red. "So my question is . . . well, I heard a rumor you would be bringing Positivity Mandates to STÄDA, and I wondered if that's true."

"Absolutely, absolutely, one thousand percent," Mat said. "Thanks for asking, man. Going forward, STÄDA will be a solutions-based company."

Applause erupted around Ava, startling her. Were her colleagues this desperate for a more positive work environment? Many of the people applauding were engineers. It was their *job* to detect and call out problems with products.

S        "And actually, just to piggyback off that a minute," Mat said,  
R        "can you say your name for everyone?"

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“Owen Lloyd!” Owen said too loudly, glowing from the success of his question.

“Well, Owen, good news in the Positivity Mandate department. Starting today, STÄDA will be partnering with SHRNK, an awesome text-therapy app. Everyone’s subscriptions will be covered by STÄDA and you will never, ever have to put your mental health on hold. Execs at STÄDA know as well as the rest of you how difficult life can be. Now you can bring your problems to your SHRNK so you can bring your positivity to STÄDA.”

Another eruption of applause. The Spirit staffer handling the audio pumped his fist, as though Mat had just dunked a basketball. Then he hit a button and the music blasted. Ava had seen subway ads for SHRNK. They featured a muscular man in a white T-shirt sitting in a mid-century armchair and looking solemnly at the camera. *Got help?* was the slogan. Ava wasn’t sure whether the man in the ad was supposed to be the therapist or the patient.

“As a matter of fact,” Mat said, pacing now, “wellness will no longer be just a suggestion. Our friends in Spirit believe, as I do, that everyone has a right to their best self, and in fact we demand it. So whether it’s a SHRNK membership or a Self-Care workshop, your participation will be noted and included in your annual review.”

Ava’s breath felt shallow. She was reminded of the time she had inadvertently walked into a Self-Care workshop in which participants were instructed to force a laugh every five minutes.

“I think I’ve given you all more than enough to absorb for today,” Mat said. “So what I’ll ask everyone to do now is put your hands in,” he said, demonstrating with one of his hands. He wore a rubber yellow bracelet around his wrist, which Ava had first interpreted as some sort of sports accessory and now realized was a personality bracelet; it matched that of several

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others in the room. Many of Ava's colleagues stepped forward, throwing their hands into a pile. "Yep," Mat said. "All of you in the back too." It was physically impossible to get all hands in, Ava noted, and she watched as her colleagues standing at the edges of the room simply jutted their hands forward in front of them, vague smiles on their faces. Ava looked around for Jaime, who stood with his arms crossed, looking as if he were watching a live dissection.

"Awesome, awesome," Mat said. "On three, I want to hear *absolutely!*"

He counted to three. It was a clunky word to demand everyone shout together, but her colleagues did so with giddy excitement, then broke apart into many small, happy clusters.

Ava tried to squeeze her way to the exit, but she bumped into Jaime.

"Sorry, Ava," Jaime said. He bent to pick up her Decent Notebook.

"Thanks," she said.

"Trying to get outta here?"

"Yes."

"Me too," Jaime said. "That guy is one thousand percent the *worst.*"

"You think so too? Did you have any idea that Karl—"

"No," Jaime said. "I thought maybe you knew. I mean, what even *is* STÄDA without Karl? Who am I without Karl?"

"Was he joking about that therapy app?" Panic thrummed in Ava's chest. "It's absurd."

"I guess a text therapist is better than no therapist," Jaime said pointedly.

Ava wasn't currently seeing a therapist, and she struggled to avoid the implication. She pressed her lips into a tight smile and let a group of engineers from the Appliance team squeeze between them.

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Mat had emerged from the knot of people and was now, to Ava's horror, making his way to her. "Hey, Ava!" he called over the noise.

"Yes," she said, looking at him suspiciously. "Hi."

Jaime waited a beat. "I'm Jaime," he said, raising his hand up. Mat high-fived him. "Hey, amigo!" he said.

Jaime opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

"I'm sorry if this is a surprise," Mat said, turning to Ava. He was sincere. He gestured to say more, but he was approached by two women from the Marketing team who looked like they were going to ask him for an autograph. One woman wore a forest-green silk blouse. The other, who was dressed in a butter-yellow shirt and a checked mustard-yellow skirt, stood directly in front of Ava.

"I've read about how Positivity Mandates can completely transform an office!" she shouted at Mat over the commotion. "I'm totally on board!"

"Amazing!" Mat said. "We're going to level-up this company. Yellow fist-bump."

