



Chapter 1

In 1892, Walter Dimsdale and Franklin Morris meticulously drew up a partnership agreement establishing the law offices of Dimsdale & Morris. They hung their shingle, which Walter carved himself, on the third floor of a Market Street office building in San Francisco. Conscientiously, quietly, they sought out the most prestigious clients the city had to offer, promised only what they could deliver, and delivered what they promised. Within ten years, Dimsdale & Morris had established itself as one of San Francisco's most respectable firms. Their clients pointed to the firm's traditional, low-risk approach to civil litigation as the predominant reason for D&M's success. Walter and Franklin credited their ability to make money for themselves and effectively defend against those who would take it away from their clients.

In 1906, the law offices of Dimsdale & Morris were leveled, along with the rest of San Francisco, by the great earthquake. The two partners packed their bags, bid adieu to their former clients, who were now sucking bricks, and moved on, settling in Los Angeles. Initially, the going was rough. Los Angeles was little more than a lazy desert town. By the early twenties, though, a flourishing movie industry was making and breaking contracts with satisfying regularity. This suited the two old lawyers quite well. Once again, the firm began to flourish as it burrowed into this burgeoning market.

Sadly, neither man adapted well to the more casual attitude of their new home. They continued to wear their starched collars on a daily basis and preferred to meet moguls in suits at the office rather than in informal costumes by a pool filled with half-naked, frolicking starlets. Luckily, Dimsdale bit the dust before he could become totally outraged by such freewheeling posturing. Morris, alone and rich, was now in need of help. Mott, their associate of some years, was immediately made full partner. Two young associates were brought on board to replace him, and they all settled into a fine routine.

Mott was forty and a native of Southern California. Working the field was his forte, despite his generally conservative bent. Fully understanding that luncheon at the Brown Derby was more appropriate than a meeting inside an office and that clients were more amenable to the advice of Dimsdale, Morris & Mott attorneys after a few drinks, Mott took the DM&M show on the road. Morris and Mott became richer as the firm entered this new era. More associates were hired, the office space was expanded, partnerships were bestowed, and Morris died.

In the natural scheme of the things, the legal community mourned during the funeral, then scrambled to steal Dimsdale, Morris & Mott clients only to find the firm's relationships solid and Mott staunchly at the helm.

In the intervening years Mott died, senior partners were assigned, their names never gracing the letterhead in a show of some long-forgotten respect for the founders, and the conservative agenda established in 1892 was adhered to. The senior partners lived and died for the firm and its profits. Dimsdale, Morris & Mott would have been proud.

By 1993, the firm was a huge establishment, commanding three full floors and a partial in the Interstate Building in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. It represented clients, both corporate and private, of great wealth and notoriety. The contemporary DM&M handled its clients' affairs discreetly, intelligently, and, at times, brilliantly. Most of the ten million people in LA had no idea that DM&M existed, which suited the partners just fine. Scrutiny made them very uncomfortable. There were only two things in the contemporary firm that Dimsdale, Morris, and even Mott would not have condoned, even if the year was 2092.

The first was the partners' retreat: Each year since 1987 the four current senior partners of DM&M hosted three glorious days of professional intimacy for partners and associates. A few secretaries and paralegals came along to take notes and run errands. Partners and

their wives were treated to rooms in that year's designated hotel, but were expected to pop for their own food and drinks, including at least one dinner for the senior partners. The partners' wives shopped and played tennis, had their hair done and attended tea with the associates' better halves.

Associates were invited to the social festivities—which more often than not failed to live up to the adjective—and tedious seminars. They drove from the suburbs to attend, since few could afford the price of a room in the places DM&M chose for this occasion, in a show of excessive good cheer, the senior partners approved all-day parking vouchers for the associates. In return, the associates were expected to bill at least twenty hours to various and sundry clients during the weekend.

The senior partners and their wives enjoyed full amenities during the three-day professional extravaganza. Their rooms were suites, their parking valet and their meals written off by the firm. The designated site this year was The Regency Hotel. Beverly Hills. *Tres chic.*

Though theoretically Dimsdale, Morris & Mott might have approved of the partners' retreat, the expense of three days at the Regency Hotel would have sent collective shivers down their conservative and miserly spines. Yet it was the second modification of their original charter they would have considered beyond objectionable. It was downright sinful. In 1993, the firm of Dimsdale, Morris & Mott employed female attorneys and had done so for the past twelve years. The only saving grace was that these women ascribed to certain decorum. As associates, they worked hard, preferred discreet suits in blue and gray with skirts that skimmed well below the knee, and spent less time on their makeup than they did brushing their teeth.

For the most part they were serious, intelligent young women who could be counted on to seek other employment without a fuss when it became clear the partnership track was peppered with almost insurmountable obstacles. Only handpicked associates were able to negotiate the road to glory with any degree of surety. Not surprisingly, those that triumphed were men. An exception had been made, however, in the case of Nora Royce. Obstacles, when they appeared, were conquered easily, as she was guided down the partnership path by her assigned mentor, Lucas Mallory. But then, Nora Royce had been the exception rather than the rule all her life. Things were no different now.

If Nora Royce wore gray flannel she had it fashioned into a skirt that rode her thighs and a jacket that fit snugly over what Dimsdale would have referred to as “fine bosoms.” She was tall. She stood out. She was beautiful. She was outspoken in that slightly disdainful way of hers. And Nora Royce was smart.

Her curriculum vitae boasted a finish of three in a class of five hundred and twenty Stanford undergrads; two in a class of one hundred and twelve Harvard Law graduates. Nora Royce clerked for the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court. She was *Law Review*. She was an affirmative action dream: a woman who was easy on the eye and efficiently effective in the courtroom. Nora Royce was a sign of the times, and most of the associates hated her guts. The partners, on the other hand, found her a definite asset to a firm that was considered incredibly dull even in a colorless industry.

The final night of the partners’ retreat Nora outdid herself, surprising everyone with both her conspicuous costume and deportment. Nora Royce swept into the black-tie reception well after almost everyone was in place with the same drama she brought to a courtroom. Heads turned. She hardly noticed. The attention was expected. Her dress was royal blue, shirred at the waist, short and tulip-skirted. Her beautiful shoulders were bare, and it was obvious that, in those few hours when she wasn’t giving every breath to DM&M, Nora managed to lift a weight or two. Her shoes matched her dress. Her bag matched her shoes. She stood in the doorway, indolently perusing the room as if she commanded everyone in it. Identifying her quarry, she headed straight toward Lucas Mallory, senior partner, slipping a drink off a silver tray as she went.

“At least she’s not wearing that stupid scarf,” one of the less-than-stunning female associates whispered to her companion.

“Oh, I don’t know,” her equally plain friend answered, picking at what was left of the first-class hotel’s third-rate pate. “She might be on to something. Maybe if we wore the same thing day in and day out, Lucas Mallory might decide to notice us, too.”

“Christ, I’d give my left tit if Lucas Mallory even remembered my name. On second thought, I’d kill just to have a partner say hello and mean it.”

They laughed together; unaware their voices had a hard, hungry edge. Envious eyes darting to Nora Royce, both women wished they had the guts to walk up and vent at a senior partner in that controlled, righteous way she had. They wished they could make a powerful

man like Lucas Mallory look pale and sick with chagrin, nervous in their presence. Maybe they'd be happier if they could. More than likely, though, they'd be unemployed if they gave voice to their frustrations in the presence of anyone other than mail room personnel. So the two women looked away from the oh-so-civilized altercation and did what they did best. They eased into a lively conversation with three of the nicer looking male associates. The topic was Constantine's repeal of the Roman law of Commissoria Lex. These were smart women, after all. They knew their allure lay north of their necks. But the subject couldn't hold their attention. Like everyone else, their eyes kept skittering toward Lucas Mallory and Nora Royce, their heads together as they argued. Lucas turned away first. Nora actually reached out and held him in place, her hand on the arm of his beautifully tailored tuxedo. He glared at that hand and said something. Nora seemed to struggle with herself. She released him, and then walked regally, stiffly out the side door of the reception room. The warm-up act was over. The real show was about to begin.