Ava watched the woman in the green silk shirt assume an expression of pure jealousy while Mat fist-bumped the woman in yellow, until Mat turned to her. "Mat Putnam," he said, sticking out his hand.

"I know!" the woman in green said. "I'm Kim."

Ava watched, perplexed. She desperately wanted to leave the room—to go back to her work, where her task for the afternoon was straightforward: to calculate the optimal hinge width for the Very Nice Box.

She saw that Karl was shaking hands with a pair of senior engineers. "... keeping up with the ... well ... times," she heard him say with a deflated smile.

Ava slipped out of the room and made her way back to her desk, where she tried to resume work as though nothing

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unusual had happened. She put on her Peaceful Headphones to block out the commotion spilling onto the floor. Her inbox was empty other than a survey email inviting her to rate the meeting and a notification that she had been preregistered and pre-approved for a SHRNK account. She moved both emails to her trash folder and tried to focus on the hinge mockups.

But she couldn't. She kept going back to Karl's announcement. *Very top of his class*. Who cared? Mat Putnam was a *child* compared to her colleagues. And now, suddenly, *she*, a senior engineer, was reporting to him?

There was no hope for productivity. She gathered her things and took the elevator to the parking lot. If anyone asked, she would say Brutus had a vet appointment.

"Hey!"

She spun around. It was — was she seeing this right? — Mat Putnam, jogging to catch up with her. She froze, watching him approach. "Hey," he panted, putting his hand on her car door, preventing her from opening it. "I'm sorry about that. I was really hoping we'd be able to powwow before Karl shared the news. I was able to debrief most of the engineers, but Storage was my last stop and I ran out of time."

*Powwow*, Ava thought. She looked at him flatly. "It's fine," she said. "Let's just sync up tomorrow. I have to get home for my dog."

Mat stood back from the car as she got in. "I promise I'm not some douchebag bro," he said, still out of breath. His voice carried through her closed window. She considered the total irony of the statement. A douchebag bro was exactly what he was.

"Okay," Ava said.

She turned the ignition, but the car wouldn't start. "Come on," she whispered, patting the wheel. "Come on." She hoped

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## THE VERY NICE BOX

Mat would be gone by the time she looked up, but he was still there, peering at her through her window.

“Not starting?”

She tried again, but this time her engine didn’t even attempt to turn over.

Mat scratched the back of his head. “Do you think maybe it’s the—” he called through the window.

“Engine,” Ava said, her hands squarely on the wheel. She got out of the car. It had been her father’s.

“Maybe it’s an easy fix!”

“It’s not,” she said. Looking around the lot, she noticed that a handful of cars around hers had been keyed. She got out and inspected her own. “Look,” she said, “my gas flap is dented. It was a Vandal.”

“Damn,” Mat said, “I’m sorry. I sort of thought Karl was joking about those guys.”

“Why would he joke about something like that?”

“Look, I know it’s weird that I’m, like, suddenly your boss—”

“It *is* weird,” Ava agreed. “How old are you, even?”

“Twenty-six,” Mat said.

“Oh my god.”

“Can I at least give you a ride home? Where do you live?”

“That’s okay,” Ava said. “I’ll call a Swyft.”

“No, really,” Mat said. “Where do you live?”

“Near Fort Greene Park.”

“Near me!” Mat said. He was delighted by this, as though she’d told him their ancestors had come from the same small, obscure town. Ava considered his perfectly symmetrical face, his clear blue eyes, his lightly tousled hair.

“I’m in the new building on the southern tip of the park,” he said.

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Laura Blackett & Eve Gleichman

She knew the building—it towered over all the others and caused a glare that made the dog park uninhabitable between the hours of three and four.

“Come on,” he said cheerfully. “We can have a redo that way.”

A ride home from Mat Putnam was the last thing Ava wanted, but she had no idea how to convey this to him. The two women from the party emerged from the Simple Tower and glanced their way before turning to each other and giggling. Were they laughing at Ava, or were they giddy simply from catching a glimpse of Mat? Or was it, Ava wondered, that they were laughing at the sight of someone like Ava with someone like Mat?

“Fine,” Ava said. “I’ll take the ride. Thank you.” She could chalk it up to convenience, or a desire to be polite to her new boss. But there was something hiding behind those explanations that was less legible. She locked her car.

“Worried someone will drive away with it?” Mat said, smiling at her, but it was too soon for the joke. She pocketed her keys and followed him.

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