Oliver Hedding, managing partner of Dimsdale, Morris & Mott, made his way through the crowd, leaving in his wake a silence born partially of respect and, overwhelmingly, of fear. Even Nora reappearing in the buff wouldn't have been competition for him.

Oliver Hedding was a frosty man who, in another time, would have made a fine pope; the kind of man who would pray to God, assuring spiritual brownie points, while relying on his own talents to guarantee more immediate, corporeal success.

Standing in front of his legal flock, Oliver seemed destined to be their infallible and immutable leader. Old, he never aged further. Intelligent, he never allowed his brightness to shine. Passionate, he kept his emotions in check, knowing only in his heart of hearts whether he was satisfied with that which was and that which he had wrought. Beside him, a bit behind, stood his wife, Kitty. In the fifties, when they married, Kitty Hedding would have been described as a cool drink of water, the cat's meow, the deb of the year. She was the kind who looked great in white tulle, whose widow's peak was a thing of envy, whose alligator bags were kept in velvet wrappings, her lingerie in tissue paper. She was a girl who made a good match, and a woman who had learned to live with it. Life wasn't perfect, but Kitty Hedding had the uncanny ability to turn a blind eye to the things that made it that way—even though one of those things was Oliver. At one time Kitty Hedding had been the object of her husband's desire. Now she was a necessary accessory. So, as she did every

time they appeared in public, Kitty looked attentively at Oliver, who expertly called attention to himself.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began in that dry, close-to-a-whisper voice of his. They all leaned forward, having learned long ago they were not worth the effort of projection; understanding that, when Oliver Hedding spoke, there was a message to be attended to no matter how dispassionate the delivery.

The associates and partners closed ranks, creating a womb to selflessly nurture Oliver Hedding. As he raised a glass of champagne they fell silent. From lowered lashes, or behind the guise of catching the eye of a friend, they looked about the room to identify the positions of the generals. The four partners had all come quietly into the room, no one was quite sure when, and scattered themselves about, creating a power surge that was at once unnerving and exhilarating.

Don Forrester, amiable and open, his long face always just a bit pale, his perfectly ordinary brown eyes twinkling as though life was nothing more than a simply executed but morally satisfying two-party contract, stood with his arm around his wife, Min.

Peter Sweeney, more suited to the work of a mercenary than a lawyer, stood alone, hands clasped at crotch level, legs spread wide apart. He surveyed the indentured from his position just to the right of Oliver, his even-toothed smirk daring them to aspire to anything but the commonplace. His wife, Peg, drank, rather than sipped, from a tumbler of scotch as she stood near the window and watched the traffic inch along Wilshire Boulevard far below.

Only Lucas Mallory was alone, moving benevolently around the perimeter of the crowd. By far the most attractive of the senior partners, he put a hand out to shake that of the newest associate, lifted an eyebrow to acknowledge the woman who managed the office, smiled considerately at a partner who had just lost his wife to cancer. His hair was gloriously gray: silver sprinkled attractively and evenly over a bed of black. It was cut short, not so much in a nod to fashion as in a gesture of confidence. He had reached an age, and was of a temperament, that this style suited him. His features were even, almost patrician, and his complexion was pale, as though dedication to his firm and his clients kept him from seeing the light of day. Lucas’s blue eyes were kind, yet lacked a certain depth of sincerity. This failing was ignored because of his graciousness. He would listen to your tale of woe for

hours on end, only to forget your name the minute he looked away. But at least he listened, and the associates liked him. The partners respected him. He alone was responsible for at least twenty percent of the billings. At fifty-seven, he was the youngest of the senior partners.

His eyes wandered over the crowd. He raised himself on the balls of his feet, peering over heads, looking for someone. The few who bothered to speculate figured he was trying either to steer clear of Nora Royce or to hook up with his wife. The latter option seemed the proper one, for it seemed that only a moment ago she was wending her way through the two-hundred-strong group of attorneys. He would find her soon. In the meantime, Oliver Hedding was beginning to speak in earnest. Ruth Mallory would, more than likely, be along soon.

“Kitty and I, Min and Don Forrester, Lucas and Ruth Mallory, Peg and Peter Sweeney are all delighted to see you here tonight. We are well aware that some of you have been putting in a few extra hours at the office today. It is appreciated. It is also hoped, in your excitement about this evening’s gala event, that you managed to assign the correct billing codes. If not, you’ll be receiving an invoice from the partners for your share of this little get-together.” Oliver cast his old black eyes about the room and drew his lips back in his interpretation of a smile. Dutifully, a titter ran through the room. He drew a deep breath, dry like that of a dying man, and continued.

“Seriously, we do appreciate the dedication all of you have shown to Dimsdale, Morris and Mott. Whether a first-year associate”—he paused, impaling two or three of them with inky eyes,—“or poised on the edge of the partnership track...” These he ignored. A look might constitute confirmation of advancement. Oliver was not that generous. “...you have proven yourself to be DM&M material. For that we are grateful and proud. It is because of you we remain one of the finest law firms in this country, and one of the largest in the state of California.”

Another deceptive death rattle; another grimacing smile.

“As is the case on this last evening of our retreat, when we leave work behind and before we engage in frivolity, it is customary to report on the health of the firm. The other senior partners and I are pleased to announce...” Oliver paused, his attention caught by a movement at the edge of the crowd.

In that millisecond of silence, all eyes followed his gaze, in time to see Edward Ramsey slink through the door Nora Royce had so recently used to make her escape. Even the most ardent brownnoser couldn't stomach Edward. He had made a career—no, a science—of fawning. He was no great loss to the party, but his defection in the middle of Oliver's speech was a point of interest. On cue, their unified attention slid back to the managing partner. In a blink, the old man's eyes narrowed, his jaw tightened, and his lips seemed to quiver for a split second with intense interest. Then the moment was gone, and he was smoothly making up for lost time.

"...happy to announce that our fourth quarter earnings for this year were solid, expenses after the renovation of the communications system have been brought back under control, and we enjoyed a passably secure end of the year. Next month, we will be closing our books on our fiscal year, and we hope to sign Andorack, the chain of superstores based in Milwaukee, by that time. We are negotiating to handle their western division civil litigation. We will, of course, keep you all informed of the progress made regarding this matter, through the normal channels."

Oliver took another deep breath, speaking a beat beyond his need for oxygen. It was an unnerving habit, one that made him seem in the constant throes of some terminal disease. "I toast you for your good and constant work on behalf of DM&M." Oliver raised his glass, sipped ceremoniously before putting the glass down, then wrapped up the show. "Now I'd like to invite you all into the ballroom, where we will be dining and, for the next few hours, I order you to put any thought of work out of your minds."

Politely, the gathered attorneys put their hands together and clapped, more in homage to Oliver Hedding than in reaction to what he had to say, which wasn't really much, in the final analysis. But it was over, the close-to-the-vest report on the firm they all wanted to call home for the rest of their careers. The applause began to subside and with amazing accuracy, everyone executed steps in the dance of the pecking order.

Oliver remained where he was. Kitty moved up a step or two, almost parallel to her husband, close to becoming his social equal. Lucas Mallory, Don Forrester, and Peter Sweeney were suddenly animated, gravitating toward Oliver. Lucas and Don stopped now and again to make small talk. Their wives hung back. Associates stepped to the side, feeling more comfortable skirting the knot of powerful men that was forming. Partners remained

in place, eagerly trying to catch the eye of one senior partner or another. With the social migration in progress, just as the doors to the dining room were being opened by white-jacketed waiters, Lucas Mallory's wife upstaged them all, blowing the choreography all to hell.

Ruth Mallory was the most affable of all the senior partners or their wives and had been conspicuous by her absence. Tall, dark-haired and perfectly coiffed, she was a lady, and a beautiful one at that. Almost ageless in her attractiveness, she preferred linen suits and silk blouses, and she eschewed high heels, opting for low-heeled spectators so she wouldn't tower over her husband. Her smile was gracious, her good words and wishes sincerely offered to any and all. They were accepted as manna from heaven by those employed by DM&M who knew themselves to be used, sometimes abused, and overworked.

So when, with a whoosh, the brass doors of the private elevator that served the concierge suites parted, more than one person grinned at the sight of so familiar and gracious a figure. The timing of her entrance was so uncanny that the laughter and conversation seemed magnified and redirected toward the woman inside the wood-paneled box.

Yet something wasn't quite right. Ruth Mallory, wife of a senior partner of DM&M, had abandoned decorum and was playing a joke. Why else would she ride the elevator backwards? Laughter, mumbled exclamations, nervous titters ran through the crowd. More than one person admired the cut of her gown, gold and black, skimming hips that looked inviting, hiding legs they all knew to be long and shapely. She stood ever so still, as though waiting for everyone's attention. Dutifully, they fell expectantly silent. Imagination was not a collective strong suit, but curiosity was.

Though later everyone would swear it took more than a few minutes for Ruth to move, in reality no more than thirty seconds passed before she painfully presented herself. That face was as they all remembered: alabaster skin, a mass of short black hair teased into a rich woman's bouffant, arched brows, earlobes glittering with large, tasteful diamonds. Ruth's eyes, invariably bright, were more brilliant than usual. Yet, rather than smiling a greeting, her lips were rounded in an O of surprise, as though amazed to see such a crowd.

In the back of the room someone laughed—a sharp, nervous bark. Others drew their breath in with hard, quick little gasps. Various reactions to information processed at differing rates, with divergent degrees of acceptance. The joke was an odd one. Many, who could tear

their eyes away from Ruth, looked to Lucas hoping he would clue them in. He didn't. He couldn't.

Lucas Mallory stood stock still, staring at his wife. Don Forrester covered his face with his hands. Oliver Hedding moved a step - perhaps it was two - toward the elevator before Peter Sweeney put out a restraining hand just as Ruth Mallory fell through the gleaming doors, staggering, barely able to retain her balance.

The doors of the elevator closed before she had fully cleared them. Those gathered winced en masse as they struck Ruth's foot, bouncing open again with an irritated little pop as brass met bone. The audience empathized. Not for any hurt Ruth sustained because of this, but for the insult the little pain was to the grave injury now so very evident on her person. Ruth Mallory held one of her hands to her throat. Through her splayed fingers a raw, crimson welt could be seen. Her other hand, almost obliterated by blood, held tight to her chest in a gesture of mea culpa. Blood poured through her fingers, ran down the front of her gown, spilled onto the hardwood floor in bright, red, nickel-size drops.

Quizzically, Ruth considered her ankle. The doors tried to close again, pulled back, and were about to come at her once more when, with great effort, she managed to move out of harm's way, stumbling into the maze of people, each step an excruciating effort.

Escape from the elevator accomplished, Ruth tipped her hand, monitoring the ebbing of her life. When it lay against her breast again she raised her eyes, letting them light on Oliver Hedding. They rolled back in their sockets before focusing again, this time on Peter Sweeney. Those fragile lids fluttered closed, and then opened, her head bowing as though in prayer just before she caught sight of Don Forrester. It was then Ruth swayed. She swooned. She pulled herself upright and, as everyone watched, Ruth Mallory locked eyes with her husband.

In the stillness, Lucas took a step toward her. Ruth was able to match it. Her lips quivered. She tried to speak, managing only a rattle deep in her chest. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. A too-long-delayed scream erupted from a woman in the crowd. Eyes shut in horror. Heads turned away. Only Ruth Mallory stirred in the freeze-framed room. The hand that clutched her wound cupped deeper. She examined the blood that filled it with a curious detachment, and then slowly, and with utter amazement, Ruth held that hand out to her husband, offering him her life. As their eyes met, a small sound bubbled deep in her

throat. It was this sorrowful, pitiful mewling, almost a word, that drove him to action. Lucas Mallory sprung toward his wife howling: "No!"

They never connected. Timing was everything, and Ruth was off a beat. She collapsed, sprawling at Lucas's feet, her eyes still locked onto his, her bloodied hand still held out to him. Ruth Mallory was dead.

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